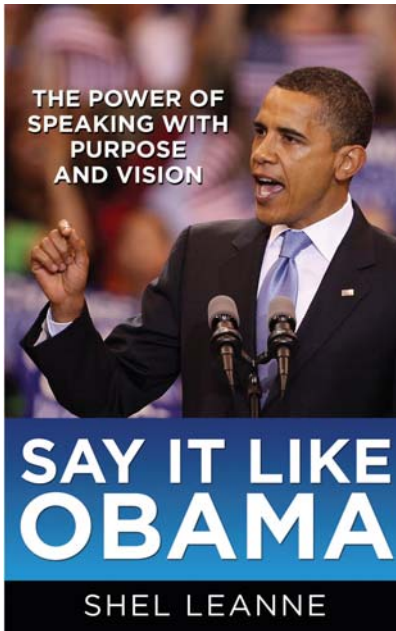




WISDOM IN A NUTSHELL

# Say It Like Obama

The Power of Speaking  
with Purpose and Vision



By

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McGraw-Hill Books, 2008

ISBN 978-0-07-161589-1

224 pages

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## The Big Idea

Barack Obama has brought the power of oration back to American politics. Using well-practiced public-speaking skills, he not only rouses roaring applause but inspires real change in his listeners.

In speech after speech, Barack Obama has “fired up” millions of enthusiastic supporters with his inspiring vision, rousing rhetoric, and charismatic presence. His outstanding communication skills gave rise to an unprecedented political movement and fueled Obama’s success in becoming the first African American presidential nominee of a major U.S. political party.

But inspiring and persuading millions isn’t simply a product of innate ability—Barack Obama honed techniques that made him a highly effective speaker before audiences numbering thirty to 200,000. These techniques are vital not only in the political arena, but also for business executives, managers, and leaders from all walks of life.

## Why You Need This Book

Whether you’re a manager, executive, or public speaker, a teacher, business owner, or community leader, *Say It Like Obama* will provide you with presentation techniques that have inspired and mobilized audiences of every size.

This book is about the art of persuasion, the power of presentation, and the most effective techniques of communication. From building strong arguments and facing tough issues to inspiring a team or workforce to new levels of innovation and productivity, *Say It Like Obama* gives you the tools you can use to instill positive change at every level of your organization by learning how to:

- Make a strong first impression
- Use body language and voice
- Establish common ground
- Gain trust and confidence
- Win hearts and minds
- Drive your points home
- Convey your vision through imagery and words that resonate

- Build to a crescendo and leave a lasting impression

## **Creating Strong First Impressions – Image and Body Language**

A first impression is a critically defining moment. The instant one person first moves into the presence of another, an opinion is formed. Even before you utter any words, you open a dialogue and have spoken volumes through image and body language. The strong first impression that Barack Obama makes reminds us that body movement and image speak a language to the audience as potent as anything said out loud.

Barack Obama is adept at establishing excellent first impressions. The purposeful walk. The visual contact he makes with audiences early on, stretching his arm to them in a confident wave, narrowing the physical distance between himself and the audience. These mark the beginnings of a two-way conversation of sorts – it elicits a sit-up-and-listen response from audience members.

Good eye contact has also been valuable to Obama. Like Bill Clinton, he is perceived as never hesitating to establish firm eye contact; he thrives on connecting with members of his audience and is energized, not drained, by them. As Obama talks, he looks to one side of the room, sometimes with a slight nod of acknowledgement in that direction, and then to the other side. He varies his gaze throughout his discussions; by doing so naturally and smoothly, he pulls listeners in to his talks and engages audience members more fully.

Audiences perceive this as respectful – the behavior of a person welcoming them. They also interpret the actions as trustworthy – the behavior of a person willing to look them in the eyes. Those good first impressions last.

Outstanding communicators take care and use image and body language in ways that wield a highly positive impact.

## **Effective Use of Body Language and Voice**

In the delivery of his 2004 keynote address, Barack Obama demonstrated outstanding use of body language. His confident gait, squared shoulders, and commanding stance reached out to the audience, set the tone, and opened a positive dialogue with the viewing public.

In short, Obama created a very strong first impression. The deep timbre of his voice, his natural asset, heightened the positive impression. The way he controlled his voice – amplifying it when appropriate, gliding up a half-octave

when needed, or allowing it to fall flat to denote disapproval – gave power to his words and helped highlight his key themes. Varying the emotional texture of his tone – making it wistful at times, affectionate at others, and indignant when appropriate – also gave great depth to his words.

Obama's gestures were equally effective – knocking on an imaginary door with a balled fist, pinching his fingers, placing imaginary words on air, holding his palm like a stop sign. They all combined to drive points home. Similarly, placing his hand over his heart at key moments conveyed the sincerity of his words. Obama came across as authentic. His gestures served as masterful elements of delivery.

## **Stressing Common Dreams and Values**

As Obama adeptly recasts the dialogue to stress commonalities rather than differences, he focuses on key aspects such as shared dreams and values. Aspiring leaders can learn much from this. When preparing remarks, consider this: What common-ground elements can you bring to the fore to establish strong ties to your audience? How can you skillfully direct attention to areas of common ground rather than keep the audience focused on elements that divide?

As political commentator Jamal Simmons noted on June 3, 2008, Obama has succeeded in presenting his life story as a “uniquely American story... Like Bill Clinton's story, Ronald Reagan's story, Harry Truman's story...” The *New York Times* concurred in July 28, 2004, indicating that Obama tells “a classic American story of immigration, hope, striving, and opportunity.”

Given his excellent communication practices, Obama has portrayed his life's tale as that of an American with humble beginnings making his way to extraordinary success. This has helped him connect with audiences; his life story is viewed as a classic story and it has endeared Obama to millions of Americans.

## **Practices for Earning Trust and Confidence**

Given Obama's tremendous success, leaders have much to learn from the way he uses excellent communication practices to earn the trust and confidence of others.

Charisma plays a role in earning trust and confidence. People know charisma when they see it – that certain fire in the eye, passion and command. Charisma helps leaders energize and motivate others.

Image and body language are also important for forming strong first impressions. Notable second impressions can reinforce strong first impressions. Through voice, intonation, and skillful use of gestures, effective communicators underscore their confidence, self-assuredness, and worthiness as a leader.

Strong communicators remember the importance of props and staging in sending sub-messages that reinforce key themes. They make efforts to “start strong” with their remarks, tapping into the prevailing mood and ensuring they begin their dialogues on favorable footing.

Additionally, exceptional communicators take opportunities to convey their strong ethics, deepening a basis for trust and confidence that can bring benefits well into the future.

## **Winning Hearts and Minds**

Obama’s success demonstrates many best practices with regard to winning hearts and minds. When seeking to use communicative power to sway others, it is advisable to adapt remarks to the audience, speaking meaningfully to audience members about the issues they most are about.

The skilled communicator keeps things personal by leveraging personal pronouns – “I,” “you,” and “we” – to connect more closely with audience members, establishing a sense of one-to-one conversation.

Excellent communicators use details skillfully to demonstrate that they understand the experiences and perspectives of audience members. Empathy and action – these are things the audience seeks. A skilled communicator will use details to show that they realize, remember, and will be responsive to the needs and desires of their audiences.

## **Driving Points Home**

Leaders have much to garner and apply from Obama’s successes. When constructing remarks, for example, highly effective communicators prioritize and focus well, casting aside lower priority issues and shining a light on ideas of greatest importance. They draw on a wide range of valuable rhetorical devices to promote assertively the most significant ideas and themes.

Rhetorical questions help crystallize attention on key ideas. Repetition and parallel paragraph structures emphasize key points and help build to a climax. Alliteration draws attention to key words and adds a musical eloquence to speech. A choice to omit conjunctions enables skilled speakers to pick up speed, presenting emphatic words.

Adding extra conjunctions amplifies points and creates a multiplier effect. When leveraging the “power of three,” skilled communicators underscore key points, building momentum or enhancing a sense of logic. Communicating with slogans and refrains helps leaders emphasize themes to be remembered.

## **Conveying Vision**

Leaders also have much to learn from the way Barack Obama conveys vision so effectively to audiences. When seeking to convey vision in a compelling manner, referencing history can make ideas more understandable and digestible. Listeners can relate to ideas more readily from a prism of shared history and cherished tradition, and may relate better with references to admired historical figures.

The practice of giving ideas physicality can also play a role in conveying vision effectively. “Embodiment” makes ideas more memorable, such as seeing “hope in the eyes.” Highly skilled communicators also employ detail effectively, calibrating the ideal amount of detail they provide as they convey their vision.

Use of dynamic imagery represents another useful communication technique. Similarly, backward loops can be powerful, as a speaker takes listeners back in time to imagine how it once was, comparing and contrasting the past with the present with great effect.

Finally, effective communicators often offer anecdotes, providing brief narration and short tales to breathe life into key themes. Together, these techniques enable readers to use communication to convey their vision in highly compelling ways.

## **Build to a Crescendo and Leave a Lasting Impression**

When seeking to use communication to deliver messages that will influence listeners and endure, several techniques prove useful. A speaker can inspire others to great achievements by employing words that resonate, including words that evoke shared values, patriotic values, and cherished principles. Or biblical truths.

Speaking in ways that create a sense of momentum and urgency to future actions can also be important. Obama has done this repeatedly with great effect as he has pointed to successes that continued to build his momentum, noted the increasing levels of support for his campaign, and demonstrated through the details he offered that “things are rolling.”

Another best practice for leaving a strong last impression is to “finish strong.” Outstanding orators will build to a high point and end on that high, leaving listeners stirred, inspired, motivated, and focused on key themes.

Speakers can also consider repeating takeaways or slogans in the closing minutes of their talks. This helps to keep those themes and ideas dominant in the minds of audience members. Issuing a call to action or directing listeners to “low-lying fruit” – the small actions they can take to aid a cause – can also help increase the motivating impact of communication.

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