

Lesson 5: Be Able to Communicate

“The thing about hip-hop today is it’s smart, it’s insightful. The way they can communicate a complex message in a very short space is remarkable.”
Barack Obama, (American, 44th President of the United States 1961-)

Talking Without Talking

Now us colored folks couldn’t talk about heading off in the middle of the night. Oh no, we had to use the grapevine. We had the same language that the white people had, but we had to learn to give it a double meaning. When it came time for passing on secret information, we found ways to talk that didn’t sound like talking. Most of the time, the message was in the songs we sang. A song about the River Jordan became a song about crossing over the river that took you to freedom in the North. See what I mean? We took the words from the songs and the Bible scripture the white man taught us and used that as code words for places and other meanings that we wanted to talk about to each other. Take the song “Steal Away to Jesus.” Sometimes when folks sang this song, they were talking about running away, but if the song passed from person to person, you knew it had a different meaning. The white men taught us this song, but they thought we couldn’t always remember the words. They figured if we sang it a little different, they didn’t care. They didn’t know that we could get all the details we needed in a few verses.

When “Steal Away” passed from the woods where the men cleared the trees to the field where people were working all day, up to the big house and back down to the slave quarters, that was a message. We all knew the what, when and where we were to meet on Sunday night.

Through this process, I learned how to communicate in a way that only the folks I wanted to get the message got the message. When it came to leading people away from slavery, we needed to talk without talking.

Lesson 5: Be Able to Communicate

Lesson Learned: Your ability to communicate well can make the difference in the outcome you seek.

Learn to use verbal and non-verbal forms of communication.

Be creative.

Harriet Tubman was also able to communicate with people outside of her own group. She learned new words from her educated friends. She was able to communicate in two cultures.

There are differences in people's culture and education that influences their ability to understand each other. Nobody follows someone that he or she can't understand. A leader must have a special way of connecting. Sometime you can't convey in words the message you want to relay. Just like in a text message, friends have their own short hand and special language. This is the same as what Harriet used. Songs were her "text messages."

Be Able to Communicate

Discussion questions:

1. What are some special words, jesters, or expression you use that only a few people in your core group/business setting understand?
2. How well are you able to communicate with those outside of your group?
3. Do you feel a need to improve your communication skills with those inside and outside of your core group?