

## LAW 4

### ALWAYS SAY LESS THAN NECESSARY

#### JUDGMENT

*When you are trying to impress people with words, the more you say, the more common you appear, and the less in control. Even if you are saying something banal, it will seem original if you make it vague, open-ended, and sphinxlike. Powerful people impress and intimidate by saying less. The more you say, the more likely you are to say something foolish.*

## TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW

Gnaeus Marcius, also known as Coriolanus, was a great military hero of ancient Rome. In the first half of the fifth century B.C. he won many important battles, saving the city from calamity time and time again. Because he spent most of his time on the battlefield, few Romans knew him personally, making him something of a legendary figure.

In 454 B.C., Coriolanus decided it was time to exploit his reputation and enter politics. He stood for election to the high rank of consul. Candidates for this position traditionally made a public address early in the race, and when Coriolanus came before the people, he began by displaying the dozens of scars he had accumulated over seventeen years of fighting for Rome. Few in the crowd really heard the lengthy speech that followed; those scars, proof of his valor and patriotism, moved the people to tears. Coriolanus's election seemed certain.

When the polling day arrived, however, Coriolanus made an entry into the forum escorted by the entire senate and by the city's patricians, the aristocracy. The common people who saw this were disturbed by such a blustering show of confidence on election day.

And then Coriolanus spoke again, mostly addressing the wealthy citizens who had accompanied him. His words were arrogant and insolent. Claiming certain victory in the vote, he boasted of his battlefield exploits, made sour jokes that appealed only to the patricians, voiced angry accusations against his opponents, and speculated on the riches he would bring to Rome. This time the people listened: They had not realized that this legendary soldier was also a common braggart.

*Down on his luck, [the screenwriter] Michael Arlen went to New York in 1944. To drown his sorrows he paid a visit to the famous restaurant "21." In the lobby, he ran into Sam Goldwyn, who offered the somewhat impractical advice that he should buy racehorses. At the bar Arlen met Louis B. Mayer, an old acquaintance, who asked him what were his plans for the future. "I was just talking to Sam Goldwyn ..." began Arlen. "How much did he offer you?" interrupted Mayer. "Not enough," he replied*

*evasively. “Would you take fifteen thousand for thirty weeks?” asked Mayer. No hesitation this time. “Yes,” said Arlen.*

THE LITTLE, BROWN BOOK OF ANECDOTES, CLIFTON FADIMAN, ED., 1985

News of Coriolanus’s second speech spread quickly through Rome, and the people turned out in great numbers to make sure he was not elected. Defeated, Coriolanus returned to the battlefield, bitter and vowing revenge on the common folk who had voted against him. Some weeks later a large shipment of grain arrived in Rome. The senate was ready to distribute this food to the people, for free, but just as they were preparing to vote on the question Coriolanus appeared on the scene and took the senate floor. The distribution, he argued, would have a harmful effect on the city as a whole. Several senators appeared won over, and the vote on the distribution fell into doubt. Coriolanus did not stop there: He went on to condemn the concept of democracy itself. He advocated getting rid of the people’s representatives—the tribunes—and turning over the governing of the city to the patricians.

*One oft-told tale about Kissinger... involved a report that Winston Lord had worked on for days. After giving it to Kissinger, he got it back with the notation, “Is this the best you can do?” Lord rewrote and polished and finally resubmitted it; back it came with the same curt question. After redrafting it one more time—and once again getting the same question from Kissinger-Lord snapped, “Damn it, yes, it’s the best I can do. ” To which Kissinger replied: “Fine, then I guess I’ll read it this time. ”*

KISSINGER. WALTER ISAACSON, 1992

When word of Coriolanus’s latest speech reached the people, their anger knew no bounds. The tribunes were sent to the senate to demand that Coriolanus appear before them. He refused. Riots broke out all over the city. The senate, fearing the people’s wrath, finally voted in favor of the grain distribution. The tribunes were appeased, but the people still demanded that Coriolanus speak to them and apologize. If he repented, and agreed to keep his opinions to himself, he would be allowed to return to the battlefield.

Coriolanus did appear one last time before the people, who listened to him in rapt silence. He started slowly and softly, but as the speech went on, he became more and more blunt. Yet again he hurled insults! His tone was

arrogant, his expression disdainful. The more he spoke, the angrier the people became. Finally they shouted him down and silenced him.

The tribunes conferred, condemned Coriolanus to death, and ordered the magistrates to take him at once to the top of the Tarpeian rock and throw him over. The delighted crowd seconded the decision. The patricians, however, managed to intervene, and the sentence was commuted to a lifelong banishment. When the people found out that Rome's great military hero would never return to the city, they celebrated in the streets. In fact no one had ever seen such a celebration, not even after the defeat of a foreign enemy.

## Interpretation

Before his entrance into politics, the name of Coriolanus evoked awe.

His battlefield accomplishments showed him as a man of great bravery. Since the citizens knew little about him, all kinds of legends became attached to his name. The moment he appeared before the Roman citizens, however, and spoke his mind, all that grandeur and mystery vanished. He bragged and blustered like a common soldier. He insulted and slandered people, as if he felt threatened and insecure. Suddenly he was not at all what the people had imagined. The discrepancy between the legend and the reality proved immensely disappointing to those who wanted to believe in their hero. The more Coriolanus said, the less powerful he appeared—a person who cannot control his words shows that he cannot control himself, and is unworthy of respect.

*The King [Louis XIV] maintains the most impenetrable secrecy about affairs of State. The ministers attend council meetings, but he confides his plans to them only when he has reflected at length upon them and has come to a definite decision. I wish you might see the King. His expression is inscrutable; his eyes like those of a fox. He never discusses State affairs except with his ministers in Council. When he speaks to courtiers he refers only to their respective prerogatives or duties. Even the most frivolous of his utterances has the air of being the pronouncement of an oracle.*

PRIMI VISCONTI, QUOTED IN LOUIS XIV, LOUIS BERTRAND, 1928

Had Coriolanus said less, the people would never have had cause to be offended by him, would never have known his true feelings. He would have maintained his powerful aura, would certainly have been elected consul, and would have been able to accomplish his antidemocratic goals. But the human tongue is a beast that few can master. It strains constantly to break out of its cage, and if it is not tamed, it will run wild and cause you grief. Power cannot accrue to those who squander their treasure of words.

*Oysters open completely when the moon is full; and when the crab sees one it throws a piece of stone or seaweed into it and the oyster cannot close again so that it serves the crab for meat. Such is the fate of him who opens his mouth too much and thereby puts himself at the mercy of the listener.*

*Leonardo da Vinci, 1452-1519*

## OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

In the court of Louis XIV, nobles and ministers would spend days and nights debating issues of state. They would confer, argue, make and break alliances, and argue again, until finally the critical moment arrived: Two of them would be chosen to represent the different sides to Louis himself, who would decide what should be done. After these persons were chosen, everyone would argue some more: How should the issues be phrased? What would appeal to Louis, what would annoy him? At what time of day should the representatives approach him, and in what part of the Versailles palace? What expression should they have on their faces?

Finally, after all this was settled, the fateful moment would finally arrive. The two men would approach Louis—always a delicate matter—and when they finally had his ear, they would talk about the issue at hand, spelling out the options in detail.

Louis would listen in silence, a most enigmatic look on his face. Finally, when each had finished his presentation and had asked for the king's opinion, he would look at them both and say, "I shall see." Then he would walk away.

The ministers and courtiers would never hear another word on this subject from the king—they would simply see the result, weeks later, when he would come to a decision and act. He would never bother to consult them on the matter again.

*Undutiful words of a subject do often take deeper root than the memory of ill deeds.... The late Earl of Essex told Queen Elizabeth that her conditions were as crooked as her carcass; but it cost him his head, which his insurrection had not cost him but for that speech.*

SIR WALTER RALEIGH. 1554-1618

## Interpretation

Louis XIV was a man of very few words. His most famous remark is “*L'état, c'est moi*” (“I am the state”); nothing could be more pithy yet more eloquent. His infamous “I shall see” was one of several extremely short phrases that he would apply to all manner of requests.

Louis was not always this way; as a young man he was known for talking at length, delighting in his own eloquence. His later taciturnity was self-imposed, an act, a mask he used to keep everybody below him off-balance. No one knew exactly where he stood, or could predict his reactions. No one could try to deceive him by saying what they thought he wanted to hear, because no one *knew* what he wanted to hear. As they talked on and on to the silent Louis, they revealed more and more about themselves, information he would later use against them to great effect.

In the end, Louis's silence kept those around him terrified and under his thumb. It was one of the foundations of his power. As Saint-Simon wrote, “No one knew as well as he how to sell his words, his smile, even his glances. Everything in him was valuable because he created differences, and his majesty was enhanced by the sparseness of his words.”

*It is even more damaging for a minister to say foolish things than to do them.*

*Cardinal de Retz, 1613-1679*

## KEYS TO POWER

Power is in many ways a game of appearances, and when you say less than necessary, you inevitably appear greater and more powerful than you are. Your silence will make other people uncomfortable. Humans are machines of interpretation and explanation; they have to know what you are thinking. When you carefully control what you reveal, they cannot pierce your intentions or your meaning.

Your short answers and silences will put them on the defensive, and they will jump in, nervously filling the silence with all kinds of comments that will reveal valuable information about them and their weaknesses. They will leave a meeting with you feeling as if they had been robbed, and they will go home and ponder your every word. This extra attention to your brief comments will only add to your power.

Saying less than necessary is not for kings and statesmen only. In most areas of life, the less you say, the more profound and mysterious you appear. As a young man, the artist Andy Warhol had the revelation that it was generally impossible to get people to do what you wanted them to do by talking to them. They would turn against you, subvert your wishes, disobey you out of sheer perversity. He once told a friend, "I learned that you actually have more power when you shut up."

In his later life Warhol employed this strategy with great success. His interviews were exercises in oracular speech: He would say something vague and ambiguous, and the interviewer would twist in circles trying to figure it out, imagining there was something profound behind his often meaningless phrases. Warhol rarely talked about his work; he let others do the interpreting. He claimed to have learned this technique from that master of enigma Marcel Duchamp, another twentieth-century artist who realized early on that the less he said about his work, the more people talked about it. And the more they talked, the more valuable his work became.

By saying less than necessary you create the appearance of meaning and power. Also, the less you say, the less risk you run of saying something foolish, even dangerous. In 1825 a new czar, Nicholas I, ascended the throne of Russia. A rebellion immediately broke out, led by liberals

demanding that the country modernize—that its industries and civil structures catch up with the rest of Europe. Brutally crushing this rebellion (the Decembrist Uprising), Nicholas I sentenced one of its leaders, Kondraty Ryleyev, to death. On the day of the execution Ryleyev stood on the gallows, the noose around his neck. The trapdoor opened—but as Ryleyev dangled, the rope broke, dashing him to the ground. At the time, events like this were considered signs of providence or heavenly will, and a man saved from execution this way was usually pardoned. As Ryleyev got to his feet, bruised and dirtied but believing his neck had been saved, he called out to the crowd, “You see, in Russia they don’t know how to do anything properly, not even how to make rope!”

A messenger immediately went to the Winter Palace with news of the failed hanging. Vexed by this disappointing turnabout, Nicholas I nevertheless began to sign the pardon. But then: “Did Ryleyev say anything after this miracle?” the czar asked the messenger. “Sire,” the messenger replied, “he said that in Russia they don’t even know how to make rope.”

“In that case,” said the Czar, “let us prove the contrary,” and he tore up the pardon. The next day Ryleyev was hanged again. This time the rope did not break.

Learn the lesson: Once the words are out, you cannot take them back. Keep them under control. Be particularly careful with sarcasm: The momentary satisfaction you gain with your biting words will be outweighed by the price you pay.

Image:

The Oracle at Delphi.

When visitors consulted the Oracle, the priestess would utter a few enigmatic words that seemed full of meaning and import. No one disobeyed the words of the Oracle—they held power over life and death.

Authority: Never start moving your own lips and teeth before the subordinates do. The longer I keep quiet, the sooner others move their lips and teeth. As they move their lips and teeth, I can thereby understand their

real intentions.... If the sovereign is not mysterious, the ministers will find opportunity to take and take. (Han-fei-tzu, Chinese philosopher, third century B.C.)

## REVERSAL

There are times when it is unwise to be silent. Silence can arouse suspicion and even insecurity, especially in your superiors; a vague or ambiguous comment can open you up to interpretations you had not bargained for. Silence and saying less than necessary must be practiced with caution, then, and in the right situations. It is occasionally wiser to imitate the court jester, who plays the fool but knows he is smarter than the king. He talks and talks and entertains, and no one suspects that he is more than just a fool.

Also, words can sometimes act as a kind of smoke screen for any deception you might practice. By bending your listener's ear with talk, you can distract and mesmerize them; the more you talk, in fact, the less suspicious of you they become. The verbose are not perceived as sly and manipulative but as helpless and unsophisticated. This is the reverse of the silent policy employed by the powerful: By talking more, and making yourself appear weaker and less intelligent than your mark, you can practice deception with greater ease.