

Is One-Way Communication a Dead-End Street?

By Michael Angelo Caruso

(as published in "The Rotarian," newsletter for Rotary, Evanston, IL)

Communication technology has presented an alluring, yet unfavorable trend toward one-way communication. Voice mail, for example, significantly reduces the time it takes to communicate by eliminating half of the dialogue. Faxes, electronic mail and pagers, offer a similar escape from human interaction. Simply tell the other person what you want and be done with them until next time. No questions, no discussion, no problem.

Telephone answering machines began helping us do this over twenty years ago. Answering machines spawned voice mail, which has virtually eliminated the need to answer the telephone. Telecom company SBC reports that Caller Identification, an add-on service available with voice mail, is the company's fastest growing service. Caller ID, which debuted in America almost ten years ago, allows subscribers to forfeit a phone conversation based on the identity of the caller. This decision gets made before the subscriber even picks up the handset. Alexander Graham Bell would have never guessed that we would willingly trade the privilege of two-way communication in favor of an unanswered phone call.

Most of us have embraced this new technology because it saves time, but there is a downside to this efficiency. We know that people don't like to take orders. They like to take part. One-way communication delays or eliminates the benefit of clarifying questions. Unanswered or in some cases unasked questions can lead to assumptions.

Television mogul, Henry Winkler, says that assumptions are the termites of communication. Technology, for all of its practicality, is turning us into machines and indeed there may be a bug in the software. Facsimile transmission, for example, is a great way to send printed materials over the telephone line, but it does not allow for spontaneous give-and-take between the sender and receiver.

We try to use electronic mail, an improved version of faxing, as a substitute for two-way communication by employing symbols and acronyms. "E-smiles," lifeless typography faces that have been turned on their sides, are often used to show that the sender is pleased about something. E-mail users also employ a series of acronyms designed to supplant the more emotive ingredients of two-way communication. So instead of laughing out loud as we do in a telephone call or a conversation, we might type "LOL," which means that we would be laughing out loud if we were actually taking the time to talk to each other.

Pagers that transmit alphanumeric codes and phone numbers are probably the simplest and most efficient one-way message devices. The message is clear: "Call 555-5555." But how does the sender know when the page is received? What if the message is not received at all? What if the targeted recipient has left his pager home that day? What if

he left the pager in Lake Winocobee last weekend? Without a confirming reply, the sender goes on with his day, blissfully believing that communication has taken place.

A timely and efficient acknowledgement – “yes, I understand you” – is an important part of any exchange. Truly “care-full” communication is two-way messaging that allows the receiver instant and unrestricted dialogue with the sender. We must learn to balance the use of technology and real-life conversation. Only by investing time in the form of discussion can we reduce the assumptions and misunderstandings originating from one-way communication and reap the full benefits of our most important dialogue.

Balance can be achieved by incorporating all forms of communication into our daily routines. We need to make sure we take time to have several interactive conversations per day, especially with people that we would prefer to email. It is no coincidence that “difficult” people are likely to be recipients of our one-way messages and that relationship problems are often due to a lack of personal interaction. Conversation is the basis for understanding. Be sure to converse with lots of different people every day so relationships can develop. After all, there are some things that need to be said in person.

My friend Paul and his wife have set up a sophisticated code in a noble attempt to enrich one-way paging. Paul proudly explained to me that a “911” page means there is an emergency and that “914” means that his wife loves him. And that’s what it has come to; we now tell people that we love them via pager.

Leave time for discussion. No confusion, no assumptions, no problem.

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