

Helping the C-suite Tell Their Stories

An Interview with Christopher Ullman, President, Ullman Communications

EDITORS' NOTE Christopher Ullman (chrisullman.com) is a communications professional, author, inspirational speaker, mentor, and champion whistler. He is President of Ullman Communications, a strategic advisory firm, and previously served as Director of Global Communications at The Carlyle Group, led communications at the White House Budget Office, ran the public affairs office at the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, and was spokesman for the U.S. House Budget Committee. Ullman is the Strategic Communications Expert in Residence at High Point University, a Senior Advisor at Narrative Strategies, and a Trustee of The Fund for American Studies. He is the author of *Find Your Whistle: Simple Gifts Touch Hearts and Change Lives* and *Four Billionaires and a Parking Attendant: Success Strategies of the Wealthy, Powerful, and Just Plain Wise*. Ullman earned his BA degree in political science from Binghamton University and is a four-time international whistling champion and member of the Whistlers Hall of Fame.



Christopher Ullman

What was your vision for launching Ullman Communications and how do you define its mission?

From day one my vision has been to help the C-suite tell their stories, differentiate in the marketplace, and solve knotty communications problems. I formed my firm in 2018 after leading The Carlyle Group's global communications for nearly 18 years. After doing all I could

for Carlyle and after working for other people for 31 years, I was ready for a major change but wanted to stay in the communications profession.

Will you provide an overview of Ullman Communications' services?

In my communications career I've seen it all and done it all. Since I want to keep my firm very small – just me – I had to have a high-level and limited service offering. I surveyed my skills, strengths, and desires and decided to hyper-focus: market position-

ing, branding, executive communications, and top-notch writing. When you hire Ullman Communications you get Ullman, though I can assemble a team to tackle bigger challenges.

What led you to write your new book, *Four Billionaires and a Parking Attendant: Success Strategies of the Wealthy, Powerful, and Just Plain Wise*, and what are the key messages you wanted to convey in the book?

Mentoring young people is very important to me. I've been on the board of an intern program in Washington, DC for 25 years. Across the years I've worked with hundreds of students. Over and over, I found myself saying "let me tell you about this great lesson from Arthur Levitt, David Rubenstein, John Kasich, or Adena Friedman." I had 15 or so lessons in my mentoring quiver. I love to write – this is my second book – so I wrote down the lessons, but there weren't enough for a book. So, I sat down, surveyed all the big-wigs I've worked for, and came up with another 35 lessons that have materially impacted me.

Perhaps the most important message in the book is that if you are not humble and open-minded, you will not grow as a person and a professional. The lessons themselves are not rocket science. In many cases they are painfully obvious, but I'm amazed at how many people don't do basic things. Ego gets in the way. Habit gets in the way. Peer pressure gets in the way. Insecurity gets in the way. But a humble and open-minded person can get beyond these impediments to see the value in specific lessons and hopefully incorporate the thinking and behavior into their own lives.

What are some of your favorite lessons from the book?

Here are three of my favorites:

1. Think Like Your Successor Every Day (learned from Arthur Levitt): If you are fired, quit, or die, someone will take your job. The person will examine everything you did and put it in one of four buckets: brilliant, good, marginal, crazy. But why wait till you are replaced to get rid of the marginal and crazy? The key is to be humble and open-minded, actively soliciting input and feedback from people on a daily basis. This is difficult because today is like yesterday and tomorrow will be like today. Being in a constant state of growth, innovation, and objectivity is the key.

2. Confident Joy: One time Carlyle's earnings were going to be lackluster, so CFO Adena Friedman brought T-shirts with big happy faces on them to the analyst call, thinking that if everyone on the call wore them they'd be a bit more upbeat. In the room were the three Co-CEOs, the COO, the head of external affairs, and the head of investor

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“THIS IS A BLUEPRINT FOR BUILDING A CAREER AND A LIFE.”

—Arthur C. Brooks, Harvard professor and #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

FOUR BILLION- AIRES AND A PARKING ATTENDANT CHRISTOPHER ULLMAN

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relations. Despite none of them putting a shirt on, Adena did not flinch or back-pedal. In the face of some serious peer pressure, she kept her shirt on and proceeded with the serious business of the day.

3. Homeless People Have Names Too: Carlyle Co-CEO Bill Conway, a devout Catholic, used to avoid the homeless people as he walked every morning to the church a few blocks from Carlyle’s Washington, DC office. After he learned a few of their names,

he couldn’t turn away anymore. Bill started giving them gift cards to Dunkin’ Donuts, then gave \$1,000 to a homeless shelter, which led to gifts with seven zeros on them. Bill would occasionally roam the halls of Carlyle with a box filled with hundreds of gift cards. He’d knock on people’s doors and offer them cards if they agreed to give them to homeless people. That was more than ten years ago, and I still carry gift cards in my wallet ready to give to a homeless person.

You have worked with some of the most respected leaders in government and business. What have you seen to be the characteristics and traits for effective leadership?

The most effective leaders I’ve worked for have well-defined goals, are relentless, have vast stores of energy, are good communicators, are able to process large amounts of information, and respect the people who work for them. Of these traits, being relentless may be the most important one. The best leaders don’t give up in the face of adversity. They climb over, dig under, or go right through the impediment.

With your deep expertise in communications, how has the role of a communications executive evolved?

When I started in communications in 1987, we used to mail our news releases to the media, there were three main TV networks, cable TV was not yet a major player, and the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post* were the main games in town. Compared to today that is shocking, even quaint. Today, everything has changed – the speed of news, the quantity of news sources, the role of social media, the rise of hyper-partisan news outlets, and a public that seems to prefer watching cat videos to learning about complex political and business subjects. The people also don’t know who to trust anymore. There are no more Walter Cronkites.

Today’s communications executives have to think faster, act quicker, and wrestle with the loudest voices on social media. The challenge is that loud doesn’t mean smart, correct, or reasonable. It takes principled leaders advised by courageous PR people to resist the mob and do what is right. It’s time for the tail to stop wagging the dog.

A huge upside for today’s communicators is that we are better able to speak directly and in a timely manner to key audiences – employees, investors, clients, suppliers, government officials. E-mail, YouTube, LinkedIn, and websites enable my clients to go right to key audiences without having to rely on third parties of the past, and we can do it quicker than ever, especially when there is a problem.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

My mentoring centers on being able to tell one’s story. If a young person really knows his or her heart (interests) and head (abilities) then they can effectively communicate to others who they are and what differentiates them in the marketplace. This requires a period of discernment; it can’t happen in a weekend.

Students also need to be curious and courageous. Curiosity begets knowledge and being well-informed is key to being courageous. Sadly, though, I’m amazed at how incurious young people are today. So, even a mildly curious person will set him or herself apart quite readily. Being courageous is the best way to go from being a message-taker to an advisor. This is the key to a truly fulfilling career, one marked by greater relevance, upward mobility, and richer compensation. ●