

THE LITTLE WHITE LIE ABOUT LEADERS' WORDS

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It's the little white lie almost everyone who listens to a luncheon speech or reads a book or an editorial page commentary by a chief executive or an elected official buys into: These are the leader's words.

But in the corridors of power in business and government, armies of speechwriters, ghostwriters, and assorted other wordsmiths craft the addresses and essays that leaders use to communicate goals, values, and strategies and, sometimes, even a dash of wit and wisdom.

Whether and how to acknowledge this polite fiction was being debated in academic and communications circles yesterday after the board of Waltham-based Raytheon Co. cut the 2006 pay package of William H. Swanson, its chairman and chief executive, by about \$1 million because he lifted passages from other writers without crediting them in his booklet, "Swanson's Unwritten Rules of Management."

Swanson apologized to Raytheon's directors, shareholders, and employees Wednesday for appropriating folksy maxims, in many cases word for word, from California engineering professor W.J. King and other authors.

Raytheon, which had circulated more than 300,000 copies of the booklet since 2004, halted its distribution this week.

There is little doubt Swanson's booklet crossed the line into plagiarism. But business ethicists, speechwriters, and communications specialists defended the more widespread practice of executives and politicians farming out their writing so long as they are involved in formulating the message and predicted it would continue.

"The big question is whether you're deceiving someone," said Joseph Badaracco, professor of business ethics at Harvard Business School. "The content, theme, and basic message have to be the work of the person giving the speech, even if the words themselves aren't. It would be reckless and irresponsible for an executive to get up on a podium, be handed a speech, and deliver it."

Leigh G. Hafrey, senior lecturer on communications and ethics at MIT's Sloan School, put it this way: "There has to be some personal involvement by the CEO for the words to mean anything."

In practice, however, there are a range of production models for, and differing degrees of top-level participation in, the speeches and essays that go out under the names of governors, senators, presidents, and chief executives, insiders say. Only in CEO books has it become commonplace for the subjects to acknowledge their ghostwriters.

Most often, leaders huddle with advisers and speechwriters to lay out the ideas and positions they want to articulate; writers then prepare drafts and bring them to the leaders for revisions. In many cases, speechwriters understand and incorporate the favored talking points and speaking styles of the leaders. In both the business and political worlds, it is rare for leaders to write their own speeches.

"It's largely a matter of time," said Laurence D. Cohen, a Glastonbury, Conn., consultant and former speechwriter for Hartford Insurance Group and United Technologies Corp. "CEOs spend about half their time giving speeches and making presentations, and they're very busy. A lot of these guys have egos to match their titles, and they wouldn't want people to believe they aren't doing the writing."

While presidential speechwriters, from Ted Sorenson to Peggy Noonan, have become national celebrities, ghostwriters in the world of commerce have tended to keep a lower profile, because of what Cohen calls "residual guilt." As a corporate wordsmith, "I didn't go around blowing my horn about it," Cohen recalled.

Still, a small industry has grown up to help leaders get their messages across. Heidi S. Berenson, who owns a Washington communications firm specializing in "powering up" the presentations of members of Congress and Fortune 500 executives, said her clients often bring their speeches to her for expert feedback.

"Sometimes they use too many words to say what they could say in a headline," Berenson said. "So we go through their speeches with a machete. Speechwriters call me Heidi the Hatchet."

Whether in politics or in business, speechwriters said, it's important to faithfully reflect the values and personalities of the leaders.

"Ideally, you take their thoughts and their views and you make them more cogent and coherent," said David E. Wade, a communications director and former speechwriter for US Senator John F. Kerry.

Even if leaders are capable of doing their own writing, they are preoccupied with other matters, such as meeting constituents or poring over financial data.

"It's unfortunate that the demands on a CEO's time mean they can't take the time to develop their own words," said Paul A. Argenti, a professor at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College.

Cohen said he sees the Raytheon case as a cautionary tale about the need for CEOs to take responsibility for their words, even if they have asked their staffers to help compile them.

"This is a warning sign for people using freelancers or ghostwriters," he said.

"You have to trust the people who are doing the writing. Because in the end, your name is on the book."

SIDEBAR:HELPING HANDSPLEASE REFER TO MICROFILM FOR CHART DATA. Robert Weisman can be reached at weisman@globe.com.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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