

Additional Readings

Reading #1: TO TELL THE TRUTH**Why suppressing bad news can make matters worse**

By Kenneth Budd
Common Ground

In February, the board of directors of the Val Vista Lakes homeowner association fired its executive director. But you never would have known by reading the community newsletter. *Val Vista Lakes Community News*, the monthly newsletter for the 2,200-unit Mesa, Arizona community, never mentioned that the popular executive had been fired. It never discussed the furious reaction to the firing by many residents. It never covered the recall effort to remove the board from power, and the petitions signed by nearly half the community's residents. That's because the board controlled the newsletter's editorial content. The board decided which articles were published and what information members needed to know. Until the executive director was fired, no one had questioned the policy. But now members were quite aware that they had not been informed—and they were angry.

The recall pressure grew. Finally, on July 5, the board voted to give editorial control of the newsletter to the independent firm that wrote and produced it. The editor, not the board, now determines the newsletter's content.

Val Vista Lakes is hardly the only community association board that has final say on its newsletter's editorial content. In many associations, the board not only approves the newsletter, board members write the newsletter.

The newsletter is typically a board's best tool for promoting association projects and sharing good news. But

what about bad news? Are associations obligated to tell the whole truth, or just their version of it? If a homeowner writes a letter criticizing the association, is the newsletter obligated to publish it? What is the difference between good editorial judgment and censorship?

Freedom of the press is guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. It is not guaranteed in a private community. You may find, however, that covering all of the issues is in the best interests of the homeowners and the board of directors.

News That's Fit to Print

Technically, a community association newsletter has no obligation to present opposing viewpoints or negative information. The newsletter is a house organ. It exists for the association to communicate with members, not for a disgruntled owner to attack the board. "The only test is that the board—and thus the newsletter—act in the best interests of the association and its members," said Vienna, Virginia attorney and CAI President-Elect Bob Diamond. "Reasonableness and fairness should be afforded, but there is no Constitutional obligation to publish negative information." But acting in the association's best interest doesn't mean ignoring potentially negative issues. Brent Herrington, PCAM®, an Arizona community manager and a creator of CAI's Community Associations Online (CAO) computer network, believes a board has a moral and ethical duty to advise the members of any major decision affecting their ownership interest.

Concealing important information, he feels, is a violation of members' trust. "When news leaches out as gossip, it heightens suspicion, amplifies interest, and reinforces the perception that the board has done something wrong," said Herrington. "Backlash becomes inevitable. It wastes time and causes confusion. It burdens staff with having to explain the situation over and over, and people end up hearing different versions of the story."

Withholding information can also destroy the association's credibility. As Janice Phagan, PCAM®, writes in CAI's *GAP Report 15—Communications for Community Associations*, the newsletter is often the voice of a community. If members believe they can't trust this voice, how can they trust the board?

"We all dread going public with unpopular news," said Herrington. "But it never pays to conceal important facts from members."

Nothing to Hide

How should a newsletter treat controversy? By confronting the issue head on.

"Litigators have a rule," said Hawaii attorney Richard S. Ekimoto. "If you know the jury is going to find out about something bad, you tell them about it first, because you can control the impact and you don't look like you're hiding something."

This also applies to newsletters. To quote poet Michael Drayton, "ill news hath wings." If something negative has happened, residents will find out.

Mistaking apathy for ignorance can be fatal. The best way to handle bad news is to address it, not to ignore it. "If you approach the community from the beginning, you won't be put on the defensive," said Becky Lu Brown of Community Consulting Services in Carson City, Nevada. Brown uses the example of Marcia Clark, the prosecuting attorney in the O.J. Simpson trial.

"She knew that Mark Fuhrman was egg on their face and that the defense

would make it an issue, so she didn't hide it—she discussed it up front," said Brown. "She confronted the problem then said, 'Now let's focus on the real issue.'" If a newsletter is covering a controversial decision, Brown suggests focusing on why the decision was made. Cover the pros and cons. A recent summary of a town meeting in *Life at Ken-Caryl*, published by the Ken-Caryl Ranch association in Littleton, Colorado, discussed a variety of comments from members.

According to Ken-Caryl General Manager Chris Pacetti, residents want to hear all sides of an issue.

"It gives more credibility to our publication to present as much information as we can, whether it supports our cause or not," Pacetti said. "Not everyone is going to agree with your decisions. There's nothing wrong with that. It's always better to tell both sides of the story."

Life at Ken-Caryl also includes letters-to-the editor page. Many experts believe a letters page is the best way to handle opposing viewpoints.

"In a letters format, people will understand the comments for what they are—that they represent the views of the writer only," said Wendell A. Smith, an attorney with Greenbaum, Rowe, Smith, Ravin & Davis in Woodbridge, New Jersey.

Smith suggests that associations allow a variety of letters, provided they are not offensive—no racial or ethnic slurs or profanity, for example—or libelous. Libel is damage to a person's reputation. *The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual* defines libel as "words, pictures, or cartoons that expose a person to public hatred, shame, disgrace, or ridicule, or induce an ill opinion of a person." The association is obligated to ensure that nothing published in the newsletter—be it a story or a letter—is libelous.

Board Control

If the newsletter lacks clear policies and procedures, a letters page won't necessarily provide owners with a voice. Becky Lu Brown knows this from experience. Several years ago, as manager of a community in Oregon, Brown struggled with a defensive board in a debate over information disclosure. Alienated members accused the newsletter of being a one-way association mouthpiece and threatened a recall vote. The association eventually agreed to publish letters to the editor.

One problem. The board only printed letters it liked, not ones it didn't. Brown believes part of the problem was that the newsletter lacked formal guidelines, policies, or procedures. The Communications Committee, which was supposed to be the editorial arm of the board, was unsure of its authority. No one knew what was expected. Wendell A. Smith recommends that the board adopt a comprehensive policy resolution regarding all aspects of the newsletter, from acceptable content to the extent of board control.

"Associations often get involved in a variety of policy issues over who has ultimate control—the board or the newsletter committee," said Smith. "This way you can establish who has control." Smith believes boards should have oversight control. Detailed editorial changes should be left to a Communications Committee. Instead, the board should look at the newsletter with a broader perspective, and determine if it is effectively informing the community. At Ken-Caryl, for example, a board member newspaper liaison reviews only those articles that staff thinks could be controversial—not to censor them, but to ensure that the facts are correct and that the board is aware of the article.

A newsletter policy should also address content. For example, will the newsletter cover political issues? Will it

include letters? It is important to set these policies in advance, said Smith, before a problem arises.

Newsletter Policies Reduce Publishing Problems

Does your association have a written policy? If not, here is a sample policy provided by New Jersey attorney Wendell A. Smith:

1. Priority will be given to items of significance to the majority of the association membership.
2. Legitimate controversies of interest to all residents will be reported objectively in a pro/con manner. Staff shall seek out diverse opinions and publish them with approval of the board.
3. Sources of information shall be verified, accuracy shall be established, fact shall be distinguished from rumor, and content shall not be colored by personal opinion.
4. The newsletter will not be used for expressing political views.
5. No libelous or inflammatory

"Personalities change," said Smith. "A policy provides consistency."

The Right to Information

The need to print controversial or negative information depends on the association, the newsletter, and the specific situation. In some cases, the newsletter may not even be the best vehicle. In *GAP 15*, for example, Phagan writes that special notices are best for handling hot issues such as assessment increases and major repairs. Some associations may rely too heavily on the newsletter for their communications.

"I try to integrate all the available methods of sending and receiving information when I develop communication plans," Brown said. "If you rely solely on the newsletter, members get an incomplete picture, or

some members may be missed altogether.”

The important thing is that association members stay informed of community issues—both good and bad. That is the lesson of Val Vista Lakes.

“Every homeowner has the same right to information,” said Roy Brown, the

new executive director of Val Vista Lakes. “The board may have made the right decision, but did a poor job of communicating it. And sometimes communication is more important than the decision itself.”

Reading #2: Getting the Message

By Diane Coppage
Common Ground

Can your community association reach members quickly with accurate information? Is an information exchange loop in place between the board and the community? Does the board know what association members think about the job it's doing?

A proactive member relations program can meet all of these communications challenges. Being proactive means being ready. It means knowing what you will do and how you will do it, before you need to do it. It means having the staff, equipment, and programs in place before you need them. It means communicating with members, not to them.

Reactive communications keep an association on the defensive and lead to actions based on crisis instead of fact, preparation, and planning.

A member communications program will not succeed without support from the board of directors. It takes wisdom, courage, and vision to build a program that will pay off for future boards, but a proactive communications program is every bit as important as maintenance, security, and recreation.

"A carefully planned communications program gives a board the ability to respond promptly to resident questions and complaints," said Karen McKay, president of CoMac Associates, a marketing and public relations agency in Chicago, Illinois. "This prevents rumor and misinformation from skewing debate and complicating decision making." According to McKay, this program includes regular print and, for larger associations with the resources, broadcast communications. Spokespersons for the association should be clearly identified to residents.

Forming a Team

A communications team is essential. A paid professional, expert volunteers, and strong staff support can develop a proactive program that will keep information flowing to and from the community. Key ingredients of the team include:

Communications professional. If the association can't afford a full-time staff member, consider part-time or freelance services. Advertise in the association newsletter—a member who is a public relations practitioner may be willing to consult for a nominal fee.

Support staff and equipment. A computer with desktop publishing capability and a person who can produce printed materials and work with vendors saves money and allows you to make changes without incurring design and typesetting charges.

Communications committee. Volunteers bring the dynamic of the community to their work. They help staff stay focused on the audience. Build a small committee of diverse talent. A writer, photographer/videographer, graphic designer (preferably with computer skills), and volunteers with marketing, public relations, or presentation skills make a well-rounded committee.

The Information Loop

Community associations can communicate with members in a variety of different ways. These include:

Newspapers and newsletters.

These are a staple for most associations and the foundation of a good program (see "12 Tips for Improving Your Newsletter," July/August 1995). If you want to limit costs, take a tip from Lake Carroll Property Owners Association of Lake

Carroll, Illinois. It has an agreement with the local newspaper to publish and mail the association's newspaper to 3,100 members at no cost to the association.

"We maintain complete editorial rights, and review the layout before the paper is printed," says association general manager, Jim Blackburn. The publisher sells the advertising and keeps the revenue. "The association has no expense other than time in reviewing the paper, and the publisher gets a ready market for its advertisers."

Special issues. Boost the power of your newsletter by adding "special focus" issues throughout the year. For example, before an assessment increase is put to a vote, inform members and build awareness with a special issue devoted to the budget process and what members get for their assessments. If architectural guidelines are revised, publish them. Explain why they were adopted and how they'll affect the community.

Updates and flyers. The Montgomery Village Foundation, Montgomery Village, Maryland, sends a one-page flyer with its quarterly assessment bills to show how the board is working for its 34,000 members. Called MVF—Working for You, it lists anything positive the association has done during the previous quarter.

"We use bullets to list the activities and explain their effect on owners. It answers the question, 'What does this mean to me?'" said T. Peter Kristian, PCAM®, executive vice president of the association. "The board likes it because successes can be published right away. And our members are reminded several times a year that the board is serving their interests." Steve Gross, editor for the Ocean Pines Association in Berlin, Maryland, publishes a flyer every two weeks called *Pine Lines* that communicates board activities to members.

"The simple format of *Pine Lines* helps us get news to the community fast, and it supports our monthly

newspaper," said Gross. Gross also uses *Pine Lines* to poll community opinion. When the association's board found itself debating with the environmental control committee over small satellite antennae, Gross used *Pine Lines* to inform the community and ask for feedback. Based on the results, the board voted to allow a variance for satellite dishes up to 20 inches in diameter. [In order to comply with the Federal Communications Commission's Over-the-Air Reception Devices Rule, associations must allow dishes of up to one meter (39 inches) in diameter.]

Message boards. Put a message board in every clubhouse and lobby and at all exits from the community. Post messages early in the day, so people leaving in the morning will get the news.

Town meetings. These are a must for timely two-way communication between the board and members. Depending on the issue, invite the media. Use town meetings to introduce candidates at election time. Tap owner opinion on controversial issues or rally members around a shared issue. Concern for the area's water management program prompted The Landings Association on Skidaway Island, Georgia, to schedule a public hearing with the Metropolitan Planning Commission.

"The purpose was to let residents hear the proposed water management program and to make the commission aware of our program to reduce dependency on deepwater wells," said General Manager, Paul Sousa, PCAM®. "The commission was impressed enough with our residents' concern and knowledge to prevent stricter controls."

Ed Miller, general manager of the Meadows Community Association in Sarasota, Florida, uses town meetings to reach a large community of 44 condominium associations, seven homeowners associations, a nursing facility, a retirement development, and

a country club. Representatives from each group are appointed to an assembly which meets 10 times a year to review the budget, select board candidates, and exchange information. The Assembly provides a “forum for the community, which the board uses as an open town meeting,” said Miller. “It’s a great mechanism to disseminate news and get feedback to the Meadows Association board.”

Personal appearances. This is one of the most effective ways to build confidence in an association board and its management. Go to the people—church, social, and service clubs abound in many communities. Or bring the people to you. Pat McKenna, general manager of The Landings Club, hosts a monthly “GM Breakfast” for club members.

“It’s nice way for members to meet the managers who operate their club,” McKenna said. Each meeting focuses on an area of club operations. McKenna welcomes members and presents the topic, then introduces the operations manager for that area and opens the floor for questions and comments. Managers look forward to the breakfasts because they learn how members feel about the job they’re doing. “That feedback makes a big difference,” McKenna said. “The club has integrated a number of ideas from the meetings into its operations, and the board is in touch with members and responsive to their needs.”

Phone trees. These are a great way to get out the vote, conduct opinion polls, or explain complex issues. With a phone tree, a group of volunteers call a list of homeowners. To increase effectiveness, maintain a standing committee of trained telephone volunteers. Train the committee on phone techniques. Write scripts so that all volunteers deliver the same message. Phone volunteers are frequently asked difficult and unexpected questions—plan a pre-calling meeting to review the scripts and practice responses.

Welcome packets. These supply important information and say, “We’re glad you’re here.” Packets can be attractive and inexpensive—as simple as a colorful folder with the association’s name. Include bylaws, architectural guidelines, covenants, articles of incorporation, maps, association services, common property information, club schedules, telephone directory, emergency information, and a list of administration phone extensions. Add a personal touch. Train a staff member to explain the information in the packet to new members.

If You Have the Funds

In addition to these proven internal communications techniques, consider adding one or more of the following for a message delivery system that will enhance your efforts tremendously.

Cable publicity. Most cable companies have a public service channel that runs local advertising and public service announcements. Call the local cable company and learn how to publicize community messages. Tape town meetings for members who can’t attend. Air the tape on the local cable channel and have a duplicate available for members. The equipment can be rented and a volunteer can tape the meeting. Publicize the tapes’ availability.

Voice mail. Telephone voice-mail systems can disseminate fast, accurate information to members, even after the association office is closed. The system’s information boxes can be scripted to suit almost any need. During board elections, it can include candidate profiles, voting procedures, and deadlines. During a weather emergency, it can focus on evacuation routes, shelter sites, and emergency numbers. It can also include information on association procedures and policies.

A word of caution. These systems are great tools, but for the uninitiated, they take some time to understand. Be

patient—know what you want and shop carefully.

Information forums. These are smaller and less formal than town meetings. Schedule as many as possible if a project is controversial or requires a vote. Publicize them well. Have two or three directors and project committee members available to answer questions and discuss the issue. Keep notes, summarize the conversations, and develop a final report.

The goal of a communications program is to build respect and trust among members and the association. Rumors can't root in soil rich in fact. Stay informed about everything that goes on in the community. Use the techniques outlined here to write an action plan for each project that is reasonable for the association to implement.

Reading #3: Ready-To-Use Newsletter Info

By Jessie Newburn
Common Ground

Looking for filler information for your newsletter? Government agencies and nonprofit organizations often have public service information ready to use in bite-size pieces. The information may include safety tips for smoke detectors, crime prevention ideas, or where to drop off hazardous waste. Rather than doing the legwork alone, pool your time and efforts with other community associations in your area. You can assign tasks and have

different people contact the various organizations. Then the data can be retyped or scanned and saved in a software format that everyone can use. (Make sure you proofread the material and give credit where credit is due.)

Next time you find yourself staring at an empty space on a newsletter page, you won't panic. Instead, you'll have a relevant, ready-to-use supply of information.

Reading #4: www.community.com/now

By Christopher Durso

Common Ground, September/October 1999

Jim Nelson remembers the way things used to work. If you wanted to publicize an event at Shakerec Homeowner Association, outside Atlanta, you had to place an ad in the paper, then field however many phone calls it would generate. Or run off more than 600 copies of a flier, then hand-deliver them to everyone's mailboxes in the four subdivisions that make up Shakerec, and wait for responses. That was then, this is now. Today, anyone wanting to get the word out—for a garage sale, a pool party, or whatever—can post it on the association's Web site (www.athomenet.com/shakerec). Those interested in an event can find out about it online and, if necessary, respond at their leisure. The whole process is cheaper, faster, more accessible, and, according to Nelson, a Shakerec resident and the site's administrator, more convenient in just about every way. "For the community, it's more time-saving for a lot of people," Nelson says.

Click Here Neighbor

Like just about every other facet of society, community associations are tuning in to the Internet. There's no shortage of service providers, and they'll all tell you that it's a pretty natural fit. Says Jeff Sanders, director of technology for AtHomeNet (www.athomenet.com), an Atlanta-based company that creates Web sites for community associations (including Shakerec's): "The main focus of the thing is to get people more involved in the community—perhaps people who are so busy with work and kids and everything these days they can't get as involved in the community as they like." The Web, Sanders says, allows

for community involvement 24-7.

"Maybe that's 10 o'clock at night, after the kids are in bed," he says. "Maybe that's during lunchtime at work."

Not that the Web is a mere balm for the guilty consciences of overextended association residents. It boasts lots of practical applications, too. The site for the Boca Pointe Community Association, in Boca Raton, Florida—www.bocapointe.com—is loaded with relevant news-you-can-use:

condensed versions of meeting minutes, community happenings, a governance section (for bylaws and regulations), a staff and board e-mail directory, even hurricane updates when the weather turns dicey. In a community association of 8,500 residents, some of whom spend their summers up north, "We think communication is of the utmost importance," says Boca Pointe president Jerry Marks.

Likewise, Sanders points to the many functions on Shakerec's site, which is divided into a public portion, accessible by anyone, and a private, residents-only portion, which requires a password. The public site offers photos of and information about the community, notices of houses for sale, and classified ads, while the private site—"the real meat of the system," according to Sanders—includes newsletters, announcements, covenants, chat rooms, and message boards for residents. "Pretty much we're hoping it will bring more residents of the community together." Convenient and community-fostering Web sites may be, but associations still aren't logging on as quickly as (at least) one vendor would like. Michael Vandor, of America's HOA Central (www.hoacentral.com), thinks that

when it comes to launching a Web site, a fair number of community associations are behind the curve. Volunteer boards of directors, he says, are surprisingly Internet-savvy but often reluctant to spend extra money. "I think [with boards], the reluctance is largely financial," Vandor says. "There's a perception that it's more expensive than it really is."

At First Bite

To stake your piece of the Internet, you have the usual options: Get a professional company to do it, do it yourself, or try some combination of the two.

Professionals. Companies like America's HOA Central will create and maintain Web sites specifically for community associations. The cost depends on the size of the site and the features involved. The "largest and most sophisticated" site that HOA Central has designed, Vandor says, was for Boca Pointe, which launched a few years ago and features plenty of bells and whistles. (Marks is even hoping to wire bocapointe.com with audio and video capabilities.) These days, Vandor says, such a site would cost about \$4,000 to build and launch, and about \$100 a month to maintain. A few times a month, HOA Central will key in any updates or new material that Boca Pointe sends in. Marks, who urged his board to fund the site (and formed a committee of "Internet-literate people" to draft a proposal), has taught himself to make some changes, but can't say enough about relying on professionals. "Just like anybody can sit down and sketch a picture or type out a story," Marks says, "if you are a professional, your picture or your story is definitely going to outshine the amateur's."

Yourself. Amateurs who still want to give it a try should brace for erratic results. It's probably the most economical solution, yes, but such a Web site depends almost solely on the technical expertise and the commitment level of its (volunteer)

creator. "What do you do when the volunteer sells their house and moves," Vandor says, "or gets tired of giving away their time?" Of course, when you're on staff, that's not too much of a problem. Allen Atkins, of CFM Management, helped create the Web site for one of his clients, Arlington Oaks, a 372-unit garden condominium complex in Arlington, Virginia. Launched in May 1998, the trim, easily navigated site (www.arlingtonoaks.com) was designed and coded by Atkins and Arlington Oaks' site manager, who taught themselves how to do it. It's not for everybody, but probably isn't as hard as you think.

Combination. AtHomeNet will set up your association's Web site at no charge, then turn the reins over to a resident to serve as administrator, like Shakerec's Jim Nelson. The association then pays a monthly fee, based on community size, that ranges from \$35 to \$115. Procedures are kept simple—the designated administrator needs only a Web browser to add announcements, documents, links, and whatever else to the site. "This is nice, because I can start it off," Nelson says, "and if I don't want to do it, somebody else can take it over."

Net Gains

So let's talk virtual turkey. How might a community association use a Web site? Count the ways:

News. As a medium, the Web is best suited to getting out information: CC&Rs, newsletters, news updates, upcoming events. Unlike a monthly publication or a special flier, a Web site can do this continuously, as often as you want—and can reach residents who are away for extended periods. Some community association members and service providers talk of one day eliminating paper altogether, but Marks doesn't see that happening, "People still like to read a newspaper," he says. "And probably over half our people don't even have computers." Still, compared to print publications

and word of mouth, Vandor says, a Web site has “a much higher level of communication value.” And you can go one step further and offer flash e-mailing of breaking news to anyone who signs up for it.

Marketing. Put your best face forward. Arlington Oaks’ site originally was conceived as part of a marketing initiative, with photos and information on specific units for sale. (“We don’t focus on that anymore,” Atkins says. “I think now it’s basically general information on the condominium.”) Similarly, the Woodlake Community Association, in Midlothian, Virginia, designed its site (www.woodlakeonline.com) partially as a marketing tool. In addition to news and resources for residents, it offers photos and buying and selling information clearly aimed at potential residents. “If someone in Michigan is moving to the Richmond area,” says Woodlake community manager Terry Sheets, “we want them to be able to find our site and be attracted to come look in the community for a home.”

Archives. Put your old newsletters, meeting minutes, budgets, and annual reports online and throw in a search engine, and you’ve got yourself an archive. It’s a huge time-saver for managers, who sometimes are asked to track down happenings from years before, and helps board members and residents feel involved and in the know.

Member surveys. Online polls are a quick, tidy way to sample public opinion. How do residents feel about putting in speed bumps? Is there any interest in an association-wide pool party? These aren’t binding referendums, AtHomeNet’s Sanders says, but “it has the technological capacity to be used for [official]

voting.” (See “Ask the Expert,” May/June 1999.)

Community interaction. Get to know your neighbors. Message boards and chat rooms, Sanders says, “allow resident-to-resident communication.” Some sites offer resident profiles—names, birthdays, interests—as well as movie and restaurant reviews. This is perhaps the Web’s biggest gray area. Is personal electronic interaction an oxymoron? Does finding out about a yard sale online, as opposed to in your mailbox, or chatting with your neighbor via e-mail, as opposed to over the fence, promote or subvert community? Shakerec resident Nelson thinks it’s the former. “I don’t see anywhere where we’re not going to see our neighbors,” he says. “And I only know so many neighbors in the subdivision anyway. If anything, I think it helps. It really is convenient.”

Forms. A Web site can also cut down on management processes. Post your forms online and allow residents to submit them electronically, and save everyone a trip or a series of phone calls to the management office.

Account balances. On “the upper end of technology,” Vandor says, a Web site can let residents check their account balances, to see if they’re current on assessments and fees.

And more. Vandor says that he and his colleagues have come up with lots of other association-specific ideas for the Web—like a network for bidding out services and contracts. But bigger and better Web sites depend on associations and management companies getting wired. “If the typical manager doesn’t even have Internet access,” Vandor says, “then a network for bidding out services just doesn’t have a lot of value.”

Reading #5: Happy Talk

Improving Speaking and Listening Skills

By Norma Carr-Ruffino

Common Ground, September/October 1989

Most of us take our speaking and listening skills for granted, assuming that we are doing a pretty good job of communicating with others. Nothing, however, separates the person of authority from the amateur as quickly as the ability to speak clearly, persuasively, and empathetically. Board members, managers, and business people can all benefit by learning to use the spoken word as a powerful tool for gaining and using personal power. The following article focuses on ways to sharpen basic communication skills and become better leaders.

Start practicing empathy by being aware of what your listener will value as a payoff, try to put yourself in his or her shoes. How is your listener likely to feel about your message? What pressures is he or she under? How calm and confident is he or she feeling? What kind of relationship do you two have? If the topic is controversial, is there anything that you both can agree on to begin with? Remember that people usually base actions more on feelings, opinions, and beliefs than on logic and reason. A rational approach is one that considers all the variables, and in most situations there are many variables of which we cannot be sure. True rationality also considers people's emotions and other "illogical" factors. Here is a four-step sequence for persuasive communication.

1. Establish rapport. Communicate to the listener, in both words and actions, that you see the problem or situation from his or her viewpoint, too.
2. Introduce your proposal or idea and suggest how it can help generally.

3. Try to determine what your listener's problems are and what payoffs are important to him or her by using good questioning techniques (see the discussion that follows).

4. Follow up with details to convince. Provide the listener with evidence that your proposal can help. Maintain your credibility by avoiding too many strong adjectives, adverbs, superlatives, euphemisms, or worn-out phrases; words that imply a certain knowledge of future events; and inappropriate surprise or amazement.

Watch Word Choice. Be yourself and use language you are comfortable with, but modify it to fit the situation and your listener. Choose familiar nontechnical words when talking with people who might not understand technical terms or business jargon. Make this your goal: words and statements that are as short, simple, direct, familiar, and concise as is appropriate for the listener and the situation.

Use Specific Language. Another barrier to complete communication is the use of vague, abstract, general language. The more specific your message is, the more likely the listener is to interpret it correctly. You have a picture in your mind of what you're trying to get across. The more specific the language you use to describe that picture, the more likely the listener will be to get the same picture in his or her mind. Let's look at some comparisons:

General: We have got to get on the ball.

Specific: Everyone on the newsletter committee must sell at least 2 ads by July 15.

General: You can bring me the stuff now.

Specific: I'm ready to go over the Treasurer's updated report now. Notice that in order to be specific, it's important to use the names of things ("the Western Company account files"), names of people, and numbers where possible. Watch how you use indefinite words such as "there," "that," "this," "it," "thing," "whatchamacallit," "dilly." Even when you use "he," "she," or "they," be sure you are clear about exactly to whom you're referring.

Use of the Active Verb Form. Active verbs generally signal a willingness to assume responsibility, a sense of being in control, and an assertive, positive approach. Active verbs are also more specific. They give more information and help the listener form a picture in his or her mind of someone doing something, of action taking place.

Compare the active and passive forms:

Active: I will achieve the objectives by May 1.

Passive: The objectives will be achieved by May 1.

Active: On the basis of my investigation, I believe that the CRP is the best choice.

Passive: The investigation has led to the conclusion that the CRP is the best choice.

Don't Focus on Rules. The typical bureaucrat uses a variation of the logical approach when he or she keeps falling back on company rules or company policies as the reasons for decisions and instructions. Although some people will seem to go along, you'll get more cooperation if you communicate the reason for a policy or rule and the payoffs for following it. This approach conveys consideration of people as human beings rather than viewing them as cogs in the machinery. At times it's more productive to put people's feelings ahead of following the rules or even to allow them the freedom to make their own decisions.

Prepare Key One-Liners. Condense your thoughts and opinions on key issues, new proposals, and other matters, and be ready to express them at appropriate times.

This is one way to stay prepared, avoid being caught with "egg on your face," and come across as an intelligent, well-informed, decisive, and assertive leader or manager. Keep on top of issues that may come up in meetings or in chance encounters where you may have only a few minutes to communicate. Formulate your position and phrase it in one clear sentence. Write down these key one-liners and keep them up front in your mind.

Avoid False Assumptions. One of the most common barriers to communication is false assumptions about yourself or your listener. People frequently assume that the listener knows more about the content of the message than is actually the case. We can become so involved in a situation that it's easy to forget how unfamiliar a listener may be with important details. We therefore leave gaps in our messages, causing the listener in turn to act on incomplete information.

Allow for Face-Saving. The listener may or may not be aware of gaps in a message. Someone who is aware may be unwilling to ask for more information for fear of appearing ignorant or stupid. As the speaker, then, it is often crucial that you make sure your message is clear and complete. For example, you can say, "Let's review. Will you give me your interpretation of what I just said so I can be sure I have covered everything?" On the other hand, when you are the listener, don't resort to face-saving tactics when you are unclear about a message. Feeling free to say you don't understand can be a sign of confidence. Certainly no one signals a lack of confidence more dearly than the person who is pretending to understand.

Provide Closure. Have you ever talked with someone who jumped from one topic to another, perhaps switching back and forth among topics? Some people even interrupt themselves in mid-sentence to digress to other topics, confusing and frustrating their listeners. Listen to yourself. Do you usually stick with the topic until discussion of it is complete before moving on to another matter? If you find it difficult to stay aware of your conversational patterns, tape-record yourself. When you play back the conversation, make notes on speaking habits and patterns that need improvement. Do this periodically until you have cleared up any poor speaking habits.

Maintain Relationships. Keep communication lines open and let your people know you're interested in them as people through the appropriate use of small talk. Be warm and friendly while maintaining an air of professionalism. Consider using brief references to interesting current events or to the listener's interests, hobbies, family, home, pet, or vacation or holiday activities. By giving people this type of personal attention in the hallway, on the elevator, during breaks in meetings, and in other routine encounters, you can maintain relationships with little or no extra time cost. The person who discusses only business can get the reputation of being more a machine than a human.

Take Initiative. In addition to taking the initiative to maintain personal relationships with people, you must also let them know what's going on in the company or the association and what you're thinking—if you expect them to let you know what they're thinking. Although some details may have to be kept confidential, you should communicate as much as possible about every phase of the group's operations to as many people within the group as possible. Take stock. Are you expecting your people to read your mind? Maybe they should

know you need that report by Friday, but chances are they don't.

Get the Feedback You Need. The key to getting feedback is letting people know you're open to it. People will give you the feedback they think you want, not what you need, unless you can accept criticism from them, help them bring facts and ideas into proper focus, and ask them for data properly. When you ask for data, let people know why you need it and what you plan to do with it. In that way you're more likely to get exactly what you want in the best form for your purposes.

Helping others bring their ideas into focus is the key to getting good feedback when you meet to discuss problems, plans, or the progress of projects. Don't just have a vague discussion. Get people to focus on specific questions: What are we going to do? What other information do we need to get? Who is going to do what and when? At the end of the discussion, ask for a summary. Once you get it, ask for a one-page memo itemizing what has been covered and agreed upon.

Accepting criticism without resentment is necessary if you want honest feedback that helps you lead your team to top performance. If you ignore or punish critical feedback, you'll probably become isolated from the effects of your decisions and therefore make increasingly poor decisions. The subordinate who is willing to tell you that you're going in the wrong direction may be far more loyal than the one who keeps telling you how wonderful your decision is. Such honesty may also indicate strength and self-confidence.

A major obstacle to getting constructive criticism from people is a lack of clearly stated, specific objectives. This lack prevents a subordinate from intelligently discussing how your decision affects others' performance. Another major obstacle is fear that you will react

badly. You can help your people overcome this obstacle by training them through example.

Listening for the Total Message.

Saying the right things to the right people at the right time requires good listening skills. For example, the ability to determine when it's best to just listen and when it's best to become actively involved in a situation is important to the effective manager or leader. Most of us can profit from spending some time on improving our listening habits and skills.

The ability to communicate empathy, encouragement, and acceptance of the speaker depends mainly on what you don't say. The ability to phrase questions effectively as well as to identify and follow up on the speaker's key points depends on your level of verbal skill. So does the ability to help the listener identify, analyze, and express her or his thoughts, beliefs, ideas, and behavior patterns. Finally, you must depend on your own judgment about the degree of personal

on merely being with that person—without adding anything to or taking away from the experience of just being there together. Take in everything the person has to communicate, both verbally and nonverbally and absorb it as fully as possible. Don't try to evaluate it as good or bad, right or wrong. It just is. Let the person know you are taking in the message. If parts of it are unclear, ask questions or feed it back in your own words to check for understanding. Once you are sure of the message, you can evaluate its validity and appropriateness, its effects on achieving objectives and cooperating as a group, and other factors. Absorb first; evaluate later.

Encouraging People to Talk.

Drawing people out of themselves requires the use of some specific skills in addition to the ability to provide a supportive atmosphere. Getting others to talk can bring rich benefits to you. It helps keep the other person at ease as he or she becomes engrossed in verbalizing thoughts and experiences.

Open	Closed
<i>Who</i> is in favor of the reorganization?	<i>Are</i> most of the budget committee members in favor of the organization?
<i>What</i> information did you get?	<i>Have</i> you got the information?
<i>Where</i> is the best place for the new machine?	<i>Is</i> this the best place for the new machine?
<i>When</i> did you first notice the communication problem?	<i>Has</i> the communication problem been bothering you for long?
<i>Why</i> do you dislike the new schedule?	<i>Will</i> the new schedule interfere with your job?

involvement that is appropriate to your role as listener.

Developing the Art of "Being With" Another Person.

Perhaps the first step in improving listening skills is becoming aware of the importance of simply "being with" another person. This is an art that can be especially important in listening to subordinates. When you meet with subordinates on a one-to-one basis, it's important to give them your full attention. First, put everything else aside and concentrate

It can start the person to thinking about a topic you want emphasized. You give the person an opportunity to show what he or she knows and understands and bring out facts you might not otherwise find out about. In addition, you get the opportunity to communicate that you understand his or her situation.

Phrasing Questions Appropriately.

Another key to drawing people out and to pinpointing information you need is skill in phrasing questions. Open-

ended questions are phrased so that they cannot be answered “yes” or “no”: “What do you think about this decision?” “Why are you late so often?” Use open questions when you want to encourage talk. Open questions usually begin with some variation of the “Five W’s” (who, what, where, when, and why). Closed questions, on the other hand, frequently begin with some variation of the “be,” “do,” or “have” types of verbs. They are phrased so that they can be answered “yes” or “no” or with a specific bit of data: “Do you feel this is fair?” “How many committees did you serve on this year?” Use them when you want to zero in on a specific response. More examples of open and closed questions are given below.

Focusing on Important Aspects.

You can guide a conversation so that the most important facts come out and the key issues are explored. Listen for key thoughts and follow up by further questioning and discussion. A key thought is an idea, opinion, or experience that is expressed by the person talking and appears to the listener to have an important bearing upon the matter being discussed, even though it may be hidden in casual comments or very brief references. Become alert to the underlying meanings of the speaker’s words—you can note key thoughts and return to them.

Learn to distinguish between the content and relationship levels in conversations. **Content level** refers to the topic being discussed, the verbal content of the message. **Relationship level** refers to predominantly nonverbal messages about the way one person values or accepts the other person; it is based mainly on feelings. We feel comfortable, free, anxious, or guilty in a relationship, for example, and the other person’s messages of acceptance or nonacceptance can trigger these feelings. Messages at the relationship level usually contain the

best clues to key thoughts and the important aspects of a situation.

Communicating Acceptance. Let people know that you accept not only the facts they present but the feelings and opinions they convey. If you accept only facts, you limit your acceptance, placing conditions on it. Since people’s feelings and viewpoints are what help to make them unique, you seem to be rejecting their individuality when you accept only the messages that don’t include opinions and feelings. When you communicate acceptance at a relationship level, people feel trusted and respected. On the other hand, when people feel rejected, they often respond by pushing harder, trying to prove that their feelings and opinions are justified. Messages at the relationship level tend to become pressured, accusatory, and defensive. The speaker may withdraw and withhold information. Therefore, it’s worth sharpening your skills at communicating acceptance so your people can relax and give acceptance in return. When they feel free to listen to your messages, accept them, and act on them, they may allow other, perhaps deeper, feelings to surface. Avoid the trap of thinking that acceptance of another person’s opinions and feelings are the same as agreement with them. Agreement is an alliance with the other person in his or her position that implies you feel basically the same way. Acceptance is merely an understanding that a person feels a certain way about a topic without condemning or denying the person’s right to feel that way. To be a supportive listener, you must be able to accept people’s feelings and opinions, whether you agree or not. When you and your people share feelings, opinions, and experiences rather than try to prove they’re good or right, you have a chance to begin understanding one another. Until people feel they can trust you, they tend to express themselves

indirectly, perhaps by sending out trial-balloon problems. They present you with small, relatively innocuous problems. If you accept the total message and express acceptance of the total person, then she or he will probably feel safe enough to discuss more basic, meaningful problems with you. Effective listening, therefore, is essential to communicating at progressively deeper levels.

Some typical responses that can communicate nonacceptance of a person's feelings, thoughts, and actions are shown below. These are based on the work of Dr. Thomas Gordon. The responses illustrate the difficulty of merely listening, being with a person, and showing acceptance. Some of them may be appropriate and even constructive messages at certain times, but not when your major goal is to communicate acceptance at a relationship level. The receiver of one of these messages may become defensive and never allow you to hear anything deeper than the trial-balloon problem.

Developing Active Listening Skills.

This prepares you for a deeper level of involvement with the speaker once she or he feels accepted and trusts you.

Author Linda Adams has described active listening this way:

Active listening is a special way of reflecting back what the other person has said, to let her or him know that you're listening, and to check your understanding of what she or he means. It's a restatement of the other person's total communication: the words of the message plus the accompanying feelings. To shift gears to Active Listening, you must temporarily put yourself in the other's positions, try to get a sense of the other's thoughts and feelings, and then share your understanding with the other to check its accuracy.

This active listening sequence consists of these steps:

1. You receive the other's message, verbal and nonverbal.
2. You translate the message and get your sense of what the other is trying to communicate.
3. You feed back your understanding of the other's message, saying in effect: "Here's my understanding of what you're feeling or experiencing. Am I right?"
4. The other person then reacts to your active listening response, confirming clarifying your understanding of her or his message.

Here's an example of active listening:

You (I-message): I think you did a good job with that presentation, but I disagree that we should forego putting up the new security lighting in favor of hiring additional security personnel. The budget just won't cover the difference.

Peer (resistance to message): That's a pretty pessimistic point of view. I'm really surprised to hear you say that.

You (shifting gears to active listening): I see you are upset about what I said. I'm interested in knowing more about why you feel the way that you do.

Peer: I believe we need to give our members the additional sense of security that only the presence of more security personnel will provide.

You (active listening): It's important to you that the additional security be personnel not equipment, right?

Peer: Yes, and one reason it's important is because the marketability of our property is going to suffer if we don't act immediately to create the image that this is a safe community to live in. The personnel are more visible evidence of this security.

You: (another I-message) I see your point; however, the safety reports we've been looking at indicate that for the type of problems we've been having, lighting is the best actual deterrent.

By shifting gears to active listening after an assertion, you can constructively explore value

differences. Avoid assuming what other's motives are, however. Frequently you can cool down a potentially volatile argument without either party backing away from her or his own feeling. You encourage rational discussion of controversial issues.

Being an active listener gives you a chance to communicate understanding and acceptance of a person's ideas and feelings, and it gives the speaker an opportunity to correct you if you have misunderstood. When you use this skill, people will feel more comfortable about bringing ideas and problems to you and sharing deeper thoughts. They'll be able to talk through their feelings and subsequently to solve many of their own problems.

Reading #6: Responses that Can Communicate Nonacceptance

When You Make This Response:

Ordering, demanding: "You must try . . ."

"You have to stop . . ."

Warning, threatening: "You'd better . . ."

"If you don't, then . . ."

Admonishing, moralizing: "You should . . ."

"It's not proper to . . ."

Criticizing, blaming, disagreeing: "You aren't thinking about this properly . . ."

Advising, giving answers: "Why don't you . . ."

"Let me suggest . . ."

Praising, agreeing: "But you've done such a good job . . ." "I approve of . . ."

Reassuring, sympathizing: "Don't worry . . ." "You'll feel better . . ."

Persuading, arguing: "Do you realize that . . ." "The facts are . . ."

Interpreting, diagnosing: "What you need is . . ." "Your problem is . . ."

Probing, questioning: "Why . . .?" "Who . . .?" "When . . .?" "What . . .?"

Diverting, avoiding: "We can discuss it later . . ." "That reminds me of . . ."

Kidding, using sarcasm: "That will be the day!" "Bring out the violins . . ."

Are You Implying This Message?

Don't feel, act, think that way; do it my way.

You'd better not have that feeling, act, or think that way.

You are bad if you have that feeling, act, or think that way.

You are wrong if you have that feeling, act, or think that way.

Here's a solution so you won't have that feeling, act, or think that way.

Your feelings, actions, and opinions are subject to my approval.

You don't need to have that feeling, act, or think that way.

Here are some facts so you won't have that feeling, act, or think that way.

Here's the reason you have that feeling, act, or think that way.

Are you really justified in having that feeling, acting, or thinking that way?

Your feelings, actions, and opinions aren't worthy of discussion.

You're silly if you persist in having that feeling, acting, or thinking that way.