Chapter 8

The Sovereignty of Communication

"You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can't get them across, your ideas won't get you anywhere."
Lee Iacocca

Mass Communications that Work

No one argues over how important or critical communications are in the life of any organization, but there is a lively debate on how communications can be done effectively, especially when it comes to dealing with organizations that have members with commitments scattered hither and yon.

Smaller volunteer organizations tend to put their communication eggs all in one or two baskets – a website or an e-mail mailing list or perhaps an old-fashioned newsletter – but the reality of the communication world in the 21st century is that people now have more communication choices than ever before. The profound irony of modern communications is that instead of making communications more uniform, the variety of choices has made communications instantaneous *only if you are on the right channel*. You can get news instantly – but only if you are there to get it. For all the benefits of modern technology, you still have to reach 'em where they is, not where they ain't.

The Conversation

When I was growing up, my dad opened a small hardware store in our neighborhood that serviced the west side of our town. Dad was very handy, knew how to fix a lot of things, was dedicated, and hardworking. He did whatever he could for the neighborhood and when someone brought him something that was broken, he tried to find ways to fix it. As the family business grew, we ended up sharpening tools, doing bicycle repairs, lawn mower repairs, and at one point my grandfather even fixed cuckoo clocks. Dad poured endless hours into that store to make a living for us, but what made him and the store so special wasn't everything he did, but how *engaged* Dad was. Gunther Hardware was a

> *Solid communication at the level of* conversation *is the doorway to the house, the ticket to the show, the way in, the grease on the gears, the tires on the car, and the premium gas in the tank.* Period.

gathering place. Dad made friends with everyone, or at least he tried to, and his secret to success was simply this: conversation. Dad talked to everyone and he sought to have meaningful conversations at every opportunity. What kept our little neighborhood hardware store alive for so long was not how well-stocked or how pretty it was. It was the guarantee of good conversation, solid information, and the friendships Dad made happen by engaging his customers.

As I moved into my professional career, I became part of a number of companies and operations, but the ones that were the most satisfying, rewarding, and meaningful were the ones that had leaders at the helm who understood the value of *great communication* and practiced that craft as if it were the same kind of conversation that went on at Dad's store. Every one of the wonderful mentors I've been blessed with has stressed in one way or another, the imperative of communicating well, and that by doing so in the most personal of ways, is *the* way to get the most traction with people.

Solid communication at the *level* of conversation is the doorway to the house, the ticket to the show, the way in, the grease on the gears, the tires on the car, and the premium gas in the tank. Period. Without it, everything else in an organization just *grinds.*

This may not be anything new. Any leader worth his or her salt understands this on some level, whether they practice it well or not. What almost everyone misses is that meaningful communication *inside* an organization or volunteer group happens differently than in any other kind of organization. It has to do with a principle I call *the sovereignty of communication.*

The Sovereignty of Communication

> *When it comes to volunteer members, the bottom line is simply this: Ya gotta reach 'em where they is, not where they ain't.*

If you work for someone other than yourself, the company you work for has probably set up a number of things for you to help keep you in the loop with the rest of the company. You probably have a desk, cubicle, or office assigned to you. Along with that, you probably have a phone extension perhaps with a unique number where you can be reached. You may have some kind of instant messaging system and may even have a video conferencing address or log-in that you are a part of. You may have been assigned a fax number, an e-mail address, or perhaps an in-house mailing address. The company and, maybe even your division or team, probably has an established routine set up for meetings and, whether it is formally established or just a matter of protocol, there is usually some form of internal memo patterns or reports that follow along established guidelines. These are all ways that you communicate with the rest of the company and the company communicates with you.

All of these things have been *assigned to you* by the company. The company has control over all of these. If you leave the company or, God forbid, you are fired, all of these connections go away. The company is in control of all the communication channels – *it* determines how you will communicate regardless of whether *you* like using a particular system or not. *It* – the organization, or more specifically, *the leadership* of the organization – has the *sovereignty* of communications.

However, if you take a look at the local mutual interest or skills organization you belong to, whether it is a hobby club, church, Scout troop, etc., in the vast majority of cases, your group does not dictate much of anything in the way of communication channels *to* you – certainly not in the way your company does. Some communication protocols may exist, and most of the time those will be pretty informal, but your church is not going to issue you an e-mail address, give you a phone number, tell you what pew to sit in, and give you a Twitter account. *You* pick all of that. *You* choose your personal e-mail account and give it to folks you *want* to communicate with. *You* contract for a phone number, pay the bill, and choose who you will take calls from and who you won't, who you will text, or who will have to wait for a response. *You* choose which e-mails to respond to and which to ignore (or delete) and when you might visit the group's website and for what reasons. *You* ultimately are in control of how you send and receive information to and from the groups you belong to. *You*, the *individual member*, have the ultimate control over what you are willing to pay attention

to and *how* you *prefer* to get your information. *You* – the member – possess the *sovereignty* of communication, NOT the leadership.

Let that sink in for a minute.

At the very least, this puts most volunteer organizations and the leadership of those ORGs at a distinct *dis*advantage. Not only does the leadership have to figure out *how* to reach you, it also has to reach you in a way that you will pay attention.

Here is the *real* kicker – while many ORGs will ask for your address, phone number, and e-mail address as a matter of course when you apply to join – *rarely* do they ever ask you something like, "What are your three preferred ways of receiving communication?"

What this really means is that most ORGs desperately need to reach their members to keep them motivated and focused on what is going on in the group, and yet haven't the foggiest idea how to reach each member in a way that will command their attention because the leadership does not possess the sovereignty of communication – the member does. Blissfully ignorant of this *vital dynamic*, most volunteer ORGs struggle to communicate with their members in ways that leverage responses and then blame the lack of involvement on members that don't care.

This is called *attribution error*.

The *real* problem is that members probably don't know what is going on because they have never gotten the message in a way that they will pay attention to and in a timely enough manner to make sure that they *want* to participate, or at least understand the need and obligation to.

You see, it really goes back to what I was saying in the beginning about Dad's store and what made it so successful. It is all about *conversation* and in order to have a genuine and meaningful conversation, you first have to be able to communicate using preferred channels. In a volunteer organization, that means reaching out to them *their* way.

When it comes to volunteer members, the bottom line is simply this: Ya *gotta reach 'em where they is, not where they ain't.*

The Power of Sovereignty

All the other things hinge on who ultimately has the sovereignty of communications.

I suspect that many with management, leadership, or human resource experience will say something to the effect of, "Well, this is simple, Tim. You just tell them how they will get their information. Just establish the channels for them." It seems to make sense, but if you truly feel that way, you have misunderstood the power of the independent mind and nature of volunteer members. The wildcard in this is *commitment*. Dictating works on employees in a company because even if they don't like it, they may still be motivated enough by their paycheck and benefits to do what they otherwise would never get around to. But most volunteer organizations don't have those pressure points or that kind of leverage that can be used on their volunteer members. For that matter, turning someone into an employee is an automatic means of raising the level of expectation with regard to their commitment. A level a volunteer may not be thrilled about.

You see, a key fact often overlooked or obscured when dealing with volunteers, and a key point leaders of small groups need to really understand, is that first and foremost, volunteers *volunteer* their time. They give their time when they want to, and not a moment before. If they

hear about an event that isn't all that attractive to them, the vast majority will find something else to do. If you treat them poorly, ignore them, make them do things they don't like or endure things they wouldn't normally put up with, don't expect them to hang in there and hang around. They will, as my dad used to say, "Take their bat and ball and go find somewhere else to play."

Get this dynamic straight: What they endure at work, especially if they don't care much for it, will NOT be endured when they are on their own in your organization. Expect them *not* to put up with it, and to probably tell you about it in no uncertain terms. If they don't tell you, rest assured, they will tell their neighbors – something no small neighborhood or community organization can afford. So the stakes are higher when trying to get it right with volunteers, much higher.

"But they have an obligation to the organization!" I hear you say. To which I ask, "Obligation?"

Which comes first? The cart or the horse?

In volunteer settings, *obligation* is something the leadership *has to earn* – over and over and over again. It doesn't stop. You gain a sense of obligation from members once you have convinced them that the vision, mission, and goals of your organization are worthwhile and worth their time. You *earn* obligation when you have communicated frequently enough and well enough and effectively enough to earn their commitment. A sense of obligation is a direct result of their sense of commitment.

Little or no communication equals little or no commitment.

No commitment equals no obligation.

Do you see how this works? You simply cannot expect members to do anything just because they signed up. The initial enthusiasm that caused them to join will only go so far – and, on average, that it is a *shockingly short* distance. As a leader you have to make volunteers want to participate because you don't really have the leverage to compel participation the way you might at work. If you do succeed, it will probably be short-lived since most people belong to these kinds of groups because of the joy it brings them on some level. And when you quit making it fun or something deeply and personally rewarding and turn it into work, then your volunteers will simply go away.

So again, you have to *reach them where they is, not where they ain't*. It applies to the channels of communication you use and it applies to the way, and the what, you communicate as well.

The sovereignty of communication truly belongs to the members in all-volunteer organizations – *they* are leading the dance steps. Leaders need to understand that and adjust to the dance accordingly, or they won't have dance partners for very long.

Their Way

So what would the results be if we, as leaders, actually did it their way? What would that *really* mean?

To grasp the difference in the dance, you have to change the way you think about or conceive of your volunteer members. Instead of thinking about them as being like unpaid employees (something most of us default to without even thinking about it), volunteer members need to be thought of as something much closer to *customers*. Volunteers choose to participate, choose to belong, and choose to get news about your group more like they are

consumers and *not hired help*. This really is the transformational key. As a leader, if you want one constant guiding premise on to how to handle anything with your volunteer members, always think of them as your *customers*, and you can't go wrong.

If you approach them as customers, then the issue of internal communications with them becomes much more an exercise of seeking dialog than making statements or announcements. Instead of putting up a website as one of only a few ways of communicating with your group, and then expecting them to eagerly come to visit, you need to think in terms of going out and finding your lost sheep and making sure they get the message, regardless of which way the message needs to go out or what the message might be. By doing this, you will begin to approach communications as an act of winning them over, convincing them again and again of the worthiness of your product, and getting them to invest in it. What they will give in return is their time and money.

From a leadership standpoint, this brings the constant pitching of the group's vision, mission, and goals into sharp focus, as does the need to continually mention them at every opportunity. From a personal standpoint, it will force you as a leader to be far more personable with your members, respecting them and treating them more like family, than expecting things from them that you may not have earned yet. In doing so you will make the first steps towards building rapport, which is so vital to the survival of any volunteer organization, but also make transmission of any message far easier. Once you have earned their respect and given them the understanding that they matter as individual members – each and every one – getting them to pay attention and give their commitment will be far easier.

This cascade effect of benefits generated by thinking of your members as being much more like customers continues with you as a leader getting to know them better, understanding what makes them tick, and anticipating what they will want and what they might be willing to do. Again, I saw this over and over again in my Dad's store. He got to know many of his customers as personal friends and, in doing so, knew the kinds of thing they might be interested in. He would then act as a connector between his customers and the product and services he could offer them. In exchange, he earned a level of loyalty that helped our little store live long past when the doors and windows should otherwise have been shuttered. It works the same way in any volunteer organization. If you, as a leader and your leadership team, act in a way that conveys that you are the lookouts for opportunities to do what your members really want to do, and then double down by acting as the facilitators to get those activities rolling, they will participate and respect your leadership, because that's what leadership really is!

Semaphore Syndrome – A Failure to Communicate

The biggest mistake most ORGs make is not *fully* understanding the significance of *quality* member communications.

Simply put, communication efforts with your membership *is not* just an event. It *is not* just an activity. It *is not* something you just do once you decide to let your people know what you have planned or is important news to the group. Communications is all of that, but attitudes and mindsets similar to this dilute the importance and power of internal ORG communications.

Get this straight from the start: *Quality internal communications to your members is your ORG's life blood. It is the lynchpin that holds the vision, mission, and operation together. It is the keystone holding up the rest of*

the organization's operations. It is the conduit that brings the power of solid leadership to your people. Face it, if you are unwilling to put forth the effort to get this part of the organizational management and leadership done fully, pack up and go home now. Save yourself and all those around you all the wasted time, effort, and agony that will surely follow from a failed attempt at trying to get your ORG healthy and working at maximum efficiency. Because, *without quality communications, you are dead in the water.*

The biggest failing of modern ORGs, and perhaps even in business itself, is understanding that quality communication begins *with the consistency of doing it.* Tech, webs, cells, tweets, PR experts, English majors, and all the rest, are all useless window dressing unless you are *really* out there communicating. We take all that other stuff and put it ahead of *the act*, and as a result, ORGs are notoriously *bad* at communicating.

Want proof? Marinate on this for a moment: Many ORGs now have webmasters. How many still have a position called "Communications Secretary" and of those that do, what does the Communications Secretary actually do or manage?

Every time I have dealt with, seen, or heard about an ORG that was in trouble, close examination revealed that poor internal communications were *always* part of the mix, if not at the heart of the matter.

Leaders do not seem to understand that poor communications is not just overlooking follow through on a pre-event action item. Poor ORG communications is not an organizational thing we didn't have time for. Poor internal communications with your members is not just an annoying thing that we all tend to push to the back as an act of collective procrastination.

Let's call a spade a spade here: Poor internal communications is a *failure* to communicate internally with your members – a *critical failure*. It is as bad a failure *of organizational stewardship* as the treasurer having no clue what the balance in the checkbook is or the leadership blowing the treasury on a personal junket to Bermuda. It's a cancer. It's the termites that will eat away at your ORG from the inside out. But here's the worst news of all: The effects of poor internal ORG communications are hardly ever static. Poor internal communication is destructive. It is literally a *silent* killer. If you are not doing a top notch job of communicating to your members, whether you realize it or not, your ORG is suffering. You just haven't gotten the message yet.

You reap what you sow, and as true as that statement is for the quality of the lives we lead, it is a pivotal statement for our organizations.

It is as fundamental an understanding of organizational health as fully comprehending that organizational health depends upon good management that, at its core, is all about leading well, which is *dependent* on the quality of communications.

A leader needs to do a number of things well, but if the leader is a lousy communicator it won't be long before *any* leadership initiative grinds to a halt – essentially stillborn for lack of the critical messages that need to be conveyed.

What it does take, and what most ORGs fail to do well is *make the effort*. For most, the effort is lackluster, partial, and incomplete – and the ORG reaps what it sows, or, more accurately, what it *fails* to sow.

Quality communications is *so* simple. It does not take any special tools or skills. It doesn't need anything high tech. Those things can help, but before you use them, you have to do one thing and do it well, over and over again – ***you have to reach your audience where they is, not where they ain't.***

Again, to be clear on this, in corporate settings, lines of internal communication are usually mandated by the company and the systems the company uses. Employees are issued a telephone extension or cell, given a company e-mail

address, assigned a place to sit or an office or station where they can be found. Every company has established ways of getting information out to their employees and this is so automatic and assumed that most of us don't even give that a second thought. It's just the way things are done.

But when you get to church or your bowling league, your hobby or hunting club, or the non-profit you volunteer at, the assumed lines of communication usually aren't *actually* there, and most of us are not aware of that either. The ORG assumes automatically that you use your phone, e-mail, and snail mail as your primary ways of communicating. You, on the other hand, default to your own ways of communicating – the ones that you – the receiver – establish and prefer. And here is the first major communication problem experienced by most ORGs: *how does the ORG know where you are?*

This is exactly what I ran into when I assumed the Ranger's position at Camp Acahela in the Poconos of Pennsylvania. When I got there in early 2004, Acahela was a neglected mess. I needed to get some help quickly and put the word out to our volunteers that I needed help. But little in the way of help came. For the first year I had only a handful of helpers and it took almost a year before I realized that my pleas and calls for help were not getting through.

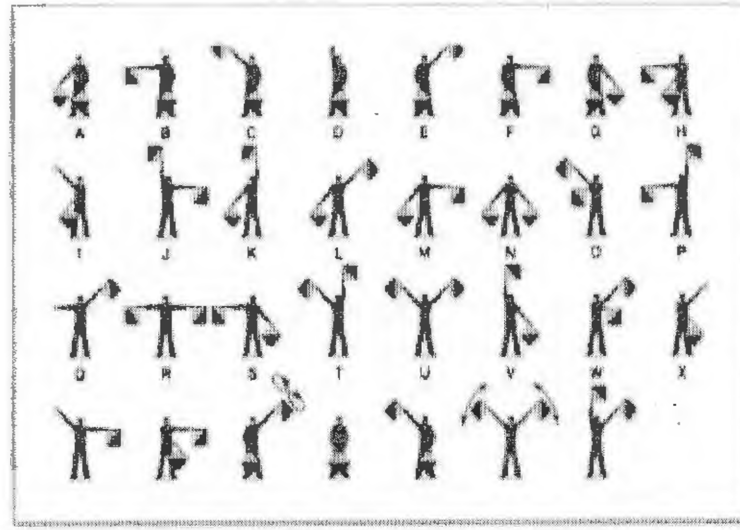
This was a mystery. The professionals at the office had advised that I announce work weekends on our website and to send out bulk e-mails to the list of volunteers they had, but, generally no one ever showed up. Sometimes, several old-timers would come, and I assumed that they had gotten the messages – that is until Charlie Jackson clarified the whole situation for me. The conversation went something along the lines of me thanking Charlie for showing up for a planned work weekend, to which he replied, "What work weekend?" I was confused. "Aren't you here to help out today?" I asked. He replied that he was, but he didn't know about any work weekend. I was even more confused. "It was on the website and e-mails were sent out," I said. He scoffed and told me he didn't know anything about that and that he didn't even own a computer. Even more confused, I said something like, "Well how the heck am I supposed to get in touch with you?" That's when he started poking his finger in my chest and growled something akin to, "Send me a postcard. Call me on my house phone. But don't bother with that computer stuff – I haven't got one, and neither do any of the other guys coming up here to help you." He quit poking my chest and just stared at me like I had rocks in my head – which, at that point, was exactly how I felt.

It never occurred to me that none of the regulars who were showing up didn't have a computer. I had just been following Council instructions to send out e-mails and post notices on the website to get help because I assumed they knew what they were doing. When I finally sat down and thought about it, I realized that almost none of the volunteers were coming to me from those notices, and if that wasn't working, then how was I supposed to get in touch with any volunteer? Out of stunned curiosity, I started asking any volunteer helper or potential helper I ran into what their favorite ways of getting messages were and I was shocked. As crazy as it sounds, it quickly became apparent that the council and I were really clueless when it came to communicating with my volunteers at the camp. You see, the basic problem that Charlie helped drive home so clearly is that, in most volunteer scenarios, the communication channels *are really based on the preferences of the volunteers or members*. In other words, ***you have to reach 'me where they is, not where they ain't.***

Semaphore Syndrome

The old communication signaling technique called Semaphore is a perfect example of this phenomenon. Semaphore is essentially signaling with flags. If you want to send a message, you spell the message out using a code where each letter of the alphabet and numerals is represented

by the way the sender holds the flags as shown in the illustration below.



The military and groups like the Boy Scouts and US Forest Service used to use this technique for line of sight communications between locations or ships for decades. The Navy still uses the code to communicate between ships in close proximity, such as during refueling procedures at sea. It is a handy way of being able to communicate, but it also has a few drawbacks based upon what it was designed to do.

As simple and easy as semaphore may be to use, one thing absolutely *must* happen, or the entire system falls apart: The message receiver has to be paying attention and watching for an incoming message. Semaphore, as it was taught in Scouts, even has an "acknowledged" signal to confirm the receiver got the message – but they have to *see* the message first.

Obvious, right?

Your ORG may have Semaphore Syndrome if:

- You have not accounted for the fact that *receiver* established channels *are based on personal preference.*
- Sender is usually ignorant of the receiver's preferences or capabilities.
- Sender defaults to several streamlined ways of communicating in the name of efficiency or ease of use for those doing the work, without considering receiver preferences.
- ORGs generally fail to differentiate between passive and active communication techniques.
- Many of the common default communication techniques used are passive.
- Worst offense of all in this generation: "Timely" communications usually are not.

First of all, both the sender and receiver have to be proficient enough to send the signals and decode them clearly (this includes knowing how to spell of course). The sender and receiver both have to be in clear sight of each other and able to clearly see the position of the flags. Most of all, the sender and receiver need to know where the other is. Semaphore is an interactive form of communication – both parties actively have to participate. So if the sender is up there on a hill wagging his flags for all he's worth, the receiver needs to be paying attention. This means the receiver *has to be watching for and properly interpreting the message*. In a best case scenario, and working the way the creators of the system intended, both parties send signals to indicate a readiness to receive the message, receive the message itself, and acknowledge receipt of the message. This may sound cumbersome, but until the last decade or so, and before the introduction of cell phones and inexpensive handheld radios, semaphore was pretty efficient.

Back in the early seventies when I was trying to pass my First Class rank tests in Boy Scouts, learning semaphore or Morse code was still part of the Scouting requirements. It

seemed like a pretty good idea at the time, but let me take a moment to frame this in the technology of the time to give you some perspective. Wrist radios existed only in the minds of the author and fans of Dick Tracey, the closest thing to a cell phone was Captain Kirk's communicator from *Star Trek*, and the CB craze was just getting started. Getting a message from one side of the lake at an encampment to the other meant you either walked around the lake or sent a signal.

Semaphore has some drawbacks too. It is imperative that the signaler and receiver *pay attention to each other* and *know where the other is* at the appointed times to insure the message gets through. It is also entirely dependent on the sender and receiver being proficient at the code and spelling. If the system was used as intended, and the sender *and* receiver could spell, then things usually went pretty smoothly. But when proficiency wasn't what it should be, or if the sender *or* receiver wasn't very good with the code, interpreting the code or spelling, mayhem would quickly follow.

The absolute worst scenario was when one or the other party simply wasn't where they should be or paying attention. Young teenage boys are not the most patient or attentive things in the world, so getting distracted, missing an appointed time, getting lost on the way to where you were supposed to be, or any number of other possibilities could effectively kill *any* communication efforts. And in the field on a camping trip, you usually had one of two choices in communicating: Using a code like semaphore or Morse code, or walking over to someone to pass the message along. This makes the potential for communication failures imminent and pretty commonplace. Thankfully, a solution is easy, as long as you ae willing to reach your members *where they is, and not where they ain't!*

Chapter 9

The Flexible Matrix Solution

"The most important trip you may take in life is meeting people halfway."
Henry Boye

Flexible Matrix Communications – How to Solve Semaphore Syndrome

The solution to Semaphore Syndrome is a classic illustration of why this handbook is called *Tweaks*. There is not one, huge, earth-shattering idea that changes the internal communications paradigm in ORGs. It is understanding and using an array of simple, small changes to get your communications efforts into alignment with what your members want and need. More than anything else, this collection of ideas is designed to break the stranglehold that current thought and practice has on ORGs when it comes to the issue of internal communications.

Start with the Failures

It should be clear from the previous chapter if your ORG has a case of Semaphore Syndrome and, if so, how bad it is. Before you can fix what is wrong with your ORG's internal communications, you have to understand where things are not working. In general terms, especially in volunteer organizations, the failures can be any one or a combination of the items in this list:

- Not understanding you are competing for your members' attention and time.
- Not knowing what communication channels your members prefer.

- Assuming the channels (methods) you are using are sufficient.
- Relying upon one or two channels to handle all internal communications.
- Relying on one person to handle all the internal and external communications.
- Messages to members are too infrequent.
- Messages to members are sent out much too late.
- Messages are far too routine.
- There is no understanding on the part of the leadership about active and passive communication techniques.
- Unrealistic expectations about member participation.
- Defaulting to a "corporate" communication mindset.

Each one of these on their own can spell trouble for an ORG, but when you start combining them together, the effect quickly multiplies. They also tend to reinforce each other, so that one bad approach supports another and so on. It's like bad, home-brewed chemistry. For example, ammonia has fallen out of favor as a household cleaning agent because it makes most people gag. Chlorine isn't much better. Both compounds are still included in many cleaners even though breathing either of them is not very healthy. However, things get really bad when you combine something like Mr. Clean (lots of ammonia) with Comet (a chlorine cleanser). The result is a chemical reaction between the two that can create ammonium chloride which is seriously toxic. This same kind of wicked additive chemistry is what you get when you combine some of these seemingly inoffensive communication problems and not fully comprehend how destructive or incapacitating they can be. Ammonium chloride won't simply make you gag more than ammonia or chlorine; it will make you pass out first before it kills you – much the same way combined internal communications problems will cause an ORG to pass out long before it finally squeezes the life out of the ORG entirely.

Competing for Their Attention

You may be thinking that this whole communications problem is easy to fix by simply mandating where your members need to go in order to get information. However, that ignores some very important paradigms that go right to the heart of how volunteer organizations differ from corporate organizations. Unless you have ever had the experience of actually leading volunteers, you are very likely not to going to believe this. There is a prevailing belief in leadership circles that the hardest and most difficult form of leading occurs in corporate settings. After all, it takes a *professional* to get it right – at least that's what most people think. But corporate leadership benefits from the leverage that is part of the employment agreement. That is, if you do your job well enough, you get to keep it. In fact, most employers will be kind enough to make it worth your while by paying you and giving you benefits. That *does* have the effect most of the time of keeping an employee at work when they would rather be home taking a nap or playing golf, and it *does* provide leaders and managers with at least some modicum of leverage when dealing with their employees.

As I've said before, volunteers and ORG members do what they do because *they want to*, not because they *have to*. They pick and choose their participation and, with the jam-packed lives we all lead nowadays, you often have to compete for their attention. If they don't like what they are told or don't agree with what they are instructed to do, they are very likely to take their coffee and go home to find something more entertaining to do. This is not an exaggeration, it is a fact. The leverage point a leader has with volunteers is not the employment agreement, but the vision and purpose of the organization and if it happens to be something the volunteer wants to support. It's all about what they are willing to do. So, knowing that, it is simply wiser and more efficient to reach your membership by *their* preferences, not *yours*, especially on the front end of getting an ORG back into healthy shape.

Mandating any line of communication can come much later in the process after the culture and consistent operations of the group are firmly in place. Even so, you always have to remember the difference between what drives a volunteer (desire and passion) and what drives an employee (leverage) and never, ever forget it.

Where are They? - Begin with What You Know

As I have said before, the principle you are trying to engage is simply this: *Ya gotta reach 'em where they is, not where they ain't.* The most obvious way to start that process is to use what you *do* know. This may sound ridiculously simple, but it is amazing how often this is overlooked in ORGs.

Please understand, I'm saying this from practical experience. I've made this same mistake several times over. After a good six months or more of working with the few volunteers I had in the very beginning of working as a Ranger at Camp Acahela, it *still* hadn't registered with me that none of these old guys probably had a computer or Internet access. I simply *assumed* they did. Then again, I never took the time to ask. I never got personal enough with each of them to find out. *That* changed immediately after the chest poking I got from Charlie Jackson.

I had one rudimentary list of volunteers left for me from the previous Ranger and another from my boss. Neither had a lot of information, and most of it was really old, but at least it was a start. I called everyone on the list, let them know I was the new Ranger and that I was updating my list of volunteers – could I update their information and count on their help in the future? When I started, I thought I was doing some fact finding, but I soon discovered that this was even more of an exercise in relationship building and I switched gears. Here was a chance to share a little of the vision I had for the camps and instill some sense that I was trying to get things moving again.

It also gave the folks I was talking to a chance to vent some of their frustrations and concerns over things that had occurred in the past. I didn't want to get tangled up in a lot of that, but it was long overdue and was something I needed to listen to in order to get a better sense of what had happened. In the long run I ended up with a better understanding of how my grand old High Adventure Base had devolved into a barely functional Cub Camp. Giving the volunteers a chance to vent was like draining an infected wound. Some were so frustrated that they vented and said they had had enough and their time of service was done. Those received my sincere thanks and I told them I would keep them posted on progress in the future and that the door was always open in case they changed their minds. Others had their interest piqued enough to want to know more, while more than half were eager to help. All of this came with a willingness to want to know more of what was going on and what opportunities there would be to help. In the end, working the old list gave me far more than I bargained for or could have ever imagined, even as I reestablished the best ways to communicate with my volunteers!

On the opposite end of the spectrum, I had a recent experience with a local hobby club that underscores how damaging it can be to ignore the principle outlined above.

A national chapter of a large model building organization had a list provided to them by their national headquarters that had over 150 names, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses on it. Most clubs would *kill* for a list like that. In addition to what their national office provided, they also had several club lists accumulated over the course of several years that had another 50 or so members or past members with the same kind of information on it. So far, so good.

They had a major annual event coming up and spent several months ironing out a new website, complete with a

new domain name. They sent out a few tacit announcements and passed around some fliers announcing the annual event. In years past, about 200 people would show for the event. This time, about a dozen people showed. Not so good. What happened?

Well, a bunch of little things all added up to hobble what had been a big success in the past. A change of location and a change of domain name certainly didn't help. But the biggest failing was that the Board really didn't have a solid handle on where their 200 potential members were – and they steadfastly ignored working this major asset. Instead of actively chasing down their members to let them know what was happening, much in the same way I did at Acahela, they relied on a number of rather passive attempts to communicate and they paid the price for it.

However, that isn't the worst failing, believe it or not.

At the Board meeting immediately after the lackluster showing, the Board discussed what happened and concluded, much to my dismay that, "members nowadays simply don't care."

Really? Seriously?

This obviously wasn't the first time I've ever heard a leadership group conclude this. The leadership team at the Scout council said the same thing about the Acahela volunteers. I've heard this over and over again from a number of leaders and leadership groups, but it rarely has anything to do with the potential drive of their members. It has far more to do with the lousy, poor, and uninformed way ORGs try to communicate with their members. They violate the idea of: *Ya gotta reach 'em where they is, not where they ain't,* and then blame the members for the results.

This principle, or more precisely, the violation of it, is rampant in our organizations – professional or volunteer –

and it has to do with the level of effort and commitment of the leadership to do a craftsman-like job in communicating, and that often comes because assumptions are made about what needs to happen and how it should be done.

Find Out What Communication Channels Your Members Prefer

As I mentioned earlier, the primary reason for chasing down what members you do know about is not only to find out if they are still willing to help, but what is the best way to get news to them of events and work sessions. At Acahela, I asked each one, "What are the three best ways for me to reach you? What ways am I guaranteed to be able to get news to you about what we are doing, and know that you will pay attention to it?" Two things immediately happened. First, the reaction I got most of the time was a chuckle and something like, "Well, gee, I never thought about that. Let's see. Uhmm," and then eventually we zeroed in on the three best ways *for each member.* That provided the second thing which, still to this day, always fascinates me – and that *is the wide variety of communication preferences people have.*

Again, think about this for a minute. Modern communications are *supposed* to streamline the way we communicate - to make communication more efficient and to basically standardize how we pass information back and forth between one another. But instead, all we have really done is multiply *the number of ways* to communicate, or what I refer to as "channels." That is what makes it so hard to know what your members are paying attention to. Nowadays there are a bewildering number of choices:

- Landline telephone
- Cell phone
- Work number
- Fax
- Video face-to-face

- Video messaging
- Standard e-mail
- Facebook messages
- Facebook posts
- Twitter tweets
- Internet messaging
- Text messaging
- Calendar invites
- Paging
- Radio or Plectron
- Postcards
- Newsletters by post
- Special letters or appeals by post
- Newsletters by e-mail
- Special letters or appeals by e-mail
- Face-to-face verbal communications
- Hand-outs at meetings
- Websites
- Internet forums
- Bulletin boards
- Advertising or newsprint articles

That's just for starters!

Picking three channels that each member prefers *is not* a democratic exercise in finding out what three channels or methods are *most* popular so you can focus on those. It is truly a matter of discovering how each *individual* member *prefers* to be communicated with. If you take the time to do that, and then actually communicate with them in those preferred ways, the results are far more productive than any other technique you can use.

In this process of discovery I can guarantee that you will eventually stumble across something else that is not on the list above. In the development where I live for example, the community communicates with its residents by leaving newsletters and bulletins under a rock each of us has at the end of our carports. I'm not kidding! The community leadership cannot legally leave unposted material in the mailboxes, so the driveway rocks serve as the mailboxes for "official" or important community news. Since I live in Arizona, we don't worry too much about inclement weather, so the "Mailrocks" are actually a lot more efficient and are far more functional than it may sound. When residents see something under their carport rock, they know it's important. It works because *it reaches them where they is, not where they ain't.*

Don't Assume You Know

Use the Matrix strategy even if you already have a list that contains a couple of methods of reaching your members. Why? You need to *confirm* their preferences. Don't assume. In the hobby club I mentioned earlier, when I poled the Board members what their preferences were, two significant things became clear: 1) the Board wasn't paying any attention to the channels they created for the other members and, 2) texting was the most preferred method of effectively reaching Board members. Ironically, texting was not anywhere in that ORG's communications scheme. Unfortunately, it never occurred to anyone on the Board that if they weren't following their own scheme, there was little chance their members were either. This ORG simply had no clue how to effectively and efficiently communicate with its members and this, in turn, compounded other problems as they tried to move their ORG forward.

The lesson here is to do the legwork you need to in order to reconnect with your membership on a *personal* level and find out what *exactly* what they prefer. Then once you have done that, begin to do the same with every new member and possible contact you can find. After attempting to track down all of the old volunteers at my camp, I then started showing up at events where I knew I could get in touch with other possible volunteers, both in Scouting and around the

community. *Everyone* got the same questions when it came to staying in touch: *What are the three best ways for me to reach you? What ways am I guaranteed to be able to get news about what we are doing to you, or know that you will pay attention to it?* In doing so, you are letting them know you are serious about communicating, and the response will tend to be more reciprocal than if you make the communication question a secondary piece of information gathering or an afterthought. You are, in essence, cueing up your audience by asking for their preferences.

Use a Matrix to Communicate

Once you have gathered all the communication preferences, the best way to manage it is to create a Matrix using a database, spreadsheet, or some other kind of list. You will probably discover a fascinating array of member preferences – it will be a real mix – but the Matrix will help you keep things straight. Each time you have a key or major event, be sure to let your membership and interested parties know by using the matrix to get the word out. The same goes for the usual monthly announcements and newsletters – use the matrix as the basis for sending out the information.

So how does this actually work? Say, for example, you have 33 members. Each member has three preferences, so the total possible preferred ways of communicating will be 99 (3 times 33). When you look at the 99 possibilities, 20 may be e-mails, 25 may be text messages, 12 may be postcards, 15 may be cell calls, and so on. Therefore, you create a message that can go to each of these preferred channels, then send the tailored message to each, by sending out the e-mails, the text messages, the postcards, etc. This is, without a doubt, more complex and time consuming then sending one blanket e-mail or posting it to your website, but there are multiple trade-offs. The biggest trade-off of all is insuring that *all* of your membership and interested parties have received a message via channels *they prefer*. There will be a much higher percentage of folks actually seeing the news and paying attention to it. By reaching them on *multiple* preferred channels, you are not only letting them know the message is important, but one channel acts to reinforce the other – remember that you are competing for their attention as much as you are competing for their participation. Again, aside from reaching your people where they are most likely paying attention, the extra effort also communicates a willingness and concern on the part of the leadership to pay attention to the member's specific wants and needs.

The Generational Phenomenon

One of the stranger things I ran into as I continued to use the Matrix was that, in some ORGs, the span of technologies preferred by members and interested parties can be pretty impressive. By the time I left the Boy Scouts as a Ranger, I was reaching my maintenance volunteers with a wild array of preferences that spanned postcards for the old-timers and text messages and tweets for the teens – and just about everything in between. While this sounds like an operational nightmare, it actually wasn't that bad and if I had to look at it in a negative light, I preferred to see it as a "*success problem.*" It truly indicated that the programs we were running and the interest we were generating were cutting across a bunch of boundaries and genuinely reaching a wide cross section of our total volunteer population.

Don't Assume the Channels you are Using Are Sufficient

The other near fatal assumption leaders tend to make about their ORG's internal communications is that the communications regimen they have in place is *sufficient* or *adequate*. If you stop and think about it, the question should *not* be, "Is our communications regimen *adequate* or *sufficient?*" However, it seems that most ORGs think in terms like that. The question *should be,* "Did we get the message to *everyone*?" If you are honest and use a critical eye, using anything less than the Matrix to communicate to

ORG members and interested parties will likely yield an automatic, "No."

In addition to the story I related earlier about the hobby club, I can cite more examples of where the leadership of an ORG assumed that the communications situation was covered when it really wasn't. Often, those leadership decisions in the name of expediency or convenience lead to self-destructive communication strategies. For example, one state conference in a church congregation on the east coast decided that it would be a great idea to create an electronic (e-version) of their newsletter that would go out to all their lay volunteers. Initially, members received both the printed version by post and the e-version by e-mail, with the promise that members would continue to receive both. (Mind you, the denomination didn't ask which they preferred.) At some point, someone in the congregation decided that this was redundant, so the snail mail version was halted – but many of the members were older without any capacity or desire to receive the electronic version. Participation dropped as a result, but no one at the denomination seemed to connect the dots that the reason might have something to do with communicating to fewer members. It took time for members to realize that they were not getting the newsletter. The problem did not surface at the leadership level until they started getting calls asking if the newsletters had been discontinued. Aside from sending the unintended message that the administration didn't care about older, non-computer savvy members, it illustrates how assumptions like these can kill active participation and frustrate volunteers into quitting or giving up.

ORG leadership must apply careful thought to the entire process to insure that everyone is covered and taken care of. Even then, the best well-intended effort can fall short. A major university, for example, installed a program where students and staff could be notified immediately of any threat, danger, or crisis and provided instructions or direction to make sure everyone remained safe. The system sends text messages to cell phones to make the notifications, but a big problem that seemed to escape everyone at first was that most staff members are not allowed to have their cell phones on or out on their desks – a rule designed to insure the integrity of student record confidentiality. This would not be so bad if it accounted for only a handful of staff members, but the number of individuals affected are in the hundreds. The lack of global awareness of this confidentiality rule coupled with the assumption that *everyone* carries a cell phone meant that the administration confidently believed everyone was now safe, and as a result, no other form of immediate notification was worked out to provide any form of communication back-up. This is not only a breach in smooth and complete communications, but creates a potentially dangerous situation where a large number of staff members could miss important communiques. The lesson here is not to assume your communication regimen has it all covered. You need to walk through the *entire* process to insure everyone can get the message in more than one way and then go out and check!

Routinely Use More than One Channel

Compounding a lack of clarity or understanding where members are, when ORGS try communicating with them, is that ORGs frequently default to using only one or two channels or methods to do it. Again, call it expediency, call it convenience, or call it a lack of understanding, but using only one or two ways to communicate with your members is a sure-fire way to hobble far more than just your communication efforts. We have already seen that ORG members, especially volunteers, communicate by a different set of rules than employees. You will always have to give some level of consideration to the independent nature of your members – how they think, how they act, and what they might be willing to do. You can't take these points for granted the same way you would if you were dealing with employees.

You cannot simply dictate how they will receive their information either as you reduce your effectiveness by doing so because they say, "Well, OK, I won't participate if that's what it takes," or, "It's too inconvenient," or, "Too much trouble." If you are a fisherman, you know you need to cast the net to catch the fish. The fish usually don't seek out the net and simply jump in. Why we think members are more likely to find the net and jump in is a testament to our overconfidence in what our ORGs are offering our members. In fact, if we are making our members take the initiative on this level of communications, then the program side of things must not be functioning at a high level of efficiency either – meaning a member has to work at finding out little to nothing is actually going on. That spells automatic *disillusionment.*

If you know the channels your members prefer, use them. If you don't, use an array of them and find out for sure.

Use more than One Person to get the Job Done

We will explore the idea of being sure folks are in the right jobs for the best possible reasons a bit later, but for now, let's take a look at the old-fashioned idea of a Communications Secretary and how to get this communications job done.

Years ago it was pretty common for organizations to have two secretaries on their Executive Boards, not just one. The Recording Secretary took care of keeping the records and minutes of the group, while the Communications Secretary took care of all the correspondence and might double as the newsletter editor. That was 50 years ago, and since then I've seen that most ORGs of less than 250 members have dispensed with having two secretaries and combined the responsibilities. This, in most cases, has yielded the result that the communications side of the job falls by the wayside. The level of effort applied to the position just isn't there the way our grandparents used to do it, and the associated tasks are quickly becoming a lost art.

Let's be honest here too. Many ORGs suffer from too few volunteers willing to step up and help run the ORG. When it comes time to fill the elected officer positions, there is a split between folks wanting a position for the prestige of it and finding a body to fill a spot where the member won't have to spend that much time. Yes, there are plenty of volunteers out there that understand the joke of, "The job only takes an hour or so a week," when they are spending far more time on it than that, but the norm is more likely to be the job needs about 3 hours a week and the member tasked with it is spending 15 minutes before the meeting banging out the report so they don't show up empty handed. That isn't getting the job done, and one area where this happens with chronic regularity is *communications*.

Instead of approaching the Secretary's position as we commonly do nowadays, I would suggest that we go back to having two different positions and resurrect the title and job description of Communications Secretary. This person would be tasked with any correspondence needed by the ORG, but would also head up the entire suite of communications efforts in the ORG. Can this be done all by one person? Probably not once things are really rolling, so whoever lands in this spot *must* be a capable leader – someone who can delegate effectively and create a team that can handle the website, the communications matrix, and the creative writing of blurbs, announcements, and other public relations tasks. In other words, as I see it, the Communications Secretary in a fully functional and healthy ORG, is the leader of a very active *team* of folks who specialize in presenting the ORG to the community and the world.

The building of this team begins with the Matrix and getting the word out to members about events and important news. It is easy to look at the Matrix of preferences and gather a few people willing to help with getting the word out: one handles e-mails and text messages, another handles a phone chain, a third takes care of sending out snail mail, and someone else takes care of the website. This coordinated

effort grows over time, and with it, the ability to insure that messages are going out on a timely basis and are varied enough to spark and capture the attention of members and other interested parties. At the start, the effort begins on a smaller scale and is set up in a way where it can easily grow – the coordination and execution of the special team vision is the *primary* responsibility of this resurrected Communications Secretary position.

Aside from the results it will yield, there is another monstrously important reason to try to do this. This approach does not create a single position, but creates an opportunity to form the first of, what should be, numerous special teams within the ORG. The big difference is that this one reports *directly to, and is managed by,* the Executive Board, and does so in a way that shows the rest of the ORG how special teams should work. Therefore when, at a later date, the ORG needs to explore securing a new piece of property or designing a new facility or program, the ORG will already have a working template on hand that says, "Here, do the job the way the Communications Special Team (or committee) does it." *This* is how to divide up the work, make the work efficient and effective, and set a standard of performance that will drive the ORG towards being a highly effective group with substantive organizational health.

Make the Messages Frequent Enough

These next couple of points all work hand in hand to get and rivet the attention of your members and other interested parties. These are simple, but critical points. The first is to make sure your messages happen frequently enough.

Sending out ORG announcements too infrequently communicates that not much is really going on or that the leadership is not on top of their game on either the communications or program fronts. Sending out announcements or reminders too frequently is almost as bad. It can make the ORG sound or appear desperate and turn off recipients. There has to be a balance and each organizational situation will have to find what is too much, what is too little, and what is just right. In most cases, it will probably be a timely, long range "plan for" announcement, followed up by a specific reminder, and then a final "48-hour before" reminder. Using the array of communication preferences, this will probably do the trick and gain the maximum possible participation level.

Be Sure Messages Are Timely

Timeliness of the messages is imperative. If we routinely mess up on the timeliness of messages, it can do irreparable harm to an ORG and get your members to view ORG activities with a critical eye. If your ORG membership is suffering from a case of the bad attitudes, this may be one of the reasons why.

Once, a club I belong to, sent a notice that a membership meeting was being called to hold the club's elections. However, there were a few problems with the execution of this:

- The *first* message about this went out 2 ½ hours before the meeting.
- It announced a *new* meeting location.
- The message went to less than half of the total membership because the e-mail was only sent to those registered to the club's news group (about one-third of the total group).

No surprise here, but no one showed up except the current officers, who then explained away the lack of participation as evidence that the membership simply wasn't interested enough to be involved. This was hardly the case, but it is shocking how often I have seen this same thing play out over and over again in ORG after ORG. Management does a poor job of executing their duties and the blame is laid at the feet of the members when they don't participate.

With the busy schedules we all have and how ORGs have to compete for the attention of their members and potential members, getting the word out about events needs to happen *early enough* and *frequently enough* to insure the time will be set aside and the members can and will attend.

Another unanticipated consequence of using the Matrix at Camp Acahela was the discovery of how many members actually preferred postcards as a way of receiving communications. That forced me to announce things much earlier than I had been, which moved the preparation planning for the event to a spot a couple of weeks earlier on my calendar. The earlier preparation eventually morphed into *better and more complete preparation.* This translated into better execution of the events, as well as pre-event communications. This little tweak forced the entire chain of activities associated with each event to be done in a way that was better for my ORG, and the results showed. When I first started, I had as few as a half dozen, unorganized volunteers I could count on. Six years later, I had a list of over a hundred volunteers I could tap into and get regular participation out of. Here, as elsewhere, the little tweaks add up.

Beware of Routine Messages

One danger in all this is to make the messaging strategy you use *too* routine. If the same kind of templated message comes out too routinely, the lack of variety will quickly cause the messages to lose their intended effectiveness. Like a Major League Baseball pitcher, you have to mix up the pitches in order to keep the batter engaged. A certain amount of routine is good, but you also have to modulate the message to keep the recipients curious enough to want to read or see what the messages say.

Making every message a priority has the same negative effect as well. NASA has learned this lesson several times in the history of their operations when every activity ended up being labeled "Mission Critical." It became clear during the investigation into the 1986 *Challenger* disaster that the classification was used so often that *everything* became "Mission Critical," which not only diluted the label, but had a seriously negative impact on how operations were handled. Critical items were missed as a result, and the same kind of thing can easily happen in your ORG to diminish the impact of your communication efforts. So modulate your messages.

Let me put this in clear, unmistakable, operative terms: When both sides of the communications equation – sender and receiver – are taking a passive approach to communications, active engagement **is highly unlikely.**

Understand the difference between Active Outbound and a Passive Resource

The worst and most common mistake most ORGs make is using only *passive* communication channels in order to get their messages out to volunteers. Volunteer leaders sending members to only their website demonstrates that leaders have little to no appreciation for how to *really* get a message out in a way that encourages and motivates members to participate. Unfortunately, by misusing this asset, our websites have become as much of a curse as they are a blessing. It's the communications equivalent of owning a beautiful Steinway grand piano and only ever learning how to play "*Chopsticks*" on it.

There seems to be this nearly automatic default in most ORGs to, "*send the members to* ___." The blank is

usually filled in with something like, "the website," as if the web is the magic bullet solving all communication problems. Yet, it is not. Websites are passive forms of communication where information is posted and the member has to go looking for it. That's easy on the staff, but lousy at *engaging* the members. Again, keep in mind that as an ORG you are probably competing for your members' attention, so how intelligent is it to depend on *them* to go get the latest news?

The forms of communication discussed above break down into passive and active. Think about your situation at work. *Active* is stuff that comes roaring across your desk in the form of urgent e-mails, incoming phone calls, the IMs that pop up on your computer, or the memos dropped on your desk – *the message comes to you,* the receiver. The *passive* stuff is like the Help library in your computer program, or the company employee network that holds all the forms and policies – *you have to go find it,* whatever "it" happens to be. Which of these gets your attention more quickly and more often? If you are anything like me, it's the *active* stuff. If we do this automatically at work, why then, when we get to our churches, bowling leagues, clubs, or any ORG we belong to, do we think our members – with everything else going on in their lives – will be rushing with joyous anticipation to the group website to get the latest and most important news?

Let me put this in clear, unmistakable, operative terms: When both sides of the communications equation – sender and receiver – are taking a passive approach to communications, *active engagement* ***is highly unlikely***.

Again, let me be clear. I am not saying that websites or other forms of passive communication are not important or should be abandoned. Hardly! But they *are not* and *should not* be relied upon as *the only* mode of communications to your members. If that is the one dance step you are using, close up shop and go home. Your ORG is already well on the way to dying, you just haven't realized it yet. Sorry to be so blunt, but this is an ORG *killer*. Communications that really work and help ORGs grow and get healthy are ones that involve *active* engagement – and that means *you* going after *them*, not them coming looking for you.

Use *active* channels augmented by all the passive resources you can offer – this is the best combination of communications tools you can use.

KEY TWEAKS TO GO

1)

2)

3)

4)

Volunteer Groups and their Leaders *finally* have a practical and realistic handbook designed specifically for the congregations, leagues, clubs, troops, and fellowships that make up the backbone of our communities. *TWEAKS* is written by veteran how-to author Tim Bongard in his familiar, hands-on and folksy style that will give you an immediate handle and understanding of the complex issues and demands needed to lead your volunteer ORG to greater levels of performance regardless of the condition it may be in now. Complete overhaul, addressing serious problems, or just some fine tuning, *TWEAKS* will be a guide you will turn to again and again.

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AUTHOR Tim Bongard is a retired Ranger and experienced corporate and volunteer leader. Active in numerous community groups and clubs, he is currently working on his doctorate in Leadership at Grand Canyon University.

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Tweaks

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