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Conversion on a Plane to Dallas 3rd Annual Business Book Review Contest Preview

By Frank Grossman

The purpose of this short article is to herald the third annual Business Book Review Contest, and—more importantly—to encourage M&PD section members who may not have otherwise planned to participate. The September 30 submission deadline is four months distant, so there is still plenty of time. But which book to select? And how to go about writing an interesting review?

First of all, your book review can be as formal or as informal as you wish. Sentence-paragraph format usually works best, but including bullet points can work too. The targeted length of 300-500 words is flexible—and fairly short. Hence, the advent of the “mini-review”! The idea is to avoid writing a grade school book report or synopsis of an entire book. It’s much better to focus on an idea (or two) that you found particularly insightful and worth sharing with other section members.

One approach to identify and gauge the wider relevance of the “pearls of wisdom” within the book you’ve selected is to consider what your book says that speaks directly to the present actuarial condition—the way actuaries do their work, and respond to the challenges we face each day.

Alternatively, you may opt to summarize how you, as an actuary, interpreted a non-standard work and found an unexpected message for actuaries therein. (Shakespeare, anyone?)

In either case, a straightforward question to address is “Is there something worthwhile within this book for actuaries and why?” In basic terms, this could be done by simply describing three things:

- i) what attracted you to the book;
- ii) what you found there that was thought provoking or of interest; and
- iii) how what you read applies to your work or actuarial practice more generally.

Rest assured that there’s no absolute need to tackle the latest management tome or “my career as-told-to” best-seller. Taking a closer look at a well-known or “classic” business book might pay ample dividends. After all, as observed by Mark Twain, “A classic is a book that everyone praises and no one reads.”

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475 N. Martingale Road, Suite 600
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2012 SECTION LEADERSHIP

Officers

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Chairperson

Nicholas Jacobi
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Anju Gupta-Lavey
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Council Members

Frank Grossman
Meredith Lilley
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Scott Haglund
Brian Pauley

Newsletter Editor

John West Hadley,
John Hadley Associates
8 Lori Drive
Somerville, NJ 08876-2517
ph: 908.725.2437
e-mail: John@JHACareers.com

Content Managers

Olga Jacobs
Brian Pauley
2012 Health Spring Meeting
Coordinators

Nicholas Jacobi
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Coordinator

Jennifer Fleck
Olga Jacobs
2012 Annual Meeting Coordinators

Stephanie Weist
2012 Valuation Actuary Symposium
Coordinator

Jennifer Fleck
Website Coordinator

Board Partner

Donna Weninger

SOA Staff

Glenda Maki, Staff Editor
gmaki@soa.org

Meg Weber, Staff Partner
mweber@soa.org

Jill Leprich, Project Support Specialist
jleprich@soa.org

Julissa Sweeney, Graphic Designer
jsweeney@soa.org



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Chairperson's Corner

The Journey Continues....

By Olga Jacobs

In the February issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I shared the personal growth journey that I was beginning. Well, it turns out my story isn't so interesting...I got a total of three responses to my column! (Now you see why I don't tweet...I'd have three followers...and that is assuming the three responders use Twitter!).

And one of the responses I received doesn't count as I had asked that actuary to preview my column, so I already had his feedback. The second response was that my upcoming journey sounded like fun. I don't know about fun. I have read that human nature is that we all like to talk about ourselves (uh...I'm doing it now!) but to journey into one's own psyche for self-assessment – not something I was looking forward to. Writing about my boys and their travel ice hockey teams, well, on that topic you can't shut me up. However, I thank this reader for picking up on my attempt to convey a spirit of adventure and humor.

But, alas, the third and final response ... It was good. The actuary told me I was "brave". THANK YOU. I had bared my soul and failure to those who work with me, those who work for me, and those who have never heard of me. He also told me that I should think about balancing my next move with the other "non-work" parts of my life. Good thought and hold that thought ... I'm going to write about that in an upcoming column. And the pièce de résistance ...he passed on some open job requisitions. I loved that! How thoughtful! (The beauty of networking!)

I don't know what I was expecting. I had temporarily forgotten that I write for *The Stepping Stone* and not *People* magazine and I'm just Olga, not Oprah. I am an actuary writing to other actuaries for goodness' sake. Thanks for keeping me grounded!

So any feeling of overshare went away ... you ain't reading this anyway. I'm planning to go to the SOA

Health Meeting and if you start looking at me funny, I'll blame it on this column.

As I wrote in my last column, my journey for personal growth entailed many possible roads, one being to assess my strengths and weaknesses. I had once read that you can't teach an old dog new tricks. I consider myself an old actuarial dog given that I've put in almost 25 years in the profession, so if I can't change myself, are there attributes that are strengths for me that I can use to my advantage and succeed? Can I identify them and find an actuarial role that required those attributes to succeed?

I read an article in *Harvard Business Review* by Scott Edinger called "Become an Extraordinary Leader."¹

His opening paragraph hit home with me, but let me paraphrase it with a different analogy:

When you have your performance review, do you:

- (a) *zero in on the few negatives and say "what's the matter here"?*
- or*
- (b) *focus on the many positives and say "great job, keep this up"?*

I am in the first category. I obsess about the negative. If one created a list of 100 things about Olga and 99 were positive and one was negative, I'd spend the rest of the year obsessing about that one negative. I'd never give myself the pat on the back that 99 percent of the review was awesome.

So, let me borrow verbatim from Mr. Edinger. Here are his three ways to work on developing your strengths:

1. ***Developing strengths requires a different approach than fixing weaknesses. We analyzed tens of thousands of leaders to determine which strengths set them apart as leaders, and***

Olga Jacobs, FSA, MAAA,
is vice president & actuary,
UnitedHealthcare.

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Working on weaknesses is a drag. It's drudgery bordering on misery to move from slightly below average to slightly above.

what we found is that leadership behaviors and competencies tend to cluster together in consistent patterns.

Extraordinary leaders with strong technical skills are frequently also good at developing others, building relationships, and communicating powerfully, for instance. Extraordinary leaders known for exceptional integrity also tend to be decisive, assertive, and optimistic. While assertiveness doesn't make you more honest, it can magnify that trait. That's called an interaction effect.

In the same way that Michael Phelps might improve as a swimmer, not through swimming more laps but by developing complementary strengths such as weight training, running, and other cross-training activities, people can improve leadership strengths by straightforward development of strongly correlated companion skills and behaviors.

2. It works because it follows your interests. *Working on weaknesses is a drag. It's drudgery bordering on misery to move from slightly below average to slightly above.*

One of my weaker areas of leadership has always been finance. Over the last decade I've put a great deal of painful effort into moving from below average in this area to reasonable competence. Reasonable I say, because while it's no longer a problem area for me, it will likely never be an area of strength either, and I work with many colleagues who run circles around me in this regard and always will. I find great enjoyment, on the other hand, in creating strategy, developing our clients and others on my team, putting teams on the right track, and leading growth. These happen to be among my strongest areas of performance.

3. Don't worry about too much of a good thing. *Have you ever worked with a leader who possessed too much character? Was too strategic? Overly effective in interpersonal relationships? I doubt it.*

There are times when leaders can become one-dimensional in their application of a strength

area — driving so hard for a result, for instance, that they fail to consider their impact on others. But that failing is not a result of overly developing strength. It's a lack of attention to related leadership characteristics.

The answer is not to reduce focus on results but rather to increase attention to companion skills like giving clear feedback, developing the talents of direct reports, and providing recognition. To return to Michael Phelps, no one would suggest he stop trying to improve as a swimmer, just that he won't get there merely by doing more and more.

After reading that I needed to find out objectively what my strengths were. I was working with a fellow MPD Council member on the SOA 2012 Health Meeting session "Improving Yourself and Your Team through Strengths." In that session a Gallup strengths coach will discuss why it is important for you to know your strengths – and why understanding the strengths of those you lead is essential to maximizing your leadership. So, I went to the store and bought *Strengths Finder 2.0* by Tom Rath. I took the test and found out that I am not an actuary! AGHH!

OK, step back! The book identifies 34 themes and after taking the quiz, it tells you your top five. I won't list all 34 themes but this one popped out at me:

Analytical! The book writes that someone with a strong analytical theme should "choose work in which you are paid to analyze data, find patterns, or organize ideas. For example, you might excel in.... RISK MANAGEMENT.

Analytical was not one of my top five themes. Why am I telling you this, my future employers?

My top theme was WOO...Winning Others Over. My report said "people who are especially talented in the WOO theme love the challenge of meeting new people and winning them over. They derive satisfaction from breaking the ice and making a

connection with another person.” People identified as WOO are friendly and enjoy socializing. The book said as a WOO I should choose a job in which I can interact with many people over the course of a day. And I should join local organizations and volunteer for committees (ding..ding...ding...SOA Volunteer!!) . I think the test and the results were spot on. This is me.

I won't go into my other top themes or the rest of the 34, but let me say that I found the exercise useful and truthful. I highly recommend the book and if you are going to the SOA 2012 Health Meeting, please attend the Strengths session.

As for my journey, the next step is to look at available opportunities and find one that requires my top themes...I need a position where I can WOO. ●

Woo Hoo.
Thanks for reading!
Olga

END NOTES

¹ http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/10/become_extraordinary.html

The Actuarial Ethicist: Deep-End of the Pool Correspondence

by Joseph Nunes



Joseph Nunes is president of Actuarial Solutions Inc. He can be reached at joe@actuariesolutionsinc.com.

The Actuarial Ethicist is one of my favorite columns in all the actuarial material that I receive from the CIA and the SOA. I have reminded my actuarial team about the valuable opportunity for professional development that this material represents. I am sorry that I missed the chance to respond to the “Deep-End of the Pool”. However, seeing the comments from others in the discussion of the case forthcoming in the February 2012 issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I thought it was worth writing nonetheless.

Before reading the responses, my initial reaction was that Walter’s well-intended “free help” may have created an undeserved level of confidence by Trevor in his own work. With this overconfidence now clearly uncovered, like many other readers, I originally saw two issues leading to a single course of action. The first issue I saw was potential litigation. The second was that Trevor genuinely needed some help.

My recommended course of action for Walter was to write a well-crafted letter to Trevor along the following lines:

“In our past informal discussions, I have provided you with information that could be helpful in your work. I have also offered in the past to accept a formal consulting assignment to assist you in your work and you have declined this opportunity. In our call this morning, you indicated to me that the regulator is not satisfied with your work. It is my recommendation that you reconsider engaging my services on a formal basis to review your work and assist you with a response to the regulator. Should you wish to consider this opportunity further, I would be pleased to submit a more formal proposal for my services.”

This correspondence offers the help that Trevor needs and—whether accepted or not—draws a line

in the sand with respect to future litigation regarding any misunderstanding that may arise with respect to Walter’s prior unpaid support. Although I do not think that this unpaid support can realistically be construed as advice, it will be up to the lawyers to decide whether litigation is appropriate.

Before reading the responses I would have sent this letter immediately, but I now see that caution likely dictates a review by Walter’s legal counsel before such correspondence is sent.

A number of readers also suggested that there may be a disciplinary issue looming. I didn’t really see any disciplinary concern for Walter and as a result I wouldn’t have commented on this line of thinking. In Canada, the disciplinary process is stressful and costly, and I would not wish that experience upon any actuary. I can only assume that the same is true for the United States.

I don’t think Walter has crossed a line. He wasn’t practicing in an area where he was not qualified, and even if his comments are taken to be an “oral report” his reporting in no way directs or approves the ultimate decisions made by Trevor and Stanley. There is no “engagement” here and I would think that a court would be reluctant to declare that one exists for the risk that it would in future prevent healthy discussion among professionals. On this basis, I believe it is premature to rush to involve Walter in a disciplinary process.

With respect to Trevor, at this point it is quite possible that with some help he will respond adequately to the regulator and demonstrate that there are no problems with his work. If Trevor (or his predecessor, Stanley) has failed to adequately perform his work, then that will be revealed in the future and disciplinary opportunities can be assessed once the facts are known. On this basis, I think it is premature to involve Trevor in a disciplinary process, and Walter just doesn’t have enough information to initiate one.

My first reading of the article was a helpful reminder about being cautious when providing “free help.” But having read the digest of responses, I am saddened that so many think that what I consider to be constructive dialogue among professionals can actually be a source of litigation and disciplinary action. I truly hope our profession is not headed in this direction.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the hundreds of actuaries that I have spoken with on the phone and through email over the past 25 years. I wish to assure them all that should I be sued in the future I will not claim reliance on their comments to justify MY work. ●

Joe Nunes, FSA, FCIA
December 23, 2011, via email



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Frank Grossman, FSA, FCIA, MAAA is a senior actuary at Transamerica who is mindful of Thomas Edison's observation: "Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work." He can be reached at Frank.Grossman@Transamerica.com or 319.355.3963.

A case in point was Ben Wadsley's experience with Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends & Influence People* late last summer¹. Ben conceded that he was sheepish about reviewing such an old chestnut, but—under the shadow of the contest deadline—he finally sent me an email: "I'll be stuck in an airport next Tuesday and Wednesday ... perfect time to write this ...". And it was during Ben's journey that he had a conversion that he described in his mini-review.

"Carnegie's book is filled with so many case studies ... that I didn't know which ones to discuss ... Ironically, I was on a plane to Dallas (while) writing this review when the flight attendant used one of the techniques spelled out in the book. ... (He) got me to do what he wanted, and made me happy to do it!"

Another approach is to write about a business book that you've previously read and know well. One of last year's contestants, Brian Pauley, did exactly that. He led a company-sponsored study group in their analysis of *Necessary Endings* by Dr. Henry Cloud, and then leveraged his insights about this title and its message by crafting an effective mini-review.

The fundamental keys to writing a good mini-review may not surprise you:

- a) It's always better to start early and write when rested.
- b) Choose a subject that you know and understand.
- c) Share your draft with a trusted reader and ask for candid feedback.

Writing skills can scarcely be taught; but they can be learned ... with practice.

Collectively, your mini-reviews will serve our section's membership by comprising an inventory of good business books. Well-written reviews will be featured in future issues of *The Stepping Stone*, providing support for your steadfast newsletter editor. And there's always the prospect of a prize or

two to be awarded at the Washington D.C. Annual Meeting in the fall. We look forward to reading—and sharing—your reviews! ●

END NOTES

- ¹ Editor's Note: You can read Ben Wadsley's review in this issue of *The Stepping Stone*.

Team Impossible

by Brian Pauley

One of my favorite TV shows is The Food Network's *Restaurant Impossible*. Each episode features renowned chef and restaurateur Robert Irvine, who is tasked with fixing a failing restaurant in two days on a \$10,000 budget. While the changes he makes are very dramatic and make for great TV, what stands out most to me is the degree of blindness to basic strategies that would make restaurant owners successful.

Actuaries are in the risk—not restaurant—business. However, if you lead a team, department or organization of any type, you are susceptible to similar problems from a leadership perspective. The result can be compromised success. Below I discuss some of the lessons I've seen owners on the show learn the hard way. Hopefully you will avoid making similar mistakes in your leadership.

LEADERS CAN'T AND SHOULDN'T DO EVERYTHING

If you are a one-person show: the owner, general manager, chef, a host and a waiter - you have a major problem. Many episodes feature leaders who work more than 80 hours per week. The reasons vary from saving on payroll to an unwillingness to give up responsibilities. The end result is always the same: failure.

Are you pulling the data, running the models, addressing external inquiries, reviewing everyone's work, attending all of the meetings and leading the team? You shouldn't be. Everyone on the team should have a defined role – and have the freedom to perform. Think through what each individual's role should be and discuss your expectations. When your team needs help or is struggling, by all means jump in and help. But, there is a critical difference between helping and micromanaging.

CREATE STRUCTURE AROUND IMPORTANT PRACTICES AND PROCESSES

It never takes Chef Irvine long to identify critical

process problems. Too often menus are overly complicated, food preparation is not set up to ensure quick service, computer systems are not utilized to track costs, and hope is a key strategy.

You must understand and identify key processes and have structure around them:

- How are assignments and projects delegated and tracked?
- Is everyone aware of deadlines?
- Do meetings have a set purpose and agenda?
- Do you have a mechanism for saying *no* to requests and projects when your team runs out of capacity?

The late Coach John Wooden, well-known for meticulous planning and execution with his basketball teams, said it best: *"Failing to prepare, is preparing to fail."*

ESTABLISH AN OPEN PIPELINE FOR FEEDBACK

Restaurant owners are often surprised, if not stunned, by the feedback obtained from employees and customers. In fact, they are often delusional about critical items such as food quality and customer service.

As a leader, it is in your best interest to create an environment encouraging employees and customers to openly discuss their ideas and concerns. Too often, employees do not feel they can. Or just as bad, they feel if they were to do so, then nothing would happen. Therefore, it is important to genuinely seek feedback and follow up with actions. Be careful not to become a sounding board for mindless complaining. Request that complaints be accompanied by suggested solutions.

STRIVE FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Owners often talk about the good ole' days when they turned a profit and had a restaurant full of



Brian Pauley, FSA, MAAA, is a managing actuary at Humana Inc. in Louisville, KY and has a passion for leadership development and personal growth. He can be reached at bpauley@insightbb.com.

Restaurant owners are often surprised, if not stunned, by the feedback obtained from employees and customers. In fact, they are often delusional about critical items such as food quality and customer service.

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patrons. Their attitude implies that since they were successful in the past, they must be doing something, if not everything, right (despite the obvious failures).

Past success does not guarantee future success. Leaders must constantly challenge practices and thinking. You must be willing to take risks and learn from mistakes. Be intentional about this. Talk to other leaders. Read books. Challenge everyone to step their game up. Otherwise, you may get taken out of the game.

TAKE CARE OF PEOPLE

People are your greatest asset. Engaged employees give their best effort. And when they do this, it makes

customers happy. Happy customers bring profits to your business. Your team may not interact directly with the company's actual customers, but you must develop a culture where everyone receiving your work product is thought of as a customer. If you provide the CFO with reserve estimates, then the CFO is a customer. If you send a rate quote to an agent, then the agent is a customer.

Don't take the above lessons for granted. They just might be the blind spots keeping you from achieving the success you desire as a leader. Meet with your team to genuinely discuss how things are going, and take action to correct any deficiencies. Otherwise, you may find yourself on a spin-off called *Team Impossible*. ●

SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

App Idea?

Share it and you could win an iPad!

The SOA's Technology Section is sponsoring an "Apps for Actuaries" contest.

Ideas could include an app that:

- Serves a clear function for actuaries or actuarial students
- Serves a function for business or financial services
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These are just examples—use your imagination!

Entering is easy. Just fill out the contest form on <http://appsforactuaries.org/App-Idea-Contest>



Why Are the Fish Dying?

...What is Culture? Why Should I Care? Where Does it Come From?

by Jackie Freedman

Have you ever heard someone explain with a sigh, “Well, that’s just how it is around here?” If so, you’ve just been given a glimpse into the culture of that particular organization. The context of that comment reveals clues about the organization’s attitude toward its clients or what it thinks of its employees or its position on any number of things. Essentially, organizational culture is the combination of tangible and intangible elements that reflect the underlying beliefs and attitudes of the organization as a whole.

Let’s reverse engineer this idea. Imagine that we have a company with a “culture of distrust.” What kinds of tangible and intangible elements might we find that would occur in this culture? In the physical spaces, we might see security cameras, metal detectors and a lot of rules and procedures governing everything, especially the handling of inventory and raw materials. This culture might also utilize a structural hierarchy designed for a low span of control (fewer employees per manager) and strict management that uses the direct and control style. We might witness interactions and communications that are not characterized by mutual respect and a pervasive us-versus-them mentality between management and the employees. Think about these elements as being the outward symptoms of an internal belief. Now, if we take another step back, we can postulate on what attitudes and underlying beliefs might have lead to this environment. “People are not to be trusted” is an obvious option, but maybe it is “people will take whatever they can get” or “people have no respect for the company’s property.” There are an infinite number of beliefs that could lead to this “culture of distrust.”

Tangible expressions of culture can include things like the physical building and its layout, the dress code, the guidelines set forth in an employee handbook, processes and routines or the existence of a cafeteria or kitchen. Intangible expressions of the culture can be the vision, mission and values, management style, level of risk-taking, treatment of people, level of innovation; the list goes on and on.

It is important to understand, however, that every organization will express its beliefs differently (that is, display different symptoms) and for different reasons. As such, something that is part of the culture in one place may or may not be indicative of the culture somewhere else. For instance, you might assume that an organization that has beautiful offices cares deeply about its employees – and it may. However, it is also possible that the organization feels that it must have nice offices to impress clients and visitors but could care less about the employees. In fact, I’ve worked in an organization that had lovely corporate offices because the owner’s daughter had expensive taste and wanted to ensure a nice office for herself – we benefitted, but it was not a reflection of a commitment to people.

So an organization’s culture is a combination of symptoms that has evolved over time. It is the result of behaviors, decisions, communication, etc., that have been heavily influenced by certain underlying beliefs and attitudes. Taken together as “the culture,” those tangible and intangible elements are merely the outward expressions of the beliefs and attitudes. And, therein lies the tricky part about culture – no matter what you say or how vehemently you say it, the culture will not be fooled. (This is one of the reasons why change management/culture change is so challenging and why most internal efforts fail.) I spend the vast majority of my time with business owners and executives discussing various aspects of culture. Not one of them, ever, has articulated the sentiment that they didn’t care about their employees or that employees were expendable or that employees were a necessary evil. In fact, many of those same people tell me all about how well people are treated and what a great place it is to work. Unfortunately, the leadership/management style, communication, lack of engagement, concern about meeting goals, low morale, etc., tell a very different story. Most leaders will tell you that they have a great culture, and yet most people are unsatisfied with their organizations – you do the math.



Jackie Freedman is founder of Delta-V Strategies in Milford, NJ. She can be reached at 908.996.1003 or at jfreedman@DeltaVstrategies.com.

I’ve worked in an organization that had lovely corporate offices because the owner’s daughter had expensive taste and wanted to ensure a nice office for herself – we benefitted, but it was not a reflection of a commitment to people.

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While the fish's well-being is very heavily dependent on water quality, it is the intangibles that have the most impact on the satisfaction and health of your people.

The hard reality is that business owners and high-level executives are often unaware of the true characteristics of their culture. Cultures evolve and develop over time and it is rare to find someone who understands what their culture is actually communicating. While some are quite dismayed to discover what their organizations are expressing, others point to their organizational values. If, in fact, the leader and the leadership team are committed to those values and devote time and attention to communicating, supporting and defending them, then they may be right. More often than not, however, organizational values are non-existent, or even worse, they are displayed in the conference room but have little or no connection to the day-to-day realities of the company. I've seen organizations whose values proclaim that they trust and empower their people but then require a vice-president to sign off on all purchases greater than \$200. Having lived with these kinds of inconsistencies, can you really blame employees for approaching organizational transformation with such skepticism?

Far easier to understand than the complexities of organizational culture, is why you should care

about the culture at your organization. It's really quite simple. People who are happy are more productive. They enjoy the environment and the people they work with and their attitudes and work habits reflect that feeling. From an organizational standpoint, the culture is either supporting your strategy and the mission, vision and values of the organization or it is working against them. And keep in mind that there is no grey area – it's either working for you or against you; an asset or a liability. A positive, supportive culture is evidenced by high levels of morale and engagement, passion and commitment for the company and its goals, a team approach, innovative-thinking...the list goes on and on. Not convinced? Best Buy found that for every 10th of a point increase in a store's employee-engagement scores, it saw a \$100,000 increase in operating income. (Liebs, Scott. "Measuring Up." CFO Magazine. 1 June 2007. CFO Acquisitions. 24 Feb. 2012) Once you begin to understand what culture is and the impact it has on productivity and performance, the next step is to ascertain where it comes from and how you, as a leader, affect it.

If you'll indulge me for just a moment, I'd like to ask you to consider the mild-mannered fish tank. Although using the word "culture" here may be a bit of a stretch, environment will do just as nicely. The environment in the fish tank, like the culture of your organization, is made up of both tangible (water, plants, snails, algae, tank itself, gravel, miniature divers, etc.) and intangible elements (how the fish co-exist, how crowded the tank is, how well the tank is maintained and how new residents are selected). Anything that affects life in the tank is a part of the environment. While the fish's well-being is very heavily dependent on water quality, it is the intangibles that have the most impact on the satisfaction and health of your people. The kind of culture or atmosphere that exists within your company permeates every aspect of life in your organization just as completely as the water surrounds the fish.

The environment in the fish tank is typically established in one of two ways. When setting up the tank, the fishkeeper begins with a general strategy,

having decided whether to create a freshwater or marine habitat. He will move forward, selecting the tank, filters, etc. Referring back to his strategy, he will then choose the appropriate number and type of fish. Once established, the fishkeeper will be prepared to monitor and maintain several variables (i.e., pH, temperature, aeration, ammonia/nitrate levels, cleanliness), any one of which can be deadly to the tank's inhabitants if it gets out of the prescribed range. He recognizes that without his supervision and possible interference, the tank can easily become toxic to its inhabitants. This first approach requires a strategy, follow-through and commitment. In the second approach, the fishkeeper takes more of a laissez faire attitude towards the conditions in the tank. In this case, the environment will develop on its own – just like it will within an organization. Without direction, though, a toxic environment is the likely result. Regardless of whether or not you decide to direct the development of the culture, one will develop. Unfortunately for both fish tanks and companies, environments that arise without supervision or guidance are generally not hospitable. Great cultures don't happen by accident.

Once the environment has been established, the keeper will work to maintain that habitat. When adding new fish, he will take great care to assess the space available in the tank, the sociability of the species and the preferred position within the tank. To protect the habitat, the keeper will make careful decisions regarding the likelihood that a particular species will flourish in the environment and will not do any damage to others in the tank. While hiring people who don't fit the culture isn't as dramatic as introducing a piranha into a tank of freshwater fish, it can be just as deadly to the culture.

For the same reason, fishkeepers take the task of introducing new fish into the tank very seriously. This process is known as acclimatizing and entails hanging the open bag inside the aquarium and gradually adding water from the tank into the bag, allowing the fish to adjust to the temperature and conditions of the water. After a suitable amount of time, the fish is released into the new surroundings.

Unfortunately, it seems that fishkeepers dedicate considerably more time to this process than many organizations that have overlooked or forgotten the strategic importance of talent selection, development and on-boarding (the HR term for acclimatizing). This process is as important to the individual fish's ability to adapt and flourish in the new environment as it is to the environment itself.

Since the tank is a self-contained environment, contaminants (e.g., disease, parasites, fungus, and bacteria) that make their way into the tank easily take hold. They quickly pollute the entire environment and often require massive effort and dangerous (chemicals) measures. Only an observant fishkeeper will notice the early signs of a problem. Once a disease has polluted the water, quick and deliberate action is necessary to protect the habitat; a strong, healthy environment can help to minimize the damage. Sometimes, there is no choice but to deliver the fish from their watery grave and begin all over again with a clean tank and new fish. Starting from scratch is not an option for business owners and executives but the analogy underscores the challenge of culture – it is a lot work.

That's right. You are the fishkeeper and it's time to start looking closely at the tank. Are the fish swimming happily around the tank or floating upside-down in a toxic environment? If you are ready to harness the power of your people, remember that it takes tremendous dedication, commitment, expertise and insight to reach into every corner of the tank and replace all those long-standing tangible and intangible expressions with a completely new paradigm. The rewards, however, are substantial, not just for the fish but for the fishkeeper as well.

Jackie Freedman partners with business owners and executives to strengthen leadership, transform culture and shape strategy. She can be reached at 908.996.1003 or at jfreedman@DeltaVstrategies.com. For additional information, please visit www.DeltaVstrategies.com. ●

Only an observant fishkeeper will notice the early signs of a problem. Once a disease has polluted the water, quick and deliberate action is necessary to protect the habitat ...

The Confidence to Walk Away

By John Hadley



John West Hadley

is a career counselor who works with job seekers frustrated with their search, and professionals struggling to increase their visibility and influence at work. He can be reached at John@JHACareers.com or 908.725.2437. His free *Career Tips* newsletter and other career resources are available at www.JHACareers.com.

Do you:

- **Deliver an engaging, confident marketing message clearly and with a smile?**
- **Project genuine excitement about your goals?**
- **Position yourself for roles that truly fit your capabilities, rather than ‘under-selling’ yourself?**
- **Present yourself with clear, confident results statements?**
- **Ask for what you deserve, instead of holding back out of fear of rejection?**
- **Have the confidence to walk away when needed?**

Let’s look at that last point, particularly in reference to internal or external job interviews and sales / consulting presentations. What should you do when you’ve concluded that the job or the assignment isn’t what you want?

The standard advice is that there isn’t anything to turn down until you have an offer, so always go for

the offer. I believe there’s a powerful exception:

“If you don’t want to be that solution, then it’s better to admit it and save everyone time and effort.”

The strongest interviews and sales / consulting presentations come from the psychology that this is an exploration by BOTH parties, not just a chance for you to sell yourself no matter what.

If I’ve already gone through all of the time and effort to come up with an offer or assignment for you, and you turn it down, that’s a cost of business that I accept. But if when I make you the offer I conclude that you knew you weren’t interested early in the process, I’m likely to be just a little bit annoyed that you wasted my time - and I certainly won’t keep you in mind for some other opportunity or go out of my way to try to help you after that!

Admitting (in a very professional way) that you don’t want what that person has to offer is a far stronger position for maintaining him

or her as a strong potential networking contact or referral source. In fact, it can earn you a degree of respect for your honesty and integrity.

Admitting that you don't want the job can also sometimes lead to a conversation about what you really want, or what they might need to do to make it a role that might attract you.

I once interviewed someone who did just that in a job interview, and we went on to have a great conversation about the role he really wanted. I did my best to draw him a road map for how the job I was describing could lead to the product line manager role he really wanted, since the last person I hired was now one of our product line managers. And before he left that day, I came up with the highest possible compensation package I

could afford to offer to attract him to my operation.

Clearly walking away doesn't apply if you are seriously considering the job or assignment, and think there's at least some reasonable chance you might be interested, if the offer is the right one. In that case, you keep going for the offer. But if you KNOW it's not what you want, have the confidence to walk away. Make sure you do it very professionally, but do it.

Try out this goal for your next interview or sales / consulting presentation:

"To help the other party succeed by providing a solution that best meets the other party's needs. And have the confidence to walk away if you aren't or don't want to be that solution." ●

Admitting that you don't want the job can also sometimes lead to a conversation about what you really want ...

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Strategies for Job Hunting in the Current Marketplace

By Patty Kent



Patty Kent is executive vice president of Actuarial Careers, Inc. She can be reached at PattyKent@actuarialcareers.com or at 800.766.0070.

For the last few years the economy has put plans for job changes on hold for many. Concerns about the stability of the marketplace and the housing market kept a lot of us from considering a change. In the interim, you may have experienced your career stalling because of a lack of opportunities with your current employer to move up the ladder, an inability to move into a different area of interest, or a downsizing that has (or will) leave you without a position.

The best strategy for finding a new position in today's marketplace can be summed up in two words—be realistic. This seems simple enough, but most of us have unrealistic expectations about our job search. We think the perfect opportunity will show up in our backyard when we are ready for it. Unfortunately, just because you are in the market for a new job doesn't mean the local companies will be in a position to hire you. If they do have an opportunity, it may be at a level too junior or too senior.

Put yourself in the position of the human resources person or the hiring manager who would be looking at your résumé and ask yourself honestly how your résumé and cover letter match up. Would you consider yourself a good candidate for the position? Companies are less inclined to “invent” a position for you in this economy and if there are a lot of others looking for positions in your local area, the positions that are available will be very competitive. Your strategy must include compelling reasons for the hiring managers to consider you over the other potential candidates.

The first step in entering the job market should be having a clear idea of why you are looking for a new position. Are you looking for a better career path, higher compensation or a more stable environment? Are you being downsized or is your position in jeopardy? Your specific reason will affect your strategy.

If you are looking for a new position because your career has stalled and you have exhausted the

opportunities with your current employer, your first consideration is whether you are willing to relocate for the right opportunity. If you are not willing to relocate, it may be challenging to find the right opportunity for advancement. The greater your geographic flexibility the more opportunities will be available for you to explore. Another area in which you need to be realistic is the potential for telecommuting with companies outside your local area. Most companies are not actively looking for telecommuters. It is a large leap of faith for companies to hire someone new and then have them telecommute full time. It is far more likely that they will allow someone who has been with the company to telecommute. If the position has significant supervisory responsibilities, telecommuting may not be a realistic alternative. If you absolutely cannot move, you may want to consider commuting home on weekends and living in the new location during the week.

If you are looking for a position because you are out of work or know that you are being downsized you may decide to spend the first few months of your job search only exploring local opportunities. Again, if there are others who have been affected, the jobs will be very competitive. After six months or more without a position, you may have to open up your search to other locations, but you are now starting from scratch with a significant gap in employment. Consider opening up your geographic range from the start if you are out of work.

If you are looking to move into a new area of expertise, the challenge will be to convince hiring managers that you can bring value with your current skill set. Carefully review the job descriptions and formulate a cover letter that fully explains how your skills can be applied and any parallels between your experience and their needs. If you are looking for a new direction, you may want to explore those opportunities in your current company, or consider companies that could use your current skill set, but may be able to move you into your area of interest in the future.



If you are out of work and need to stay in your local area, you may be tempted to apply for every position that is available locally, even if the job is too junior, too senior or out of your area of expertise. At this point, you need to put yourself in the shoes of the human resources person and the hiring manager. Take a cold, hard look at your résumé and your experience and ask yourself if you would consider yourself a good candidate for the position.

Does your résumé speak to the job description? You may have to point out specifically how you feel you could bring value to the company. If you are

looking for an opportunity to change your focus, you need a compelling reason why the company should hire you versus someone who already has that background. If the position is much more senior you need to be able to give specific examples of why you would be successful in the position. If the position is more junior, with less money and less responsibility, what would keep you from leaving if a better opportunity presented itself in six months or a year? It is critical to address these questions from the start. You also want to be aware that if you send your résumé for every position a company has open, you will quickly lose your credibility and be less likely to be seriously considered for a position that is a good fit.

Although challenging, the current market is consistently improving. Excellent opportunities are available for individuals looking for new challenges and the best strategy for securing a new position is to be realistic about your expectations. ●

Take a cold, hard look at your résumé and your experience and ask yourself if you would consider yourself a good candidate for the position.

Feedback That's Tough on Problems, Not on People

By Malory Fischer



Malory Fischer, president of Communication Concepts Training, Inc., leads workshops to increase efficiency and innovation through clear and collaborative communication. She can be reached at malory@cctraining.com or at (732) 469-1387.

Feedback is supposed to be helpful. After all, isn't that why negative feedback is called *constructive* criticism? The reality is, though, that most of us have received feedback that's felt a lot more like a punch in the gut than a helping hand. You know the kind...

"You're not pulling your weight, Sally" or "You obviously misunderstood the parameters, Jim."

Comments like these often generate knee-jerk responses that are defensive. Why? Because the remark comes across as an attack – not an attack on the problem at hand, but an attack on the person receiving the feedback.

But feedback doesn't have to be used like a club. Whether you're communicating upward, downward, or across an organization, negative feedback can be as a tool to improve work processes, nurture business relationships, and get the outcomes you want. So let's start with how to make criticism constructive.

1. Start with an observation: "I haven't received the budget figures for your department, Steve."

Notice that the observation begins with *I*, not *you*. Statements that begin with *I* tend to sound more neutral than *you* statements and are likely begin a rational conversation. On the other hand, critical statements that begin with *you* tend to sound blaming, and the receiver often responds defensively. That's human nature: to defend ourselves when attacked. So if the manager barks, "You're late again in sending your budget figures, Steve," then Steve will likely shoot back, "I can't send you the figures until I hear from my team, and I have too many other things to do besides chasing down information from everyone else."

So defensiveness can *derail* productive communication, with comments spiraling into an angry exchange. Then, too, there's the possibility that the recipient will respond passively to the initial criticism, taking it quietly, even if it's unjustified. However, silent suffering doesn't bode well for future cooperation any more than anger and conflict do.

2. Next, elaborate with expressions such as, "I think" or "I feel."

Describe the crux of the issue from an *I* perspective. In the case of the overdue budget figures, the manager might follow his initial observation with, "I'm concerned that if I don't get all the figures in time to present them well at the budget meeting on Friday, I may not be able to secure the funding we need." With this comment, the speaker describes the business problem in objective terms.

3. Finally, describe what you want and ask for input.

"I'd really like to get those figures this afternoon. Is that possible?"



Instead of demanding compliance, the manager uses a question to pull Steve into the problem-solving process. Steve now has the opportunity to discuss his overloaded schedule and uncooperative teammates, and he and his manager can put their heads together to come up with a solution.

During this problem-solving phase of the conversation, it may also help to dig for more information with phrases like these:

“Can you tell me what you think the problem is?”

“Can you help me understand what happened?”

Try to avoid leading with, “Why did you...?” because *why* questions also have the habit of triggering defensiveness.

If the problem has occurred repeatedly, a follow-up may be necessary: “I’d like to work together to avoid this situation in the future. It sounds like we have to think about work flow and priorities. So let’s set up a meeting next week to discuss the some ideas.”

Whatever you do, if you want to increase the chances of your feedback having positive outcomes:

- Avoid words like *always* and *never*. Generalizations and exaggeration tend to backfire. If my team leader reprimands me with, “You’re *always* late for meetings,” I may respond with a nitpicky, “I was on time for the meeting last week.”
- Avoid decrees like “you have to” or “you should.” The tone of the stern authority figure is a turn-off to many people.
- Avoid judgmental words such as *lazy*, *unreasonable* and *uncooperative*. By sticking to facts rather than descriptions,

the conversation is likely to stay on track and be unemotional.

- Beware of unspoken messages. If I yell, “Can’t you *ever* get this done on time?” the unspoken message is, “Can’t you ever get this done on time (*you idiot*)? Such messages come across loud and clear!

These suggestions are not just for managers who want to enhance the effectiveness of direct reports. These techniques can be applied when your co-worker leaves a mess in the microwave, your office-mate doesn’t return your supplies, or your boss is micro-managing your every move. However, in any of these cases, timing will be important. Negative feedback is most effective when delivered ***calmly and privately***; your timing, tone of voice, and use of body language can speak even more loudly than your words. Please don’t forget that!

So when giving feedback, focus on what’s important: opening communication, not closing it. And to accomplish that end, be tough on problems, not on people. ●

Negative feedback is most effective when delivered *calmly and privately* ...

Lessons from a Toothache— Part 2

By David C. Miller



David C. Miller, FSA, PCC, is president of Leadership Growth Strategies. He can be reached at dave@leadershipgrowthstrategies.com.

In the November 2011 issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I discussed what I learned about selling from having a royally painful toothache. I learned two lessons from this incident:

LESSON #1: NO PAIN = LACK OF URGENCY

If a prospect is not purchasing your product or service, they are not experiencing enough pain with their current situation.

LESSON #2: ACTION IS DIRECTLY PROPORTIONAL TO THE AMOUNT OF PAIN EXPERIENCED

To be successful selling product, services or ideas, we must find the pain the prospect is experiencing **and** it must be acute enough to take action now.

In Part 1, we discussed **Strategy #1**, which is to “*find prospects experiencing great pain.*”

In this issue we will look at the second of three strategies to non-manipulatively utilize the concept of “pain” to grow your business and leadership influence.

STRATEGY #2: FIND THE PAIN

Strategy #1 is all about finding prospects who are already consciously aware of the pain of their current situation. Strategy #2 is about helping the prospect in front of you **become** painfully aware of the current problems (pun intended).

What do people do with pain? They avoid it by burying it deep inside where they don’t have to deal with it. For example, do you know anyone who deals with financial difficulties by not opening their bills? Obviously, avoiding bills doesn’t make them go away. But it may make your friend feel better for the moment.

In the same way, many prospects have **real** problems where you can help them, but they are ignoring the

consequences of these problems, which equates to little or no urgency to find a solution.

Our task as influencers or sellers is to awaken their pain (note: I didn’t say “create pain” – that would be manipulative). So how do we do this?

AWAKEN PAIN BY ASKING EFFECTIVE QUESTIONS

By mastering the skill of asking effective questions in the right order, you can turn a disinterested prospect into one desperate for your services. Again, we are not manipulating, but awakening the pain that already exists.

Here are key categories of questions you want to ask (with generic examples):

1. Rapport Building

Start off by asking questions about them. Find common ground. Be curious about what interests them about the areas you can help them with.

2. Goals and Desired Results

After you develop some rapport, now turn your questions to find out what they want to accomplish. Questions like:

“What results would you like to see happen in the next year?”

“What do you really want?”

“What would that result allow you to do that you can’t do today?”

These questions get them really in touch with unmet desires – results they want that they don’t currently have.

3. Problems, Obstacles and Challenges

This set of questions does more to awaken pain than any other.

“What’s not working?”

“What’s preventing you from achieving your desired results?”

“What is having these challenges costing you (e.g., financially, emotionally, relationally, physically, etc.)?”

Here we are cutting to the chase. If these questions do not awaken pain (frustration, anger, etc.), then either a) you are fishing in the wrong pond or b) your prospect just does not have a big enough problem to seek out help.

If it is the latter situation, be encouraged, you just identified a non-prospect. Time to move on (better than wasting your time!).

INVITATION TO MOVE FORWARD

After you ask questions in category three, if there is plenty of pain, you can present your solution – one that precisely meets their needs.

Finally, you want to ask a question that invites the prospect to take the next step.

“How does this solution sound to you?”

“Would you like to move ahead?”

So if you are dealing with a prospect who is not already feeling the urgency to find help, learn to ask these four categories of questions.

In Part 3 we will look at the third strategy to non-manipulatively utilize the concept of “pain” to grow your business and influence.

*David C. Miller FSA, PCC, is president of Leadership Growth Strategies, an organization that specializes in helping executives become more influential leaders and consultants generate higher revenues for their practices. He is the author of the book, *The Influential Actuary* (www.theinfluentialactuary.com). For more information, contact Dave at dave@LeadershipGrowthStrategies.com or visit his websites www.BusinessGrowthNow.com (for business growth) and www.LeadershipGrowthStrategies.com (for corporate leadership). ●*

"Fat, drunk and stupid is no way to go through life, Son"

How to Deal with a Negative Boss

By John Dante



John Dante is the president & CEO of Dante Actuarial Consulting LLC, which is based in Bethlehem, Pa. He has had 25 years of experience managing people while working as a group health actuary for three large commercial insurers. He can be reached at johndante@danteactuarial.com.

If you are familiar with the 1978 movie *Animal House*, you will recognize the title as the famous quote from Dean Wormer directed at Delta House freshman Kent Dorfman after he achieved a 0.2 grade point average. I was reminded of this quote a few years ago when a former colleague mentioned that his boss had suggested that he seriously consider eating better and starting an exercise program. Aside from thinking that this statement was politically incorrect for a boss to say to an employee, the statement also surprised me because I didn't see my colleague as a person who was obese or out of shape.

It occurred to me that perhaps his boss was genuinely concerned about my colleague's well being. I am of the opinion that most of us could make better choices to lead healthier lives. However, my former colleague told me that I was missing the point. He said that this was just another example of the continual negativity he had to put up with from his boss. It seemed that his boss never said a nice word and never praised anyone for doing a good job. When he told his fellow employees what the boss said, they all agreed that the boss had outdone himself once again.

Why do some bosses believe that berating their employees is a good management practice? Why do some bosses fail to ever praise their employees? It is hard to pinpoint the exact reasons, but it is likely that they were either not trained properly to manage people or they lack the aptitude. Unfortunately for us, these negative bosses are still out there in the workplace, and given the fact they can still be somewhat successful, they are not going away anytime soon.

One of the problems with berating employees is that it usually does not lead to a good outcome. I don't see employees returning to their desks afterwards with the mindset of improving their performance. Rather, an employee is more likely to be defensive, resentful and may even say something that he or she might regret. It doesn't help bring out the best in the

employees, which should be every manager's goal. Have you ever seen a successful team that had a negative manager? Craving affirmation is a basic and critical human need. A team that has a positive and effective leader is much more successful because the employees feel good about themselves and their jobs. They are motivated to perform better. They stick around. A recent Gallup poll showed that only 22 percent of workers leave a job solely for benefits and pay.

It is unfortunate that in today's economic environment where the majority of employees are just happy to have a job, negative managers can operate with less consequence. In a recent survey conducted by Opinion Research Corporation, 80 percent of respondents said they would consider leaving their current job if presented with other opportunities. One of the major reasons why employees leave companies is leadership or lack thereof. Therefore, I believe that companies that have not addressed the issue of negative bosses will likely lose their top talent as the economy improves. What if you can't wait for the economy to improve? What if you have a negative boss now and you want to know how to deal with her? The following are some steps that you should consider.

1. Keep Your Distance

While it may be difficult given that this person is your boss, you should try as much as you can to limit your contact with him. Refrain from chitchat or discussing anything personal, as it just provides your boss additional material and opportunities for abuse. Consider using email with your boss more frequently so you can communicate more efficiently. It also creates a trail of your interactions and work performance. The hope is that through this trail, your company's management can more easily see who the problem is once they realize a change is needed. However, don't completely retreat to emails because this could lead to misunderstandings. If you sense any misunderstanding involving the email exchange, a phone conversation or face to face to straighten it out will be needed as quickly as possible.

2. Don't Let Your Boss Push Your Hot Buttons

In Dale Carnegie's book *How To Win Friends And Influence People*, he says that the only way to get the best of an argument is to avoid it. Don't let your boss rattle you. Remember that while you can't control your boss's behavior, you can control your response to it. Getting angry or defensive is not likely to help. Try to be polite and courteous at all times. This doesn't mean you shouldn't try to give a shot at honest feedback if pushed, but it may not help as his behavior could be ingrained. However, it is possible that your calm and rational manner could frustrate your boss and send him looking for another victim.

3. Don't Perpetuate Negativity

You don't want to let the ripples of negativity invade your life. I strongly suggest that you refrain from discussing the problems with your boss with your other co-workers, family or friends. You will know that you have crossed this line if you find that your family and friends start asking you, "Is work any better?" or "How is that lousy boss of yours?". If this is the case, you have succeeded in proselytizing for your boss and spreading his message of negativity.

A friend of mine told me about a call he received from his son's teacher. The class was asked to put together a Christmas wish list and his son had "firing my Daddy's boss" on his list. You don't want to let this person have that kind of impact in your life. You also want to demonstrate to your co-workers and your management that you are able to rise above the situation. Don't become the collateral damage from your boss's negativity.

4. Try to Get Known by Others

You put yourself at risk if your negative boss is the only one providing feedback about your performance to others at your company. If you have observed her criticizing your co-workers behind their backs, what is to say that she is not doing the same thing when you are not around? Whether or not she is improperly representing your



performance, it is important for you to be your own advocate in this area. I recommend getting involved with committees within your company so you can showcase your talents to others in your organization. You may also want to get involved with outside organizations such as Toastmasters where you can network and improve your skills. This can keep you grounded and provide the opportunity for career advancement away from your negative boss.

5. Wait Them Out

It is probably naïve to think that management is not aware that your boss's negativity is making him ineffective. Sometimes it is just a matter of time before they decide to terminate or reorganize to address the issue. I remember early in my career when I became aware that a vice president was struggling with the ineffectiveness of a negative boss who was his subordinate. He said that every time this person entered the room, it was like two people leaving. Not only does a negative boss

I recommend getting involved with committees within your company so you can showcase your talents to others in your organization.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 24

not pull his own weight but he also hampers the performance of others.

If you find that you can't wait, you should consider looking for a transfer or another job. Life is too short, and you may come to the realization that this situation is unlikely to lead to any career growth and could also be harmful to your health. Always explain the desire for change as a career development step: *"I like what I am doing but I want to do more."* The truth is that in a more positive environment, you should be able to grow and accomplish more.

I believe that our purpose in life is to create. We build things. We improve things. We make the world a better place. By doing all of these things,

we feel successful and we prosper emotionally (and most times financially as well). A motivational speaker recently told me that they coined a phrase about negative people in Baltimore where he comes from. He said that negative people were like "crabs in a barrel". Just when you make a move to better yourself (get out of the barrel), they grab you with their claws and pull you back in. He warned us that we should be careful who we take up with on this journey.

So if you hear something from your boss that reminds you of the words of Dean Wormer, it is unlikely that the situation can be solved with a toga party like in the movie. You just need to get yourself away from that negative boss. ●

BOOK REVIEW:

How to Win Friends & Influence People by Dale Carnegie

Review by Ben Wadsley

If you enjoy a good greasy burger and are ever in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, I recommend the “Super Cheeseburger” at the Starlite Room. It is one of the best hamburgers in town, and a great place to meet coworkers for lunch. While this is a well known fact among the seasoned actuaries in our group, a newer actuary in our group had never been there. I had overlooked taking her there because it was such a standard and so well known that I assumed that she was already a regular, but in doing so I was leaving out this great treat.

I feel like I was in that position when introduced to the book *How to Win Friends & Influence People* by Dale Carnegie. Originally released in 1936, this book has been read by multiple generations, guiding relationship and networking building skills, but like the woman who didn’t know about the Starlite Room, I hadn’t been introduced to this book until now.

Many of the examples in this book are driven toward sales, but the principles are very much applicable to actuarial communication. I was a bit intimidated when I bought the book, and almost ashamed if someone saw it on my bookshelf, as the title implies it is teaching you to be a sneaky salesman. Quite the contrary, I would rename it something like “How to lead a productive team without them hating you for it”.

Carnegie’s book is filled with so many case studies that demonstrate how to use the techniques described, that I didn’t know which ones to discuss here. Ironically, I was on a plane to Dallas when I was writing this review when the flight attendant used one of the techniques spelled out in the book.

I was hammering out the intro on my new iPad and keyboard when the pilot announced that we were about to land. I knew that I was going to be forced to put my new Apple gear underneath the seat in front of me ... what a quick way to turn a new iPad into a used one. My plan was to momentarily put it

under the seat until the flight attendant went by, and then sneak it back up, making the flight attendant’s job much harder as he would probably catch me and then tell me again to put it away a second time.

To my surprise, instead of ordering me to put away my equipment, he approached me and said “That is the neatest iPad keyboard I’ve seen, show me how it works.” I showed him, and he asked where he could buy one of his own. I quickly went from lamenting his coming orders to enjoying discussing the features of my new keyboard. I knew he wanted me to put away my iPad, but because the way he approached me I was eager to comply and I even left it there after he was gone! Instead of ‘ordering’ me to do something, he instead won me over, got me talking about something that I enjoyed, and subtly hinted at what he wanted accomplished. This mix of several of Carnegie’s techniques got me to do what he wanted, and made me happy to do it!

For any actuary who works with other people (hint: we all do!), this should be required reading, and should be revisited often!

Ben Wadsley, FSA, MAAA, has worked for Transamerica for eight years in asset/liability management, investment, and economic capital. He is currently a risk manager for Employer Solutions and Pensions (ES&P) concentrating on Pensions, Stable Value Wraps, BOLI and Worksite products. He is past chairperson of the Forecasting and Futurism Section, and a council member of the Actuary of the Future Section. ●



Ben Wadsley, FSA, MAAA, is risk manager at Employer Solutions and Pensions.

BOOK REVIEW:

What Got You Here Won't Get You There, by Marshall Goldsmith

Review by Keith Hartsough



Keith Hartsough, FSA, EA, is executive director and DB administration practice leader at JP Morgan; his interests include leading change and managing diverse teams. Keith can be reached at KeithHartsough@gmail.com.

As a reader of Marshall Goldsmith's newsletter (co-published with Patricia Wheeler, www.LeadingNews.org), I am familiar with the quality of his advice. When I saw an ad in an airport for *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, I knew it was going to be a valuable read, and I was not disappointed.

From the title, one could assume that this book is about the need to learn additional skills as we progress in our career, such as when an actuary moves from technical work into client relationship management or management. However, the book is actually focused on the behavioral changes we each need to make to get from where we are (which may be very successful) to there, a place where we can be even more successful. The further we climb in our career, the more our limitations are based on behaviors rather than skills.

In his executive coaching, Marshall Goldsmith has worked with many people who are extremely successful but are held back from further success by one or more behaviors. He includes a list of the 20 habits that can hold us back, such as using sarcasm or making excuses. Successful people are often blinded by their prior successes into thinking they have no need to change.

Consistent across many of the habits is that we behave in this way when we're focused on ourselves. Part of the solution is to focus instead on how others perceive their relationship with us. The book's practical solutions point to concrete ways to change our behavior, such as the need to consider not, "Am I right?" but rather, "Is it worth it?" before deciding how to respond to a colleague. To improve, we need to learn from the past but focus on the future. Obviously, the past cannot be changed. Looking back can be worthy and productive if we use what we learn to identify changes we will make in the future.

For those of us well into our careers, the book is a reminder to take the time to do a realistic self-assessment and see what behaviors we have that might be holding us (or our colleagues) back from contributing even more. For those earlier in their careers, the advice this book contains can help you avoid developing the habits that could limit your future growth. And, as pointed out throughout the book, many of the habits are easier to see in others than ourselves, so it helps if people around us are aware of our efforts to change and help us watch for recurrence of the behaviors. In the book's example of a Johari window of self-awareness, the key is our blind spots – our behaviors that are visible to others but not to us.

This book is recommended for anyone who recognizes they have a need to improve – and especially for anyone who thinks they don't need to. More information about Marshall Goldsmith and his work can be found on his website, www.MarshallGoldsmithLibrary.com. ●

Real World Business Etiquette

By Margaret Resce Milkint

In today's "real-world" of digital communication and open-plan workspaces, business etiquette can be tricky. The business etiquette of today applies not only to the obvious areas—table manners, social graciousness like "please and thank-you," crisp personal image, a strong handshake and eye contact—but to a broad range of other fields including email, social media and even gadget-use.

New technologies are forcing exciting changes in the way we work and communicate, but the case for proper business etiquette is paramount. Among all these new etiquette rules, your guiding principle is to treat people with consideration and respect. The Golden Rule—treat others how you want to be treated—is as relevant today as when you first learned it. Keep that classic adage in mind to ensure you never stray far from the path of proper business etiquette and common sense.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Your personal image is essentially your own unique brand. The way you present yourself makes a statement to the world about your confidence, attitude and accomplishments. First impressions are almost impossible to reverse, making them extremely important. Always introduce yourself with a confident handshake. A firm handshake—made with direct eye contact—sets the stage for a positive encounter.

Networking can happen anytime and anywhere, so you need to always look the part of the professional. Establish a personal grooming routine and stick to it. Make sure your clothes are always clean and freshly pressed. Dressing appropriately is of the utmost importance. Professional attire, rather than business casual attire, should be worn for important meetings, networking events, conferences and interviews. Depending on your company culture, business casual attire is often appropriate for regular work days. When you dress in the morning, think about the possibility of a spontaneous lunch invite or meeting. You may want to consider keeping a "goes with anything" suit jacket or sport coat in the office for any impromptu meetings.

Always carry business cards and consider investing in a business card case to keep your cards crisp and clean. After any meeting or networking event, follow up to keep the conversation going. While the medium (email or postal mail) is up to you, consider that the note card is becoming less common and the extra effort of a well-written note can make a big impact.

TABLE MANNERS

Even in today's era of informality, good table manners are an essential element of business etiquette. Whether you're trying to impress your boss or a prospective employer has invited you to lunch, your table manners have never been under greater scrutiny. The rules of proper dining etiquette can be very involved, but these imperative basics will give you the foundation for success.

- If getting up from the table during the meal, place your napkin on your chair, rather than on the table.
- Always pass to the right.
- Never separate the salt and pepper shakers. They should pass as a pair.
- Don't chew with your mouth open or speak with food in your mouth.
- Use the utensils from the outside in.
- When you finish eating, place your knife and fork across your plate pointing to 11 o'clock.
- Don't order messy foods that are difficult to eat.
- Keep your elbows off the table while eating.

If you are hosting the meal, put some thought into choosing the restaurant. Aim for something nice, but not overly expensive. Choose a restaurant you know, if possible. You may even want to call ahead and request a quiet table away from the kitchen or host stand. Inform the host upon arrival that you will be taking care of the bill.

For any business function, but especially for small dining meetings, it's helpful to come prepared with



Margaret Resce Milkint is managing partner of the Jacobson Group, the nation's leading provider of talent to the insurance industry. She can be reached at (800) 466-1578 or mmilkint@jacobsononline.com.

First impressions are almost impossible to reverse, making them extremely important.

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a few casual, non-business conversation topics in mind. This will help avoid any awkward silences. Also, remember to always be courteous to wait staff; your fellow diners will see it as a reflection of your graciousness, business poise and good manners.

IN-OFFICE ETIQUETTE

With a constant barrage of distractions from emails, phone calls and colleagues dropping by, it can sometimes be difficult to hunker down and actually get some work accomplished. When you need a few minutes with a coworker to brainstorm or discuss a project, consider calling or emailing in advance to ask if you can meet at an appointed time. This gives your coworker some advance warning, so he/she is not expected to drop everything and shift focus on a whim.

Give your coworkers and colleagues the benefit of life's common courtesies. Always arrive on time and prepared for meetings. Clean up after yourself in the company kitchen and never help yourself to any goodies stored in the office refrigerator without first confirming that they are meant to be shared.

ELECTRONIC ETIQUETTE

In today's hyper-connected business world, it's crucial that you maintain a high level of professional etiquette. While you may not have considered it before, the way you conduct yourself online and even the way you use your electronic gadgets has a real impact on your personal image. Your "digital footprint" is lasting and is a critical piece of your personal brand.

If you're using social media sites for professional ventures, always maintain a professional edge. Your profile is the equivalent of your résumé, your appearance or your elevator pitch and should be crafted with care. Highlight your skills and talents to further your brand and demonstrate your value to fellow networkers, recruiters and potential employers. And while you might look great in your favorite shot from last month's vacation, good business etiquette calls for a distinguished headshot. All of our gadgets—iPhones, BlackBerrys and iPods—call for their own proper etiquette rules. We're all tempted to check and respond to emails the instant we receive them. However, consider how these actions come across in a meeting or during a conversation with a coworker. It is rude and disruptive, and your message portrays disinterest. Always turn off your phone or at least switch it to silent mode before any meeting or event. In that same vein, refrain from popping in your headphones and tuning out the moment you cross the office threshold at the day's end. Elevators and hallways are prime spots for friendly, positive interactions with colleagues. Save the tunes for the commute and use those little opportunities effectively.

Digital communication is permanent and public! Once you have posted a tweet, texted or sent an email, there is no taking it back. So, proofread, proofread, proofread! One of the easiest ways to look sloppy and unprofessional is to distribute information with grammatical and spelling errors. Along those same lines, keep your emails straightforward and free of sarcasm. It is difficult to convey tone via email, and

without tone your message can have dual meanings. While emoticons might seem like an easy way to lighten the tone of your email, they come across as immature and are best saved for your personal communications. Remember to think twice before sending a heated email. If you are tempted to fire off an angry or emotional message, compose it in a word document first so you don't accidentally hit send before you've really thought things through.

In essence, business etiquette is a key differentiator and thus a means of maximizing your business potential. Although we are living and working in

an increasingly informal environment, decency, respect and good manners are still important. So, do what you say you're going to do, live up to your promises, and always treat people with respect. Follow these guidelines to distinguish yourself and to raise the bar on what business success means today. ●

Yes, You Can! Yes, You Will!

Here's How

by Dr. Doreen Stern



Dr. Doreen Stern is a motivational speaker, writer and success coach in Hartford, Conn. She is currently working on a book titled, *Change Your Life in 17 Minutes!* She can be reached at Docktor@DoreenStern.com, or at (860) 293-1619.

“Everything depends on who you know,” my 20-year-old niece insisted last summer, as she and I walked to the gym.

“I don’t think so,” I retorted, realizing that what she said sounded like a cop-out.

“Sure, networking is important,” I agreed, recalling research I’d read in the book, *The Luck Factor*. Dr. Richard Wiseman found that people who consider themselves lucky regularly *create, notice and act upon chance opportunities*. You can see them chatting with the person in front of them in line at the grocery store. Or conversing with the guy exercising next to them at the gym. As a result, folks who consider themselves lucky connect with more people than do those who stand at the bus stop staring down at the sidewalk.

We become luckier, Wiseman points out, when we act on chance encounters.

“Yet there’s got to be more,” I told myself, as my niece and I sauntered forward. Because although I’m gregarious and strike up conversations most places I go, I’d been wanting to finish a book for longer than I cared to admit, yet still felt stuck in concrete.

As we walked along, I thought of Kathryn Stockton, author of the best-selling book, *The Help*, upon which the Oscar-nominated movie is based. Stockton’s success wasn’t based on knowing *anyone*. On the contrary, she wrote to and was rejected by 60 agents before one lauded her work.

After each rejection, Stockton undertook a painstaking revision of what she had penned. She was so determined that a nurse had to pull her manuscript out of her hands as she was delivering her first child. “Put that away; this is no time for it,” the nurse had chided her.

“Was persistence the magic talisman?” I wondered.

Six weeks later, information related to what *really* matters appeared before me. That’s when I had the

good fortune of participating in a conference call with the preeminent social psychologist, Dr. Roy Baumeister. His new book *Willpower*, had just been released to glowing reviews.

“There are two factors associated with positive life outcomes,” Baumeister offered, in a lay-back voice: “intelligence and self-control.”

“Intelligence is largely a fixed attribute,” he pointed out. “It’s genetically endowed.”

Baumeister’s words made me think of Steve Jobs, the brilliant co-founder of Apple Computer. His biological father, a Syrian-born man new to the United States, was awarded a Ph.D. in political science by the University of Wisconsin, at the age of 23. Although Jobs never met his natural father, or even graduated from college himself, it seemed like he had inherited the man’s brains.

While intelligence is fixed, you can improve your self-control any day of your life, continued Baumeister. Just like lifting weights at the gym, you can strengthen your will-power. Indeed, improving will is the surest way to a better life: your focus, job performance, relationships, and life satisfaction will skyrocket.

Wow! This was a book I wanted to read.

“Self control: what exactly is it?” I wondered, as I headed to Barnes and Noble.

This is what I learned: Self-control is the capacity to change ourselves. To set a goal and achieve it. A goal that’s important to *you*.

Does your goal have to be huge and awe-inspiring? Record-setting like crossing the ocean in a rowboat, as 22-year-old Katie Spatz did two years ago, when she rowed solo from Africa to South America? Or winning the presidential primary?

Nope. The *very* best way to build self-control is to set a tiny, achievable goal and meet it. You can decide to make your bed every day. Or to stand up

straight. Maybe to wash your dishes immediately after eating. Perhaps to take a 15-minute walk every other day.

And then to reward yourself for your improvement, making you feel pleased and proud.

“This message is for you,” I heard the universe saying. It was Wednesday, Sept. 28th, 2011, the day I decided to finish things.

“I want to complete a book,” I told myself, *“so I’m going to finish one thing each day. That’ll give me practice completing projects, so finishing my book will seem like a natural progression.”*

On that sunny September day, a pair of pants and a sweater I’d been meaning to take to the dry cleaners were piled next to my front door. *“Today’s the day,”* I said out loud. I also stripped my bed, removing the down comforter I’d been telling myself I’d take to the laundromat to wash and dry. I pushed all the items into a wicker basket and scooted out the door.

When I returned, I cheerfully remade my bed, without lamenting how long it was taking. Then I decided to acknowledge my success.

I strode into my den and retrieved a blue plastic clipboard from the closet, placing a sheet of computer paper under the clasp. Then I wrote the word, COMPLETED, across the top of the page, underlining the title. I drew a line down the left hand side of the page, printing “Day 1, Wednesday 9/28” in the margin. On the right hand side of the page, I wrote my first three accomplishments:

1. Took my pants and sweater to the cleaners
2. Patiently washed sheets, down comforter and mattress cover at the laundromat
3. Gratefully remade my bed (took a half hour)

Since that September day, I have 148 days of completions, the first 90 of them noted on white sheets of computer paper. Then on Dec. 27^h, I



bought a special spiral notebook in which to record them.

I’m delighted to tell you that since I started my “Finishing Things Campaign,” I’ve cleaned every shelf, drawer and cabinet in my condo, 77 in all. You know that messy kitchen drawer most of us have? Mine’s well-organized now. The hardware drawer, too. Also my desk drawers, so it’s a delight to pull one open and find exactly what I’m looking for. In addition, I’ve used the five skeins of Italian yarn I bought two years ago to knit scarves for special people in my life. Plus, my tax information is ready to be dropped off at my accountant’s office tomorrow, six weeks before the government’s due date.

In addition, I’ve begun jogging again after a 20-year hiatus. I’m up to 10 miles a week, and intend to run the Hartford Half-Marathon in October. Next month, I plan to run a 5K race, followed by a

I’m delighted to tell you that since I started my “Finishing Things Campaign,” I’ve cleaned every shelf, drawer and cabinet in my condo, 77 in all.

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10K two months later, and then the half-marathon four months after that. I'm taking small steps, not worrying about speed right now; for instance, the time on one of my miles this morning was a sluggish 14 minutes. "Doesn't matter," I told my running buddy. "All that matters is we're out here."

Lest I paint an overly optimistic picture, there have been times I've stumbled; for example, a few months ago I missed a *Stepping Stone* due date for the first time in three years. Also, nagging piles of

newspapers still litter my den. Nor have I made much progress on my book – YET. Nowadays, I have considerable faith that I *will* complete it, just like I've cleaned out each messy cabinet and closet before it.

I invite you to consider what tiny goal you'll set today, so small that you can't fail, yet so important (to you) that you'll feel pleased and proud when you achieve it. ●

Have you used the Competency Framework Self-Assessment Tool?

We want to know what you think.

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Upcoming M&PD Sessions

By Olga Jacobs

MPD has been working all winter long preparing leadership and business skill professional development sessions. If you get to any SOA meeting this year, be sure to take advantage of a personal growth opportunity by attending one of our sessions.

Here's what's coming up at the SOA's spring meetings. I'd love to receive your feedback on any you attend, and suggestions for other interesting programs.

LIFE AND ANNUITY SYMPOSIUM, MAY 21-22, 2012 – LOS ANGELES, CA

Becoming a Great Negotiator

- Have you ever found it difficult to get what you want?
- Are you sure you're making your requests in the most effective way?

Negotiation is the art of achieving more with others than you otherwise think you should. In this session, we will discuss ways you can negotiate better, both in your professional and personal life. At the conclusion of the session, participants will be able to more confidently communicate their desires and requests to their co-workers, family and friends.

Communicating with Your Regulator

- Have you ever found it difficult to communicate your intentions to your regulator?
- Have you found yourself and your company unable to achieve an understanding with the men and women of our government?

In this session, we will shift our focus to the other side of this discussion and discuss what regulators ideally expect and how an actuary can speak to these expectations in light of professionalism requirements. At the conclusion of the session, participants will be able to more confidently submit

requests and engage regulators in discussions around their products.

HEALTH MEETING, JUNE 13-15, 2012 - NEW ORLEANS, LA

Leadership Book Review

- Of the many of leadership books available, which ones have been impactful to your peers?
- In this session, actuaries will review several leadership books that have added value to their lives and share relevant lessons with the audience.

Improving Yourself and Your Team through Strengths

Made popular by Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton's book, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, discovering and leveraging people's strengths has become a widespread technique for improving individual and team performance and engagement. In this session, Shari Rodriguez, Gallup Strengths Coach, will discuss why it is important for you to know your strengths – and why understanding the strengths of those you lead is essential to maximizing your leadership.

Information Visualization: Using Charts in Effective Presentations

A common challenge for actuaries is how to communicate large amounts of information to audiences with limited time and attention. We also rarely have time ourselves to create data displays that are more complicated than what comes as default in our spreadsheet package. In this session we will help you go beyond the chart wizard to find more effective ways to present information. ●

JUNE 13-15, 2012

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HEALTH MEETING



Mark your calendar and plan to attend the 2012 Health Meeting. We're heading to the Big Easy—and planning more topical sessions to provide you with the latest updates on important health issues. Expect top-notch speakers and numerous of networking events—and the opportunity to earn lots of CPD credit. There'll be plenty to see and do in New Orleans while you're there: Chill out in a blues or jazz club; check out the cities well-known architecture; take a riverboat tour or carriage ride; or—head to the outskirts to see sprawling plantations and the incredible wildlife.

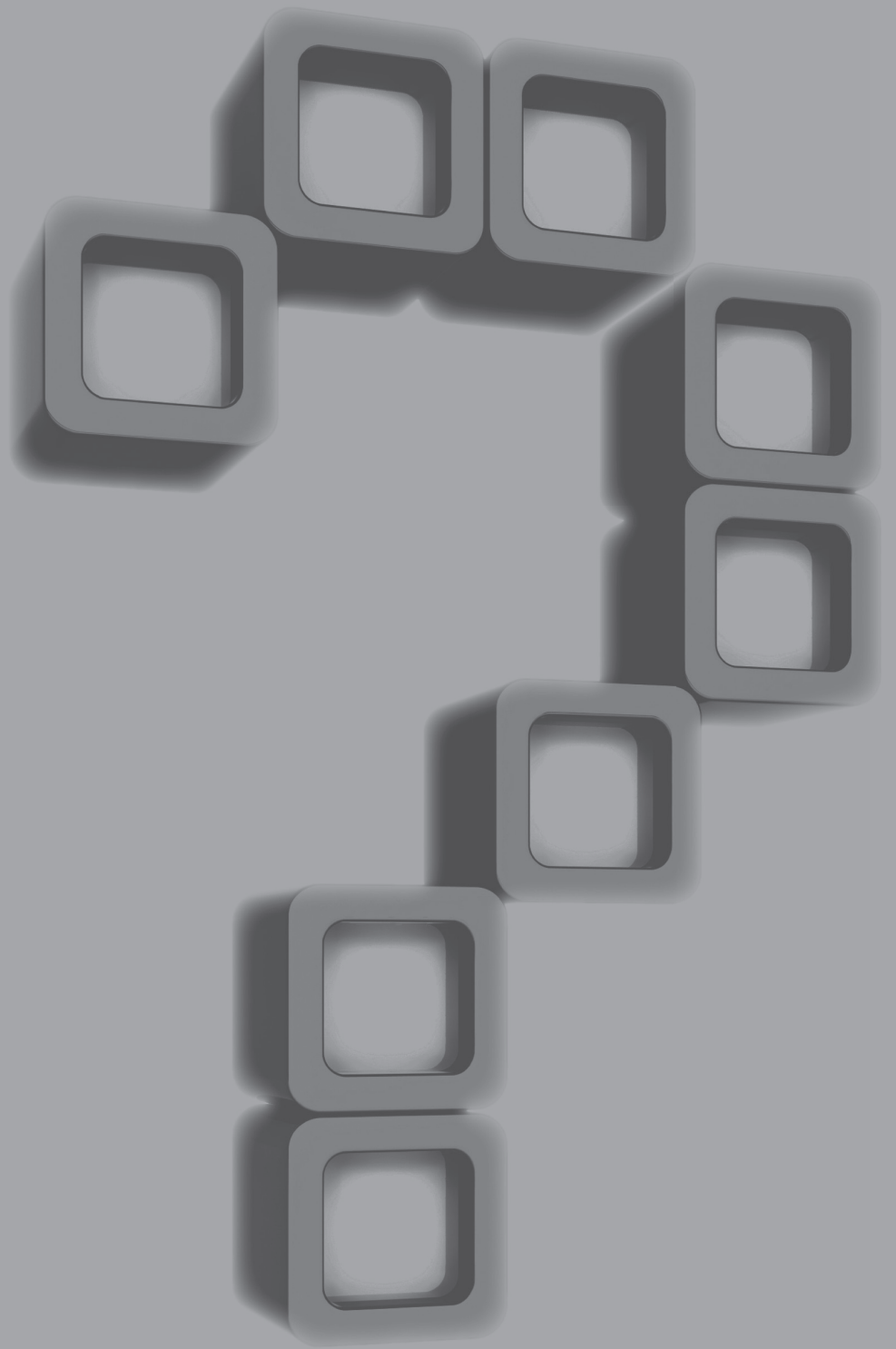
Here's what last year's attendees had to say:

"Thought provoking and extremely worthwhile." "Gained great industry insight!"

"Excellent content and thoughtful delivery." "Ample opportunities to earn professionalism credit."

"Sessions were great! Loved the smaller groups and wide range of topics!"

<http://HealthMeeting.soa.org>.



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