



# Focus

A publication of Wagner Consulting Group

August 2011

Home

Mission

Services

Testimonials

Clients

About

## Communication Process Trumps Content

1974 was the tipping point in a communication paradigm shift that allowed wireless communication with a specific person in an unknown location. That's when Motorola introduced the first commercially-successful radio pager. All it did was beep to let the user know a message was waiting or to call someone, but that was just the beginning.

- By 1994, 61,000,000 pagers were in use (per Wikipedia)
- In 2011, five billion cell phones are in use worldwide (says the BBC)

Nowadays we take for granted that we have our own walkabout contact numbers. "Call my cell phone" or "Text me" are common phrases. We receive email on our smart phones, whenever and wherever. Ah, the wonders of technology!

However, there always seem to be tradeoffs with technological advancement, and that's certainly true from a communications standpoint. The cautionary note of this article is that *for important messages* words alone are not enough. Moreover, even in a face-to-face conversation the "process" matters more than the details. Researchers began to discover this important truth ten years before Motorola's Pageboy I was introduced.

In 1964 Professor Albert Mehrabian began pioneering communications research at UCLA. Dr. Mehrabian discovered that the listener's *interpretation* of a face-to-face conversation was based almost entirely on the way the words were spoken and the speaker's facial expressions. Surprisingly, only 7% of the listener's interpretation is based on the actual words used.

Many other researchers have studied human interactions since then, and there is a consistent thread that weaves through all their research: Leaders today must connect with people to succeed. By "people" I mean employees, customers, and the public at large.

**EMPLOYEES.** By definition a leader has (willing) followers. The old command-and-

control management style doesn't work as well as it once did. Instead, long-term success depends on the leader's ability to influence, and building trust is necessary for influence.

CUSTOMERS. Remember Toyota's recent recall problems. Their CEO had to carry out a very public damage control program, which included public apologies and a commitment to correct mistakes, after U.S. sales plummeted because consumers lost trust in the brand.

PUBLIC. Former BP CEO Tony Hayward is Exhibit #1 on what NOT to say in a crisis. Despite spending vast sums of money, BP never recovered from a bungled PR approach. That is, the CEO never convinced the American public he was truly sorry – he never "connected." (Google "I want my life back" for more on this particular topic)

Okay, so you're not the CEO of a multinational corporation. The rules still apply.

For example, many of us have, over the years, analyzed and agonized over employee bonus plans. We've crunched numbers, carried out scenario planning, and worried over what might happen if . . . However, it's easy to lose sight of what is most important: the employee perceptions of the intent and fairness of the bonus plan.

- The whole point of a bonus plan is to influence (there's that word again!) desired behaviors. If that doesn't happen, then the program is really an Employee Gift Plan.
  - The details don't matter that much if the bonus plan increases the employees' perception that their leader cares about them as people, and wants to fairly reward good performance.

My point: The most technically perfect plan will fall short if the roll-out and administration lack an emotion connection.

Leaders, I've walked in your shoes, and know that in the rush of events it is often difficult to slow down and spend an extra moment with someone. In the long run, however, you'll go faster by sometimes moving more slowly. Take the time to reflect on what your audience will hear, not just what you'll say.

*Tom Wagner*

• • •

Call for stories on how you've used *Focus*

Two friends spontaneously complemented me on *Focus* during separate meetings a couple of weeks back, and went on to volunteer stories about forwarding my July article. That type of feedback is always welcome because it influences my choice of topics and narrative style.

I'd like any stories or comments you may have. Naturally, anything you send me will be confidential unless you say otherwise. Thanks.



Tom Wagner helps leaders by:

- Being a sounding board to help them think through important issues
- Identifying and developing high-potential employees
- Finding the root cause of important problems

[www.wagnercg.com](http://www.wagnercg.com)

[Follow me on Twitter at tomwagner72](#)

If you do not want to receive this newsletter, reply to this e-mail with REMOVE in the Subject field.

Copyright 2011 Wagner Consulting Group, Inc. - (800) 422-1374