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Linking Theory & Practice

Top-level communication: behind the scenes with famous French spin doctor Jacques Séguéla

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Abstract

This article explores the practice of spin doctoring through the point of view of a practitioner and possible differences between France and America in that practice. We do so by reporting and analyzing an exclusive interview with famous French spin doctor Jacques Séguéla, VP of Havas, one of the world's largest advertising and communications groups. Séguéla was involved in 20 political campaigns in France and abroad, advising, among others, French President François Mitterrand in 1981, and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barack in 1999. He still advises a number of politicians and top-level executives worldwide. In the interview, Séguéla talks about his life as a spin doctor, and divulges some of his best communication "tricks" through a wealth of stories and anecdotes. Following the interview, we compare Séguéla's point of view with American spin doctoring practices. We then discuss in more depth Séguéla's key assertions on the role of authenticity and intuition in top leaders' communication under crisis.

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Introduction

Behind every great political or business leader today lies a skilled communication practitioner, a "spin doctor." Spin doctors help leaders establish legitimacy, manage their image, and cope with crises through subtle communication strategies. They have inspired the American film and television industries through such productions as *Thank You for Smoking*, *Wag the Dog* (feature movies), and *Spin City* (TV series), thus reaching iconic status in the eyes of the general public.

The profession of communication adviser is believed to have originated in the United States in the 1930s (Huyghe, 2008), while the term "spin doctor" first appeared in the 1950s (Safire, 1986), as a sport's metaphor referring to the practice of putting a spin on a ball to better control its trajectory (Safire, 1986; Metter, 1990). Spin doctors typically advise their clients about how to dress, and coach them to use specific words, gestures, and tones of voice to improve their image (For an extensive review, see Sumpter and Tankard, 1994). The profession is closely related to advertising that involves creating favorable spins on products or stories so as to sell them

better. Indeed, several famous spin doctors came from the advertising industry, such as American John Scanlon, who advised Bill Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky affair, and British Sir Tim Bell, who advised Margaret Thatcher. These communication gurus apply the same techniques used in advertising to “sell” politicians and business leaders to voters and stakeholders.

Spin doctors are particularly important architects of the leadership process because effective leadership has been shown to be grounded in leaders’ communications (Conger, 1991; Shamir *et al.*, 1994). For instance, CEOs play a key role in defining and communicating their leadership visions to organizational members (Den Hartog and Verburg, 1997). Communication is also a crucial leadership act in times of crisis (Mitroff, 2004). For instance, researchers have shown that it was President Bush’s communication strategy that enabled him to turn the events of 9/11 to his advantage. In particular, his portrayal of Bin Laden as America’s “brutal” common enemy during his address to a joint session of the Congress elicited patriotism and support for his subsequent actions (Bligh *et al.*, 2004).

Although spin doctors have been operating in the United States for a while, they appeared in Europe more recently. In France, they only gained traction in the 1980s, when TV ads began to replace posters as the main political communication tool. This time lag, as well as cultural differences between the United States and Europe, raises the question of what differences may exist between American and European, and particularly French, spin doctors. We tackle this general question in the article, and below, we ask more specific questions about the potential differences.

Some spin doctors in the US have defined truth as two-faced and relative. In the words of the renowned spin doctor John Scanlon: “truth, you know, is often not necessarily a solid. It can be a liquid ... what seems to be true is not necessarily the case when we look at it and we dissect it and we take it apart, and we turn it around and we look at it from a different perspective.”¹ Are European, and in particular, French spin doctors equally as inclined as their American counterparts to bend the truth?

In the US, spin doctors are expected to develop strong relationships with the media in order to use them as channels to communicate “spinned” messages for their clients. According to Sumpter and Tankard (1994: 21), master spin doctors, whether they come from the political right (Republicans) or left (Democrats), “... are personally

acquainted with media superstars, can hone their message to a single, quotable slogan, and know how to repeatedly flood media channels with that message. These skills and connections give the best spin doctors a sort of ‘institutional power’ that remains, even after a political administration changes.” Indeed, in the US, the media has ceased to be thought of as independent, Fox being seen as pro-Republican, whereas ABC, NBC and CNN are seen as pro-Democrat (Owen, 1999). This has led some researchers to consider TV channels and the press as political institutions that spread desired messages directly to the voters (Esser *et al.*, 2001).

European spin doctors, by contrast, seem to have a different kind of relationship with the media. For instance, in a content analysis of the leading American and German newspapers (e.g., In the US, *the New York Times*, *the Los Angeles Times* ...; In Germany, *Welt*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*) over a period of 6 months before election day, Esser *et al.* (2001) found that spin doctors were mentioned more often in the US press than in the German press. During the 6 months, leading up to the Election Day, the German press printed 169 articles referring to spin doctors 217 times, whereas the US press printed 464 articles referring to spin doctors 647 times. According to the authors, such a difference in terms of “media coverage” or “spin doctors in the press” can be explained by the different media cultures and political PR cultures. Is this true in France too? How different is the relationship between spin doctors and the press in France compared to the US?

In the last few years, the practice of “spin doctoring” has been considerably altered by the appearance of new media forms, such as the Internet, and Web 2.0 communication tools. According to Arianna Huffington, editor-in-chief of *The Huffington Post*, “were it not for the Internet, Barack Obama would not be president. Were it not for the Internet, Barack Obama would not have been the nominee,” and according to political consultant Mr. Trippi, “the campaign’s official stuff they created for YouTube was watched for 14.5 million hours ... To buy 14.5 million hours on broadcast TV is \$47 million” (Miller, 2008). How have the Internet and Web 2.0 communication tools influenced the practice of French spin doctors compared to their American counterparts?

To better understand spin doctoring French style and how it could apply to top management communication in French and European companies, we interviewed the famous French spin doctor



Jacques Séguéla, VP and Chief Communications Officer of Havas, France' second largest and the world' sixth largest advertising and communications group. Séguéla, a captivating and authoritative speaker, began his career as a reporter for *Paris-Match* and *France-Soir*, two of France's most famous magazine and newspaper publications. In 1969, he co-created Roux Séguéla Caysac Goudard (RSCG), an advertising firm that merged 23 years later with Eurocom, becoming Euro RSCG Worldwide. Séguéla authored numerous best-selling books about his experiences as an advertiser and spin doctor. He was involved in 20 political campaigns in France and abroad. Among others, he spin doctored for French President François Mitterrand during his 1981 presidential campaign and for Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski during his 1995 presidential campaign, Gabonese President Omar Bongo Ondimbato during his 1997 presidential campaign, and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barack during his 1999 presidential campaign. Today, Jacques Séguéla remains a force in the world of communication strategy, and still advises a number of politicians and top-level executives worldwide.

We met with Jacques Séguéla in his Paris office and invited him to speak candidly about his life as a spin doctor. We chose an interview format for two reasons. First, we wanted to understand the practice of spin-doctoring from the point of view of a practitioner, as opposed to that of an academic. However, we wanted to prevent Séguéla from "spinning" his own account. In order to achieve the latter goal, we tried to create a safe and empathic atmosphere for Jacques Séguéla to be as faithful as possible to what he has really experienced as a spin doctor and to facilitate the emergence of a perspective-expanding dialogue (Kohut, 1959; Orange, 1995). The first author's relationship with the respondent (they co-wrote a book together on a different topic from the subject of this article, and have known each other for 8 years) helped him to rapidly establish a climate of trust.

The following interview outlines Jacques Séguéla's perception of his practice of spin doctoring, how the activity has evolved in France, the type of relationships French spin doctors have with their clients and the press, the ethical rules they follow, and the transferability he sees between political and managerial communication advising today. Following the interview, we discuss some of Séguéla's key assertions on the roles of authenticity and intuition in top-level communication under crisis.

The interview

Interviewer: At the beginning of your career as a political adviser, how did you approach your customers? How were your relationships initiated?

Jacques Séguéla: In the worst possible way. In 1978, 3 years before the 1981 [French presidential] campaign, there was no political communication consulting in France. Candidates had a campaign manager, who was not a professional, and who would call the fashionable advertisers of the day and ask them to make up a poster. The brief was: "Make me a poster." So, since we knew whether the candidate was left or right, we'd make a poster more to the left or more to the right, without even knowing what message they had or what their plans were. It was bullshit. So, it was actually a picture and a slogan. I was approached by Giscard d'Estaing's [French President from 1974 to 1981] campaign manager, Jean-Pierre Soisson, who was a friend of mine. He asked me to make him a poster, so I made a poster. No sooner had I finished the poster than, a week later, I was approached by François Mitterrand's [French President from 1981 to 1995] campaign manager, who asked me: "Make me a poster." I made a poster. And a week later, I was approached a third time by Goudard, my partner, and Bernard Brochant [Mayor of Cannes in 2001 and 2002], the campaign manager, who were having trouble with Chirac's [French President from 1995 to 2007] campaign and could not find a slogan. They asked me: "Come and help us make the poster." So I took part in the three posters; I made two of the three, and the slogan for the third. The three were displayed simultaneously all around France. I let things flow, and when the election was over, I contacted the press and asked them: "Do you find it normal that, in a so-called 'advanced' democracy, the same advertising executive makes the three posters, and that furthermore, he doesn't know the last thing about it, and has never been involved in politics before?" The press didn't write a line about it. Imagine how backwards politicians and journalists were back then! Imagine the drama this would make today! Two years later, in 1980, came the time for the next presidential campaign. I wrote to my three clients: "I am the advertising executive who had the honor and pleasure to make your posters during the last presidential campaign. Do you want to hire me again? But this time our agreement must be exclusive. I want to do things right. I have studied American and English campaigns in depth. I can bring political advertising in France to the highest professional standards in the

world. Let me know.” The only one who answered me was François Mitterrand, who wrote back: “If you’re free tomorrow come to this address.” The next day I went to the address, I looked up: the restaurant was called “Bonanza.” It all started there. The others never responded.

Interviewer: The next question is about your relationship with your customers, the people you advise. Do you need to feel close enough in terms of worldview and values to advise someone effectively?

Jacques Séguéla: It is impossible for an advertiser, who is also a citizen and a voter, not to feel close to the cause he’s defending. It is impossible for an advertiser, at least a passionate one like me, not to feel some sort of attraction, emotion, power, mutual admiration and understanding. Without it, how could you lead the candidate’s campaign? But I am wary of activism. If you’re too involved in a cause, if you desire victory too much – this is as true for a car as for a president – you lose control and your ability to say what you think. You get blinded. That’s why I’ve never belonged to any party, and especially not the Socialist Party. That’s why I’ve spent all my campaigns, at least those that I’ve won, eye to eye with my candidates. François Mitterrand taught me that. It is with him that I developed this system. After that, I did 20 campaigns around the world exactly the same way, except for the last one, with Lionel Jospin [the socialist candidate for the French presidency in 1995]. We started using the same method. There were only four people at first. There was Moscovitchi, who was the tech guy, there was Lionel Jospin, François Hollande, who was the head of the party, and me. We started the campaign at 47% in the polls, and we took it to 53%. Everyone thought we had won, but one month before the election the Socialist Party came to see Lionel and said: “This is not your campaign, it’s our campaign. You’re just our spokesperson. You’ve taken over the campaign. Who’s that advertising guy, who apparently has all the rights? We demand that the campaign return to the Socialist Party.” The Socialist party took control of the campaign. From that moment on, everything became stifled, everything was shut behind doors. The campaign stopped dead like a ship at full speed that cuts her engines. The campaign began to slow down, to a stop, and in the final days, Chirac’s team overtook us.

Interviewer: Have you ever refused to advise anyone?

Jacques Séguéla: Yes. I have simple rules. I’ve had proposals from all over. First, my candidates must

be in favor of democracy. Second, they must be honest. Figuring out if they’re in favor of democracy is easy enough; it suffices to read their program. You can’t be deceived. Honesty, however ... You hope it will endure ... But power corrupts a lot of people. And third, candidates need to have the desire to bring their country into modernity. I have always respected my rules. I’ve had candidates who didn’t fit. I remember Kurt Waldheim, the president of Austria. He asked me to do his campaign. But his Nazi past was too shady. So I wrote him a nice letter saying: “I cannot do your campaign for this reason, and in fact I advise you not to run.” Wisely, he listened. I mean, I don’t know if it was because of my letter, but he didn’t run. I remember Baby Doc, the son of Duvalier, Haiti’s dictator. He also wanted me to do his campaign. I wisely refused. More recently, Gaddafi wanted me to become his publicist. He even offered me a lot of money to establish a democratic image of his country. I declined.

Interviewer: Would you say that you seduce your customers?

Jacques Séguéla: Of course. Advertising consists of nothing more than seducing housewives. I’m the Casanova of housewives around the world, since 80% of consumers are housewives. Of course it’s a bit different in political advertising since the ratio is 50/50 men–women. In fact, it’s 48/52, since there are 48% of men against 52% of women around the world. But the game of seduction goes as follows: first, you need to seduce your clients to earn their trust. Then, you need to be seduced by them, so that you can carry their message. Then, you need to seduce the team that is going to work with you, so that everyone shares the same passion. Then, you seduce journalists, who will spread your message and seduce – I was going to say consumers – but I mean readers or viewers, it’s the same. So it’s all about seduction. But this seduction must be honest. The only advertisements that should never lie are political advertisements. In general, advertising should not lie, but if an advertiser wanders in saying that a laundry detergent cleans better, when it in fact cleans worse, it’s not a serious drama. The advertiser will be fired, and also prosecuted – because misleading advertisements are prohibited by law – and customers will switch to another detergent. But when it comes to a president, it’s as if you bought a 5-year stock of laundry and it didn’t work. And, presidents don’t wash laundry, they wash souls. That is where political advertising is



utterly different. The techniques are the same. It's the same neurons that make an ad for Citroën, for Louis Vuitton, or for Lacoste, as the ones that make an ad for Lionel Jospin, or François Mitterrand. There are no differences. You have the same paper, the same pens and the same teams. But what changes everything is that, on the one hand, you have a mere laundry detergent, or a car, and, on the other hand, you have the absolute product, a human being, and furthermore, the most important human being, since he or she is the one who will lead the country. This requires absolute ethicality, total commitment, enormous energy and talent, because failure is tragic. I won 19 out of my 20 campaigns. I lost the last one with Jospin. Only then did I understand the pain of failure, because when you wake up one morning and find you've lost ... I mean it wasn't me who had lost, it was Lionel, but I felt totally responsible. I had not managed to get him to follow the laws of good communication. He refused to communicate, so of course, what happened had to happen. But I've always regretted not having been strong enough to get him to follow the rules of advertising, especially since I had his affection and admiration, so I could not say that I was in difficult terrain. He was closed shut, and I was unable to crack the armor, and I thought that we could still win anyway. This is where I made a genuine analytical mistake. I did not predict Le Pen's [Head of a French extreme right-wing party] break. I made a real marketing mistake, and when I woke up, I thought: "I have betrayed 50% of French people." 50% of French people, who were on the left, saw Chirac, landing the presidency, instead of, Lionel Jospin. It took me almost 3 months to get over it. I haven't done any campaign anywhere since. I don't want to bear the weight of another failure. It's too heavy.

Interviewer: Do you give the same kind of political advice to French politicians and foreign politicians, or does it differ?

Jacques Séguéla: The same. Problems are global and the rules of political communication are the same all over the world. However, countries differ in how democratic they are. When you are in a country where democracy is being born, you use old fashioned poster ads rather than modern advertising. When you're in a very advanced country that has moved beyond advertising, you do communication and multimedia. We use more or less evolved advertising techniques. Mitterrand once said to me: "Democracies are like babies, when they

are born, they cry." Helping democracies to be born is the thing I have most enjoyed doing in my life. I've helped democracy emerge all over Eastern Europe. I did all of their campaigns. I did them for free – not only for free, but at my own expense. I brought them posters, movie teams ... whether it was Poland, Czech Republic, Romania, Bulgaria or Hungary, all of these countries ... I fought to help them at a crucial time, in 1991–1992, to help bring them into democracy. I also did Barak's campaign in Israel, to help bring the left to power. And my most beautiful campaign other than that of Mitterrand, was Ricardo Lagos', in Chile, against Pinochet, because Pinochet's soul was there, Pinochet's men were there. We won with a 1-point margin. Pinochet would have stayed in power for another 7 years if we hadn't fought like dogs. But what changes from country to country is the soul of the country. A campaign must draw its source from the roots of the country, in the country's cultural and national identity, in the humor and the mood of the country. So, each time, I do my campaigns with local advertisers, since Havas has offices in 75 countries worldwide. I have not yet done 75 presidential campaigns; I still have room if I want to do more ...

Interviewer: How far does political communication consulting go? Does it include, for example, behavioral components?

Jacques Séguéla: It begins with them. An advertiser must separate the form and the substance of the message. It's not the job of an advertiser to focus on the substance of the message. An advertiser should not advise politicians on their vision for their country, their campaign project, or their main campaign issues. The job of an advertiser is to do the *mise-en-scène*, to orchestrate, organize, and make the candidate's thoughts visible for all to see. That's why you should never advise a candidate who doesn't have a strong message. Leave it to another advertiser. That candidate has slim chances of success. Your job is to make sure that your candidate is as comfortable as possible communicating. The new generation knows TV. But the older generation, which was born before TV, which was used to podiums, and speaking like orators, when they suddenly found themselves on the small screen ... they became paralyzed. It was like the transition from silent to talking movies. Almost one politician in two was killed off by the small screen. So, for years, my job was to teach politicians how to deal with TV, how to master it. Then, my job was to

make the candidates' match their inner feelings. When I met François Mitterrand, first, he had two supernumerary teeth. They looked like vampire's teeth; that's why he never smiled. I said: "Mr. President, if you look like a funeral you will bury yourself, so go to the dentist and start smiling like everyone else. Look at Giscard's smile ... you need a smile as beautiful as his." Second, he was dressed like a fourth republic President, with three-piece suits ... "Mr. President, you're a left-wing president. You must wear brown suits, with charm. Wear wool, casual jackets. You can't be uptight." Then, there's body language. Body language is very important when you are in front of a camera. Before you speak, you must throw your hands toward the camera. If I throw my hands toward the camera, if I open my arms, I'm saying: "I am yours. I want to talk to you! Come to me! We have things to talk about. Answer me! Come here!" If you just stand like a puppet in front of the camera, people will think you're a puppet. These are such simple tricks, which are by the way not meant to trick. People think we're manipulators. But we teach what all actors in the world do, and you can't be president without being a good actor. It has never happened in history. There is no shame in being an actor. That's part of the job. They are actors, but first and foremost writers. They are authors who act their own text. And what matters is the text. But if they're not good at acting the text, the text will not be heard. Then, an advertiser must know that each sign has a meaning and it's our job to find the most appropriate time and place to get a message out and to set the stage so that the message is heard by the largest number, and is not distorted by the way in which it is said, and the place where it is said.

Interviewer: In political communication, is it better to carefully read the speech exactly as it was written, or to be looser and improvise?

Jacques Séguéla: It depends. There are speeches that must be solemn. Kennedy's best speech, the new frontiers' speech, he read it. Such speeches must be sacred. Indeed, French presidents should use the splendor of the Elysée palace. I remember once saying to François Mitterrand, as we were visiting the Elysée palace together, "This place is not worthy of you. You should build a glass house in the business district, which would be connected to the whole world, to portray yourself as a modern president." He said to me: "But, I like the Elysée." I said: "What do you mean?" He said: "You can't govern without the Elysée's splendor. Without the

Elysée, I am no longer president." So it's important to be able to use symbols like that, but you must also have the talent of a modern TV speaker, who can speak without notes and improvise, but with it always based on a well-structured speech. When you see politicians tearing their speeches and pretending to improvise, remember that below the speech, they have a set of cards that show the central word of each sentence they have to say, and with just a glance at them, they recapture the rigor of their text because every word that is uttered is repeated and then distorted. So, when you're the president, you can't afford to digress.

Interviewer: Often, issues like the environment, purchasing power and employment, are announced as priorities and related actions don't follow. What advice do you give then? Is it better to ignore this misalignment, that is, not to comment on it any further, or on the contrary to attempt to justify yourself?

Jacques Séguéla: It depends on personalities. Mitterrand liked to let things sit for a while. It was appropriate for his time. The 21st-century acceleration had not yet occurred. The Internet didn't exist, neither did mobile phones, or text messaging. It was a different world. Mitterrand used to let time decide for him, and time often solved things. Sarkozy [French president since 2007] moves faster than time itself. He's like Lucky Luke [a famous comic book character] who shoots faster than his shadow. So, his style is very different. Sarkozy likes to address a problem where it arises at the moment when it arises. That's modern politics and that's his strength, which was poorly understood at first. But, French people have now completely assimilated it. When Sarkozy stops doing that, when he slows down his actions in the field a bit, French people get upset. When he disappears from TV, they think he has stopped taking care of them. I heard yesterday that he was going to focus back on local issues, that he was going to make two trips a week in France because he's just had 6 months of intense international diplomatic activities as the European Union's president. He's therefore been away from France's grass-root issues, and he's going to make redoubled efforts to focus back on them. So, I think that silence means consent, whereas admitting guilt means you're half forgiven. Politicians should immediately respond to issues and should never give their opponents enough time to attack them. Above all, politicians should nip rumors in the bud because we live in a time of



total disinformation. The Internet is the worst and the best invention in the world. It's man's greatest invention since fire, as creative as the fire that promotes life, and as destructive as the fire that burns. It's the disinformation tool par excellence, and it is used all the time by politicians to destabilize their opponents, in a disgusting way. One day people will go to jail for using the Internet as a disinformation tool. It is a shame there's no Internet police because you should never let a rumor set in. You should always grab a microphone and set the record straight.

Interviewer: You are beginning to broach a topic we wanted to ask you about: crisis communication. So, for you, the important thing is timeliness, acting in the heat of the moment, right?

Jacques Séguéla: Absolutely. In the last decades of the 20th century, we have moved from indirect democracy to direct democracy.

Interviewer: What do you think about Japanese CEOs, who, when their company collapses, apologize publicly for their mistakes or their lack of results? Do you believe in seeking forgiveness and apologizing in public?

Jacques Séguéla: Not at all. The only way to recover when you've made a mistake is victimization. You should always present yourself as a victim because victims are always forgiven when they confess their guilt ... Even when you're not responsible, you should always justify yourself, and say that you tried hard, look modest, and leave room for weakness. Too much power scares people, and too much strength doesn't convince. Sam Goldwyn, the head of Metro Goldwyn Mayer, who invented movie stars, said: "You become a star for your weaknesses, not for your qualities."

Interviewer: Can you give us a specific example about a crisis situation that you helped one of your customers deal with?

Jacques Séguéla: Yes, it must have been 14 years ago. I did Aleksander Kwaśniewski's campaign, the Polish president. I worked on his two campaigns. He was elected twice. I'd had a phone call asking me to go see him in Poland. He had said: "You seem to be a man who loves challenges. I've read your books. I have three challenges: (1) I'm young – he was 35 in a country where nobody younger than 55 had ever been elected before, (2) I was Jaruzelski's [Polish President from 1989 to 1990] minister of sport, a man who is now completely abhorred since we transitioned to democracy, and (3) I am an

atheist in a country where 90% of the population believe in God. Can you help me do my campaign?" I said: "No way!," especially since it was against that monument of the Polish resistance, Lech Wałęsa. But, he said: "Come with me, we'll travel around Poland ..." So we spent a weekend touring around and I realized that, as usual, power had completely corrupted those in place, who were completely incapable of leading their country into modernity and democracy. Lech Walesa was an electrician, an orator, but didn't have the stature of a statesman, whereas the man I had in front of me, was left wing and a true believer in democracy. He had been caught in Jaruzelski's net because he was a young politician. So I decided to help him. It was a very difficult campaign. Walesa had the full support of the Catholic Church, and the revolutionaries. We reached a point where Kwaśniewski was almost winning, but 3 or 4 days before the face-off, in the determining final week of the campaign, the biggest Polish newspaper printed something that started a scandal. They accused Aleksander's wife of having evaded taxes with one of her companies – she's a businesswoman. It was a bomb! It seriously affected Aleksander, especially because his wife was targeted because of him. He called me, and said: "I'm going to resign." I told him: "No way! You never quit! Don't do anything, and don't answer any journalist. I'm hopping on a plane. I'll be there in 3 h." I chartered a plane, I arrived, I scolded him, and I asked: "What's the problem?" He explained it to me, and I asked: "Is it serious? What happened?" So we brought lawyers in. They worked on the case most of the night. I had arrived around 8 pm, and at 1 am, one of the lawyers said: "But, the company doesn't have to pay tax on this type of market!" It had eluded everyone. I said: That's amazing! Are you sure?" And all the other lawyers said: "He's right! This company doesn't need to pay taxes." I said: "OK, guys, we've won. Let's let the scandal brew, let things get aggravated ... and let people think you're going to resign. Don't say it, but let rumors set in." It was two days before the face-off. "The day of the face-off, which was scheduled at 8 pm, you get in your car with your own makeup person. You park near the TV station 10 min before 8 pm, where nobody can see you, and you get made up in the car. You enter the station 5 min before 8 pm. Everyone will think you won't be coming, and obviously Lech Wałęsa will have planned to spend the beginning of his speech accusing you of being responsible for everything ... and you, you appear 5 min before 8, like a flower. Lech Wałęsa will be on

his nerves, on the defensive ... and you'll sit in your seat. When the journalist asks you the first question – he had randomly been assigned to be first – you'll get up. Lech Wałęsa will be there, hunched down against the table. You'll stand up and tell him: "Before answering the question, I would like to talk to this man, who is standing before you, this man who thinks he can lead a country, who did horrendous things, who accused my wife falsely, who rigged things, who lied to you, and I have proof of it, and you will show the article of law, which I had sent someone to get at the Ministry of Finance, that showed that this type of company did not have to pay tax, and you will throw the paper on the table. The guy will cower in his seat as if the sky had fallen on his head." That's exactly what happened. Lech Wałęsa was lost for the first 40 min. He didn't resurface. "And at the end of the face-off, as you've seen in every tennis game, you'll be the first to stand. Wałęsa will be gathering his papers. You'll just get up and go and shake his hand. You'll notice that, in tennis games, the winner is always the one reaching out to the defeated. You'll be the one extending your hand to him, and you'll be the winner, and he will just stand there." And that's exactly what happened. He got up, he went to shake hands with Wałęsa and Wałęsa had a crazy reflex that lost him: instead of giving his hand, he said "It's not my hand that I want to give you, it's my foot!" And giving the foot, in Polish, is a horrible insult, very vulgar, and it stood in the middle of the screen as the last image of the face-off, and Aleksander won.

Interviewer: In a few words, can you tell us what changed in political communication from De Gaulle [founder of the Fifth Republic and its first president from 1959 to 1969] to Sarkozy?

Jacques Séguéla: What has changed is not communication but technology. In De Gaulle's time, you were elected thanks to a poster, one or two TV appearances, and some radio. Written press was what made the difference. Mitterrand was the first one to do a real campaign with TV advertising, newspapers, billboards and radio, which was later banned. And then came Ségolène Royal [French socialist presidential candidate for the 2007 election], and with her, the era of the Internet, and this brilliant idea of "The desire for the future," which opened the door to a whole new generation of political campaigns. There won't be any more political campaigns without the Internet. The Internet is where they'll be launched, and will

constitute the backbone of the campaign. If you look closely at Obama's campaign, you'll notice that the Internet structured it. But, when you look at Obama's campaign, you'll also notice that what made him win was door-to-door. On Sunday morning, the day of the vote, in the state of Pennsylvania, which was so hard to win and crucial for victory, at 8 am there were one or 2000 activists present. They each received a form that detailed every square-mile of the town, and they were each given a sector to cover door-to-door, asking: "Will you vote or not?," or to note if the person was absent. One hour later, there were another one or 2000 activists, who had been waiting, who returned to the people who had been absent, and tried to convince them to vote. And they did this until polls closed. We live at a time when on the one hand, proximity is more important than anything else, and, on the other hand, when the Internet technology makes personal messages, blogs, giving the floor to the voter and the ability to interact directly with them possible. So campaigns will continue to evolve. The resources devoted to campaigns are unbelievable. The latest US campaign swallowed almost five times as much money as the previous one!

Interviewer: Does the advice you give to politicians for their campaign apply to top executives in the business world?

Jacques Séguéla: Certainly. I did political campaigns for free because they were laboratories for my regular ad business and for my top management communication business. It was after my first political campaign with François Mitterrand that I created an agency specializing in corporate communication. It was a very small agency. There were only five people at first. There are 500 now, and it's the top European agency specializing in corporate communication. In this building here, there are about 1500 of us, including 500 people that specialize in corporate communication. We advise CEOs worldwide around the clock.

Interviewer: How did you choose the CEO of your corporate communication agency, who is said to be your designated successor?

Jacques Séguéla: Back in the early 1990s, there was the referendum on the autonomy of New Caledonia [Former French overseas territory], which ended up being Rocard's [French prime minister from 1988 to 1991] big victory. So, there was a procurement call for the referendum campaign, as for all



political campaigns. We won the referendum, but I made the worst campaign in my life. The motto was “The gesture of brotherhood,” and the TV ad was ridiculous. It featured a Caledonian passing a flower necklace she had around her neck to another Caledonian. It was worse than bad. We won the referendum despite the campaign. A few days before the referendum, I received a phone call from Stéphane Fouks who was Rocard’s deputy chief of staff in 1992. He said: “I wanted to call you to speak my mind. You’re the one who drew me to advertising. I read your books. I was fascinated by you. You were my god. And I have never seen a campaign as bad as this one! This campaign was handed to you ... not by corruption but at least passive corruption because you are close to people in the government, and they did not dare say no to you. This is appalling ... and I’ve decided to create my own agency to destroy you.” I said to him: “That’s very nice. Why don’t you first calm down and come and have some spaghetti with me at my favorite Italian restaurant?” He came, and he began the same speech. I realized that he had in him the seed of a true advertiser, so I said: “Listen! You want to kill Séguéla? Do you know what the best way to kill Séguéla is? Come and take his place. You come with me. You create your agency. We’ll create a political communication branch, which we’re lacking. It will be the first one in Europe. There are a few in the United States, but none here. We will make it into a great thing, and one day you’ll head it.” And that’s what happened.

Interviewer: What advice would you give to CEOs, at this time of crisis and insecurity?

Jacques Séguéla: The first piece of advice I would give to CEOs is simply to communicate. What I mean by communicating is not just talking to the media, but it’s having a communication strategy, preparing for communication, training in communication, speaking only when they have something to say and being surrounded by the best possible communication team. CEOs are like politicians; they are subject to the same media rules. The second piece of advice is to communicate inside as much as, if not more than, outside, because when CEOs are focused on the media, they run from one media to another and they completely forget the hard workers, the galley slaves who keep the boat afloat. And, the third piece of advice is to be at the forefront of technology, of today’s communication tools. Today, CEOs who don’t have a blog, a website, an iPod, and all the other modern

means of communication aren’t current. So, it’s imperative that they adapt to changing times. All CEOs over 50 are what I call sergeant major CEOs, with their Waterman fountain pens. They write by hand, as I do, by the way. They must start to master modern techniques of communication.

Interviewer: Who’s the best in this class in France, according to you? Who meets all of these criteria?

Jacques Séguéla: I would say that the best communicator is Sarkozy. I mean, he is the CEO of France in a way. But only thinking about real CEOs ... We don’t have anyone like Tapie [a famous French businessman in the 1980s and 1990s] any more, a communicator who overrides all of the others. They are all roughly at the same level. Arnault [French Chairman of LVMH] is not a great communicator. He has his style, he says little, but he speaks well. Pineau-Valencienne [a French businessman who was the Chairman of Paris-based Groupe Schneider] is just the same. Bolloré [CEO of publicly traded Bolloré group] is a slightly better communicator than the others. He doesn’t do TV. He refuses to use TV, so he speaks about himself rather than speaking directly. In fact, that’s his communication strategy. Then, if you think about CEOs in the Telecoms industry, Vivendi, Canal +, the luxury industry, the car industry ... the best communicator, a bit Japanese-style, is Renault’s CEO, Carlos Ghosn, although he nonetheless made a big communication flop because he made promises that he could not keep. But it wasn’t his fault. He was announced as the messiah at a time when Renault did not have the right models. He was not responsible. It was his predecessor, who had not planned the right models, so Ghosn was blocked by that. Ghosn also used American-style communication means. He’s the only CEO who broadcast messages live on LCI [a French information channel] to his collaborators, like a real speech from Ségolène Royal or Nicolas Sarkozy. That kind of thing turns against you if you can’t deliver on promises.

Interviewer: Do you think that the CAC40 CEOs [CEOs at the head of the 40 biggest publicly traded companies in France] have progressed in terms of communication?

Jacques Séguéla: Of course. They’ve progressed a lot. Note that the CAC40 CEOs have become much younger. Their average age must be 45. They’re among the youngest CEOs of all Western stock exchange indexes, because the Russian, Chinese,

and Indian CEOs of publicly traded companies are very young. And they were all born in the age of communication. They all have their communication coach and consultant. They know the power of communication. Over the past ten years, there's been major progress in the way French CEO's communicate.

Interviewer: Can you summarize in one sentence what top management communication consulting is today?

Jacques Séguéla: Do not attempt to appear to be what you cannot be. Communication means being yourself.

Post-interview reflections

In this article, we pondered over the potential differences in the practice of spin doctoring between France and the US. Our interview with Jacques Séguéla provides anecdotal evidence that the practice of spin doctoring is fairly consistent between France and the US, and indeed, across the world. Séguéla, for instance, admits to using the same "recipes" for his political campaigns across the world: "I did 20 campaigns around the world exactly the same way." However, Séguéla notes that he adapts aspects of his communication, such as humor, and symbols to a given culture. "A campaign must draw its source from the roots of the country, in the country's cultural and national identity, in the humor and the mood of the country. So, each time, I do my campaigns with local advertisers ... When you are in a country where democracy is being born, you use old fashioned poster ads rather than modern advertising. When you're in a very advanced country that has moved beyond advertising, you do communication and multimedia. We use more evolved advertising techniques."

One of the more specific differences we examined was the relationship between spin doctors and the media. Again, the interview reveals little differences between France and the US. Like his American peers, Séguéla has built his "institutional power" by being personally acquainted with media superstars (Séguéla is a visible French celebrity, often appearing on the news and TV talk shows). He has shown to be capable of honing his clients' message to a single, quotable slogan (e.g., "La force tranquile (silent strength)" for François Mitterrand). And he knows how to repeatedly flood media channels with that message.

However, while Séguéla, like his American counterparts, recognizes the power of the Internet and

web 2.0 communication tools, and therefore embraces them, he also expresses some reserve about them: "The Internet is the worst and the best invention in the world. It's man's greatest invention since fire, as creative as the fire that promotes life, and as destructive as the fire that burns. It's the disinformation tool par excellence, and it is used all the time by politicians to destabilize their opponents, in a disgusting way. One day people will go to jail for using the Internet as a disinformation tool. It is a shame there is no Internet police because you should never let a rumor set in. You should always grab a microphone and set the record straight."

The last sentence of Jacques Séguéla's interview emphasizes the importance of authenticity in top-level communication, which is increasingly recognized as a key factor of effectiveness in leadership (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999; Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Goffee and Jones, 2005). Authentic public expressions from leaders, for instance, have been found to induce followers to experience positive emotional reactions towards their leaders (Dasborough and Ashkanasy, 2002). Séguéla also believes that leaders must be good actors, a perspective that is consistent with management as symbolic action (Pfeffer, 1981).

How can one act and be authentic at the same time? The Actor Studio's method, developed by Lee Strasberg, and inspired by the Stanislavski-Vakhtangov approach, may provide an answer. The "Method" requires performers to draw on their experiences, memories, and emotions to project their interior lives onto their character rather than faking it. They therefore can be said to act authentically. An example of this when applied to political communication is provided by French president Charles De Gaulle, who is known to have followed in 1946–1947 "diction" courses (working on his breathing and his tone of voice) taught by a "pensionnaire" of the Comédie-Française, a historic company in France famous for its association with Molière (Chignaguet, 2011). Using theatrical techniques to express his inner feelings, he thus became an emblematic figure for the Post-war era.

Despite his professed attachment to authenticity, Jacques Séguéla also recognizes the need for "smooth manipulation" in certain circumstances, such as crisis situations. For instance, he unequivocally advises leaders to present themselves as victims when publicly confronted with a serious mistake, which he does not construe as inauthentic, but



rather as good spinning. This position is consistent with the one taken by American spin doctors who believe that every issue has two sides (Sumpter and Tankard, 1994). According to Séguéla, when presenting themselves as victims, leaders appear to be more human, more fragile: being weaker than expected is good because too much power scares. While such advice contradicts current research on acknowledgement (Marcus and Goodman, 1991) or apology accounts (Kim *et al.*, 2004) which shows that verbalizing an “apology” can repair the damage committed, it could be consistent with recent studies on restorative behaviors (De Hooge *et al.*, 2007). For instance, according to a laboratory study conducted by Wesseling *et al.* (2006), shameful, as opposed to regretful CEOs are assigned different levels of integrity, which is an important determinant of trust (Mayer *et al.*, 1995).

Séguéla’s insistence on the importance of integrity as a crucial factor of leaders’ impact, in the political or the managerial arena, echoes recent academic research on behavioral integrity as a key antecedent of trust (Simons, 2002). Beyond leadership traits, followers are particularly sensitive to congruency between leaders’ words and deeds. Leaders’ ability to deliver on promises is a key antecedent of trust and willingness to cooperate, especially in periods of drastic change and high uncertainty. One practical implication of this is for leaders to promise less but to be totally focused on delivering what they promise.

A final idea we have chosen to highlight from the interview is the role of intuition in leaders’ communication. According to Jacques Séguéla, leaders’ ability to react rapidly to events and rumors is of crucial importance for modern communicators. He therefore advises leaders to follow their gut feeling rather than their head. Such advice is consistent with recent research on intuition, which demonstrates that it enables experts to make better and faster decisions than analytical deliberation under the right conditions (Dane and Pratt, 2007; Coget and Keller, 2010). Intuitive decision-making is defined as a rapid, non-conscious process that produces affectively charged judgments through holistic associations (Dane and Pratt, 2007). While intuition has been studied in a variety of decision-making contexts, to our knowledge, it has not yet been studied in the context of leadership or communication. Séguéla’s interview provides an invitation to do so.

Intuitive processes might provide a useful complement to rational choice approaches to explain

leadership behavior. There have already been numerous critics of the rational paradigm in management. Argyris (1982) showed that the logic that guides managers’ actions, their theory in use, is radically different from their rational intentions, their espoused theory. Managers’ theory in use is all the more potent in that it is not directly accessible to their conscious mind and attempts to probe it usually provoke defensiveness, which limits learning. Weick (1995) showed that rationality is often retrospective rather than prospective. We plan our actions, then we enact them, in a messy way that most generally bears little resemblance to our original plan, and then, when asked to give an account of our actions, or to justify them, we artificially reconstruct a linear account that gives the illusion of causality between purposeful planning, behavior and results. Leaders do not always think about what to do first. They often see first, or do first, and then think about what they did. According to Jacques Séguéla, they must be like Lucky Luke, a comic book cowboy who shoots faster than his shadow: to survive, they must “draw” their verbal addresses “where the problem arises, at the moment when it arises,” which means following their gut feeling.

In conclusion, we have summarized key communication strategies taken from Séguéla’s interview for political and business leaders (see table below).

How to improve your communication

1. Speak only when you have something to say.
 2. When you’re attacked/criticized or when you make a mistake, present yourself as a victim. Justify yourself, say that you tried hard, look modest, and leave room for weakness.
 3. Follow your gut feeling to be more reactive.
 4. You must have the talent of a modern TV speaker, who can speak without notes, improvise, but always be based on a well-structured speech.
 5. Address a problem where it arises at the moment when it arises. Respond to issues and never give your opponents enough time to attack them.
 6. Communicate inside your organization as much as, if not more than, outside. Always be visible to your troops. Silence means consent.
 7. To destabilize an opponent, do not be afraid to reach out to him or her.
 8. Be at the forefront of technology, of today’s communication tools. Have a blog, a website, a podcast.
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Note

¹Transcript of “Power and Persuasion: How PR Shapes the News,” an episode of Adam Smith's Money World, PR Services (April 1991), p. 62 (Nexis) that was used by Sumpter and Tankard (1994: 23).

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