What six factors to keep in mind when communicating to management

In 2018 we remembered that 100 years ago World War I ended. Publishers used the centennial remembrance of World War I to reissue books covering this dark period in the history of mankind. One of those republished books (the first edition was published in 1958) is called The Zimmermann telegram[1]. It provides a fascinating story that I will summarize here.

How the British came perilously close to concluding an unworthy peace
For the allied forces in the First World War (England, France, Russia) 1916 was not a good year. The central forces led by Germany proved too strong to be driven back from their initial territorial gains. Trench warfare proved exhausting. The war of attrition led to unimaginable suffering. In addition, the German submarine force proved capable of surprise attacks, sinking allied shipping at will. When nothing stopped the German Navy, Britain would be starved both of bullets and of bread. Something had to be done and it had to be done fast. Briefly put, the Western allies had two options:

- conclude an unworthy peace with Germany, accepting a *de facto* German victory.
- mobilize the US to abandon their neutrality and join the Western allies in the fight.

So far, the US had a staunchly isolationist policy - in today's parlance: America first - albeit for pacifist rather than for today's economic reasons. US President Wilson had studied all the facts and had made up his mind. This was a European war where the US had nothing to gain by joining but much to lose. With the British reaching their society's point of exhaustion, the British dilemma was clear. When President Wilson stuck to his not using guns, Britain would have to sue for a peace unworthy of everything it stood for.

The German chess game: stirring up war between the US and Mexico
German policy makers fully understood the British position and the fundamental reshuffle of the power balance in World War I once the US would join the Allied side. Hence, their strategy had only a single aim: keep the US out of the continental European war. Diplomatic efforts – in today's parlance: framing and fake news – were practiced but were not considered to be sufficient. Much rather Germany would prefer to get the US tied up in a domestic war. US forces bogged down in a local war would certainly not come to Europe to fight. Thus, German efforts focused on stirring up Japan to fight the US in California. More importantly, Germany allied with Mexico to stir up anti-US sentiment there. Germany capitalized on Mexican feelings regarding having lost US states such as Arizona to the US in an earlier war. If only Mexico would start fighting the US on its southern border… This would keep the US busy in its homeland. When in addition U-boats would intercept and sink shipping to the UK, further exhausting Britain, the British would see the hopelessness of their situation and conclude the victorious peace Germany (also) badly needed.

The intelligence breakthrough
In the best British traditions, gentlemen don't read each other's mail. In 1916, however, Britain faced an existential threat to this very culture and the empire it had created. So, pragmatism was favored over principles. Hence, Britain had developed a strong capability to intercept and decode German diplomatic telegraphic traffic. In January 1917 it picked up and decoded a telegram by German Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmermann, pleading the Mexicans to start war against the neutral US. The telegram even promised German military support in the effort. The content of the telegram, once released in the US, incensed the US public opinion. It triggered isolationists and pacifists to join those that already for a longer time favored to join their UK 'cousins' in the war against the central forces. President Wilson had to accept the new reality. The US could no longer stand by. It had to declare war. In doing so, the forces it provided broke the stalemate in Europe. So ended the war.

Where extensive literature is available on intelligence failures (think: Iraq war in 2003, 9/11, Pearl Harbor to name a few dossiers) it may also make sense to sometimes review intelligence successes. From a British perspective, intercepting, decoding and using the Zimmermann telegram to mobilize the neutral US army to join in and enable the British to win the worst war in their history looks like a clear success. What factors determined that success? What generic lessons can we learn – also for those of us working in business?

Analysis of the Zimmermann telegram' intelligence success
The scoop of the Zimmermann telegram as used by the British to pull the US into World War I had at least the following attributes:

- **Timeliness**
  The British picked up the telegram and had it published before the US saw Mexicans attacking them. This enabled the US to pacify Mexico and to obstruct German schemes.

- **Completeness**
  The decoded message showed 'all there was'. The facts spoke for themselves.

- **Accuracy**
  Initially many considered the telegram as fake news (there is no news under the sun) and disbelieved its authenticity. Germany, however, in the face of undeniable evidence, admitted its authorship, firing up US sentiment.

- **Novelty**
  The telegram unveiled German schemes that none in the US knew about or had been willing to believe. It changed the perception on Germany and did so in favor of joining the closest ally the US had during most of its history – good old Britain.

- **Relevance**
  The telegram revealed a clear and present danger to peace in the US homeland territory. How much more relevance can you ask for?

- **Actionability**
  When the telegram hit the US news, the country was divided on joining the war. There was a need for a decision, but no clear-cut case in favor of joining or abstaining. One telegram changed it all. This I would call 'actionable intelligence'. The leaked telegram triggered the subsequent immediate decision-making.

The identified attributes for success look to be more broadly applicable

The first thing to do when discovering what works in one case is to test whether it also works in another case. I selected another major intelligence success case to test the above attributes: the discovery of Soviet missiles on Cuban soil in late 1962 that triggered the peaceful resolution of the Cuba crisis. The attributes again proved useful.

The opposite test to a set of attributes is of course whether we need all attributes at all times. In this case, I decided to look into one part of the now infamous 'weapons of mass destruction' intelligence failure that preluded the 2003 Iraq war. One source, codenamed Curveball, claimed that Iraq under Saddam Hussein had an extensive biological weapon program. This later proved to be a fabrication. In the Curveball case, the attributes' test showed clear flaws. There was directly a clear feeling that the intelligence Curveball provided was sketchy. It was neither complete nor accurate. The intelligence, however, suited those that wanted to start a war. Hence it got the notorious prominence in the later stages of the decision-making. It didn't need to be solid, as long as it helped building the case for war...

Based on the above analysis of the three mentioned cases, I guess I made my case. Using the mentioned six attributes to test the quality of your (intelligence) communication to management makes sense. The attributes should even feature on your checklist when your stakes are not as high as that of Britain in 1916.

Notes

.1.   Tuchman, B.W. [2016], The Zimmermann telegram – the astounding espionage operation that propelled America into the First World War, Penguin Random House, London, UK.