

Welcome to this month's Monthly Team Training. So here's a challenge for any leader. How do you communicate your ideas so they stick so that people remember them weeks later, months later, maybe years later? I know it sounds difficult, and at first I really pushed back against it. I would say things like, "My ideas are too complex, too nuanced, too important." And I had a million reasons not to reduce what I was going to share to a single memorable sentence. But over time, I realized it's actually completely doable and really critical. It's a challenge and discipline I learned from my friend, Andy Stanley, who's a senior pastor at North Point Community Church years ago. And although at first I pushed back, for years now I've done this every time I speak and write, or at least those times where I speak and write well.

The challenge here is to reduce whatever you're communicating. This can be to your team. It can be in a training like this. It can be for an online seminar or webinar you're doing. It can be for a report that you're writing, a sermon or a message that you're teaching, whatever it is, but it is to reduce your talk to a simple bottom line. A bottom line is simply a memorable, short statement or phrase that summarizes the entire content of your talk. So here are a few examples of bottom lines I've used in the past.

When I was preaching a sermon on 2 Chronicles chapter 36, the Israelites were taken into exile. The land of Israel was left fallow. And the bottom line was, for years the Israelites never really took the Sabbath. They never practiced it. And they were supposed to practice the year of Jubilee where the land laid fallow. And every seven years, the land was supposed to lay fallow and they never did it. And then they finally got all carried away and the land laid fallow and the Scripture is something like this. It said, "And the land finally had its Sabbath rest." So I thought, "Wow, what does that really mean?" And this was the bottom line of that message. And it was something I learned personally when I burned out. If you don't take the Sabbath, the Sabbath will take you. See how the whole message gets summarized in a bottom line there?

Here's another one. Time off won't heal you when the problem is how you spend your time on. That's from my book *At Your Best*. It's one of the most quoted lines of the book, because I'm saying, when you take a vacation, you're nice and rested, but when you come back, you get like hit by the truck on Monday at 7:00 AM and you forgot you were even on vacation and that's because time off won't heal you when the problem is how you spend your time on.

Another one from a message I preached a few years ago, the best sex life is a surrendered sex life. Or how about this one? Change is unkind to the unprepared. So prepare. Boiling down the content to a single sentence or phrase forces you to clarify your thinking. And as a result, your message becomes much clearer and more memorable. Not only to you, but to your audience. After all, nobody remembers the five points of a 30 to 40-minute keynote or sermon. And to be truthful, you can't remember the 5.6 hours later either. Can you? It's like four o'clock in the afternoon, "What did you speak on this morning?" It's like, "I don't remember." That's the problem.

So here's what's at stake. If you can't reduce your message to a single sentence, chances are your audience won't remember it either. If you do manage to do it though, you'll be surprised that the people you're speaking to might be able to quote a bottom line back to you. Years later, I've had it come back to me over a decade later. That's the power of a memorable bottom line. So how do you actually craft a killer bottom line? Well, here's a process that can help immensely and we've got an outline of it in the Monthly Team Training Application Guide. So make sure you check it out. This is a learnable skill. It's a skill you practice.

First, start ahead of time and come up with a general topic. So to begin with, get a basic idea of the subject and direction of the message. I like to start my keynotes and my sermon series a month in advance or more. If you're doing the Thursday night special for Sunday, this is not going to work particularly well. But if you work ahead, it can really, really be a benefit. For example, when I craft these

talks, when I'm writing keynotes for conferences, I will often work months ahead of time. And that just gives time for everything to digest.

For example, you may be wanting to talk about fatigue or the pace of life, Sabbath and rest, or perhaps you want to talk about money and giving, just pick a general area, all right. You just know, okay, this is going to be about rest. This is going to be about sex. This is going to be about money, whatever. It's fine to be vague when you're working this far in advance, because all you're doing is picking a subject or a biblical text. You don't need to take a stab at the single sentence yet. But then ask yourself early on, "What's my subject or what's my likely text?" That's it. Because what'll happen is your brain starts to work in the background. And when you're in the shower, when you're out for a walk, when you're on a bike ride, you'll start to think about ideas and then just write them down. That's phase one. Sort of identify a rough target that you're going to shoot for.

Then the second practice is to expand your research and thinking. If you preach for even a few years, one of the dangers is that you'll end up saying the same thing over and over again, sometimes in exactly the same way. So for step two, continue to expand your research and thinking. Because you've got time now, all right, what you can do is you can start working on that bottom line several months in advance. The expanded timeframe will allow you to do some research, read a commentary, read a book, read an article, watch a TED talk, listen to a podcast, and press your brain to think in fresh directions.

Now, if you don't have that kind of time when you're doing this exercise, at least start a day early. Just like if you normally start on Thursday and you say months ahead, "Nieuwhof, what are you talking about? Just start on Wednesday, just start on Wednesday." Whenever you're preparing a message or doing deep thinking, time is your friend.

Third principle, let it simmer. Great communications and great ideas are like cooking a stew. The longer you let it simmer the better it tastes. So as you research, write down your ideas, write down your insights. And you're not going to keep all of them, but it's kind of like the ingredients of your message. You're putting them into a crock pot in the morning and letting it simmer for a long time. Whenever you do that, you know this from the kitchen, it's going to taste amazing by dinner. So how do you do that practically? I keep an Evernote file open to write down ideas. In most cases, I start collecting ideas months or years before I know a series is on the calendar. I may just have a random idea. Just write it down. If you get good at keeping notes, you may have ideas you come up with a year or two in advance of preaching them. It's like, "Yeah, I didn't use that this year. I can maybe use that next year." Note keeping is a fantastic way to never be short of ideas.

Your thoughts will be a bit fuzzy at first, when you get into a specific message, but they will slowly grow sharper. Plus you've got time on your side, so you can let those ideas grow. By the way, this is also a fantastic way to avoid the sad but growing trap that I'm really troubled by, about the growing pastoral phenomena of plagiarism, stealing other people's ideas without giving credit. And you know why it happens? Because you didn't take the time to create your own. So now you've got a template for creating your own ideas.

All right, fourth step, make your first attempt. A month or two before you need to deliver the talk or message, or even earlier the week before, if you're on a compressed timeframe, take your first shot at distilling your thinking into a single sentence; a bottom line. You may not love the first draft or two, but that's okay because you need a lot of bad ideas to generate some good ideas. Take a best shot at what you have summarizing your main point. The one you want to use to really get across the gist of the entire message. If you're still stuck, here's what you can do. You're like, "I can't do that. I tried it. Nothing's coming." Set a timer on your phone for five minutes and write down all your thoughts related to the Bible research, Scripture reading, any ideas for a talk you've had to this point. And then see if you can pull the first shot at a bottom line from that list.

Now, once you've done that, this is the real magic of what I'm teaching you, CREAM it. What you do is you take your first attempts at a bottom line and then CREAM them. That's C-R-E-A-M. CREAM is a proven method used by a whole lot of communicators to produce sticky memorable statements. Let me break it down for you. CREAM stands for contrast, rhyme, echo, alliteration, and metaphor. I'm going to break those down one by one. That's contrast, rhyme, echo, alliteration, and metaphor. Not every bottom line will have all five of those elements. All it takes actually is just one or two of those elements to craft a phrase that becomes sticky and very memorable to you and to your audience. Now, one caveat, one caution. You can easily create a statement that means nothing, is misleading, or is really trite using this formula. All right, you can misuse it in other words.

The power of CREAM is that it helps you make a profound truth memorable. This is especially important for preachers to remember. Simply saying something like, "Yesterday's pain is tomorrow's pleasure," may be memorable, but it's actually misleading. It doesn't mean anything. Yesterday's pain is tomorrow's pleasure. What does that actually mean? See, yesterday's pleasure maybe tomorrow's pain is actually more accurate and far more true statement if you're teaching on the mindless pursuit of pleasure. Or yesterday's pain can become tomorrow's purpose could be a powerful bottom line if you're preaching on how God redeems pain, but you see the point, right? Don't be trite, don't be clever, be accurate. You want this weighted in truth. You want to make a true statement. So with that said, here's how each element of the CREAM method can make a phrase memorable.

Principle number one is contrast. When John F. Kennedy said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country," one of the reasons his phrase resonated was because he used contrast and echo as rhetorical techniques. He flipped his first statement so that it reversed what was asked of the listener. Our brains are very attracted to contrasting statements. So when crafting a sticky statement, spend some time brainstorming for contrast. For contrast, you create tension between opposites. So for example, light versus darkness, or today versus tomorrow, selfish versus selfless. Here's some examples from the public sphere and from some of my teaching.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that." Now that statement has a double contrast: light versus darkness, and can't versus can. Very sticky, very memorable, a generation or two later.

Here's another take on contrast, "Influence takes years to build and seconds to lose." See the difference? Years versus seconds, build versus lose. Contrast.

Another one, "Very few people get judged into life change; far more people get loved into it." Few versus far more, judged versus love. There's a double contrast as well.

We already shared this one. "If you don't take the Sabbath, the Sabbath will take you." It's a reversal of the main idea.

Another take, just to give you lots of examples, "You can accomplish more with 300 engaged people, than with 3,000 disengaged people." Double contrast, again. 300 versus 3,000; engaged versus disengaged. And a couple more. "Venting privately helps you lead publicly. And people who feel entitled to everything will be grateful for nothing." You see how contrast works? So those are some examples of contrast. Can be very effective, but that's not the only technique in your rhetorical quiver.

We've also got rhyme. So C is contrast, R is rhyme. Music and poetry have employed rhyme for thousands of years because it's effective. You don't likely want to rhyme all the time. See what I did there? Because it can quickly sound cheesy or trite, but when you can fit a rhyme in, go for it. It makes a sticky statement even stickier. For example, Andy Stanley had this line. He said, "You need to be knowing where your money is going." I think about that a lot when I'm doing budgeting. I had this one, I wrote this one: "You'll never address what you don't confess." That was on a sermon about confession.

And it's true. If you don't confess it, you're probably never going to address it. How about this? "Increase your standard of giving before you increase your standard of living." Or, "Your stress reveals what your mind conceals." I use this bottom line to talk about how stress and anxiety reveal the source of our true worries at idols. So that's rhyme. I wouldn't overuse it. You become a caricature of yourself if you use rhyme too often, but then the third, remember we got contrast, rhyme. Now we move into echo. That's the E, echo.

Echo involves taking an idea or a phrase and repeating it for greater effect. It often involves sharing a contrasting or amplifying idea during the repeated part. Once you learn how to identify and leverage it, you'll see it everywhere. So here are some examples of echo along with some explanations of how it works. "Do what you're best at when you're at your best." That was one of the bottom lines for my last book. It's best at times two. "Do what you're best at when you're at your best." And it ties to the main idea of the book.

Another one that I wrote years ago, "You can make excuses or you can make progress, but you can't make both." You see, it's you can make, and you can make, and you can't make. It just echoes and that's why it's memorable. "You can make excuses or you can make progress, but you can't make both."

This one, we already shared. It's an example of it. "The best sex life is a surrendered sex life." It's sex life and sex life repeated. It's that echo.

"God doesn't run away from runaways." That's kind of a play on the idea of running away and then being a runaway. "God doesn't run away from runaways."

"When you believe the best about others, you tend to get the best from others." So we got some contrast there, but we got best about and best from. That's an echo.

"Fixing your mind on Christ, fixes your mind." So fixing and fixes, plus your mind and your mind. "Fixing your mind on Christ, fixes your mind." That's a mnemonic device.

So we've gone through contrast, rhyme, echo, and now we're onto the A, alliteration. This may be the most common form of bottom line creation for a lot of preachers, alliteration. It can be overused, but it is an incredibly effective mnemonic device that helps you remember points based on repeating the first letter of words. So it's not an acrostic, it's just the first letter of words. In the examples below, you'll see just one or two alliterated words can move the sentence from being ordinary to being memorable. So here's some examples:

"In the future, churches that love their model more than their mission will die." It's just model and mission, right? M and M.

"Your boldest moments are your best moments." Boldest and best.

"Prayer is not a button to be pushed. It's a relationship to be pursued." It's that powerful combination of pushed and pursued, two Ps, that make that a memorable line. That's been quoted thousands of times online in some of my writings.

How about this? "Faith-based religion is not perpetually at war with fact-based science." So faith-based plus fact-based got a little bit of alliteration going on there.

"Saying no to good things allows you to say yes to great things." So this is a bit complicated, but good plus great, note the use of contrast in this bottom line, as well as no versus yes, good versus great. And echo saying no and saying yes. "Saying no to good things allows you to say yes to great things."

Okay, now we get to the final part, the M, metaphor. This is probably the least used of the five, unless you're really poetic. A metaphor uses a word, picture, or imagery to paint a memorable phrase. So metaphor can really help a point lodge in people's minds and hearts. Here are some examples:

I like this one. This isn't unique to me. I don't know the source but, "Never wrestle with a pig. You both get dirty and the pig liked it." That's like really, really good. One of my favorites.

Okay, how about this? "Don't let someone who's only been on the sidelines tell you how to play the game." That's pretty good. Sidelines plus play the game.

"The seed you sew produces the crop you harvest." Again, metaphor.

Or how about this? "Becoming a Christian is like getting married. Being a Christian is like being married." So getting married versus being married. It's an analogy I used to distinguish between the one time decision to become a Christian and the lifelong process of sanctification and discipleship.

Here's another one. "Live in a way today that helps you thrive tomorrow." Thrive is a term that conjures up pictures of what a great life could be like.

And one last point. Sometimes it can be hard to get the ideal phrase when you're working by yourself. That's where your team can help. Bounce your bottom line ideas off of them. You'll be amazed, I am anyway, at how often just saying a phrase out loud in front of a group of people can help you find a slightly better expression of it. If you don't have staff, ask a spouse, ask a friend, text a friend. Bounce your ideas off other people so you can get honest, constructive feedback. And remember, you're working ahead. So you're not doing that the day of the talk.

The bottom line with your bottom lines. You want to create phrases that have weight. If people are in a tough spot in their relationship, and they remember something you said five years ago and it helps them in that moment, that's a win. So take some time to start developing bottom lines whenever you communicate. Even in a staff talk, even in something really casual, use bottom lines. And as a result, any communication you give will become clearer and resonate even more and longer with your audience. There's a lot more in the Team Application Guide. Good luck, start practicing, and thanks for joining us for this month's Monthly Team Training.