



Interesting and Relevant Institutions

105 million people voted in the 2002 presidential election. Nearly the same number voted in the recent *American Idol* competition on FOX television. Surprised?

We are tempted to grouch about the implications: that the substance of supporting a democracy is giving way to the sugar of mindless television. Rather than public discourse about political, religious and social realities, western citizens now debate:

- Who will be voted off *Survivor*?
- What will the Osborne's do in an upcoming episode?
- Will J-Lo stay married longer the next time?

This shallowness should trouble us, but we cannot blame the audience. Doing so means we fail to own our leadership responsibility.

On the whole, institutions and their leaders shirk the hard work of remaining interesting and relevant. Where organizations do use media and technology, it largely fuels the sludge we are

bathing in, penalizing the few institutions doing the hard work.

Doing the hard work means changing agenda. Instead of deciding what people need to hear and using technology to tell them, leaders must use technology to listen. Who is their constituency? What are their needs? What do they desire? How can the organization be more effective?

When leaders change agenda to listen first and then speak from what is learned, they increase the reputation of their institution as interesting and relevant. Because they now better understand their audience, they also improve an ability to communicate compellingly. And being compelling brings an institution's mission back into public view while raising the dignity of the surrounding culture.

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