THE LOWLY TURTLE

It makes progress...

...only when it sticks its neck out!

J. Robert Parkinson, Ph.D.

This book is about making choices – looking at situations and deciding what to do. We are constantly challenged to make decisions – to select from a variety of options.

Not only in business and professional situations do we face choices but also in everyday life. Fortunately, most of them are simple, routine, and safe. But life is filled with complicated, expensive, and sometimes dangerous situations – and that can make for difficult choices.

But consider this. No matter how complicated, confusing, or detailed a situation or a problem is, it eventually boils down to a simple "Yes – No" choice.

Just think about that for a moment. Ultimately, every decision we make has only two possibilities: yes – no, stay – go, add – subtract, up – down, etc.

The essays contained herein revolve around such options.

As you read them, consider what else could have been done, what you might have done or avoided doing, and what consequences could have developed.

Each essay is a "quick read," but hopefully you'll find yourself spending time considering the choices and the implications.

Enjoy the read.

We are constantly challenged to make decisions: looking at situations and selecting choices from a variety of options. Not only in business and professional situations are we faced with choices, but also in everyday life. Fortunately, most of them are simple, routine, and safe. However, life can be filled with complicated, expensive, and sometimes dangerous situations – and that can make for difficult decisions. J. Robert Parkinson PhD shows you how to sort through your options to make the best decisions available, boiling it down to a simple “yes/no” choice—information that can change your life!

KUDOS for *The Lowly Turtle*

In *The Lowly Turtle* by J. Robert Parkinson, PhD, there is a wealth of information and advice on communication, business skills, and decision making. A collection of motivational and informational essays, the book is well organized, well thought out, and well written. Covering everything from communication skills, managing techniques, and selling skills to technology and generational differences, the book is an excellent source of advice and inspiration. I especially like the way Parkinson presents his information in the form of easy-to-read-and-understand essays and teaches you how to apply the information to both your personal and professional life. ~ *Taylor Jones, The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

The Lowly Turtle by Dr. J. Robert Parkinson is another jewel in this talented and savvy businessman and author's string of self-help books. Focusing on the decisions-making process this time, Parkinson takes us through the mechanics of decision making and how the process relates to other skills we need to have, such as communication skills, selling skills, etc., skills that are essential for success in any aspect of life. But mostly the book is about how our everyday, seemingly small, decisions can have big consequences in our lives if we aren't paying attention. A natural teacher, Dr. Parkinson gets right to the heart of the matter, presenting his ideas and information in easy-to-read essays that get his points across without preaching, making it much more likely that we will take his message to heart and apply the principles he teaches. Well done. ~ *Regan Murphy, The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

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But I appreciate everything you offered. Thanks.

A special “Thank You” to Faith, who edited this book through numerous “Bumps in her road,” and to Jack who created the artwork. I appreciate everything you did to make this an interesting professional work.

THE LOWLY TURTLE

J. Robert Parkinson, PhD

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DEDICATION

To my wife, Eileen,

my first editor, and

my greatest supporter.

Nothing leaves the office without her okay.

This book is as much hers as it is mine.

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INTRODUCTION

This book is all about making choices – looking at situations and deciding what to do. We are constantly challenged to make decisions – to select from a variety of options.

Not only in business and professional situations do we face choices, but also in everyday life.

Just think about the myriad decisions we have to make: time to get up in the morning; breakfast at home or on the way to work, or at work; what to wear; when to leave home; transportation by car, train, taxi, car pool, or walk; route to take; where to park, buy coffee, add a donut; start the day at the office, factory, store school, other.

Now it's time for lunch. More choices!!

Most of us don't think of these as "decisions" or "choices" but that's precisely what they are. Most of them are simple, routine, and safe.

But life is filled with complicated, expensive, and sometimes even dangerous situations requiring us to make decisions – and that can be difficult.

But consider this: no matter how complicated, confusing, and detailed a situation or problem is, ultimately, it boils down to a simple "Yes – No" decision.

Just think about that for a moment. Ultimately, every decision we make has only two options: yes – no, stay – go, add – subtract, try – avoid, up – down, etc.

The essays contained here revolve around such options. They explain and describe real situations in which choices had to be made because of circumstances.

As you read them, consider what else "could" have been done, what you might have done or avoided doing, and what consequences could have developed.

The book is divided into ten sections, but those aren't restrictive.

Please read them in any order you like because the sequence isn't significant.

Each essay is a "quick read," but hopefully you'll find yourself spending time considering the situations and implications.

Ask yourself a few questions:

What did I get out if reading this? What would "could" I have done? Was there an "Ah Ha" moment? Where? What was the "take away" for me?

I hope you enjoy the read.

For starters, look at this:

Change Your Point of View

Sometimes just changing the way we look at a situation makes it easier to see options and resolve issues, but many times we simply rely on old habits because that "old way" worked. Let's look at what can happen when we change a point of view.

Just for fun, and to make the point, solve this Math problem. I'm sure everyone can get the correct answer.

You are working at a tennis club. Management has scheduled a tournament. Singles competition, single elimination. One hundred twenty eight players have registered.

As the person in charge, how many matches must you schedule to complete the tournament and award a trophy to the winner?

To get the answer, most people write down columns of numbers: 64 + 32 + 16 etc. Then they add them up: That's how we've always done it.

The technique works, but if you change your point of view, there's another way. It's also much faster and less prone to an arithmetic error. You'll get the correct answer almost instantly. Here's the "new" way. Just answer these questions.

How many registered to play? 128

How many will win the tournament? 1

If 1 will win, how many will lose? 127

How many losers can you have per match? 1

If you need 127 to lose, how many matches must you schedule?

Of course, you must schedule 127 matches!

Done! Problem solved!

The "old way" works, but this "new way" is faster and more accurate. And it works with any number. With an odd number of players, you just post a bye, and byes don't require matches.

Now what does this have to do with business communications?

Plenty. Much of what we do and how we do it comes from habit. Because certain techniques have worked for us in the past, we tend to use them again and again.

Most people tend to focus immediately on the Problem – and the evidence that defines the problem. After that, they discuss the potential Solution.

Like the tennis tournament, this works, but there's another way. Audiences want answers and solutions; they don't want recitations of problems and lists of justifications. When a speaker focuses on problems, particularly at the start of a talk, audiences usually become impatient. They're waiting for the "So what" information. "So what are you (or we) going to do to fix this?"

At the start of a talk, audience interest is high. They are in the room or on the Internet to learn something. They usually already know about the "problem." They want the "solution."

Take advantage of that initial interest and provide new material. When speakers don't do that, audience interest and attention wane and may disappear completely.

The Point of View in any presentation should concentrate on what is important to the audience – Solutions – not Problems.

Remember this. To be a good speaker, think like a listener. Put yourself in the shoes of your audience, and it's easy to determine what they want. Tom Peters, the noted speaker and customer service guru said it clearly. "Find out what the customer (audience in a presentation) wants, and deliver it.

Such good advice is simple to articulate, but sometimes those old habits make it difficult to follow.

But, change your point of view, and presentations will be easier to construct and more effective to deliver.

Finally, many speakers immediately start making PowerPoint visuals. Don’t do it. That’s a good tool, but it might not be the “right tool” for your talk. With this revised point of view, let the purpose drive the technique.

Determine the tool by the reason for the talk and by the specific characteristics of the Audience. Picking the tool should be your last decision.

Again, put aside those old habits. Look at new options. See what happens.

See what progress you might make when you stick your neck out.

CHAPTER 1

Communication Skills

The key word in this title is “skills.” And they relate to behaviors – to what people DO.

There are two major components to presenting material: Content and its packaging and delivering that content.

On the content side, presentations require structure. There must be a clearly defined start, development, and close. Audiences don’t want to – and won’t – wait.

If they don’t get information quickly they will tune out and move on, either mentally or physically. Maybe both!

Either way, a presenter has lost them.

The other side is the presentation itself, the interpretation, the thoughts.

Audiences don’t want just words; they want ideas; they want concepts; they want commitment; they want passion.

The following essays describe a variety of instances where words were supported by delivery.
Consider how those two concepts combined in the examples and consider what happened – and why:

That's Not Me – Or is It?

An almost universal reaction when someone sees a photograph of himself or herself is "That doesn't look anything like me!"

That's usually followed by others saying, "Yes, it does. It looks exactly like you."

Likewise, hearing a recording of himself or herself usually evokes, "I don't sound like that."

"That's exactly how you sound!"

The reason for the different perceptions is easy to explain and important to understand.

First let's look at the photograph. Most of the time when we see ourselves, it's in a mirror or other reflective surface. That result is an image reversed from what others see. When we look at the reflection, what is on the left side of the person in the reflection is actually on our right side.

The two sides of the human body are symmetrical, but they aren't identical. The reflection we see of ourselves isn't the same image anyone else sees. When we see a photograph, a motion picture, or a video recording, however, we see that "other" person the way everyone else does. Everything is in "the correct place."

As for the sound of the voice, there are similar reasons.

When we talk, we hear ourselves through two channels – air and bone. First, the sounds we make travel from our mouth to our ears, precisely the same way others hear us, through what is called “air conduction.”

However, we also hear the sounds we make through the vibrations of the bones in our heads. That’s called “bone conduction.” No one else hears that sound the way we do!

When we listen to a recording of ourselves, however, we hear only what others hear – through the air conduction. Bone conduction doesn’t apply.

We live inside a marvelous and complex system – our own body. It’s important to concentrate on how it works, and, with a little thought, we can develop new skills to make that system work to our benefit. This is particularly important in business communication.

Start with this. Take advantage of simple and commonplace technology by recording yourself using commonly available audio or video devices.

Then look and listen to the results. Regardless of what you might think, that’s how others see and hear you! That’s the image you present to your various audiences during speeches, interviews, and even informal conversations. What they actually see and hear is more significant than what you *think* they are experiencing.

Don’t argue with the evidence – use it.

Now it’s time for assessment and honesty. Do you like what you see and hear? If so, fine. If not, ask yourself precisely what you want to change.

Here are a few questions to consider in order to “fix” what you want your audiences to see and hear when you talk to them.

Are you looking right into the eyes of audience members, or are you looking at the floor, the ceiling, the walls, or projection screens? Those things won't respond to you, but audiences will. Talk to people, not to things.

Be aware. – If you don't look at the audience, they might not look at you.

Are you standing up straight and still – the way your mother told you to – or are you shifting and "fidgeting"? A solid and balanced stance and posture will help you look professional and comfortable – even if you aren't.

Are you speaking clearly and with enough volume for your audience to hear you easily? If you aren't, they won't! Here's an unexpected benefit of increasing volume: you'll reduce the number of annoying non-words you use. Nice benefit.

It's quite possible that the first time you review those recordings, you might not be comfortable because you're observing someone you don't really know – yourself.

After you visit with that "stranger" long and often, however, you'll become comfortable with your new "friend."

Get to know that "stranger." Visit regularly.

When you do that, the professionalism will expand, and that's good for everyone.

Maybe you'll even be able to teach him or her a thing or two!

Don't Expect Your Audience To Be Patient

A while back, my wife, Eileen, and I were presenters at a Communications Seminar. We discussed material that has broad implications for many businesses, including these ideas which resonated with the audience.

When addressing any audience, remember: audiences are impatient.

They're polite, but they want something from you.

And they want it now!

Speakers often "ease into" a presentation by providing extensive background information. They want to "warm up" their listeners, but that's not what the audience wants, expects, or deserves.

After a brief "hello and welcome," get to the point of the presentation before the audience starts to review the agenda or look at the rest of the program events to determine what else they could be doing.

Capture an audience with a strong sentence that makes your point. Even if your point is "bad news." Make it quickly.

Here's an example: If the corporate offices are moving to Fargo, North Dakota, tell them up front. They might not like the news, but now you have a basis for a focused discussion. If you simply begin by saying something about relocating the headquarters and continue with justification for a move without stating the location, the audience becomes anxious, wondering when the "other shoe will fall."

Audiences want data, structure, and clarity.

Give it to them.

Speakers sometimes seem to take on the role of the mystery writer. They set up twists and turns, plant clues, and contrive surprise endings. That's good for the mystery writer. It sells books, which sometimes exceed five hundred pages, and readers devour them by choice, devoting hours to discovering "Who done it?"

But that's not the case with business presentations.

When offered an opportunity to talk about what you do or what your organization does, make your point with a few appropriate words like this.

“We build cars;” or

“We build safe cars;” or

“We build safe, fuel efficient cars;” or

“We build safe, fuel-efficient, eco-friendly cars.”

Decide just how much information you want to put in one sentence, but car manufacturing is the primary point in each of the examples.

The focus is clear. If you use words such as “exciting” or “trend-setting,” don’t expect the audience to figure out what you want them to know. That’s not their job.

Here’s a disciplined way to make that all-important point quickly and clearly.

In one short sentence state what you do. Follow that with why you do it. And conclude with how you’re going to do it.

Not only will this sequence get you started, but also it will open a dialogue by using the same questions and prompts to discuss: What can/should the audience members do? Why should they do it? How can they get started?

This compact sequence is important with business audiences, because many of them see themselves as “problem solvers.”

As soon as a situation is presented, they immediately consider possible solutions. They have ideas about what could/should be done. Help them use that motivation to your advantage by framing the situation quickly.

By offering your recommendations you’ll focus their thinking, but if you don’t offer such information quickly, two possibilities might occur. First, you’ll lose control and have to work even harder to convince them to accept your recommendation.

Second, they might “turn off” and follow a completely different line of thought. In each case, you lost them and the opportunity to direct and harness their interest and abilities.

Here’s an exercise for you. As you plan a presentation, write down your answers to these questions:

What do you want your audience to know about you and your company?

What do you want them to do when your presentation is over?

What services can you provide for them?

What resources do you need from them?

What is the next step for them and for you?

Become a teacher, not only the speaker. Teach your audience what you want them to learn by helping them make your information their own.

And do it quickly.

The Power Of One

Every decision made in a family, an institution, or a company, a government agency or department can be traced back to an individual – a single person.

That person is the driver.

Without his or her initiative and direction, nothing constructive would happen.

In business and society today, we all become involved with teams, departments, and other groups; and often the people who constitute these groups discuss, debate, and compromise to collectively make decisions or plans.

But when we stop to think about the process, in every instance, a single person is responsible for the eventual decision and action.

No company ever made a decision!

No team or group ever made a decision. Individuals make decisions, and in every instance, a single participant is responsible for proposing an idea, focusing it, and moving toward an action.

Other participants agree to and participate in development; but without that individual driver, nothing gets started.

This recognition – and respect – for the power of one individual is significant because it can reduce the intimidation many of us feel in a variety of situations. Just realizing that one person – somewhere, in an agency or a company – developed an idea that resulted in a requirement or a regulation that has an impact on a business or an individual encourages us to raise questions rather than to accept new rules blindly, or just complain about them.

That's why group input has value.

As we navigate our business and civic worlds, it's important to remember the significant roles individuals play in making decisions, writing letters, and preparing contracts.

That means if you don't agree with a message and can substantiate your point of view, find someone of equal authority and work to get it changed.

Many people don't take that route because they are intimidated by a piece of stationery with an official looking letterhead. It's only a piece of paper.

Here's an interesting – and hopefully, enlightening – exercise. Identify a business or regulatory decision you think was really bad – or one that was really good.

Now, do some detective work. Find out who originated the idea. You may not come up with a specific name, but you'll see quickly that such a search will lead you to a single person. Even in a team action, someone will say, "Go!" Until that single person offers the direction, nothing happens.

There is always some*one* in charge.

Some individual person's "Eureka" moment is essential. Multiple people might be needed to implement the idea, but without the idea itself there can be no action.

And think of the implications a single idea can have. On the negative side, three decades ago, a major soft drink company changed its successful and profitable time-tested formula. But it wasn't the company making the decision. A single person developed the idea, and because of his stature and corporate power the formula was changed – with disastrous results.

On the other hand, many years ago a mid-west department store owner directed everyone in his company to, "Give the lady what she wants." That one man changed the course of customer service. His staff, of course, changed the way they treated customers, but he set the tone. He was the driver.

Not too long ago, we were able to observe an example of the Power of One in a fun way. On Sunday night, thanks to Abner Doubleday inventing the game, the Chicago Cubs faced the St. Louis Cardinals in the first game of the 2015 baseball season.

Then on Monday, most of the other Major League teams played their first games. But there's a problem. Sport history doesn't confirm that Abner Doubleday invented the game of baseball. Someone invented it, though, and huge crowds of people are glad he – or she – did!

Without that one person, none of us would have been able to enjoy the opening day or all the games to come throughout the season.

From the time we were little kids, we heard your name associated with baseball, and that's good enough for us.

So, thanks, Mr. Doubleday – even though the game wasn't really your idea.

Who Says So?

It's easy to intimidate or impress people. Just put on the cloak of an institution, and let it do the talking for you.

For example, when a letter containing bad news arrives in a mailbox, many people feel pressured to do something they didn't intend to do when they see the return address. However, taking a brief pause and considering the source of the information can make a big difference. Just look at these two sentences:

"The insurance company cancelled my policy."

"Charlie Jones cancelled my policy."

Which one is more likely to induce a panic response? The first one, of course, because it came from an institution.

But remember this. No institution ever wrote a letter!

Only a person can write a letter!

Here are a couple of examples demonstrating the power of the "anonymous author," and they raise the specter of having to "fight City Hall."

An acquaintance of mine told me how a letter from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) informed him he cannot expand his dock because of some new sea grass growing in the area.

A neighbor wants to build a patio in his back yard, but the zoning board wrote informing him it won't issue a permit.

Life becomes more manageable and less frightening, however, when we realize a missive was prepared by some person sitting at a desk somewhere. not by an institution or by an agency.

Since this "panic" response happens frequently, here's a suggestion that can help reduce anxiety. Find out who wrote the letter. Get a name and a phone number. Place a call, and talk to him or her. The Internet has made it easier to accomplish that task today than it was a decade ago.

It's impossible to talk to an institution, but it's easy to talk to a person. This is an important mindset, and it applies in many areas.

When I entered military service, a friend who served many years as a military officer gave me an interesting piece of advice. Initially I didn't believe him because it was contrary to everything I thought I knew about the military.

"During your service time you'll be subjected to many official orders," he told me. "Some you'll like; some you won't. Of course, you must obey legitimate orders, but always remember, some enlisted clerk somewhere typed those orders. If you want to do something other than what the orders direct, find some other enlisted clerk who can legally type other orders."

When I was eventually in a situation in which it was appropriate to try out his advice, I did. It worked. He was right.

Here's another tactic that causes readers to react unnecessarily. Many institutional directives are written in passive voice, and read like this:

"Your policy has been cancelled."

"Your permit has been denied."

That wording alone is intimidating because it seems to be final and absolute rather than a "work in progress."

Well-placed questions about such sentences can often reverse a decision or modify directed action.

If and when you receive such a communication: first find out who wrote it; ask specifically who made the decision; ask why. You are entitled to an explanation. Worst-case scenario, you'll simply understand better the reasons behind the negative decision. Best-case scenario, you'll get that person to change the decision. That's well worth the effort!

"But wait, there's more."

As the legendary radio personality, Paul Harvey often said, "Here's the rest of the story."

When you are the one writing those letters, use these same tactics to your advantage.

Write in passive voice. Don't take personal responsibility for decisions or conclusions. Let the reader believe the directions are coming from a powerful impersonal source. The tactic will give you a distinct advantage.

By knowing how the system works, you'll be able to use it when you're sending a message, and you'll be aware of it when you're receiving one.

When all the players know the rules of any contest, the competition is always more interesting.

It’s the Tone, Not Just the Tome

How clearly we communicate our ideas has a powerful impact on the success of our businesses, our family lives, and our civic interactions.

Many people spend long hours and extensive energy crafting and delivering messages. Others just “wing it.” The first activity can be time consuming, but the second can be risky.

Either way, it’s a choice, and there are consequences for choices.

Many people concentrate on WHAT to say, which is important, of course, but equally important is HOW they say it.

It’s necessary to concentrate on what the receiver hears, and that’s affected by a wide variety of vocal characteristics including: volume, pace, vocabulary, pronunciation, non-words, and tone of voice to name just a few.

On another front, written messages are also influenced by a number of characteristics, but we’ll cover them at another time. Today, let’s focus only on spoken messages.

Like many other behaviors, speech is a product of habits. We learn to speak by imitating sounds we hear from the time we are young children.

Some of us intellectually change and modify speech patterns and habits, but for the most part the speech patterns we exhibit on a daily basis are not planned.

Habits prevail, but we can’t rely solely on those habits. We must make choices, and the first choice is to speak with purpose and deliberateness.

What an audience hears from us forms and influences what they think about us when they receive the information we deliver.

What an audience hears from us is far more important than what we say.

Think about that for a moment!

Our messages aren't for us. We already know what we want and why and how and when. Because our messages are for our listeners, what they hear should be of paramount importance.

We must take care the audience "gets" what we intend, and that requires planning. Not planning every word; that would take too long, and audiences would get lost. This planning focuses on the impressions we create.

How will our listeners feel about what we say to them? How can we construct that feeling? What tools do we have? How do we practice them?

Here is an often-repeated line that has been credited to a wide variety of people. So many I won't pick one in preference to the others. The attribution, however, isn't as important as the message. Remember this:

"People will forget what you said; they may even forget what you did; but rarely, if ever, will they forget how you made them feel."

Feelings are carried and remembered long after an encounter, so take care to create the ones you want.

Don't take a chance; take charge.

Use speech tools to your advantage.

Something as simple as the emphasis we give to a word can change the meaning of the words we say. This old song lyric provides sound advice, "It ain't what ya say, it's the way that ya say it."

Now, that’s the lyric as written, but simply changing the slang words changes the feeling and the impression a speaker would create by using the “correct” words.

Going a step further and emphasizing just one of the words in the sentence changes the meaning. Look at these sentences, and listen to what happens:

It isn’t what *you* say; it’s the way that you say it.

It isn’t what you *say*; it’s the way that you say it.

It isn’t *what* you say; it’s the way that you say it.

It isn’t what you say; it’s the *way* that you say it.

Each sentence carries its own emphasis. Now do this. Say each sentence out loud. You’ll hear even stronger differences. That’s what audiences will get. They hear what we say out loud so that’s what must be our guide.

Once again; it’s risky to allow habits to determine how we voice our thoughts, because they can be misunderstood.

Audiences will remember the tone of voice we use as we address them, so be sure the sounds don’t interfere with what you are saying to them.

Image Counts

The image we present to others has a powerful and lasting impact on our messages.

That was the final sentence of an earlier essay, and it’s significant at the start of this one. Everyone with whom we have contact judges us by what we say and do. And because they do that quickly, it’s in our best interest to have a plan for presenting ourselves in the best possible light.

And what we do influences how people assess what we say. One easily observed example these days is what happens when speakers use a TelePrompTer – that device that enables someone to read a prepared speech and seem to be looking into a TV camera or at a live audience.

I use “seem to” because that’s the desired impression, but it doesn’t always work. Like most hardware, using a TelePrompTer requires practice to become proficient.

Here are three suggestions that can make or break a speech read from the device – where the speaker/reader is looking, where the device is located, and how the speech is written.

First, where to look. Look directly at the TelePrompTer screen. This is particularly true if the speech is being televised. Doing that correctly will create the impression you are looking directly at your viewing audience – - if the device is positioned correctly. That’s point number two.

For television transmission, the TelePrompTer screen, which is transparent from one side and displays the printed copy from the other side, should be placed directly in front of the camera lens. From the speaker’s position, the copy is easy to read while the camera “sees through” the glass from the opposite side.

For a stage presentation place a separate TelePrompTer screen toward each side of the lectern. Read a bit of the message while looking at one of the screens. Then read the next sentence or thought silently. Move your eyes to the center of the audience, and deliver those words to the audience. Next move your focus to the other screen and repeat the sequence. This impression of making “eye contact” is important to engage the entire audience.

Point three – How the speech is written will also make an impact on your delivery. Write sentences to be "spoken" not "read." In most cases people speak in short simple sentences, but they write in long complex ones. Written vocabulary is usually more formal, too. Since you'll be talking to an audience, sound like you're actually talking to them rather than reading to them.

Reading a prepared text can present yet another problem for an audience. Remember when you were read to as a child? What was the purpose?

Right. It was intended to put you to sleep! And it still works!

Now, another word about words we use in business situations. Avoid jargon. It's interesting to note how quickly words enter the language. Here are a few that have grown popular recently.

OPTICS. METRICS. and PIVOT. They refer to what can be seen, what can be measured, and a specific point of view, but the words "see," "measure," and "perspective" take care of such meanings. Certainly there is nothing wrong with using the other words, but using them repeatedly produces the impression of having a limited vocabulary.

Don't risk creating that image by using the "one word fits all" words.

Finally avoid acronyms. They might be misunderstood.

A colleague of mine almost set off a major argument when he arrived at a meeting a few minutes late and heard the featured speaker recommending action that should be taken by the NEA. He was furious because he was convinced schoolteachers should not be involved in such activity. A moment before he sounded off the speaker said, "And that's why the National Endowment for the Arts should take that position." He had missed the full title when he was late for the start of the talk.

There is the NEA, and then there is the NEA!

We've often said, "Words mean things." Avoid the verbal shortcuts and potentially confusing acronyms. Use the appropriate words in order to create the desired image.

Image Might Be "TOO Good"

Many years ago a former neighbor of mine took over a business his father-in-law had started and developed into a thriving enterprise. Paul, my neighbor, inherited the business when the founder passed away.

The business was "personality driven" and required a great deal of one-on-one attention at client's homes and / or other social settings. Paul expected to continue growing the business, but he found his client base begin to erode.

Long-time clients and customers began to shift allegiances after long associations with his father-in-law.

He shared his concerns and his surprise with me about losing a sizable portion of his client base.

"I don't know what I'm doing wrong, but it must be something serious." He described what he did and how he did it, and an idea began to form in my mind.

Because I had known him for a long time and had a pretty good sense of what his answer would be I asked, "What do you wear to the client meetings??

"Always a suit. I've acquired quite a work wardrobe even a step up from what my father-in-law had, and he often looked like he just stepped out of GQ Magazine. I think my appearance is very important to clients, and I have to look good."

With great pride, he showed me his wardrobe. Very impressive and very expensive.

My idea grew stronger and clearer.

Like most suburbanites, Paul had more than one car so I asked, "Which car do you use when you make your business calls?"

"The big one, of course. It's comfortable, and I think it makes an impression."

My idea was now fully grown, so I asked Paul another question.

"Could it be that you look TOO good and TOO successful to your clients? You're focusing on getting your clients to give you money for your services. Might it possibly look to them that you're getting too much money from them already? You look to be a lot more successful than they are when you drive up in that big car wearing that very expensive suit. Maybe you look too successful. Just a thought."

Paul ended the conversation saying, "I'll think about that."

Several months passed before we talked again about his situation. 'You might have been right about looking 'too successful,'" he told me. "I cut down a bit with the wardrobe, put away that gold chain and the Rolex watch, and left the big car in the garage. It might have been coincidence, but business is a lot better now, and I've picked up an impressive list of new clients."

I thought that certainly it could have been a coincidence, or it could have been a clear case of cause-effect. Sometimes we can display "too much of a good thing," as my mother used to say.

Customers judge us on many factors including appearance. It's worth looking at ourselves through their eyes from time to time, and asking ourselves, "What do they see, and how do they feel about it?"

Changing our point of view might change how we see ourselves. That, in turn, could change how customers and clients act toward us.

No one would ever argue that appropriate clothing and overall appearance are significant in business, but Paul's experience opens up a new view ? And a new question. Can something be TOO good?

A former colleague of mine often prodded his students with this comment. He said, "Any positive quality when taken to an extreme becomes a negative."

Just think about that for a moment. Borrowing from the Boy Scout Law, we

know that qualities like Trustworthy, Loyal, Friendly, Courteous, Obedient, Thrifty, and Reverent are all positive. Take them to an extreme, however, and they become: Gullible, Subservient, Obsequious, Fawning, Slavish, Miserly, and Fanatic.

It's a question of degree. When is enough enough?

Of course there is no visible line of demarcation between the positive and the negative labels, but the transition is worth considering as we interact with customers and colleagues.

But Not For Everyone

At the conclusion of a television commercial about a "significant breakthrough drug," I saw a comment that was either a powerful confession or a gigantic insult to viewers. It communicated the audience was either fooled, or stupid.

The disclaimer said, "Don't expect to achieve these results."

If a sponsor purports a product or service will produce specific results but doesn't get them, why market the product in the first place?

Or on the other hand, if the sponsors knew the stated results are questionable why spend the time, talent, and resources extolling its merits for any reason other than to fool gullible viewers?

There once was something called 'Truth in Advertising,' and it served as a first line of defense against dishonest claims. Advertising content was required to meet a certain standard of accuracy that seems to have disappeared.

Now the standard seems to be, 'Make all the claims you want within the body of an ad and then indicate at the conclusion that what was just disclosed might not be so.'

If a product is aimed at a large audience, what's the point and the truth in admitting it may be effective in some cases but not in all? And what's the purpose of spending most of the time on the "advantages" only to negate them in the final sentence? All too often, that sentence isn't even spoken. It's printed usually in small type at the tail end of a commercial.

It's there for legal cover. But the true purpose and the ethics are subject to question.

The real question isn't about confessions or insults. It's a simple Yes or No, without qualifiers. Does the product or service do what it is supposed to or not?

Here's another common qualifying statement. 'No case is typical.' After extensive claims are made in the body of the commercial the qualifier is tacked on to the content. And that qualifier negates the claim.

That tactic reflects an adage that seems to be popular in some businesses as well as in governmental agencies. It's the dictum that, "Viewers buy Image faster than they buy Content."

Think about the products and services and people that seem good at first glance but become tarnished upon careful inspection.

"Caveat Emptor ~ Let the buyer beware," is not only alive and well, but it has also become more significant as communication technology has expanded. Messages are packaged in ever-increasing formats and devices using highly sophisticated imaging.

Computer generated images are often impossible to distinguish from reality and we often see things that simply don't exist. Powerful visual messages are almost impossible to ignore and they are very convincing. Those images seem to be real, and they produce results.

"Seeing is believing" is no longer a reliable statement.

The general population has been so inundated by excessive claims that businesspeople must be careful of how products and services are projected. The impact of the bombardment is often a wiser, more sophisticated clientele. False claims and exaggerations become more obvious to observant viewers and readers.

When many people are deceived they become skeptical of claims. It's just sound strategy to avoid any appearance of saying what isn't so. Something as simple as claims that certain products advertised on television are 'not available in stores' is blatantly untrue. We see many of these products on store shelves every day.

It's easy to stretch truth or to make up facts to sell an idea or an item. Deception works for a while, but ultimately truth emerges.

In daily activities with customers, staff, and colleagues it's always best to maintain the high ground.

If we don't, we'll get caught, and there's usually a high price to pay for that.

As consumers, it's important to remember the adage, "If it's too good to be true, it is." The desire to want to believe in a product, a service, or a person can lead to misdirection and disappointment.

Be informed. Be skeptical. Be safe.

Hi Diddle Dee Dee,
An Actor's Life For Me.

Let's begin with a couple of questions. (And a virtual show of hands to respond). First: How many readers are accomplished Shakespearean actors? Actor, by the way is the appropriate designation for both men and women.

Second: How many readers know someone who is an accomplished Shakespearean actor?

Probably only a few hands went up for each question. Why is that?

Almost everyone has access to all the scripts, and everyone can read and study the plays, so shouldn't there be a big response? Clearly, it takes more than the words of the script to be an accomplished actor. The words must be interpreted and delivered. How the actor brings them to life determines the impact of the play.

And now, another question. Raised hands aren't necessary for this one.

When businesspeople have to give a speech or make a presentation to clients or customers, how many of them give almost exclusive attention to the words? They write the words (their scripts), re-write the words, and then make some visuals that reflect the words.

Business executives in classes I teach admit they hardly ever rehearse! They're busy! Very rarely do they even say their words out loud until they are standing or sitting in front of their audience. Here's a thought for everyone planning to deliver any talk to an audience. Just because you have written some words doesn't mean you will be an effective speaker. As with the actor, how a presentation is packaged and delivered breathes the life into the words.

And just because an actor has a good script in his or her hands doesn't make that person a good actor. Likewise the businessperson delivering a presentation.

All too often businesspeople evade opportunities to deliver presentations. Many students at all academic levels also avoid giving presentations or "reports" as they are often called. Presentations can be opportunities to be welcomed rather than ordeals to be avoided.

Audiences at all levels judge us more critically on how we look and how we sound than on the words we say. Words are important; no one will deny that, but how words are delivered creates the impression and contributes to developing the convictions.

Here are some suggestions to help with creating those impressions.

First, talk to people, not to things. Look right at the audience's eyes, and talk to them. If you have to use notes or visuals, that's fine; just don't talk to them. They won't do anything for you, but people will.

Let your hands help you be descriptive. Don't lock them together, at your sides, or put them in your pockets. Give yourself license to move. In daily conversation, everyone moves to describe and emphasize. Doing those same things during a presentation will make you look comfortable and confident. Audiences respond positively to such an impression.

Stand or sit up straight and balanced. Such posture tells an audience you are prepared and able to deliver your information. Move around when necessary and appropriate; just don't meander. That's a distraction, and signals to an audience you perhaps aren't the professional you know you are.

Finally, speak up so audiences don't have to work to hear what you are saying. There's an old adage related to volume that's worth remembering. "If you make an audience work to hear you, they won't." You lose!

Also, when volume is strong the voice isn't just louder; it's richer and fuller. It sounds like you're comfortable, which helps make the audience feel comfortable. Even when using a microphone, speak up. An amplifier will make you loud but not necessarily good.

There is an added benefit to using these skills. Those annoying "ums?" and "ahs" we hear so often will go away.

When they are numerous, audiences begin to count them. When that happens, your potential impact disappears.

So develop solid content for a presentation, but remember the importance of the packaging and delivery of that content.

Like the Shakespearean actor, begin with a good script, and then rehearse, rehearse, rehearse.

A solid and professional presentation doesn’t just happen. It’s crafted.

Much Is Revealed When a Question Is Asked

We usually think of asking a question as a way to collect information and that works well. There’s another way, however. Questions provide information simply by listening to the way they are asked.

If we listen carefully, even before anyone answers a question, the question itself can speak volumes.

In order to capture all of the information, though, it’s important to listen to all three parts of a question. That’s right, three parts, but most of us listen to only one part the words that are actually said or written. That’s important, of course, but there is more than just that verbal part. Let’s examine the other two parts as my co-author, Jack Grossman and I described in our book, *Becoming a Successful Manager*.

A non-verbal part is revealed by what is done while the words are being said. Listen for harmony or dissonance. Do the actions that accompany it reflect the words that were used?

The third part is revealed by how the words are said, the tone of voice and the words that are emphasized.

In the following sentences from employees to their managers, the words are clear, but other messages might be significant in understanding the real issues.

"Don't you think we already have too many meetings?"

"You're in charge. I'll do it exactly the way you tell me to."

"What do I have to do to gain some appreciation around here?"

"Why is it every time we schedule an appointment, you cancel it."

"I don't know if you realize it, but the only time I hear from you is when I seem to have done something wrong."

If you really listened, you heard the "hidden?" messages in each of these remarks.

So, one side of the coin relates to listening carefully to how questions are asked. Don't answer a question until you know what it really is. If someone asked you, for example, "Why are your prices higher than your competitors?" Watch out! You might go on the defensive if you answer this without getting more information.

You need to do some probing before tackling this one. Questions like: "Which prices?" "What product?" "What competitor?" These questions will help you specify the real issue.

Many businesspeople view themselves as "problem solvers" and jump right to a response, but, in this case, haste might lead to solving the wrong problem. Don't begin to answer any question before you know precisely what it is. A few questions of your own here will likely avoid lengthy explanations or verbal U-turns later.

Just as you want to be sure of the meaning of a question before attempting to answer it, when you are constructing your own questions, do so with care and clarity.

You’ll get what you ask for, so be sure of your words and stay focused and accurate. If you were to ask a customer about the greatest difficulty he or she is having operating a new product, you’ll get a laundry list of problems. On the other hand, if you ask a customer about the best features of a new appliance, you’ll likely get a testimonial about benefits.

An old adage tells us, “Be careful what you ask for. You just might get it!”

Finally, remember questions open up routes for conversation. They identify what is important to another party – a customer, a colleague, or a family member. Don’t view them as interrogations, but rather as requests for more information. Questions are like road signs. They provide direction. They aren’t merely “Stop Signs” indicating “Danger” or “Rough Road Ahead.” They give direction, speed, and location while offering permission or prohibition. They help us get where we want to go, but we have to be careful to understand them thoroughly.

A road sign is usually short, bold, and bright; but questions are sometimes confusing and convoluted, so give yourself plenty of room and time to process what the messages are.

And, by all means, don’t begin your answer until you are sure of the question, and you’re ready to begin your answer.

Proceed With Caution.

Fix It? – Or Just Accept It?

A new phrase has entered our everyday language. “The New Normal” Like any other living language, English is constantly changing, but sometimes changes sneak up on us. We find ourselves using words and phrases we never expected to come out of our mouths.

Sometimes they speak volumes about us “for better or for worse” about our outlook and about our expectations.

All manner of new procedures in employment, education, travel comfort, living standards, and financial security; to name just a few, are now referred to as “The New Normal.”

In almost every instance, however, that label describes an unavoidable lowering of standards, expectations, and services.

The phrase demonstrates a willingness to blindly accept a significant downward change without question. It says that although something isn’t as good as it once was, we just have to get used to it.

The impression is: “If it’s Normal it must be okay. Even if it’s inferior, it’s okay because it’s Normal.” That’s self-deception, because whatever is defined as “normal” then becomes normal.

Accepting such thinking provides an easy excuse for giving up. It justifies surrender.

A disturbing element of the phrase is the potential impact of simply accepting without question that something is inevitable. It says, “I can’t do anything about this. I’ll just go along so I can get along. Ever hear that before?

It encourages defeat.

That defeat, however, is the result of the fact that language can change behavior. Words influence and shape belief.

This “New Normal” is the latest version of some previous popular aphorisms including:

o It is what it is,

o Accept the inevitable,

o Que Sera, Sera ? Whatever will be, will be.

When we hear something repeated often enough, we find ourselves falling into the trap of believing it. Repetition can build the façade of truth, and if listeners don’t question the idea the words evoke, behavior changes.

That’s what often drives advertising? The slogans, the rhymes, the jingles, and the frequency. Political campaigns have used this technique for ages, and it and works!

A carefully selected and focused short sentence, when repeated often enough shapes, our thinking, and can eventually change our behavior. In extreme cases, the technique has been called, “The Big Lie.” History is filled with examples so we don’t have to repeat any of them here.

So, be careful about the level of credence we give to such comments. Also, be careful about what we tell ourselves. For example:

Remember the time you were invited to a social event, and you told yourself it was going to be boring, and it was? On the other hand, how about the time you went to an event after telling yourself it was going to be great fun? It probably was!

Language influences attitude, and attitude influences behavior.

Avoid telling yourself or letting others convince you changes are unavoidable and inevitable because something is “The New Normal.”

It’s possible you might not be able to change everything you want, but in your own best interest, think of the sentiments and the directions included in what has been called “The Serenity Prayer.” Written by the twentieth-century theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, it has had a far-reaching impact. Aside from the religious community, it has been adopted be Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs, and it was also distributed by the US Army and the USO in Germany after World War II.

Consider the power of these words:

God, grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can;
And wisdom to know the difference.

In our business and personal lives it would do us well to weigh these thoughts before accepting the notion of “The New Normal.”

Assess a situation, gather facts, and evaluate options. Then select the course of action most appropriate for you and for your business based on facts, not on feelings, and certainly not on a new catch phrase.

You Are the Most Important Visual

Seems that almost everyone who delivers a presentation these days uses visuals. Today, it’s PowerPoint. Years ago it was thirty-five-mm slides in a Kodak Carousel Projector. We've all moved up in the "High-tech" world.

Presenters use them because visuals are powerful, and they can carry a great deal of information. Sometimes they carry too much information, but that's for another time.

In a previous column I suggested that visuals should be made only after the content, sequence, and audience have been defined, and I stand by that. But, let's assume you've done that, and you've created good visuals.

In most presentations there is another visual that doesn't get much attention.

YOU! You are the most important visual in your presentation.

The audience observes – and evaluates – everything you do, how you do it, and how you look when you're doing it. The first impression they get should be carefully crafted and executed.

That doesn't imply being deceptive, but you must be aware and discriminating.

In a moment we'll visit some physical skills to use in presentations, but first, let's take a brief look at your appearance – your clothing.

This won't be a fashion review; just a look at what should be common practice and obvious. Unfortunately, much of it is neither.

For both men and women, common sense must prevail, but factor in these considerations. Make sure the clothes fit properly: not too tight, not baggy. Nothing provocative or flashy. Everything must be clean and pressed. Go easy on jewelry. It can be distracting, and it can interfere with items like microphones and remotes.

I know, for some, I'm stating the obvious; but presenters sometimes don't realize the impression clothes create and how they influence the audience's impression.

With so many levels of business dress these days, be sure you know what kind of environment you're entering. Is the dress code, "business," "business casual," "casual," or something else?

Once I went to a meeting where the dress code was "business campus." I had never heard of that, so I made a few phone calls and learned it consisted of t-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops.

Be sure you know and conform to the code, and then dress slightly on the high side of it. That can be tricky sometimes. (Think "business campus.")

I have a business associate who is proud of how he dresses. He usually looks like he stepped out of a fashion magazine. That can be good, but he realized his version of what that meant became a serious problem for him. His four-figure suits, alligator shoes, gold rings and watch were creating a "big money" image. Many of his customers thought they must be paying too much for his services, and? "excessive" profits were going into his clothes closet. Eventually, he eased back on the pricey clothes.

Remember, it's all about the audience. Consider what they'll think about you, and respond accordingly.

Other factors to consider concerning you being the most important visual include these behaviors. Before you say the first word in your talk the audience is already evaluating you. They process all of this information.

How do you walk to the front of the room? Fast? Slow? Hesitating?

How do you organize your material on the table or lectern?

Where do you look as you're getting ready?

Is your stance even and balanced?

Do you make eye contact with members of the audience?

Do you engage your audience by moving closer to them?

Even though you haven't yet said a word you've sent many messages. Everything you have done will influence how the audience will react to what you say when you start to talk. You have already set their expectations.

Throughout your talk, continue to be aware of your appearance because the audience certainly is.

Remember, you are the most important visual in your presentation.

Impatient Audiences

The adage tells us that, "Patience is a virtue," but in many instances audiences don't demonstrate that quality.

Makes no difference if it is in a large auditorium or in a boardroom, an audience wants information "right now." And the higher they reside on the organization chart, the less time they'll wait.

In order to perform well in such a pressure situation, have a game plan.

We've all heard the advice about, "Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em. Tell 'em. Then tell 'em what you told 'em."

That's been around for a long time but it seems lately that a different approach might be appropriate. An approach like this.

For starters: "Tell 'em." Right away. That's why they came to the meeting in the first place. They want to know what you're recommending. It's interesting to note that even if the audience doesn't agree with what you're saying, they want to know about it right away – no matter if it's good news or bad news they want it now!

Next, "Tell 'em" why you are delivering your specific point. What is the justification for your recommendation?

As soon as they've heard the news they'll want to know why, so here's the place to tell them.

Many speakers want to take time at the beginning of a presentation to provide a "Set up." Especially with bad news speakers are tempted to "ease into" the bad news. When that happens audiences quickly become inpatient. If a speaker withholds the news too long, the audience becomes annoyed, and that can be a serious problem.

So, begin with "What." Then quickly follow up by telling them "Why."

Immediately, they'll know your position and hear your support for it. No time wasted here.

The third step is to tell them "How" you intend to accomplish the task.

In coaching sessions, we often use the analogy of a legal trial as an example. In a trial, each attorney begins by stating his point: "Find my client innocent" from the defense. "Find the accused guilty." from the prosecution.

The members of the jury don't have to "again figure out" the position of each attorney.

The next phase of a trial is each attorney presenting evidence to prove his or her position – guilt or innocence.

Again, the jury members don't have to figure out if specific pieces of evidence are good or bad news for the accused. Each attorney tells them!

Imagine how complicated it would be for jury members to have to figure out if specific evidence was good news or bad news for the accused.

In the third step of a trial, the attorneys provide the marching orders to the jury and tell them how they want them to proceed to closure.

This is precisely how a presentation should unfold. Tell the audience: What you want, Why you are making the recommendation, and How you recommend it be accomplished.

This format is fast, clear, and specific. It's also possible to add background information to the "Why" section if time permits or an audience member asks a question. Be sure to keep answers to questions focused on the recommendation, and avoid being forced or tricked into talking about other issues. Staying focused on the topic is easy if you simply refer back to the recommendation by saying "That's why I'm suggesting…"

Stay focused, and honor the time demands of your audience. Don't stretch their attention span. It might snap back and hit you.

Make your point up front. Audiences look for such focus, and they appreciate such attention. And always remember, as we've often said before, a presentation is for the benefit of the audience, not the convenience of the speaker.

So test this format. See how it works for you

CHAPTER 2

Managing Techniques

In early employment years and entry-level jobs most of us were “Doers.” We learned what to do, how to do it, and we were rewarded by how well we did it.

When we did well, we got promoted to another level, and we learned how to do more things. This cycle was repeated until we reached a fork in the employment road, and we became a manager. Congratulations!

No longer were we doers – or we shouldn’t have been. We were now responsible to get others to do the work. Our job was to guide, teach, coach, and evaluate their performance.

The difficulty was this. For the most part no one taught us how be a manager – to get those others to do the actual work.

When things went wrong, we tended to retreat to past behaviors. We jumped in, and we fixed the problem.

In short, we became doers again. But that was no longer what we were supposed to do!

When we "Jumped in" like that the others for whom we were responsible didn't learn or grow. They were simply "place holders" because we didn't guide them.

It's difficult to be a Manager, but these essays present some ideas that merit your consideration.

Think about how you might have responded to the situations – and the benefits of "managing" rather than "doing."

Old habits die hard for all of us, but there are some solid suggestions here.

They might work well for you.

First, The Person

Well. We're already into the second week of a new year! Traditionally this is a time for new beginnings. We celebrate and look forward to events and changes. But sometimes there are endings that must be recognized.

In business settings such changes surface in products, procedures, and people. Nothing stays the same, and the changes require attention and care.

It's probably a pretty good guess that many readers have been in positions to guide, manage, evaluate, and even terminate employees. Let's start the New Year by revisiting techniques that can help navigate those difficult waters.

Perhaps the most important – and difficult – task of a manager is providing guidance to those for whom he or she has responsibility. Because a manager can't and shouldn't attempt to DO everything, it's necessary to teach staff what they need to know and to coach them as they develop.

A manager should be a good and sensitive teacher. That requires attending to each individual in the "class – the department or the company. The most powerful activity in any instructional environment isn't "teaching," however. It's "learning."

The student, the staff member, the participant is the one who must internalize new information and adopt new behaviors. The manager provides the direction through information and criticism – constructive criticism.

As we turn the page to a new year, with the holiday season" in the rear view mirror, think of that constructive criticism as another "gift" still to be delivered.

Constructive criticism is indeed a gift, but to be viewed as such, it must be properly wrapped and sensitively presented. In order to determine how to provide constructive criticism it's important to first become that other person, and focus on that person in order to determine the most appropriate action.

Here's a simple example. Put yourself in the position of someone who reports to you. If that person did something "wrong" you have at least these four possible responses:

Ignore the action;

Chastise him or her in private or in front of colleagues;

Tell him/her what was done wrong but offer little or no help; or

Call attention to what was done wrong, determine the cause of the error, agree on a course of corrective action, and determine what needs to be done.

Of course, the last action is what you would want because it calls attention to an error, but then it allows you to become part of the solution.

Although this tactic works, many managers don't apply it. They confuse criticism with adverse judgment. To assure that constructive criticism will be the dominant message, remember these points: Criticisms are gifts; When delivering those gifts, be specific about what is needed and expected; Deal with the error, not the emotion.

An additional factor relates to offering the gift of constructive criticism. The personal relationship inherent in any exchange of gifts grows and develops over time. A trust factor plays an important role, and here is where "the person" comes into play. In reality, at least two people are involved – the manager and the employee, or employees. It is also important to restrict the conversations to the individuals involved. As soon as other people are within hearing distance, the relationships change. The "gift" being presented is a personal matter. Keep it personal. And confidential.

Most physical gifts are given at specific times of the year: for birthdays, weddings, and other celebrations, but constructive criticism shouldn't be confined to specific dates and times like scheduled performance reviews.

Many people dread them – managers – for having to conduct them and employees for having to participate in them. But think about this:

A Performance Review should be a process – not an event.

If a relationship has been built over time and included open communication by all parties, by the time the "official performance review" date arrives (most organizations have then) there should be no surprises for any on the participants. And there will be none if the manager encouraged and nurtured a continual cooperative working relationship.

When that happens the Performance Review will certainly be a process – not an event.

Try it.

Hiring the Wrong People

At a recent conference I heard a business executive say something to which I and many other participants responded with great surprise. Here's what he said – loudly and emotionally.

"All the people I hire these days are no good! They never stay very long.

Those two sentences spoke more about him than about his hires and short-term employees.

Hiring an employee is a difficult task if you don't have a solid game plan, so here are a few factors to consider. Of course, there isn't only one way to accomplish that daunting task, but here are some time-tested steps.

First, be sure you know precisely what you need. What skills, experiences, and personal traits will be required? That sounds obvious, but it is often overlooked. When you think you know what you need write it down. Don't just "think about" it. And be specific about what you write.

If you can't write it down on a blank piece of paper or on a computer screen, you probably aren't sure of what you want. It's impossible to fool a blank page or screen.

Taking the time to write out what you are truly looking for will save you a great deal of time later. It will also save expensive hiring and training time and dollars.

Once you are sure you know what you want from a new employee, check the applicants by using this three-step process.

As an instructional vehicle we're going to compare the hiring process to climbing a mountain, and we'll call that process ALP. The letters stand for Able, Likely, Personal.

Step one: Able. Determine if the candidate possesses the skills and knowledge to meet the job requirements. Much of this information will be relatively easy to secure by close examination of the applicant's resume?. This is all past tense and it's easy to review. Carefully look for gaps, lapses, or omissions. If you find any, make a note to ask about them during an interview – if there is to be one.

That takes us to the second step: Likely. What is the applicant likely to do if he or she is hired? This is future tense, so assess what reaction you can expect concerning future activity, growth, and willingness to learn new skills that direct and contribute to the growth and health of the company.

Be prepared to ask questions during the interview that will uncover such needed information. Share your questions with others in the company who will likely participate in the interview process. The interview is the best place to compare the past activities with the future needs.

Of course, be aware of the legal limitations and restrictions about what you can and can't ask or you might find yourself the respondent in an uncomfortable inquiry of another type!

The third element is perhaps the most difficult one. It’s the Personal element that will determine the probability that the applicant will “fit into” the existing workforce and corporate structure.

Again, have other colleagues participate in the interview process in order to assess the likelihood of such compatibility. Once a hire decision is made it can be difficult to undo an error.

These aren’t hard and fast rules to this process, and interrelations need to be flexible in order to assure success. For example: a missing skill (Able) can often be overcome with sufficient training (Likely). On the other hand, solid skills and a willingness to learn may be overshadowed by a negative personality (Personal) that can destroy a working relationship.

So look at the entire process. Ask the applicant – and yourself -- the tough questions. And by all means, be sure of what you want and need so you’ll be able to see it when you’re looking at him or her!

Keep that alpine analogy in mind. With planning, instruction, and effort, a climb to the top of a mountain is rewarded with a beautiful view and a sense of accomplishment. Taking a short cut or making a misstep, however, will likely lead to little more than a fast trip to the bottom.

Modifying Managers

While working recently with a major US based international corporation, I was reminded of a concept my wife and I have observed with many of our clients. It is both sobering and exciting, and the first question that comes to mind is: "How can something be both an "upper" and a "downer." Seems contradictory, but it isn't. We'll focus on business experiences here, but it affects everybody in every walk of life.

Here's the concept: Everything is changing – all the time. That's exciting for some people, frightening for others. Many of us avoid looking at that certainty and the emotions that accompany it. Some changes move quickly, some more slowly, but the changes do come. Nothing today is the same as it was yesterday; and tomorrow it will be even more different.

Some changes reflect and demonstrate improvement, some just the opposite. It depends on how we embrace or reject change.

This isn't intended to be a depressing idea. Quite the opposite. It is intended to evoke a positive reaction. It is an invitation to explore how we relate to our own individual worlds and to the people in them.

All too often and as a matter of self-deception, we behave as if they will always be there. Think again!

Constant change has enormous implications for how we conduct business, and, in fact, in determining what is happening to our businesses, our customers, and our associates.

Many organizations, large and small, are currently recognizing the need for "retraining" their workers. To the surprise of many, those workers include managers and C level personnel.

Over the years, with increasing frequency and speed, the ways of doing business have changed and cannot be managed the same way now as they were a decade or two ago.

Many of today's managers and C level personnel, however, were "trained" to run businesses and specific departments under conditions that no longer exist. Their training no longer matches their responsibilities.

Even the word "training" could be revised. Many professionals now prefer to use the word "teach" or "educate" because those words reflect human behavior.

Animals are "trained" to perform certain tasks in specific ways. They don't measure, plan, revise, and select appropriate actions based on acquired and evaluated data.

Unfortunately, the word "re-education" has taken on negative and sinister definitions because of various political and literary references. (Remember George Orwell's *1984*?)

Regardless of the word that is used, however, even experienced staff members, managers, and other leaders must learn new specific elements of their jobs because many of the "old ways" are no longer operational.

Managers must learn new ways to relate to today's new employees. The "new" people are responsive to factors far removed from those of twenty years ago.

It's incumbent on today's managers that they learn – again – how to manage employees. The operational rules of the game of business have changed. Some current managers might not like that, but to remain effective, they must learn new skills, or they may become obsolete.

Learning new rules and behaviors doesn't mean the old rules are now bad. They are just different! A sport analogy might be appropriate here.

An accomplished athlete, as talented as he might be, cannot play quarterback on a baseball team. In order to join a baseball team, he must learn a new set of rules and skills. A great baseball pitcher would need to relearn how to throw a ball if it were to morph into a football. He might still be a great player, but he would need to acquire and apply new behaviors.

As the game of business changes, so must the players change in order to “stay in the game.”

It just makes sense for professional managers to update and use their abilities and drive to avoid being sent back to the “minors” because they couldn’t “cut it?” any more.

So, here’s the instant re-play: Everything changes; people, products, technology, rewards, opportunities, goals, tools, challenges, etc.

Maintain your values and your focus, and learn the new game.

Who knows? You might even like it better than the old one.

The Extremes Are Easy

One of the most difficult parts of being in charge of anything is the need to make decisions. The manager of a business, the principal of a school, a teacher, or a parent is required to make judgment calls on a daily basis.

Even what seem to be “routine” events are the result of unique characteristics that are influenced by a vast variety of variables including changing times, individual participants, operational pressures, and interpersonal relationships. In other words, no two events are the same. And that poses a problem for the person in charge.

In recent years a wide variety of institutions and organizations have adopted a “fast track” approach to decision making. The approach has many names, but the most common is “Zero Tolerance.”

When an observable event takes place, a single element is used to identify “what happened,” and the characteristics mentioned above become unimportant and irrelevant. When only that single event is deemed to be significant a reaction to it is simple.

It’s almost like using a checklist where Column A indicates the element and the corresponding Column B dictates the response. Using such an approach enables anyone ?”n charge” to make a quick decision without having to think because, once the element is defined, the corresponding reaction is predetermined.

All the variables become unimportant. The consequences reflect a “one size fits all” mentality.

What otherwise would require thought, analysis, and judgment is simplified and catalogued in the pages of a discipline manual. Just look up the event, and Presto, the dictated response pops up.

No thought is needed to make the swift decision. No time is wasted thinking, analyzing, or judging.

The interesting factor here is this. The desire to organize and codify reactions to events does have some value. Clearly articulated systems can produce efficiencies.

However, as I mentioned in another column a while ago, my colleague Jack Grossman was correct when he wrote, “Any positive action, when taken to an extreme, becomes a negative.”

Think about that for a moment. A disciple becomes a zealot; desire becomes compulsion; guidance becomes domination; thrift becomes miserly; and caution becomes cowardice.

As soon as anything becomes “All vs. None” or “Always vs. Never” there is no room for assessing individual situations – what some would call “common sense.”

Recently a magazine published a story that describes this “Always vs. Never” limitation. A nine-year boy established a mini library on the front lawn of his home. A sign on the little blue box on red stilts read, “Take a book, leave a book.”

He did it to promote reading, and no money changed hands, but the local government shut him down, citing an ordinance that bans “structures on front lawns.”

That was certainly zero tolerance in action because it focused on a specific element and provided no room for interpretation.

His little box of books was a structure, but it likely was not what was intended when the statute was written. But, once written, no one had to think about it anymore.

Another recent news story describes how an elementary school student was suspended for “terrorist activities.” His offense? After seeing a movie with his parents, they gave him a souvenir ring similar to one used as part of the movie plot. When he went to school he told some of his classmates, “With this magical ring I can make you disappear.” That “threat” resulted in his suspension.

The school principal justified the harsh reaction by saying, “We can’t tolerate threats to other students – even fantastical ones.”

Certainly the intent of both examples was sound, but taking them to the extreme in each case made them almost ridiculous – made then negatives.

No one will dispute that rules and boundaries are necessary, but being "in charge" requires evaluation and judgment not simply the ability to read a manual and select a response. True leaders and true managers are decision-makers, observers, evaluators, and not just good readers.

Responding to "extremes" is easy, but understanding the variables that surround events requires careful thought to be valid and positive.

Groundhog Day – Again

Groundhog Day has been around for more than a century, and the lore indicates that a groundhog named Punxsutawney Phil will come out of his hibernation spot and predict the weather. If he sees his shadow, winter will last another six weeks, but if the day is cloudy and he sees no shadow the weather will be moderate, and winter will be over.

It's a fun story and a festive celebration each year, but old Punxsutawney Phil hasn't been very good at the prediction business. The predictions have been correct only thirty-nine percent of the time – not very good from a business perspective.

But, here's another side of Punxsutawney Phil and Groundhog Day. In 1993, Harold Ramis directed a motion picture with the same name. He and Danny Rubin wrote a story in which a TV weatherman relives the same day over and over, and, of course, that day is Groundhog Day.

We're looking at it here because, at the moment, it seems in many areas of business and society, we are doing what has already been done. For example:

Businesses rise and fall based on the same factors they experienced in the past. The success/failure of schools, likewise, ebbs and flows, and educators work at researching multiple factors aimed at solving the same problems they faced a generation ago. Social and race related situations also continue to demand attention.

The pages on the calendar have changed, but the attitudes and behaviors haven't. It's Groundhog Day again.

In many ways it seems we haven't learned from our past actions, and the results are predictable.

To paraphrase George Santayana, those who don't learn from their past experiences are doomed to repeat them. In many respects, it seems that each generation is determined to make its own mistakes and to think it is traveling in new territory.

If businesses operated that way, they probably wouldn't be in business very long. Businesses look for solutions and developments, not opportunities to revisit old problems, point fingers, or just "try again."

Here's an interesting way to examine a "problem" be it business, academic, civic, or social. First, look at this definition. "A problem is a perceived divergence between a reasonable need or expectation and what has or is currently happening."

Since the perception belongs to the person with the problem, the problem belongs to that person as well. And that is a key factor in resolving any problem!

Solving a problem doesn't come from simply assigning guilt and finding fault. It requires collaborative effort. All parties have to participate in order to move from the perceived gap to what is desired.

Without the willingness to share the identification of the cause, there will be no success in finding a workable and agreeable solution.

Having a positive attitude and a true desire to understand why the problem exists and what is causing it provides a direction and a strategy for remedying it.

You can’t always fix the cause, but knowing what the cause is provides insight into figuring out how to remedy the problem.

In both the annual groundhog event and the movie, there were no positive actions. Events were left to chance. When Punxsutawney Phil wakes up, he may or may not see his shadow, and that happenstance is credited with determining if weather will be good or bad.

In the movie, Phil Connors, the TV weatherman, just goes to sleep at the end of each day, and the morning delivers unplanned activities and events.

In neither instance is there any direction, focus, control, or intent.

Waiting for things to change, improve, or expand is precisely what both “Phil(s)” demonstrate, and neither one can take ownership or credit for anything that follows.

So, as we continue to face business, academic, civic, and societal problems and opportunities, take ownership and set courses.

We’ve done many of the same things over and over again when they didn’t work in the first place. No point in trying them again just to look like we’re “trying.”

Don’t Water the Weeds

While driving out of state recently, I heard a guest on a talk-radio program make an interesting comment about using talent and resources well. I don’t remember the program or the entire discussion, but I do remember this one-liner. I like one-liners because they deliver strong messages with an economy of words.

He said, “Don’t water the weeds.”

Just think about that for a moment. With all we have to do in business, it makes no sense to waste time, talent, and resources cultivating weeds rather than focusing on the flowers.

I think that line resonated with me because in, *Becoming a Successful Manager*, (McGraw-Hill) a book I co-authored with my friend and colleague, Jack Grossman, we described these three major roles which define a good manager: Be an Effective Teacher; Be a Sensitive Counselor; and Be a Master Gardener.

I’m sure I reacted to that radio comment because it reflected the analogy Jack and I used in describing some of the qualities that contribute to being a good manager. Here’s some of what we said about managers being good gardeners

If anyone were to ask a serious gardener to describe the secret for success the response would be something along the lines of, “First, I have to create a fertile culture that stimulates healthy plant growth. Next, I must ensure that the different species of plants in the garden are compatible. And finally, I have to maintain the garden by watering, cultivating, weeding, and fertilizing it, and by providing special attention to the plants that require it.”

Master gardeners will also say this is a full-time job yielding great joy when they see the positive results of their efforts.

It doesn't require much of a stretch to apply the rules and principles of successful gardening to being a successful professional manager. The "human plants" you select ? or inherit – to be part of your business garden must reflect your values and be willing to contribute to your vision of what you want your garden to produce. Your abilities and skills will determine how productive and responsive they will be. The chance of managing a cooperative team that's full of potential is great if you do your job well.

But, a significant part of your job is to see to it that "weeds" don't drain your business garden of its nutrients or adversely affect its productivity.

Of course, a business garden consists of people, who are much more complex than varied flowers and vegetation. However, they both require fertile soil as well as proper care and feeding in order to flourish. Some people, like exotic flowers, may even require special treatment.

Regardless of their differences, what's obvious about both gardens is that neither can be taken for granted if it is to flourish.

And this attention is a constant process. Most of us have experienced what happened when we left a garden unattended for an extended period because of vacation, travel, or a host of other reasons.

When we return, the weeds seem to have been on steroids in our absence. They have far outpaced the other plants, and in some cases, have "taken over" the garden. That requires hard work removing the weeks just to get back to where we were previously. We do it with the plants, but because it isn't so easy with our "people gardens" we often delay. When that happens, the roots grow deeper, the weeds grow stronger, and the removal is more difficult.

Sometimes weak or corporate gardeners "transplant" the weeds to other locations, but that doesn't solve the problem. It only defers or transfers it to another gardener.

As a manager, as with the master gardener, select the plants carefully before adding them to your garden. If they "came with the job" examine them quickly to assess their quality.

Nurture what fits – remove what doesn't.

A garden can't fix itself. That's the gardener's responsibility.

And remember, as that radio guest said, "Don't water the weeds."

I Don't Mean To, But…

Sometimes people say and do things just the opposite to what they intend – or purport to intend. And they say and do those things without giving thought to the comments or the actions. Here's what I mean.

With great frequency we've heard – perhaps even offered – comments like: "I don't mean to interrupt, but…" or "I don't want to disagree, but…" or how about this? "I don't mean to change the agenda, but…"

I'm sure we could add more, but this should make the point.

In every one of the above examples, the speaker did indeed interrupt, disagree, or change the agenda!

The habit seems to be an attempt to excuse away bad behavior. The intentions of such speakers and the outcome of their comments are clear to everyone who knows them, but the speaker gives himself or herself permission to behave inappropriately.

Here's the other side of such behavior. The person who has been interrupted, disagreed with, or forced to revise the agenda is equally responsible for the behavior because that person allows it to happen. That person is an "enabler."

Think how interesting it would be if the "I don't mean to…" comment were met by, "Then don't!"

That would certainly be a conversation stopper at a meeting, a conference, or a business discussion.

Isn't it interesting that one party has no qualms about "taking over" a situation, while the other parties surrender to the offending party?

Here's another contradictory sentence. "You'll never believe this, but…"

If any speaker thought that was true, the comment would go unspoken. No one would want to waste time and effort saying something no one would believe. Of course they expect their listeners to believe their comments.

Here's one we observe every time there is some kind of celebrity award ceremony like the Academy Awards or the Emmy Awards. "I never expected to…"

When the winner in a particular category is announced the celebrity walks to the microphone and recites this line. "Just being nominated is an honor in itself. I never expected to win." Then he or she takes out a prepared statement and reads the names of everyone who was helpful in the production.

If there was no expectation of winning, why prepare the speech? One could admit to hoping to win and therefore being prepared just in case, but saying I never expected to win can be seen as pushing humility a bit too far.

We've heard businesspeople – especially entrepreneurs – say, "I didn't think this would work." It's hard to believe such a comment because if that person didn't believe it would work, it would never have been attempted in the first place.

Many have heard business colleagues proclaim, "I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to get the funding for this, but…" People, especially businesspeople, don't waste time, resources, and effort on concepts and activities they think will fail. Such behavior just doesn't fit their personalities.

Those self-deprecating behaviors and comments might evoke images of the stereotypical farmhand with downcast eyes kicking dirt and saying, "Aw Shucks."

It just doesn't make sense, nor does it create a positive and professional image.

Better to be positive and to take the initiative with comments like, "I have to interrupt to correct the minutes," or "I must disagree with that comment," or "The schedule has to be changed to accommodate the revised shipment," or "Listen to this new development," or "I'm honored to have won," or "From the start, I knew this would work," or "I knew the funding was out there somewhere if I looked hard enough."

When such words are delivered with the appropriate tone of voice, eye contact, facial expression, and body language the impression is strong and positive. With inappropriate delivery, however, the comments are judged to be self-centered and arrogant.

The outcome depends on the choice of the words and how they're delivered.

As we've said in the past, "Whatever you do – do it on purpose, in order to create a professional image."

Fight or Flight?

In business activities, most of us strive to be supportive and inclusive. We focus on fostering cooperative and mutually beneficial outcomes for our customers and our colleagues, and we offer products and services they need and want.

That just makes good sense. That's what business relationships are all about.

So why is it many of today's messages that confront us are foolish and even violent? Think about some of the examples you've seen on television, and ask yourself, "Would I ever do or say that to a customer or a co-worker?"

Usually, the answer is a definite, "No." Why then are such tactics used by some businesses to sell their products and services when the messages don't reflect the real would?

Many people try to avoid conflict and confrontation – sometimes to their own disadvantage. (If people don't defend a position, the resulting neutrality can be interpreted as timidity and uncertainty.)

In an effort to be seen as neutral they attempt to "keep the peace." If that's what many people do, why then do so many speakers and advertisers assume the posture of conflict?

Every day we hear speakers telling the world they will "fight for a cause, a position, or a product"

Politicians are prone to declaring how they will “fight” for constituents when they never lift a hand or make a fist. They don’t “fight” for anything. The word sounds strong, and its use conveys determination, but it’s hollow.

The word creates an impression that constituents have elected a modern-day gladiator or “knight in shining armor.” Neither is true. There is no “fight.” There is only “talk.”

We see the pseudo bravado in other venues, too – most notably as mentioned earlier in relation to television advertising. Violence is almost everywhere in TV commercials not to mention the programming itself. Collisions, explosions, and demolition are integral elements in many commercials. People and things break other people and other things in a very-not-so-safe world.

For the most part, the world is a relatively safe place populated by decent people. Commercials, however, don’t seem to be filled with those “nice” people. Many of the characters portrayed are foolish, naive, silly, or just plain stupid.

Is that just a case of attention getting, or is it how the writers and producers see their theatrical world? Good theater portrays unusual behavior because that makes for solid story lines. Commercials, however, aren’t theater. Far better if they related to authentic behaviors in order to entice viewers to become customers.

“Cops and robbers” stories are popular because they provide exciting vicarious experiences, but commercials are intended to change viewer behaviors, and that’s not make-believe.

In commercials, fathers are often foolish, mothers are usually muddled, but children are always champions. If the real world met those criteria we would probably live in a perpetual state of chaos.

Now, if commercials deliberately depict a fantasy world, why would anyone expect viewers to believe what they see and hear and then spend their money to acquire the offered product?

Sometimes, even “serious” commercials have surprise endings. That’s especially evident with pharmaceutical products, which show “normal” people but conclude by making unexpected and sobering statements like, “Actual results may differ,” or “Could cause serious side effects, including “ (Insert your own calamity.)

The products often depict heartfelt stories, but then they make it clear to viewers that the product might not do what had just been described! Strange behavior.

So, what’s the point of all of this for business? Simple. Tell the truth in a manner appropriate for real people. Tell your true story – not the fiction.

The advertised products and services have value so stress that. Focus on “contributions” not on catastrophes. Solid relationships will be strengthened and preserved by helping viewers make good decisions,

A basic principle of communication states: “To be an effective presenter, become your audience.”

Audiences are real people who make real decisions about real products and services. They aren’t caricatures or violent cartoonish characters. Showing respect results in getting respect.

Working With Negative People

Because it's so easy to do, many of us tend to put people into categories -friendly, pleasant, interesting, annoying, negative, etc. Once we mark them with a label, we tend to respond to and act toward them with an almost automatic response.

That seems to make our lives easier because we don't have to think much about how to respond. But it can cause problems if "those people" are Negative People (NPs). Let's look at what might make sense as we navigate through our workplace contacts with NGs, because working with negative people can be draining. That drain can be costly because it distracts us from our business focus. We need a plan. So how do we stop – or prevent "negative and pessimistic people from poisoning our workplace and our relationships? If you manage or work with an NP, here are some suggestions to improve the situation and the relationship.

First recognize this is a "Toxic Behavior" which will worsen the longer it is allowed to continue. Take time to understand why the person is negative or pessimistic.

The behavior developed over time- not overnight, and no one can fix it with just a few clever statements. Certainly, Confrontation won't fix the situation, but Communication will. So here are some steps we can take as managers to address that negativism.

1. Ask Questions. We don't know what's causing the bad attitude so find out before trying to address it. The cause could be fear of failure, lack of necessary information, unfamiliar processes, adjusted reporting relationships, not

feeling part of the work team, or a host of other reasons. Don't assume you know the cause. Ask about it!

2. Listen to the Answers. Really listen. Don't just wait and nod your head in agreement. You might learn about factors you never considered – factors that shape the problem and define the person. If you don't listen, you can't expect that other person to listen to you.

3. Discuss options. The "negative person" (NP) just might have some good ideas. You're still gathering information so be sure not to stop the flow of information. You might not know all you need to know yet.

4. Agree on Possible Solutions. Encourage the NP to articulate what he/she believes should be done. Don't you do it. When the problem person describes what is to be done, it's more likely to happen because he or she "buys into' the solution. Behavior is much more likely to happen if the NP suggests the solution. Of course, you have to agree with it ? It's a two way street.

5. Assure that he or she is specific about actions, timing, expectations, etc. Without specificity there can be no accountability. Write down answers to these questions. What will happen? When? Who will do it? How will everyone know when it has been done? What will be the consequences if it isn't done?

6. Touch Base. At regular agreed-upon times meet to evaluate progress – or lack of progress. Changes in negative behavior require time and attention. Permanent changes won't happen after just a single meeting.

In *Becoming a Successful Manager*, (McGraw-Hill) my co-author and I used this analogy. A workplace is similar to a garden in which the plants, the soil, and the nutrients require constant care and attention. Without attention from the gardener, the weeds take over. Negative people are human weeds and require attention or they will take over the garden. They might have to be removed from the "workplace garden."

To maintain the productivity and stimulation of that workplace garden, look for the early signs of potential trouble because awareness is the beginning of change.

Everybody has a "bad day" from time to time so don't overreact to one of those. Be supportive where necessary because everyone you meet is fighting some kind of battle. A consistent pattern of negative behavior, however, is the giveaway. And that requires action because weeds don't monitor themselves.

Go After the One Who Did It.

I'm not sure if it's just because I've become more aware of this behavior, or that it's becoming more commonplace in business.

I'm referring to the "grammar school punishment" of all students in a class because of the misbehavior of a single individual. Often, in those situations, the identity of the "offending party" is unknown. "Someone" did "something," and the entire class is punished.

I became aware of that last month when a colleague told me about his manager who called for twenty-one experienced professional employees to participate in a required conference call. The reason – a client had "heard" complaints about the behavior of an individual "someone."

There was no indication of time, place, action, or personal identification.

Here's what he told me. The manager sent a two-page email to the entire twenty-one people so they could prepare for the conference call although it contained only vague references to the "someone comments.

All twenty-one were criticized, but the offending party (or parties) wasn't contacted directly. No one had specifics.

Criticizing an entire group for the alleged "infractions" of a few is terrible management!

In *Becoming a Successful Manager*, my co-author and I stated: a manager is a teacher and a leader. A manager faces unacceptable behavior immediately and directly.

Writing accusatory emails and requiring attendance at a subsequent conference call is weak managerial behavior, and it demonstrates incompetence.

My colleague continued: The critical email sent prior to the conference call ended with an attempt to make everyone happy by closing with this statement, "Thank you for the tremendous job you do." It was like addressing children rather than competent professionals, and it was as inappropriate here just as it's inappropriate and ineffective in a grammar school classroom.

After two pages of criticism and accusations, the concluding sentence of that email made the entire communication laughable.

The manager wasn't doing his job, and was alienating his entire staff by making unfounded accusations based on lack of information.

There is an axiom in business circles that states when solving problems first isolate behavior and then be specific about it. That way a manager won't create even greater problems by reacting to "wrong" information.

As bad as the email was, the conference call was worse. The manager began with a rant saying, "This has got to stop. This will not be tolerated. This must change. This cannot continue."

The problem with those admonitions was the simple fact he never defined what "this" was.

There were simply vague references to what "Some clients overheard." As the call continued, the pitch of his voice heightened, and the volume grew louder.

Talking with some of the call participants later in the day, my colleague confirmed the general reaction was insulting. The people being chastised had no idea what caused the concern in the first place nor did they know who had done what to whom.

Further, because no specifics were presented, they had no idea what "had to change."

Although this conference call involved almost two dozen people, aside from the manager, only a handful had anything to say.

The others felt it was impossible to contribute to a diatribe when the direction was so unclear.

The call ended abruptly and surprisingly when the manager informed all the "offending" participants that, "But you are great. We talk about you to our clients all the time. You are the face of the company. Thank you for all you do."

Talk about confused and confusing messages!

From time to time, every company confronts difficult situations, but correction requires clarity, accuracy, and professionalism. Responsible adults expect and deserve to be treated as responsible adults – not as errant school children.

It's quite possible that manager was dealing with his own problems. That might have contributed to his behavior, but he didn't resolve anything. In fact, he wounded his relationship with his staff.

My colleague concluded that only time would tell if it was a critical wound.

The Other Side of Rights

Recently, both print and electronic media have been focusing on the wide range of "Rights" we have as citizens – and as businesspeople.

Many across the country agree that some of our rights may be threatened, and their arguments deserve our attention because of the consequences such a development would have.

Rather than becoming enmeshed in any specific debate, however, I want to look at "Rights" from another perspective – one that doesn't seem to get as much attention in business circles as many think it should. That's the other side of "Rights" which is "Responsibilities."

At the risk of sounding like a variation of Newton's Third Law of Motion, think about this: "for every Right, there is an equal Responsibility." All too often, however, people demand the "right" but disregard the "responsibility." Why is that?

That attitude seems to reflect a self-centered personal philosophy. One is about receiving something for which no effort has been expended, and the other requires contributing something and working to produce it.

I thought about this recently when I read a report on the increasing use of company-owned computers to carry on personal activities during the workday.

That's not why anyone gets hired.

When someone enters into a work for pay relationship that clearly indicates an agreement between parties to devote a specific amount of time and effort in return for a specific amount of money. That's a simple concept that defines the "two-way street" of a work relationship.

Regardless of the location on an organizational chart, it is understood that every participant is expected to work for the duration of the workday.

To accept payment without working for it is theft.

Most people would never consider stealing funds from a company they work for, but many never consider the implications of stealing time.

People are using company computers, cell phones, etc. for strictly personal reasons, but they are accepting full pay while engaged in non-business activities.

Workers are paid to work – not to shop on line or correspond with friends via email.

It's important for all us to remember that just because something is possible doesn't mean it is permissible or acceptable.

Workers certainly have the right to use company equipment. That's part of their job. But they also have the responsibility to use it for the purpose intended – company business.

That's the "quid pro quo"

Just as we all have the right to drive a car, we have the responsibility to obey the laws. We have the right to vote, but the responsibility to be well informed about issues. In the current public debate, we have the right to own guns, but we also have the responsibility to use them safely.

Considering this relationship of Rights and Responsibilities is particularly significant at this time of year when we recognize President's Day on Monday and remember the contributions of two of our greatest presidents. Washington and Lincoln were both focused on securing the rights of citizens and engaged in great and costly conflicts to protect those rights and assuring they endured for future generations.

Both men accepted the great responsibilities thrust upon them to do what they considered to be the right things to preserve, protect, and defend our society.

So this week, while honoring both of our former Presidents, it's appropriate to reflect on the Rights-Responsibilities relationship in our business dealings and in how we use and protect what is available to us.

No question about it, we have the Right to work under safe conditions, but also we have the Responsibility to deliver all the services for which we are paid.

Sometimes it's difficult to buck a trend in the workplace because of peer pressure when "everyone else is doing it," but with resolve, it's possible.

In the words of Abraham Lincoln, "If you think you can, you can; if you think you can't, you're right."

In business, as well as in society, in order to preserve the rights we enjoy, let us always take our responsibilities seriously to preserve the rights we enjoy.

Behaviors Have Consequences

Whatever we do during the course of our business – and personal – days, produces reactions from our customers, colleagues, and social acquaintances.

Many of the behaviors are unintended, and daily pressures sometimes cause them, so here's an idea that might help avoid inappropriate reactions.

Attitude is a powerful factor that influences our behavior and how we view situations and conditions.

Consider this definition of attitude my co-author and I used in our book, *Becoming a Successful Manager*.

"An attitude is a state of mind and a predisposition to action based on what you tell yourself.

"Attitudes precede actions; positive attitudes lead to productive actions; negative attitudes lead to unproductive actions."

From the book, here's an example showing how attitudes work, and how what we call "self-talk," can provide control and direction:

The customer-service department of a Midwest company was receiving frequent complaints. Specifically, people said customer service representatives treated them rudely. They were left on hold for what seemed to be forever, disconnected while waiting to be helped, and then not given the help they hoped to receive.

These complaints had gone on for almost a year and were accompanied by a steady decline in sales. During a meeting we had with the five-person department, we asked, "When the phone rings, what do you tell yourself before you answer it?"

We received blank stares and no immediate responses. With some encouragement, though everyone eventually related a variation of the same negative self-talk comment. We heard, “Here comes another complainer!”

After discussing the effect self-talk can have on behavior, we suggested they tell themselves something else when the phone rings. For instance: “This caller has a problem. My job is to help him or her to solve that problem, and I can do that. I’m a valuable resource to this person in trouble.”

As part of the solution, they also adopted the greeting, “How can I help you?” when answering the phone.

This simple question was more than words. It was a genuine positive attitude, revealed in their tone of voice that said, “I want to help you.”

Within a month, the vice president of operations started receiving feedback praising the customer service department.

The lesson learned was this. If your attitude is negative, it will come through; but if your attitude is positive, that, too, will come through.

This positive attitude suggestion isn’t a “magic bullet” that will solve all your problems immediately, but it will go a long way influencing and reshaping behavior. It’s a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

We’ve all done this to ourselves without even thinking about it. There may have been a time you were invited to go to a meeting you didn’t want to attend but didn’t have an option. If you chose a negative attitude and told yourself the meeting would be a waste of time, it was. On the other hand, if you had chosen a positive attitude and told yourself “This is a tight time, but as long as I have to go, I’ll see if I can learn something I might have missed out on had I not been invited, you did.

In all likelihood whichever attitude you choose will result in your prediction coming true. When we have a strong belief about the outcome of a relationship or an impending experience, we do everything in our power to make that belief come true.

It's a pretty safe bet to say that attitudes are responsible for creating and perpetuating our successes and failures as well as the quality of our relationships.

Business is all about building and maintaining relationships, and directing attitudes by this self-talk can be a great help for all of us.

I've written this line before:

People might forget exactly what you say, and they might forget precisely what you do, but they will never forget how you make them feel.

Use this "self-talk" technique. See how your attitude can shape your behavior.

To Avoid Disappointment – Lower Expectations

When my wife and I lived in Chicago the running joke about "Da Cubs" was, "If you don't expect much, you won't be disappointed." A close second was, "Wait until next year." And we always did!

In spite of these comments, fans continued to purchase tickets, and Wrigley Field continued to fill up. The good feelings inspired by the "mystique" perpetuated the support.

In business, however, performance trumps feelings. Businesses must perform, or they go out of business because good intentions never overcome poor behavior. A NASCAR vehicle, for example, never won a race because it had a great paint job. That may make the car look good, but other factors make it a winner.

In business, we expect people to do what they're paid to do. Performance is crucial. That seems so obvious some readers might be wondering, "Where is this going?"

Here's where. Because education institutions provide the eventual workforce for all businesses, what those institutions do has a profound impact on the cost of doing business.

With increasing frequency, educators are telling us about the evils of "teaching for the test."

Many people across the country, however, ask, "What's wrong with expecting students to pass a test to demonstrate they have mastered specific material?"

Before earning a driver's license, everyone must demonstrate knowledge of the rules of the road by passing a standardized test. Lawyers must pass the bar exam in order to practice. Doctors must pass exams before they are board certified. Engineers have to demonstrate mastery of multiple skills to be sure bridges don't fall down and airplanes stay up in the air.

The educations for those professionals rely on the ability to demonstrate proficiency by passing tests. That's much smarter than assuming proficiency because they sat in a classroom for a specified number of hours.

So what's wrong with teaching the facts and concepts students must have, and then requiring them to demonstrate proficiency? After all, if they become cashiers, they'll have to be accurate every time they make change in a store. (Had a cash transaction in a store lately?)

If they're taught to "think," but they can't "compute," what have they learned?

A test is simply a way to assure someone has mastered content, and there's nothing wrong with teaching that content in order to achieve mastery. Knowing "how" to add a column of numbers is fine, but getting the right answer is absolutely essential.

In a "former life," I was dean of a teacher-education program at a small college with an "Open Enrollment Program." Applicants could enter the program without demonstrating basic abilities.

I remember one particular meeting where faculty members were criticizing the lowered quality of many entering students. My comment to them was simple and clear. "We have no control over the abilities of the students when they enter our program, but we have total control over their abilities when they leave us.

"The only way we can be sure of that is to set standards and test to assure students meet those standards – not just help them to "feel good" because they 'tried hard.' It's all about performance."

If students aren't required to demonstrate performance, why should businesses hire them, teach basic skills, and add to their own cost of doing business?

When testing shows that students can't perform what is expected of them, it makes no sense to make the tests easier by lowering the standards. That's avoiding disappointment by lowering expectations. No one is fooled, and everyone loses.

I'm reminded of the old joke about a patient who couldn't afford to pay for an operation, so the radiologist retouched the X-rays.

It's easy to lower expectations, but the cost will be high.

We must be sure our businesses, and our employees, are capable of providing quality service to our customers.

Moreover, unlike the Chicago Cubs, businesses can’t afford to “wait until next year.

CHAPTER 3

Customer Service

Most of us have experienced instances when "Customer Service was an oxymoron. All too often we seem to forget that they are the reason businesses and jobs exist. Without them everything disappears.

Many of us have seen customers as "interruptions." We're busy doing something, and they expect – sometimes demand, attention and assistance.

When our focus id disturbed, it's clear to see that. When our attention is directed, it's clear that providing good service is easy – just as easy as providing bad service.

In a word, poor customer service makes no sense. Remember the adage: "If we don't take care of our customers, our competitors will."

The events in the following essays describe some good, and some not so good examples for your consideration.

Take some time to review and to consider these events.

What could have made the situations better?

What would you provide as an appropriate suggestion?

How can we teach ourselves to provide better customer service?

Everyone's Job

Customer Service isn't – or shouldn't – be a department. It should be a state of mind.

And it's everyone's job!

That really means "everyone" from the corner office on the top floor to the back room.

Here's a brief story to illustrate the implications and consequences.

In a "past life," I worked with an organization that specialized in the food industry. At one of our annual meetings, the president of the association jolted the audience of senior executives in attendance with this comment. (It was a while ago so these aren't his exact words, but they're close, so I'll take the liberty of using quotation marks.)

He looked at the group and said, "All of you in this room run very profitable companies. During the past year your companies handled millions of dollars, but your customers don't know you. In addition to that, no one in this room handled any 'real' money! You got spreadsheets and financial statements.

"The people who handle the real money are the least paid, least trained, least valued, and least respected people in your organization – the clerks and cashiers.

"To the customers, however, those people are your company. How they relate to your customers dictates how your customers think about you.

"What messages are they delivering to your customers? What are they doing to and for your customers? What services are they providing?"

His remarks relate to every business.

Good customer service is simple. Many volumes have been written and training sessions offered about it, but good customer service can be summed up in five words. "Treat people well – as individuals." That's it.

Customers come into your place of business to give you money. Be nice to them because they have a great deal of power.

Sam Walton made this clear when he said, "There is only one boss. The customer. And he can fire everybody in the company from the chairman on down simply by spending his money someplace else."

No matter what business anyone of us is in, someone else offers essentially the same product or service. Customers buy the people they encounter, not just the things, and they'll shop where they are treated well.

Be helpful, and take the extra step. For example, when a customer asks for assistance, resist the temptation to just say, "It's in aisle 7" or "Go down that hall, and turn left. You can't miss it."

Differentiate yourself by saying, "Come with me. I'll show you." Then take the customer to the appropriate spot. It will take you only a few moments, but the customer will remember it for a long time.

In some of the most successful companies in the country, that behavior is central to their customer service policy.

Be sure your entire staff follows that practice. A few extra moments with a customer can lead to a long-time relationship. Because it's the little things that often develop customer loyalty, give the customer more that he or she expects.

An old adage in business tells us, "People might forget what we said to them, but they'll always remember how we made them feel." Make them feel special.

So far, our focus has been on face-to-face service, but we would be remiss if we overlooked phone service – or lack thereof. Think how your customer feels when a machine answers a phone call requesting assistance and is then forced to navigate through a menu as complicated and convoluted as an Indiana Jones treasure map.

The machine says, "Your call is important to us," but then, as Rodney Dangerfield said, "We don't get no respect." We wait, and we wait!

Because all business is person-person, good customer service can be simple.

The legendary retail store owner, Marshall Field, had it right when he said, "Give the lady what she wants."

If we don't take that simple step, our competitors will.

What Do Relationships Really Mean?

Every day in our personal and business worlds we're faced with challenges, opportunities, and choices. Some of them we like and pursue; others we avoid. The difficulty is selecting the appropriate options.

Many of us are prone to make decisions immediately. Some in the work force do that because they are sure their experiences have taught them what is correct and appropriate. They reflect on past activities and success rates, they select those same options again.

Seems like a sound practice, doesn't it?

Others in today's workforce, however, have less experience, but a great deal of self-confidence. Their peers, who have similar opinions and experience, often reinforce such self-assessments and influence decisions.

Their reaction becomes the proverbial self-fulfilling prophecy. "I think I'm right and good. You too think I'm right and good, so it must be true.

"Therefore, what I think and recommend must also be accurate – and good."

Many decisions and debates between such groups within the workforce are related to one of the popular buzzwords receiving attention today: "relationships." There is much discussion about the importance of building relationships whether it be with individuals within these groups or with customers, vendors, or other colleagues.

It seems to be a generally accepted and important element for doing business. But what is it? How do we build it? How do we keep it? And how can we nurture it?

First of all, relationships are very personal, and they require attention and commitment from all involved parties. They involve much more than just "doing business" over an extended period of time.

Relationships involve more than spending time in an office or on a golf course, buying lunch, and asking about the kids and the family pets. A relationship might begin that way, but if that's all there is, it dies quickly.

True relationships require Individuals to "give a bit of themselves" to another person.

When defining and describing a true relationship certain concepts and words come into play. It's impossible to define such relationships without including these concepts: trust, concern, care, and support.

Perhaps that first word, "trust," is the primary ingredient in building a true business relationship. Without trust, it's difficult if not impossible to believe what is said or promised. When the parties can't believe what they are told about price, quality, delivery, forecasts, opportunities, etc., the interaction between parties can become confrontational rather than collegial.

Comments may be challenged until proven. Conversations that are parsed and footnoted often include comments that reflect a "Yes, but…" framework.

There is little doubt that successful businesses revolve around offering a product or service in turn for receiving a mutually agreed upon payment of some sort.

A good relationship also reflects concerns for another party to the point where they demonstrate care and support whenever it's needed, not just acknowledgment when it's convenient. It's the personal demonstration of truly "being there" when needed and not just being present.

It results in true and open communication and an honest exchange of ideas, not just giving directions, taking orders, or "doing a deal."

Developing relationships in business is a willingness to enter into a long-term personal interaction with others as equals. Each party contributes and receives support on the basis of what is needed, not just balancing an imaginary scale or keeping a scorecard on who owes what to whom.

Building a true relationship makes us vulnerable because we agree to provide honest comments – even when they might be negative. Sometimes things are bad or wrong and need to be corrected, not just accepted or, worse yet, overlooked completely. To not provide such feedback diminishes the potential of the relationship and could even jeopardize future business.

But, it takes strength – and courage – to offer such comments.

Kermit the Frog told us, “It isn’t easy being green,” and it isn’t easy to develop a true and lasting business relationship.

But when we do, the results expand our businesses – and our worlds.

That’s pretty good payback for the efforts expended.

To Thine Own Self Be True

When the Bard had Polonius tell his son, Laertes, “To thine own self be true,” he was also sending a message to every businessperson, parent, teacher, and public figure to “Just tell the truth.”

In the line following that advice he presented the reason and the justification when he added, “And it must follow, as the night the day, thou cannot then be false to any man.”

Recent news items have carried many items describing how that simple advice has been ignored. There is no way to know for certain that is the result of a general decline of honesty or an increase in the access to information through expanded use of communication media.

This isn’t a judgment about the current state of honesty and morals because most of us follow that other advice from Matthew 7:1 “Judge not, that ye be not judged.”

It is, however, an observation about how we relate to colleagues, peers, superiors, subordinates, and family. That relationship is also illustrated in the language we use.

It has been said that to be a good liar, one must have an excellent memory because it's difficult to remember all the intricacies of a falsehood. Truth, however, is transparent – and consistent. Either something IS or it ISN'T. Simple, clear, universal.

Because the word, "lie" is such a strong, harsh word our language has willingly accepted the use of other words to explain away or to smooth over the lies.

We see and read news stories about how someone "misspoke" or "misremembered." Sounds as innocent as tripping over a new rug. It communicates, "I didn't intend to do or say that; it just happened. It isn't my fault."

But when anyone "misspeaks," that person is indeed responsible because the action was deliberate, and it was intended to influence a belief or an action. He or she plainly lied!

Another word has gained some notoriety lately in relation to not telling the truth. "Embellishment" has been used to explain – or justify – telling a lie.

An old adage in communication tells us "Words mean things." But words can also deceive. For example:

Reading that a service offers a "discount up to fifty percent" can be an attractive lure because we see the number. The "up to" words, however, clearly indicate that might not be the actual discount! That discount might be only one percent.

A product might be advertised for a specific price "as is." That's an eye catcher, but the actual price might be much higher. Those statements aren't lies, but they do deceive.

A corporate representative promoting an event recently stated, “We donate one hundred percent of all profits to charity.” Sounds wonderful, but profit is what’s left after paying salaries, expenses, incidentals, etc. There might be nothing left, so the charities would get nothing.

Products are sometimes touted as “having a value of…” Again that sounds enticing, but who establishes that value?” The amount could be anything the writer says it is.

When clients and customers come to us for purchases or assistance they are placing their trust in us. They are expecting us to be honest and straight forward – and they have a right to expect that from us.

If any businessperson plays a “word game” with customers, it might work for a while, but sooner or later the TRUTH will come out, and the language impact will be clear.

“Double talk” doesn’t last for long, but it’s results do!

I’ve mentioned my first-grade teacher in previous columns, and her advice is as sound today as it was decades ago. “Say what you mean, and mean what you say.”

Those nine words can serve to ward off the need to explain, justify, clarify, or correct a lie. And it’s easy, too!

Polonius was right, and so was Sir Walter Scott many years later when he wrote, “Oh! What a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive.”

Our customers and colleagues expect – and deserve – honesty in every interaction. There is never a good excuse for not providing it.

Time is a Treasure

With a tip of the hat to the lyrics of the old British folk song, “The Bunch of Thyme,” in all business dealings it’s important – essential – to remember, “Time, it is a precious thing.” Everyone is allocated a specific amount of it, and it makes no difference if it’s used well or wasted. When it’s gone, it’s gone.

When we waste time, we can’t put it in a plastic bag and set it on a shelf to use another day. Time is non-renewable, so it’s important to honor it.

Everyone’s time is equally important, but that’s often overlooked in many business, civic, and social settings today. All too often the hierarchy in various organizations ignores that simple fact.

It’s easy to see that abuse. Think of instances when you were called to a meeting scheduled for nine a.m. You were there at the designated time, but the convener wasn’t. He or she called the meeting, but then didn’t arrive on time, so everyone had to wait.

There will always be unavoidable situations, but we all know the careless and habitual latecomers. Unfortunately, even though we can usually predict their behavior, we find ourselves having to tolerate a situation that might inconvenience us.

That’s rude, and it borders on arrogance and disrespect. In many instances, it’s just a bad habit, but it’s still arrogant – and it wastes valuable resources of a business. It’s difficult to justify making otherwise productive people sit in a room waiting for the convener to arrive.

As more and more meetings are now held virtually, that waste spreads over increasingly large geographic areas. So when we schedule a meeting, it's incumbent upon us to honor and respect the selected hour. That's one of the unique factors about time. It's specific! Noon is noon. It isn't 12:04 or 12:27. It's 12:00.

Another time waster is the person who takes more time than is allocated on an agenda. When anyone goes beyond the allocated time, an equal amount of time is stolen from the following participants.

During a discussion of this topic in a communication seminar I taught not long ago, one of the participants – an Executive Vice President of a large corporation – proudly made this comment. "Whenever I participate in a program, I make it a point to be the first one on the agenda. That way I can take all the time I want!"

A low groan rippled throughout the room. He showed his disrespect for others, and he was arrogant about it, too. In the vernacular of the day, "He just didn't get it."

Misuse or disregard of time can just be a bad habit, but it also can show lack of planning, forethought, or attention.

Everybody's watch works the same way and at the same rate of speed, but I heard an interesting explanation – or excuse – for not honoring time. The excuse relates to the ever-increasing use of digital rather than analog timepieces. With digital timepieces, the numerals change, but everything still looks pretty much the same. With an analog clock, however, the image is constantly changing, and the minute hand keeps moving closer and closer to the all-important "zero hour." A fast moving second hand makes the picture look even worse!

Analog timepieces demonstrate that time is constantly moving, and that's an interesting visual lesson and reminder. Very few things in life, and in business, are certain, but time is – so it demands we pay attention to it. Use it well.

Also, it's important to respect other people's time as much as we respect our own. Available technology can help with that recognition. With a simple phone call – or text message – we can alert others when we'll be late for a meeting. They can then adjust their personal timetables and use their time profitably until we arrive.

Anyone, regardless of the position on the organization chart, can cause time waist. Don't be that person because, as we said earlier, once it's gone, it will never come back.

Indeed, "Time, it is a precious thing."

Guidelines vs. Rules

Sometimes well-intentioned, well-thought-out, and sound decisions become rigid and inflexible restrictions. The result is usually absurd or annoying – and difficult to justify.

In most businesses, regardless of size or focus, managers are expected to make decisions and offer recommendations concerning how the business operates; who does what and how it is done. Sometimes the why – the reasons behind the are explained. But not always.

Frequently, items that start out as suggestions and recommendations become hard and fast operational requirements. Options give way to restrictions, and interpretation and flexibility disappear.

It's easier for an employee, for example, to say, "The boss says…" than it is for that person to assess the conditions surrounding a situation and make a judgment – to make an independent interpretation.

Here's an example I learned about recently.

When a prospective customer entered a hotel restaurant for an early dinner while on a business trip she was greeted by a smiling hostess.

To the customer's surprise, the restaurant was empty except for one couple sitting in a booth at the rear of the room.

The customer said, "A table for one, please."

The hostess responded, "How about a booth?"

"No," the customer replied. "I prefer a table."

"Tables are reserved for large parties," the hostess said.

"But there isn't anyone in the restaurant except for that one couple."

"I can seat you at a table outside on the patio," the hostess offered.

"It's very chilly out there, and reports say there could be showers. And there are lots of tables right here inside."

"Tables are reserved for large parties."

The volume level went up when the customer repeated, "But there are no customers here – no parties large or small. The restaurant is almost empty. I prefer to sit on a chair at a table not to slide into a confining booth."

Once more the hostess said, "I can seat you at any of the tables outside, but the inside tables are reserved for large parties. Let me direct you to a booth."

With firmness and even more volume the customer repeated, "I prefer a table, a table inside this empty restaurant."

The lone couple smiled and nodded as the situation became increasingly ridiculous.

The hostess finally said, "Okay, this way please," and she seated the customer at one of the many empty tables.

What probably caused this encounter was a manager providing a sound suggestion that tables could be used for large groups because it's easier to serve large groups seated at a table than crammed into a booth. That makes sense.

What didn't make sense was the hostess's rigidity. She took the manager's suggestion as an absolute restriction and avoided making a judgment based on the realities of the situation: early evening, no other customers, a chill in the air, a possible shower, and a customer's stated preference.

The result of this encounter included: the couple in the booth was amused, the hostess was annoyed, and the customer was frustrated.

What an unnecessary conclusion to an ordinary situation – an early dinner at an empty restaurant.

Certainly, rules and regulations are important in every business, but so is common sense. It's doubtful the manager who decided that tables would be reserved for large parties intended the unbending restrictions to apply to a single customer in an empty dining room.

The initial direction was logical, but the unbending application of that direction was not.

Giving the hostess the latitude to make a decision based on circumstances would have eliminated the problem and contributed to a pleasant meal that evening rather than a debate and a conflict.

To that customer, that hostess was the company, and illogical rigidity was not the intent of the manager when developing the procedure.

Common sense sometimes isn't very common – but it can and should be.

A previous column included this comment. "Any positive quality (or decision or recommendation) when taken to an extreme becomes a negative."

That's precisely what happened that evening in that restaurant.

Looking at Something, and Then Seeing It

While on an extended road trip recently, I observed something that seemed to have a close relationship with business behavior. I realized driving activities offered some sound examples all of us can use in business. In the interest of full disclosure, my wife was driving while I was observing and thinking.

Here's what I saw: Drivers texting, talking on the phone, reading maps and newspapers, tuning radios, disciplining children, applying make-up, and a host of other things.

In addition to all that, many drivers also appeared to be connected to the steering wheel in a "death grip," staring hypnotically through the windshield looking neither left nor right. They were on their predetermined routes with no deviations or detours, traveling the course at a set speed (usually slower than the rest of the traffic).

These drivers were concentrating on a single task, moving from point A to point B with no distractions or variations – and no peripheral vision. They would probably get to their destinations, maybe a bit later than other drivers because of the slow pace, but chances were good that they'd get where they wanted to go.

I saw connections between what was happening on the road and what goes on in many businesses.

First, let's look at positive one. Without a doubt having a clear destination and route are as important in business as they are in taking a road trip. Without a clear end point, there is no way to set a course of action. Taking a trip requires knowing at least two reference points – where you start and where you want to go. Without knowing both points it's impossible to plot a course or know when to make corrections.

In business, having a goal is essential to allocating resources and assets. Knowing what you can use to start with will determine the difference between reality and wishful thinking. Without a plan it's impossible to quantify progress.

Now a negative. Fixing the focus on only what's directly out front – like staring through the windshield – eliminates knowing about other elements that could have an impact on the operator. That impact could be either literal as in a car, or figurative as in a business setting, but there will likely be consequences.

Traffic conditions change from minute to minute, and those changes require adjustments in speed and direction. Disregarding those changes can have serious repercussions. Likewise, missing the changing dynamics in business can have long lasting consequences.

When businesses and cars don't make the necessary course adjustments they usually cease to be safe or effective.

And what about those drivers who were dividing their attention between the requirements of safe driving and other distracting activities. They were "multi-tasking." Perhaps they believe they can do many things at the same time and do all of them well. Not so. I have a plaque on my office wall that aptly describes the implications of multi-tasking. It says, "Multi-tasking: Messing up everything simultaneously."

No matter how smart someone might be, it's impossible to devote one hundred percent attention to more than one item at a time. Something gets lost as soon as full attention shifts from one point to another. That shifting might be fast, but, by definition, attention has been redirected.

At the rate cars move and business climates shift, that momentary loss of attention could have long lasting implications. When drivers lose focus, vehicles drift from lane to lane. They slow down and speed up. The erratic activity makes it difficult to predict what movement might occur from moment to moment.

In business, false starts and unexpected reactions to changing conditions might likewise have significant consequences. No one can predict the future, but maintaining certain principles and practices can avoid serious accidents.

So, in the car and in the office, keep your eye on what's in front of you, but remember to watch both sides, and check in the rear view mirror, too.

You never know who or what might be overtaking you.

But What Does It Say?

Contrary to what many believe, the customer isn't always right – but he or she is always the customer – the person with the money. Exchanging money for goods or services is what business is all about. Pretty simple.

All it requires is a fair and equitable exchange. That, too, is simple until one party tries to get "the upper hand" and out maneuver the other.

Wonderful stories about the "good old days" describe when a handshake constituted a contract. We'll never know how true those stories were, but it seems in today's world we pay more attention to what someone might get away with that what someone will actually do.

"Truth" is stretched, and "Promises" are subject to interpretation. A formerly simple sentence like, "I'll do this," is now filled with qualifiers like: "I'll do this if, provided you, according to, when, under the condition that, et cetera…" That kind of wording results in confusing convoluted sentences.

"Clever" has replaced "Clear."

Television commercials are another interesting example of deception. For example: After making verbal statements about the benefits of a product, the print text says, "Results are not typical." If that's the case, what's the point of the commercial?

In addition, have you ever attempted to read the small print at the end of a commercial? Two problems are apparent with such text: it's too small, and one would have to be an accomplished "speed reader" to get through all the words.

Here's a broad generalization about print size and clarity. If the text is too small to read easily – beware. If something is difficult to read – read it!

When a writer wants someone to read his or her material he makes it easy to read. The author of difficult to read material didn't put it there to help the reader. He put it there to protect himself. In the event of a misunderstanding, that author can always say," It's right there." And it is – if you can find it.

The difference in attention is startling. Contract lawyers pour over every word and phrase, but many customers just look for the line where they sign their name. Bad idea!

And there is really no such thing as "boiler plate" in a contract. Every word has been carefully selected – to the advantage of the writer. In most instances, lawyers like to have "drafting rights" for preparing a contract. Although it entails work the "other side" doesn't have to do, authoring a contract allows the writer to include whatever he or she wants. It's then up to the other party to find the objectionable parts and get them removed.

So, when you have the opportunity, take the drafting rights, and do the initial writing. It could have a significant benefit.

The writing doesn't have to result in a long, complicated document. Sometimes only a few lines in a Letter of Agreement can avoid future complications and hard feelings.

Years ago, I authored a book with a colleague, John. Our simple Letter of Agreement stated we would share equally all the writing and then share equally whatever benefits we derived.

We signed and dated the letter and put it away.

As we neared completion, John told me his wife had commented she thought he was contributing more to the process than I was. She felt he should be entitled to more than half of any future royalties. Potential Problem! She was mistaken, but had it been so, such a late date restructure would have had a serious impact on our writing project.

The danger abated quickly when I opened my briefcase, took out the Letter, showed it to him, and said, "Remember this?" End of discussion.

We completed the book. It was published, and we happily shared the royalties equally for a long time.

I would not presume to offer these examples as legal advice. They're just reminders of how important it is to pay attention to what we see and sign.

Remember, “Caveat emptor.” That’s always good advice.

No One Can See You

In 1897, HG Wells wrote a chilling story about Dr. Jack Griffin, a researcher who discovered a drug that would make him invisible. He also made two subsequent discoveries. He couldn’t reverse the process to become visible again, and the side effects of the drug drove him insane.

The book was made into a motion picture in 1933, starring Claude Rains, and it became a classic horror movie. In 2008, *The Invisible Man* was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being, “culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant.”

“Monocane,” the drug central to the story line, doesn’t exist, of course, but widespread behavior in business, government, religion, and society in general often demonstrates the same result.

Sometimes, real people become invisible! Although we can still see them physically, they become unimportant or meaningless.

One of the easiest and best examples of invisibility is demonstrated when someone stands at a Customer Service counter. (By the way – that’s often an oxymoron.) All too often, the clerk is occupied with activities that render a customer invisible. No eye contact. No service. It’s as if the customer doesn’t exist.

The ignored customer might just as well be living in another dimension. That lack of awareness infuriates customers, but there is another side to the story. We've all seen those same angry customers then exit the store or office and walk right past someone raising money for charity selling candy or ringing a bell next to a red kettle! Invisibility works both ways.

So when encountering other people, acknowledge them. Look them in the eye. When we make them visible we become visible, too.

On another, perhaps more serious note, it seems many people today are more reluctant to take stands on issues or voice opinions than they were in the past. They are more inclined to remain invisible and let others make decisions for them rather than standing up and speaking up on what they consider to be important issues.

They don't want to "make waves" by disagreeing, but rather to "go along to get along."

Here's the problem with such behavior. Being invisible by saying nothing or doing nothing doesn't mean one is not participating in an activity. Inaction and invisibility provide support for an opponent or an opposing belief.

Business pressures created by new laws, rules, and regulations are increasing daily to the point it's difficult to make plans. Education, civic, and governmental changes also require attention and active participation in order to maintain stability.

The interesting paradox here is the fact that everyone – even the silent one -has a position on everything. People like or dislike, agree or disagree about everyday issues large and small. All too often, however, they keep that position private, and they justify the silence by saying, "What difference does it make what I think? I'm just one person."

What individuals think makes a huge difference! But it's necessary to communicate those otherwise private thoughts because we don't live in a society of mind readers.

Whenever groups or individuals remain mute – or invisible – on issues, they give up the right to complain if they disagree with the ultimate decision.

If anyone abstains from a vote, for example, the abstention is the same as voting for and aiding the prevailing side. It allows others to decide for the inactive individual.

Many people think they are being "neutral," but they aren't. Remember the old adage, "Action speaks louder than words?" So does inaction!

When someone elects to become invisible by not standing up, speaking up, or showing up; he or she is giving up. Every voice and every action, overt or covert, contributes to the ultimate decision.

In many respects, no one can remain neutral. Everyone is either for or against an idea. And it's important to be able to see and identify the stance.

So, if you're wearing a "cloak of invisibility," take it off. Be seen and heard so others don't speak for you.

Action – Reaction – Consequence

A recent newscast provided an example of sensitive and brave behavior by a corporate employee as well as the implications, reactions, and consequences of his action.

The story recounted what a restaurant waiter did, why he did it, and what happened as a result of his actions.

To set the scene, this waiter, let's call him "Sam," chose to act because, in his own words, "It was the right thing to do." A wonderful model for all of us!

Here's what happened. A young child with Down Syndrome was dining with his parents in a local restaurant when Sam became aware of another patron ridiculing the little boy by making fun of the child's behavior. Sam told the patron to stop, and he refused to wait on the offending customer and his party.

Now, this was risky because his job was to wait on tables not to be an advocate for another customer – regardless of the reason. But, at personal risk, Sam confronted the man.

How many of us would have done that?

Sam could have ignored the offending customer, or gone about his business, and let the little boy's parents handle the situation if they so desired. Sam could have thought, "Not my problem."

Choices for all the parties were clear: the parents could ignore the insults, leave the restaurant, or confront the clod.

The people with the offending customer could correct him, ignore him, or laugh along with him and encourage him.

Other patrons who witnessed the actions did nothing. Only one person acted to stop the insulting and insensitive behavior – Sam.

He risked his job.

Here's the next reaction. When the rude and thoughtless customer reacted loudly to Sam's comments, the restaurant owner, Sam's boss, appeared. The customer complained, again loudly, about how Sam had treated him.

Now, the owner had to make a decision. Should he support the customer because, “the customer is always right,” or should he support his employee?

When he learned the details of the incident, the owner backed Sam! He agreed Sam had done the right thing, and the customer had been out of line. When the customer became even angrier and louder, the manager suggested to the customer that it would be best for everyone if he and his party would leave the restaurant.

The next reaction came from the community. With the number of ever-present cell phones and video recorders, it wasn’t long before the incident became a topic on local news and social media outlets.

The overwhelming response from the local community was positive, and business at the restaurant increased. “Regulars” returned in large numbers to support the restaurant and what Sam and the owner had done for the little boy and his family.

New customers came in droves because they had seen the story in print and in the electronic media. They wanted to offer their support for taking the position and to offer a clear “Well Done” to everyone involved.

The take-away from this series of events is this. A “chain reaction” always follows actions and decisions. Because things don’t occur in isolation, we should be mindful of what we do and be prepared to accept the impact of the “ripple effect” that follows a decision. Sometimes that ripple is obvious and immediate, and other times it is subtle and delayed.

I have used a motto many times in past columns, and it’s appropriate here as we look at action, reaction, and consequences. Here's the motto: Whatever you do, do it on purpose.

That way, business realities as well as our individual beliefs, core values, and ethics will drive and justify how we act toward customers, clients, colleagues, and, of course, family members.

Sam's action in that restaurant took on a life of its own.

His actions could have resulted in him being on the unemployment line or the morning television talk programs.

He didn't care about that. He did "what was right."

What a lesson for all of us!

Gifts to Give and Receive

Everyone knows it's more difficult, and more expensive, to get a new customer than it is to keep an existing one. Yet we often take our existing customers for granted. They have kept us in business, but we tend to ignore them when we offer promotions.

Frequently, we see invitations to "Open a new charge card and receive a discount on all your purchases today," but existing charge card holders pay full price for everything!

It might be advantageous for a customer to close an existing account and open a new one at a competing establishment. I know opening and closing charge accounts would raise havoc with credit scores, and I'm certainly not suggesting anyone do that, but it's interesting, isn't it?

My simple question is this. What message does a business send when it ignores existing customers in favor of potential new customers? Wouldn't it be thoughtful to recognize and reward long-term and loyal customers the same way we entice new customers?

If you currently hold a charge card, some companies offer promotions indicating, “If you spend X dollars today, you’ll receive a Y percent discount.” But the new customers get the discount without a minimum purchase.

I have a charge card that I received from a major department store decades ago. (Long before many of their current employees were born.) I have never received anything that indicated, “Because you’re such a good, long-time customer, enjoy an X percent discount on your purchases today.”

Wouldn’t that be a positive example of good customer service?

What I’m suggesting is that we “Consider Our Customers” – All of them – All the time.

A current television commercial provides this interesting example. The owner of a florist store apologizes to a customer because her computer is running so slowly. Turns out the customer knows about available software (Made by the sponsor of the commercial), and he installs it free of charge.

Instantly, her computer is running like new.

After thanking him, she says, “And the flowers are on the house.”

The customer didn’t “do a deal” to get something for nothing. He did it to help. There was no quid pro quo.

The owner showed her gratitude by giving him a gift.

There are many gifts we can give our customers, and it’s appropriate to think about them particularly at this time of year.

So, once again, “Consider Our Customers” by giving simple gifts like these:

Attention: Look at them when you talk to them, and look at them when they talk to you. Eye contact is essential in this part of the world if we want to develop positive relationships with customers. That relationship should be more than exchanging money.

Assistance: When customers ask for help locating an item, resist the temptation to simply say, "It's over there" or "Down that aisle." Escort the customer to the item. It takes a few moments, of course, but the gesture will be remembered long after the customer leaves. And, that customer will likely describe the action to friends and colleagues. Great advising at no cost.

Consideration: A customer comes with a need, a problem, or a requirement; and we can help. We know more about what we can offer than the customer does, so take the time to ask questions. Identify the product or service that will help. Sometimes customers don't know precisely what they want to ask for because the requirement or situation might be new to them.

Because of what we know, we can be instant problem-solvers for customers when we take the time to work with them.

Time: Time is a precious and personal commodity. When we give of our time, we give of ourselves; and customers will remember how we made them feel when they came to our place of business.

There are no price tags on any of these gifts, but there is plenty of payback, and that's good for everyone.

To Lie or Not to Lie – That is the Question

Let's begin with a few questions about events that come up often, and require all of us to react. Here they are.

If a supplier reduces the content of a box but not the size of the box and charges the same price, is he telling a lie?

If a bottler converts from quarts to liters but maintains the same price per bottle, is he telling a lie?

If an insurance company eliminates specific coverage but maintains the same premium price, is that a lie?

When an automobile company promises specific fuel economy but then qualifies the number by using selected variables, is that a lie?

Are these intentional deceptions, or are they just examples of the old "caveat emptor" warning? Must the "buyer beware" because the seller has a right to be deceptive?

What happened to the old "Golden Rule" of treating others as you want to be treated?

What happened to the basic principle of honesty? Telling the truth because it's the right thing to do?

The concept is obvious everywhere:

Thou shalt not bear false witness.

A Scout is Trustworthy.

It's a sin to tell a lie, as Fats Waller wrote in his 1969 song.

Tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Recently, that precept seems to have changed with the US Supreme Court's announcement that it is perfectly acceptable to lie about military service and decorations for valor. The court said it is okay to lie in select situations. That causes many interpretation problems. A lie was once unacceptable, but now it might be fine, and lies are even protected under the First Amendment.

It's certainly confusing, and I'm reminded of the wonderful lyrics Oscar Hammerstein II wrote for *The King And I* when he had the king sing, "A Puzzlement" which includes these words:

When I was a boy, the world was better spot.
What was so was so, what was not was not.
Now I am a man, the world has changed a lot
Some things nearly so, others nearly not.

There are times I almost think
I am not sure of what I absolutely know.
Very often find confusion
In conclusion I concluded long ago.

Our worlds now, business, social, and civic have become a "puzzlement." If it's okay to lie to stay out of trouble like the self-proclaimed (but false) Medal of Honor recipient, what about providing false information on a credit application? What about taking an oath in court and then not telling the truth? How about falsifying a business contract to obtain improved financial terms? And what about the proverbial question of shouting, "Fire" in a crowded theater?

Here is another example of telling untruths, but this time without negative intent. Recently, I re-read a book which upset the advertising world when it was published in 1957. We're seeing a revisiting of much of what was described then as we look at market research and polling data predicting how people will behave. In *The Hidden Persuaders*, Vance Packard said, "…what people tell interviewers had only a remote bearing on how they might actually behave."

Market researchers described three basic findings.

First, "You can't assume that people know what they want."

Second, "You can't assume people will tell you the truth about their wants and dislikes even if they know them."

And third, "It is dangerous to assume that people can be trusted to behave in a rational way."

As we continue to develop products, services, and relationships, keeping a close eye on our basic core values seems essential to help us navigate the confusing conditions and options we face every day. Although the specific conditions might change, the core values don't. Staying true to those values might be difficult sometimes, but back-tracking is even more difficult and costly.

Those values will help us avoid the puzzlements of business. Those values will enable us to stand by the conclusions we concluded long ago.

About the Author

Bob Parkinson has served as a communications consultant and coach for numerous Fortune 500 companies working successfully at all levels of corporate, government, and academic institutions from CEOs to new hires. In addition, he has taught more than 1750 communication related programs for clients in the US and internationally and consulted and conducted research in South America, Africa, and Australia.

He earned a PhD degree from Syracuse University. His other degrees are: MA in Management and Supervision, and BA in English and Biology from Montclair State University (NJ).

After serving on active duty in the US Army, Parkinson began his professional career as a high school teacher. Subsequent professional positions include: Faculty, Northwestern University; Associate Dean, National Louis University; Director of Research, Office of the Governor, IL; Director of Research, Bell & Howell. He lives with his wife, Eileen, in Sarasota, Florida.