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## Communication

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### From the Editor

In a conversation not so long ago, a manager with a lot of years on their career odometer bemoaned the fact that "there's nothing new under the sun." She was jaded, I suppose, because she had been hoping for a silver-bullet solution and what she got was what she had already tried.

"Perhaps there isn't anything new," a colleague responded. "That being the case, the only option we have is to change our perspective."

Nice, I thought. Innovation may not require us to *create* from new as much as it may require us to *see* new.

At LIVE Consultants, that's part of our job description: to help our clients look at how they do business, how they lead, how they coach, how they make change, and how they problem solve ... from a different point of view. When that happens, fresh possibilities appear.

*Marilyn Baetz, editor*

### About the Author and the Article

Can you ever know enough about interpersonal communication? I suspect not. It is complex, nuanced, layered, and fraught with a thousand and one traps. Become ensnared in one of those traps and you either spend time trying to "un-say" what you never intended to say or you walk away wondering why what should be so easy (this thing called communication), isn't.

Stephen adds to the dialogue on interpersonal communication by offering 5 suggestions about how to think about communication beyond merely the words we use.

Stephen is a partner in LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization which sponsors this publication.



*Stephen Baetz*

# Communicatin' Ain't So Easy

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My name is Stephen and I have an addiction. Oh nothing debilitating (at least I don't think so), nothing that causes others sleepless nights (as far as I know), and nothing that has prompted a family intervention (at least not yet).

Oops. Perhaps those observations alone are evidence that I'm in denial. Unfortunately I know of no 12-Step program that is willing or able to help those of us who are similarly addicted. And so I thought that, as my first step on the road to recovery, I would declare to you, the readers, what exactly my problem is. Taking personal responsibility is always the first step, isn't it? Here goes.

I'm addicted to wry. More precisely — so there is no confusion about what kind of wry — wry observations. Wit. Tightly-wrapped commentary. Pithy insight. Quotable quips.

There. I said it at last.

I know it doesn't sound like much of a problem to most people and, in the scheme of things, it isn't. It's just that I spent a lot of time looking for it. More time than I should, I suppose. Although how do I know what an appropriate amount of time should be or shouldn't be?

Oh, I've tried to self-analyze and figure out why. Perhaps I've come to the conclusion that there is too little humour in this world or not enough insight or both. Perhaps I am fascinated by the economy of it and how a little says a lot. Perhaps I am easily taken in by a quirky turn of phrase, or the hidden surprises, or the edginess, or the ...

You're right. Analyzing the source of an addiction is usually fascinating but not helpful.

On the other hand, maybe it's not an addiction, maybe it's merely a habit, an innocent habit, that is no more dysfunctional than looking both ways, washing my hands before a meal, or flossing. When I put it that way, maybe I don't have an addiction.

In fact, let me take back my misguided confession and share with you some of the best stuff I've uncovered lately. It has to do with improving the quality of interpersonal communication. And you have to admit that a habit dedicated to that end, can't be all bad.

## **Listen or your tongue will keep you deaf.**

American Indian proverb

A much recognized but under-utilized ability, this thing called listening. Who doesn't have some awareness that listening is the bedrock of interpersonal communication? How often do we wish we had only taken more time to listen more acutely to hear what was really being said? And yet, the desire to say what we think, to declare what we know, to demonstrate our mastery of verbal communication, often overrides any awareness that we have that listening first is the better option.

George Eliot put it nicely when he said, "Blessed is the man who, having nothing to say, abstains from giving us wordy evidence of the fact." Having nothing to say and dedicating lots of time to listening, requires us to feel comfortable with silence and to rely more on our ability to communicate without words.

For those of us who feel that others may label our silence as intellectual timidity, we ought to remind ourselves of this observation by Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr: "It is the province of knowledge to speak, and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen."

## **To look is to learn, if you listen carefully.**

Per Arnold

Those who listen least well are those who focus on the exact words that someone says and then, at a later time, feed back those words with a preface of "But you said ..." We've all heard the retort: "That may have been what I said, but that's not what I meant ... and you should've known that."

Those who are slightly better at listening pick up on the messages that are hidden in pitch, tone, intensity, cadence, and speed. They recognize that a yes is not always a yes and that a no can be a perhaps.

By contrast, the best listeners watch, they observe, they see what people mean. They also know that each of us has our own non-verbal vocabulary and they read the subtle differences and nuances in what each of us says through gesture, expression, and posture.

They listen by watching. They can hear the screaming rage in a throbbing cheek muscle; they can hear "I'm with you" in a raised eyelid. They observe when a smile is being born; they read melancholy in the eyes of others.

**Language exists to conceal true thought.**

Tallyrand

Those who know me well are not surprised that this quote by this French politician of the late 1700s would be a wry observation that would catch my eye. I have no idea whether the use of language to conceal is, more often than not, consciously intentional or whether it is an accident that happens occasionally when words fail us. Whether conscious or not, words and the sentences they make frequently are not the dutiful servants of our thoughts and ideas.

Why? From my observation, the most common reason for miscommunication is the desire to tell others what they want to hear. So we dress up the message, spin it, give undue emphasis to a segment of the whole, or edit parts that we believe won't be palatable. When that reason is coupled with the desire of the speaker to sound like they are in the know (by using jargon, acronyms, and buzzwords), the chance of true thoughts being communicated from one person to another becomes slim.

None of this argues, of course, for either bluntness or rudeness. Both decrease the chances that we will be heard. My suggestion is that we learn to speak plainly about what we think, what we know, what we feel as well as what we don't know. And when we do so, we ought to speak for only ourselves.

And oh yes, when communicating those ideas, be as brief as possible. Excessive language conceals despite its often well-intentioned motive to explicate. George Burns once observed that "The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending and to have the two as close together as possible." The counsel is not only valuable to the clergy but also to leaders, managers, coaches, mentors, educators, and salespeople.

**Those who write clearly have readers.**

Albert Camus

And those who communicate clearly have listeners. Clarity happens when we think about what we want to achieve prior to speaking and when we use language which the listener can hear. Saying whatever comes into our mind whenever it comes to our mind is best reserved for the psychiatrist's couch and for brainstorming.

Clarity, however, does not require us to dumb-down our language but to think about what words are best to use with the listeners we have and the purpose we are trying to achieve. Which means that in some situations, the language will be sparse and specific; and in other situations the language will have lush images, metaphors, and allusions.

**A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.** William James

And, if I may extend the observation to interpersonal communication, I'd say a great many people think they are communicating when all they are doing is rearranging their biases.

Sure enough, some communication is purely transactional: Do you want me to put this down here? What time is the meeting? And yes, some is ritual: How are you today? It was good to meet you. However, a good chunk of our communication ought to take us to places we haven't visited: past what we already know.

To do that, we need to have the ability to be self-conscious. Not the awkward, golly-gosh, ghee-whiz self-consciousness. But a self-consciousness that allows us to be aware of not only what we are communicating but why we are saying what we are saying. As we are speaking, gesturing, moving, however we communicate at the moment, we ought to be thinking about what our mental models are or what assumptions we are making to cause us to communicate what we have. Such an awareness moves us beyond merely rearranging our biases.

# Let's Stop Training And Let's Start Educating

Ever wonder why senior management views trainers as mechanics and the classroom as the service department where you send people to be fixed?

Senior executives didn't get that impression on their own.

Somehow or other that impression is there because our profession has helped to create it. Training has been used all too often as a quick fix. "Not performing? Let's send them on this training program, give them some basic skills, and see if it makes a difference."

It won't.

We owe it to our organizations to provide people with an education and get out of the quick-fix business. Education improves the quality of the organization's intellectual capital by not only building skills but also by building knowledge and the supporting attitudes. Education is a longer-term developmental process which helps people understand context and constraint. Education focuses as much on how to think as what to do. Besides, if the truth were told, most current performance problems are best addressed by the immediate manager on a one-to-one basis with specific coaching, support, and follow-up — not by mere classroom input and practice.

If our business is education, then a long-term development process should be what we offer and promise. To do that, we should

- be thoughtful about what attitudes, skills, and knowledge we help managers to learn,
- develop a variety of learning experiences — inside and outside the classroom — that complement one another,
- measure what contributions we are making to learning, and
- refuse to offer quick fixes.

If you would like some help in figuring out how you can best carry out the development work of an educator, please call us.

**For more information about our services, contact us at (519) 664-2213.**

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