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From the Editor

Rekindling Your Passion

by David C. Miller



David C. Miller, FSA, MSCC, is a professional business coach who works with actuaries, consultants and sales professionals who are struggling to attract enough clients. He conducts seminars and one-on-one coaching in business development, influence, leadership and career enhancement.

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On a scale of one to 10 (with 10 being the highest), how would you rank your level of passion for what you do? My sense is that for many actuaries, this number would be a five or lower. For most, it's not a job that causes them to jump out of bed and rush to work each morning. This impression first hit me like a ton of bricks over a decade ago, while attending an SOA meeting. At the general session, the speaker asked the audience (numbering easily over 1,000) to raise their hands if they wanted their children to follow in their footsteps. Probably less than 20 people raised their hands! What a statement as to how many actuaries view their careers.

As a business and life coach, it's not uncommon for me to be working with professionals who have lost their passion for their career or practice. At one time, usually when they begin their venture (or is it "adventure"?), they were full of passion, excitement and creativity. Now their professional life has become routine and mundane. They've lost their heart for what they do.

Others have never known passion when it comes to their profession. The idea of simultaneously "doing what you love" and "making a living" is foreign to them. It's unobtainable.

Many have bought into the myth that you can't support your life doing what you love. So they resign themselves to earning a living and looking for adventure outside the workplace. They believe that the price they pay for their success is to let go of their passion. This usually occurs over a span of years and comes on in a subtle manner. It's not that you feel miserable about what you do—no, it's a respectable job and you feel good because you're providing for your family. On the other hand, it's not something you're jumping up and down about. So what's the answer?

The remedy for lost passion for your profession comes down to your vision of what you're about and who you're going to be in this world. I tell my clients that "the size of your passion is limited to be the size of your vision." Your passion is lacking because your vision is small.

Is your career "a job that pays the bills" or is it a "mission (or calling)"? A large vision is one that inspires us. What is it that inspires us? The answer: being part of something that's bigger than ourselves. Deep down we all want to play a bigger game. That's what creating a huge vision all is about.

This is a vast topic to explore, but as a starting point here are some questions to help you develop inspiration:

- What are the big problems that you really care about in your organization?
- What are the big sources of stress, strain or struggle?
- How does this impact you personally?
- How can you be an agent of change in this situation?
- Who do you want to be in this life? How can you unleash the full expression of who you are into your workplace?

Here's the principle: when you see a need and it becomes a cause, your level of passion will rise. Hint: You know you've really found it if it's somewhat scary to you!

It's interesting that just about every article submitted in this issue follows similar themes: finding your passion, enhancing your image, stretching to the next level, etc. This makes me believe that there is a growing awareness and desire for actuaries to step up and make a bigger impact in their organizations and consulting practices.

As you read the articles in this issue, my hope is that it stirs in you the desire to seek a bigger vision for your career and your life! □



The "It" Actuary

by Jennifer L. Gillespie

As one of our key areas of focus this year, the Management and Personal Development Section Council has been working with the staff of the Society of Actuaries on the image campaign. As was mentioned in the "Turn Risk Into Opportunity" video, we each own a little piece of the image. To some circle of people, whether within my department, my division or my company, I = ACTUARY. Within these circles it is realistic for me to tackle my image and hence the image of actuaries.

With image on my mind recently, I read an article written by Paula Froelich, author of the book *It! Nine Secrets of the Rich and Famous That'll Take You to the Top* and a columnist for the New York Post's gossip page. She comments that there is a lot of room outside the tabloids to be "It." This caused me to think about what it might mean to be an "It" actuary. I've taken the liberty of considering what Paula's six rules might mean for actuaries.

Rule #1: Find whatever it is you're good at, and do it.

None of us is equally good at all parts of our job. If we could each build a job around the parts we're best at, think how successful we could be! As we imagine what that job might look like, we can't limit the possibilities to jobs as they exist today. There may be chances to rearrange roles and responsibilities in the future. Have a conversation with the boss about what this ideal job would look like. If we both know what we really want and why, we improve our odds of getting it.

Rule #2: Don't try to fake a talent you don't have.

While building a future around strengths, we need to avoid our weaknesses. There is usually an opportunity to ask for help or to build a partnership with a colleague if we're willing to admit that the outcome of a project will be better for it.

Rule #3: Ask friends what you're good at.

If we can get honest input from friends at work, we may be able to identify what we do better than anybody else. There is a good chance that doing what each of us does better than anybody else is also doing something that makes us very happy.

Rule #4: Plan on success.

As actuarial students, it is easy to get lulled in to thinking we have a plan for our success. It seems to be all about passing exams. However, we also need to plan for success beside and beyond exams. Projects and meetings are opportunities to learn and to shine. There could also be the chance to volunteer for a project that helps make contacts in a different area of the company where we might wish to work some day.

Rule #5: Learn to attract the spotlight.

This is probably the scariest rule for many actuaries. It doesn't have to mean getting up in front and doing stand-up comedy. It does mean speaking up strongly and confidently if we have ideas to contribute. This also means being aware of physical presence – attire, posture and eye contact!

Rule #6: Be nice to waiters.

None of us can get all of our work done without assistance from others. They help on a project, provide information or give us honest feedback. It is important that when we interact with people they feel respected and not belittled. Consider that we are building potential "fan clubs."

The Society of Actuaries will be prompting each of us to work on our image and to work on the image of actuaries within our companies. Please watch for the assistance that will come in the form of a "tool kit," filled with hints and challenges. □



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While building a future around strengths, we need to avoid our weaknesses.

Call for Actuarial Pioneers

by James C. Brooks

Think of a pioneer as “someone who opens up new areas of thought, research or development, or one who ventures into unknown or unclaimed territory” (Webster’s Dictionary).

The SOA’s current image campaign is based on the belief that the actuarial skill set has value that extends beyond technical analysis, into other operational and strategic roles. We know there are actuaries demonstrating this expanded value today, thereby modeling the dynamic and relevant image of the profession we are seeking to promote.

Specifically, actuarial pioneers fall into one of two categories:

OUTSIDE the traditional sectors of insurance companies, reinsurance companies and consulting firms applying their actuarial skill set to new, nontraditional roles such as chief risk officers, financial planners, entrepreneurs and personal actuaries.

INSIDE the traditional sectors, applying their actuarial skill set in nontraditional ways to become chief marketing officers, chief risk officers, CEOs, etc. Pioneers who are identified will inspire the profession, create practical pathways for career development and potentially serve as spokespersons to business leaders. They will be profiled through articles, Web sites and media releases.

The anticipated time commitment for a pioneer is small. Minimally, it will involve communicating some basic information to SOA staff, and at a maximum involve a few interviews for articles or media events.

Names and contact information are to be submitted via e-mail to pioneers@soa.org. Individuals are free to nominate themselves or recommend others. SOA marketing staff will follow up on each nomination. □



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ACTUARIAL  PIONEERS

Have You Found Your Niche?

by John West Hadley

My son is a junior in high school, and we have begun the exhausting process of considering his options for college. During a recent visit to Boston College, I was struck by the similarity of a statement by the admissions officer to something I often tell clients: "We believe strongly that students need to first explore what they are really good at, and what they are passionate about, then consider whether the world needs that."

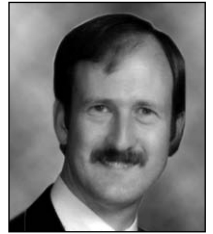
I firmly believe that the greatest success comes from first aligning what you are best at with what you love to do. That is where you are going to bring true passion to your career, where you can really set yourself apart from others. Only after you have determined where those intersect, should you concentrate on figuring out how to achieve your life goals within that area. My experience is that with a little creative thinking you can always figure out a way to satisfy your life goals if the first two criteria are met. (Sometimes this is partially through the realization that doing something you are passionate about is so important that some of what you previously might have assumed were your life goals just melt away from your consciousness.)

For example, many would say that I am now on my third career. I started out as an actuary, and fully enjoyed what I did for that "first" career, which lasted 20 years. Over the years, I found that I loved recruiting, interviewing, training and giving presentations. I also always found myself drawn to the systems elements of my work, taking personal responsibility for an increasing variety of systems-related projects. I was no longer particularly drawn to one of the natural aspirations for many younger actuaries—to be chief actuary of the company. (I actually had that experience in my last corporate job, which served to confirm what I had long known.)

My next move was to seek a systems-related role that would take advantage of my actuarial background. I had the advantage of an executive outplacement program to aid me in that transition. As I went out talking to people about my new passion, I came across selected positions that fit very well my passions, skills AND compensation goals. Ultimately, this led to a successful consulting practice that was much more systems-related than actuarially based, career number two.

As it turns out, my exploration with my career counselor also led me to my current practice, as I found that what they were teaching came quite naturally to me, and I began helping some of the other people there with their own transitions. I wasn't yet ready to make it my new career, but it began germinating in my mind. During the next five years, I continued to help selected people with their career searches as a sideline to my consulting practice, essentially as a hobby. And although I really enjoyed my systems consulting work, more and more I found career search counseling calling to me, and a new passion required me to embark on my third career.

This didn't mean simply jumping into the unknown with total disregard of my life goals, but moving forward aggressively with goals in mind, and checkpoints as to where I needed to be to have confidence that it would support our needs (and ultimately, our wants). Naturally, that has meant continually examining what I am doing, and how I am doing it, being open to change and opportunity. And it has led to expansion of what I originally saw as my core competency and practice as I saw opportunities to apply my skills in new, but related, ways. Thus I grew beyond career-search counseling into the broader arena of teaching people how to be more effective in their chosen careers, and



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To subscribe to his free Career Tips newsletter, visit his Web site at: www.JHAcareers.com.

**My experience is
that with a little
creative thinking you
can always figure
out a way to satisfy
your life goals...**

even into business coaching. (I was very pleased the first time I began helping a client with business issues and was told that I really “think out of the box,” something I’m not sure I was often accused of during my 20 years as an actuary!) While career search is still a cornerstone of my practice, the expanded areas have allowed me to serve clients even more effectively, as they shift focus between whether they want a corporate role or their own business, or even simply getting ready for the next move sometime down the road.

This also points to another key: Focus! I often observe people sabotaging their career searches by lack of sufficient focus. They waste a lot of time and energy going after pretty much anything that moves, which makes them less impressive to hiring managers and draws out their search dramatically. The same is true in exploring new opportunities. Had I started out deciding to be a career-search counselor, a career-enhancement counselor and a business coach, I would have been struggling for a long time, and probably would have folded up my tent and gone back to a corporate role after a few months. Sure, I would have managed to get some clients in each area over time, but it would have been a lot harder to convince people that I had the expertise to help them, and it would have taken a lot longer to build the level of my skills in any one area, such as happens naturally through concentrated attention and focus.

I meet people all the time who have reached a point in their careers where they no longer are very excited by what they do. They continue in their jobs because it’s what they have always been told they are good at, because it supports their family’s lifestyle, because they don’t know what else to do! Those are terrible reasons to keep doing something you aren’t passionate about. Take stock, think out of the box, and take action to incorporate what you love in what you do, even if it’s on a volunteer basis! Use that to explore new avenues more thoroughly, and you will begin to see the possibilities, as I did with my current practice.

I think back to a conversation I had last year with an actuary who had been working part

time for a few years as her children were growing up. She told me confidently that by year-end she wanted to be back on a full-time basis in a traditional, financial actuarial role! As we explored this further, suddenly it came out that her long-term passion was to work in human resources. I asked her how going back to a traditional, financial actuarial role would help her in any way achieve her passion. She stopped short, and then we began to brainstorm on ways she could explore that.

My advice is to stop and think periodically about what you really want from life, from your career. It may seem like a risk to step beyond your comfort zone, but what “risk” are you taking by continuing to follow a path you don’t love?

We often worry about providing our children “the best” of everything. But where in that equation is providing them the best of you? What message are you sending to your children about their futures if you regularly come home from the office feeling drained, showing little enthusiasm for what you do? And how much energy do you then have left to invest in family, hobbies and your true passions? With risk comes rewards, and even if you ultimately need to compromise on more traditional measures of success like income level, size of house, age of car, etc., what is “happiness” worth to you? □



Turn Your Name into Your Brand

by Melanie J. Davis

Donald Trump may not be charming when he aggressively proclaims his own greatness, but he makes it impossible to forget him. Indeed, when most of us hear his name, we probably think of one of his commercial properties because, simply put, Trump has brand recognition.

The name Trump is linked with real estate development just as Kleenex is linked with facial tissue. Being a brand is beneficial in business because it means people remember your name and what you're selling—even if what you're selling is your expertise rather than a product.

The American Marketing Association defines a brand as “a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers.” Brand recognition is the Holy Grail of marketing. When your name is recognized, people have remembered you for your expertise, your client service, your integrity; in short, they remember you for having something they need and respect.

In his book, *The Revenge of Brand X*, Rob Frankel wrote: “Branding is not about getting your prospects to choose you over the competition. It's about getting your prospects to see you as the only solution to their problem.”

Creating your own brand takes some finesse because most people can't successfully emulate Trump's larger-than-life nature. In trying, they turn off the very clients and contacts they want to impress. Their personalities become increasingly bloated with each boast until they are as attractive as puffed up, poisonous fugu fish.

The challenge then, is to be memorable without being egotistical. People do business with professionals with whom they are familiar and in whom they have confidence: a weak Trump imitation won't accomplish either goal. The solution is to communicate effectively and often,

so that when people hear or see your name, they are reminded of your strengths, your professionalism and your ability to solve their problems. In other words, you need to interact with them successfully until your name becomes a highly respected brand.

The most important aspect of branding is quality: yours. If you aren't at the top of your professional game, invest in improving your performance before you invest in marketing. Then, focus on efforts that will enable you to personally interact with your clients and potential clients, such as:

- Provide excellent customer service – Without it, you'll undo all the other efforts you put into marketing. Give clients more than they expect, including your undivided attention during consultations and phone calls.
- Follow-up – A few days after a meeting or consultation, call your client to see if you can answer any questions that may have arisen. Clients will remember the extra effort you've made.
- Keep clients warm – If you haven't spoken to a client in a while, reach out. The main reason people seek new vendors is because they feel ignored. Make them feel appreciated, and they'll repay you.
- Network – Getting to know people one-on-one is the key to building relationships, and the people with whom you have good relationships will create a positive buzz about you.
- Share your expertise – Public speaking enhances your credibility. Start by talking to a small group of fellow professionals. As you get more comfortable, speak to larger groups of people. Enhance your brand by creating useful handouts or manuals with

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...Getting to know
people one-on-one
is the key to building
relationships...



So What Do You Do?

by Mark E. Green

Editor's Note: No accountants, labor attorneys or morticians were harmed in the writing of this article.

Most of us aren't very effective at describing what we do for a living. This is particularly problematic if your professional responsibilities include selling, (note to business owners and consultants: this includes you). To be fair, part of the problem is in the question we're usually answering—"What do you do?" but it's also in how we choose to answer it.

Humans have a need for order that drives us to classify the world around us. We have "good" friends, we know doctors, your next-door neighbor is a firefighter, your father is a former marine—you get the picture. In fact, we've been conditioned to classify people and we do it through some basic questions. "Where do you live?" "Where did you go to

school?" And, of course, the question of the moment here is—"So what do you do?" We believe that the answers to these questions tell us more than meets the eye—information about social status, economic status, points of view and more. What we're really asking for is help; help making sure that we classify the other person correctly.

The flip side of this is that we've been conditioned to help others classify us, so we can be assured that we wind up in the right bin in their minds. This is why we so readily answer these types of questions with the expected, brief instant-messenger-type responses. "I live on the West Side." "I attended Notre Dame." "I am an actuary."

Somewhat nefariously, and just as we were conditioned, we do our best to pass more of the same to the next generation. For example,

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your name and contact information prominently displayed.

Other marketing communications tools—newsletters, Web sites, advertising and public relations—are also very important and should be part of a carefully crafted marketing plan.

You may never achieve brand recognition akin to Donald Trump's, but then again, his level of fame is not necessarily your goal.

Concentrate on building your professional quality and brand, and you'll reap more realistic, but equally impressive, rewards. □



Coaching for Actuaries

by Gerry Fryer

Editor's Note: This article previously appeared, in a somewhat modified form, in the April 2005 issue of the Canadian Institute of Actuaries Bulletin.

This article is about coaching. I will outline how being coached can improve the performance of actuaries, deepen our learning capabilities and improve our quality of life.

The actuarial profession as a whole has recognized gaps in the skill sets of its members. The Management and Personal Development Section of the Society of Actuaries has been assigned the task of helping actuaries develop business-savvy skills such as focusing on the big picture, being proactive, improving their communication skills, and so on. Other actuarial organizations worldwide subscribe to the need to have their members' skills expand beyond just technical ones.

When actuaries should consider coaching

The endorsements above take us into the world of seminars, workshops and publications. But there are circumstances when you, as an actuary, might entertain the possibility of using a coach. Let us examine a few classic examples:

1. You have a strong sense that you are not utilizing your full potential or inner resources in your current role or position.
2. You have just become a Fellow and want to survey the career landscape before moving on to establish new goals.
3. You are, or are about to be, in career transition and want to review your options with an independent source.
4. You are taking on a new role and want to achieve a successful transition.
5. The degree of change and uncertainty in the workplace has created an unacceptable degree of personal and career unrest for you, and you want a safe place to talk out the situation and re-establish your goals.
6. As an actuary in a leadership role, you require a person to act as a confidential sounding board for strategic thinking and decision-making.
7. You have become dissatisfied with the fit between your work and the rest of your life, and want to work on ways to bring the situation in line with your emerging vision of a balanced lifestyle.
8. You are in a relatively small organization and the in-house human resources support is not adequate.
9. You are about to start an exciting new venture that involves many aspects with which you are not familiar.
10. You are approaching retirement and beginning to explore the prospect of large changes in how you spend your time.

What Is Coaching and What Are Its Benefits?

The author of *The Mindful Coach*, Douglas Silsbee, defines coaching broadly yet concisely as: "that part of a relationship in which one person is primarily dedicated to serving the



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Coaching plays a critical role in helping individuals and organizations create, adapt to and accept change as a challenge rather than as an obstacle.

long-term development of effectiveness and self-generation of another.” He captures parent-child coaching, when it occurs in this definition, as well as coaching as part of a supervisory relationship in the workplace.

Silsbee’s words focus us on the idea of building the long-term capacities of the person being coached. The “development of effectiveness” incorporates the notions of competency and success for the client, by building on what was already there. “Self-generation” means that the client will develop and ultimately will take personal responsibility for their own learning, that is, they will outgrow the need for their coach.

According to the authors of *The Coaching at Work Toolkit*, Zeus and Skiffington, “Change is at the heart of coaching. Coaching plays a critical role in helping individuals and organizations ‘create, adapt to and accept change as a challenge rather than an obstacle.’

Professional coaching is a partnership between a qualified coach and an individual or team to support the attainment of extraordinary results. Through the process of coaching, individuals focus on the skills and actions needed to successfully produce their personally relevant results. Coaching concentrates on where individuals are now and what they are willing to do to achieve their objectives.

During a typical coaching session, the individual or team chooses the focus of the conversation. The coach listens intently and contributes observations and stimulating questions, as well as concepts and principles that can assist in identifying possible actions. Coaching accelerates an individual’s progress by providing greater focus and awareness of possibilities, which often leads to more effective choices.

Actuaries who engage in a coaching relationship might expect to benefit from:

- Fresh perspectives on personal challenges and opportunities,
- Enhanced thinking and decision making skills,
- Better interpersonal effectiveness,
- Increased confidence in carrying out their chosen work and life roles,
- A commitment to enhancing their personal effectiveness—they can also expect to see appreciable results in these areas:
 - 1) Productivity,
 - 2) Personal satisfaction with life and work, and
 - 3) The achievement of personally relevant goals.

Coaching Compared to Similar Fields

We can gain further understanding about the nature of coaching by comparing it to related disciplines such as:

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Thinking About Buying European Goods?

by Alan J. Sheptin

In T.R. Reid's book, *The United States of Europe: the New Superpower and the End of American Supremacy*, we learn more about the European Union (EU), a 25-nation economic and political powerhouse consisting of 450 million middle-class, educated consumers, and its effect on how America and the world at large will have to conduct business and military practices in the future.

But right now, think about a typical day in your life. You start your morning with fluffy eggs, crunchy toast, and cold milk purchased from the local Stop and Shop. After your morning shower, you put on your best Brooks Brothers ensemble, get into your Chrysler LeBaron, and head off to the office, stopping for gas at the local Shell station. Once you arrive at work, you slowly imbibe your Nescafe followed by a Red Bull chaser, and then you read the blast e-mail that proudly announces that your 401(k) is now being managed by Equitable.

"I'm such a patriot, I only buy American," you proudly say to yourself.

Did you really buy American today? Well, not exactly: Stop and Shop, a major northeastern supermarket chain, is owned by Royal Ahold, a Dutch grocer. Brooks Brothers was owned by Marks & Spencer, but has been acquired by Retail Brand Alliance, an Italian retailer that also owns Sunglass Hut and Watch Station. Chrysler is part of DaimlerChrysler, the German company that owns Mercedes-Benz, Shell Oil is Dutch, and Equitable is a subsidiary

of AXA, a French insurance holding group. And, by the way, Nescafe is owned by Nestle, a Swiss confectioner and Red Bull, that omnipresent beverage of choice of Generation X, is German-owned by Red Bull GmbH.

While American culture has imposed itself on Europe, with the bombardment of McDonald's, Sex and the City, Starbucks and Levis, the Europeans have been putting their stamp on America, not only with exclusive brands such as Louis Vuitton and Gucci, but also with the purchase of significant American corporations and brands. And there's a valid reason that the Jack Daniels you purchased to celebrate your last actuarial exam ever is now sold in 75 cl bottles—not in fifths.

Acquiring American companies provides an additional boon to the Europeans: whereas widespread layoffs are illegal in the EU, employment at will is U.S. standard. That said, when a European multinational is experiencing an earnings squeeze, the U.S. market is the easiest to downsize and reduce expenses, via labor costs.

What makes this story even more compelling is recalling recent European history: just 60 short years ago, World War II ended, with Germany and Italy as archenemies of Great Britain, the Netherlands, France and Belgium. Only 50 years ago, the Soviets pummeled Hungary's quest for independence. And within the past 15 years, the Iron Curtain became scrap metal. Today, formerly communist nations, such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, and the Soviet Socialist Republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are now full-



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While the American culture has imposed itself on Europe, with the bombardment of McDonald's, Sex and the City, Starbucks and Levis, the Europeans have been putting their stamp on America...

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fledged members of the EU. Even more compelling is that Bulgaria, once known as the 16th Soviet Socialist Republic, and Romania and Albania, the most severe dictatorships in Eastern Europe, are headed toward eventual membership in the EU.

The EU further fortified just three short years ago, with the introduction of the euro, which replaced centuries-established currencies such as the mark, franc, and drachma (had Julius Caesar traveled to Athens for vacation, he'd have been using the drachma!). Among the major EU nations, only the British resisted in converting the pound. In its three years of existence, the euro has become 50 percent stronger against the U.S. dollar, making acquisition of American corporations and brands from American companies bargains.

This new United States of Europe has more power, wealth and trade clout than the United States of America. While it does not have our military strength, this Union has more votes in every international organization than does the United States, and gives away far more money in development aid to the Third World. In the United Europe, a university education is free and physicians still make house calls. It can afford such luxuries because the United States subsidizes the EU's military bills.

In time, the EU will set the course on financial and reporting standards for all corporations. We must pay particular attention to all developments in this vital market. The International Accounting Standards Association (IASA) will, in time, become the standard by which companies report results, weakening U.S. GAAP as the "gold standard" for financial companies.

Many of us presently work for European-based organizations, and in time more of us could. To wit, here is a small sampling of American insurers have been acquired by significant European holding companies:

- Equitable, MONY: AXA (French)
- Jackson National: Prudential PLC (British)
- Life Re, Lincoln Re: Swiss Re (Swiss)
- Transamerica, Diversified Investors: Aegon NV (Dutch)
- Reliastar, Security Life: ING (Dutch)
- William Penn, Banner Life: Legal & General PLC (British)
- Fidelity & Guaranty: Old Mutual PLC (British)

So, when you think of Europe as a quaint place to visit, full of old churches, foreign languages, art masterpieces and lovely town squares, remember that the United States of Europe has become a force to be reckoned with, stealthily gaining momentum against the United States of America in business and consumerism. □



Image or Reality?

by Steven J. Gaspar

A Tune-Up

This afternoon I was talking to a friend of mine—an actuary—about the new actuarial image campaign. You know the one: “Actuaries, the Best-kept Secret in Business™.” In our discussion we arrived at what I think is a key question: Why does our profession need a makeover? Don’t get me wrong, I think we do need a makeover, and I think it is great that our organization is taking proactive steps to manage our image. But I suspect that real money is being spent on this campaign, so I hope this does not end up being fresh paint on a car with engine trouble. This campaign will be a wasted effort if we focus only on the paint—the image. I believe we need to also take a look under the hood and consider whether the engine needs attention as well.

I can think of one area of our profession that might need a tune-up in addition to a touchup—communication. As a group, we’re smart. Some of you are really smart. That fact has generally been increasing the effectiveness of actuaries, and is not a problem. However, as a group we are not known for being great communicators—in particular when communicating to non-actuaries. My nonscientific empirical evidence is that I have met far more smart actuaries than smart actuaries who were effective communicators. I think part of our image problem stems from our communication abilities. Were we great communicators would we still be a well-kept secret?

As an employer of actuaries, I view this communication gap as a real problem because my

business (health insurance) benefits from more actuarial influence rather than less. It does not matter if you are the smartest actuary ever with the best ideas in the land if you cannot influence others. As any seasoned business professional will attest, a critical aspect of influence is effective communication. This is a key point and one that seems to frustrate many bright actuaries. Such frustration is both very real and quite strong. At times it manifests itself verbally, “What is wrong with these people?! Why don’t they see that this is the right answer?!” The most effective actuaries on my team are excellent communicators. Verbal communication is one method of communication and the written word is another. In this article I will focus on the latter.

Typical Actuary

Use the phrase “typical actuary” in a candid conversation with a group of insurance professionals and see what kind of response you get. Comments usually start with something related to “good with numbers” or “analytical” and then quickly deteriorate to “pocket protector” and “geek.” “Excellent writer,” “super facilitators” or “dancing machine” usually are not mentioned. Having two left feet is a concern of one type (and one that contributes to the geek label), whereas being an unskilled communicator is an issue that truly matters.

The “Road to FSA” is paved with an emphasis on quantitative and analytical skills, so our reputation as analytical experts should not surprise anyone. In most groups of business



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I habitually analyze things ... I viewed term papers and essays as necessary evils and a means to a degree ... my writing skills as an actuarial student were typical.

people I think it is common for the analytical aptitude of the typical actuary to exceed that of most of the group. This attribute of our group is a hard-won asset, and the result of a rigorous training program. Were we to be lacking such skills the insurance and pension industries would certainly suffer. However, this enhanced analytical aptitude can create a gap in understanding at times. That gap can lead to ineffectiveness because people don't pay attention to what they don't understand, whether it is an oral presentation or a written document.

In some ways, I think I am the typical actuary, and in others I know that I am not. Though lacking the pocket protector (seriously!) I habitually analyze things. As with most of us, I can remember being a high achiever in math classes without much effort for most of my math career. However my writing aptitude was not as naturally strong. I viewed term papers and essays as necessary evils and a means to a degree. In comparison to the actuaries I know, my writing skills as an actuarial student were typical. Today I know that I am not the typical actuary in that I write articles for non-actuarial publications. My first article was published in 1999, and I place two or three a year. In fact, if you rush out now to a fine sporting goods store in your area, you are likely to find the current issue of Upland Almanac with my latest article beginning on page 24.

Why Bother?

'Why do I do this?' you ask. The deep answer to the question 'Why does Steve write?' is that Steve thinks he has something to say. The practical answer is that writing makes me a better actuary. My effectiveness as an actuary has increased as my writing ability has improved. I should pause now and acknowledge the danger that one invites when writing an article on

writing articles. I offer this disclaimer: I do not think that I am a good writer. However, I am certain that my business writing has improved as a result of developing my non-business writing skills. Put simply, people understand my memos better now than before I began freelance writing. As a result I am a more effective actuary. As I said, my writing skills weren't spectacular upon emerging from college—they are not stellar now either, but the point is that I have improved.

In much of an actuary's work he/she must present recommendations or research findings to others, including non-actuaries. Frequently those findings are in the form of a memo or a document. Whether we want them to or not, documents are leveraged communication. The message they send can and does influence many people once, and that message is far more durable than a conversation. The author and others can refer back to the document over a period of time. Documents also deliver a consistent message. How well the document is written will determine whether that message is consistently bad or consistently good.

(continued on page 20)



How to Handle the Audience Bully

by James Gray

Editor's Note: This article last ran in *The Globe and Mail*, January 16, 2004. It is reprinted with permission.

The inconsiderate and rude abound these days. They exhibit a host of infuriating behaviors—among them yakking loudly and obviously on cell phones in public places, blocking traffic after blithely driving into congested intersections at the turn of a light and, incomprehensively, walking into you (smacking into you) on city sidewalks. Is the long-established pedestrian directive of bearing to one's right so hard to follow?

Sadly, the number of obnoxious among us appears to be increasing exponentially.

It's a statistical certainty that if you conduct enough meetings and deliver enough presentations, you'll eventually encounter members of this disagreeable crew. They're easily identified under two main personality types: the know-it-all and the disrupter.

The good news is that both groups can be managed. The key to dealing effectively with the difficult is to take them on early and decisively. If you don't, they'll weaken your credibility while traumatizing your audience.

So, let's examine how to handle those who seek to undermine our communication, according to their disorder.

The know-it-all

He (and in 95 percent of cases, it's a he) knows everything. And he's obsessed about persuading everyone else he knows everything.

If you're running a workshop he'll interrupt you early and often. He'll look for contradictions and inconsistencies, and insist on providing the group with his insights, relevant or not.

A know-it-all identifies himself even before a meeting begins. He'll strut in with a swagger and a slight roll of the eyes, and invariably position himself as far away from other participants as possible. (Why would he sit with them when he's so much smarter?)

Then the challenges begin.

You need to deal with difficult personality types through escalating stages of response. For the know-it-all, the first stage is engagement. Ask him his first name. Use it frequently in conversation; his ears will prick up at the sound.

Ask him questions: "Bob, what's your experience been in that area?" Your intention is to make the know-it-all an ally, a co-presenter, your new best friend.

Certainly, you'll pay a price at the outset, because Bob will undoubtedly take up a lot of the proceedings. But far better to have him contribute positively. After he's had his status as the brightest entity in the free world confirmed, you can back him off and begin paying more attention to the other participants. In rare cases, Bob won't respond to your outreach. He'll continue to confront you, immobilizing your session and alarming other participants.

Now, it's time to get tough. Stage 2 has to do with reminding the know-it-all (and, therefore, the group) of your expertise, while noting the limitations of his. "On the contrary, Bob," you might begin. "Most experts agree that this technique works best. Let me explain why."

If Bob still doesn't play ball, it's time to deploy the heavy artillery. Freeze him out. Limit eye contact with him. Answer his questions quickly and succinctly, continually reminding the group (and, therefore, Bob) that you have a busy agenda to get through.



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INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

In the vast majority of cases, the know-it-all will begin to exhibit the type of responsible conduct that facilitates re-entry. But remember: Never gloat. And when facing defiance, never panic. Always keep your communications cool.

The disrupter

He (although, in my experience women offend in this area as often as men) likes to talk, which can be a problem, because he often insists on doing so when presenters are speaking. Again, the staged response needs to be implemented.

If two people in your audience are chatting, identify the initiator of the conversation. Keep talking as you look directly at him. Most will get the message and stop further discussion.

But some won't. If you encounter a particularly insensitive observer who doesn't pick up on your initial approach, proceed quickly to stage 2. Stop speaking. Square your shoulders to the perpetrator and look at him impassively. Keep looking at him, without speaking, until he stops talking.

He'll usually return your gaze, sheepishly, and mutter: "Sorry." That should do it. You'll have quelled the impoliteness. However, if the disrupter continues to talk, nail him. Stop talking. Look directly at him. Then, raising your voice slightly and betraying just the slightest hint of irritation, say: "May I have your complete attention, please? Thank you."

In 99.95 percent of cases, that will do it. If, though, for whatever irrational reason the intransigent resumes talking, it's no longer just your issue. Make it a collective issue. Firmly announce to the crowd: "We have a problem here. This person continues to disrupt our meeting. How do you suggest we handle it?" Audience members will invariably tell the disrupter to be quiet, or leave. Perhaps someone will call security. Whatever the decision, you'll have empowered others affected by the agitator's behavior to resolve the situation. That way, it's not just you against him. It's the group against him.

There's a different kind of disrupter, represented by those angry and distraught citizens who vent their collective rage in public infor-

mation meetings organized to brief them on some government policy or decision, perhaps having to do with a local development or environmental concern.

Of course, in our democracy, we have the right to publicly express our opinion; it doesn't extend to tromping on the right of others to express theirs.

Canadian public officials at every level have set a bad precedent in public meetings ostensibly set up for the respectful exchange of information and views. They often sit at the front of an auditorium only to be interrupted, insulted and threatened by hundreds of enraged listeners. Nothing good or productive ever comes out of these encounters.

The officials have rights, too. They have the right not to be verbally abused or intimidated. However, they often make it tougher on themselves by failing to set the ground rules for audience conduct—they need to state up front that profanity, insults and shouting won't be tolerated. Swear once, and you're warned. Swear twice and you're asked to leave. Refuse to leave and the meeting will be terminated immediately. (Everyone pretty much understands the drill after that.)

In many ways, the difficult among us are like the schoolyard bullies of our youth. Avoiding them may work, for a time. But, ultimately, we need to confront them.

In communication, as in life, the sooner you do it, the better. □



So What Do You Do? • from page 9

when was the last time you asked one of your kids (or nieces / nephews) what he or she wants to be when he grows up? The effects of conditioning are both powerful and lasting—this is the primary reason that we grew up to be much like our parents and that our children will be, for better or for worse, much like us.

So, what's an actuary to do?

Start with the realization that saying "I'm an actuary" isn't the answer to the question, "What do you do?" In answering that way, you're falling victim to your conditioning and trying to help the other person assign you a label to place you in the correct mental bin. "Actuary" is a convenient label that helps do that, although as I hope you'll see, it also drastically oversimplifies and, in most cases waters-down, the truth and any semblance of value that results from what you actually do. In addition, think about the company you'll find in the "actuary bin" in the other person's mind! Accountants, labor attorneys and morticians* to be sure.

Allow me to propose an alternate path. Take a quiet moment and give some serious thought to the benefits that you provide to your clients, be they internal or external to your organization. Ponder your value to your organization and to your organization's clients. These are the same things—benefits and value—that cause people to engage your services. If in attempting this exercise you just can't identify anything more compelling than "I need an actuary," dig deeper—way deeper.

You might discover that what you really "do" includes helping businesses manage risk, increase their profitability, and spend more time focused on the technical aspects of their industry for competitive advantage. Now that's of

value. What's more, I'm sure there are other, even more compelling reasons out there. In fact, and I'm not a betting man, I would wager that any one of them would sure sound a lot more impressive than "I'm an actuary," wouldn't it?

In giving these alternative answers, you're providing information that is more business-oriented and value-driven. It speaks precisely to the results of your work. This is the type of information that doesn't just go into the "bin;" rather it's usually processed into a follow-up question. And follow-up questions lead to dialogues, dialogues to relationships, and relationships to business transactions.

As you'll discover, although it takes work, the rewards can be great when you question an element of your status quo and identify a more productive approach to serve your purposes. So what'll it be? Accountants, labor attorneys and morticians (oh my!)—or real, differentiating value that leads to a deeper understanding and dialogue of what you're actually about? Your results will speak for themselves. □

In answering that way, you're falling victim to your conditioning and trying to help the other person assign you a label to place you in the correct mental bin.

Consulting. Organizations retain consultants in order to access specialized expertise. While consulting approaches vary widely, it is often the case that the consultant diagnoses problems and prescribes and sometimes implements solutions. In general, the assumption with coaching is that individuals or teams are capable of generating and implementing their own solutions, with the coach facilitating their progress and providing tools, support and encouragement.

Mentoring. In general, mentoring relationships tend to be looser than coaching ones. In coaching, there is usually an informal contract between the parties. A coach tends to have more expertise in the process of coaching than a mentor. Finally, a professional coach usually does not offer expertise in a subject area, as often happens in mentoring.

Training. Training programs are based on the acquisition of certain learning objectives as set out by the trainer or instructor. Conversely, the individual or team being coached sets their own objectives, assisted by their coach. Training also assumes a linear learning path that coincides with an established curriculum, unlike coaching.

Therapy. Coaching clients are not seeking emotional healing or relief from psychological pain. They do not depend on resolution of past difficulties in order to move forward. The working assumption of the coach is that the client is “creative, resourceful and whole” and this enables the coaching process to unfold.

Further Topics

The references below provide a starting point for any actuaries who wish to investigate coaching further. Two of the more interesting subject areas include the whole concept of the collaborative partnership between coach and client, as opposed to an advisory relationship, and the many benefits to the client that flow from that; and also the idea that significant change can only be achieved by accessing the client’s basic strengths and values, which drive new learning and ultimately their performance.

There are a number of additional considerations when coaching takes place in the workplace, whether provided by a supervisor as part of their duties, or by an inside or outside coaching provider. □

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Web site of the International Coach Federation, www.coachfederation.org

The working assumption of the coach is that the client is “creative, resourceful and whole” and this enables the coaching process to unfold.

Finally, with the high volume of communications bombarding the typical businessperson, a poorly written document is at best ignored and at worst misinterpreted. In contrast, a well-written document leverages an actuary's communication influence.

Research generates facts and/or support for a strategy. Substituting facts for impressions is great, but getting people to understand the facts is better. The facts themselves are frequently the product of good actuarial work, but to a business they are a raw material, rather than a finished product. A final written document, which communicates effectively, is where the true value resides. The need for an ability to effectively communicate actuarial findings is well recognized. Consider John W. C. Stark's article in the December issue of *The Actuary*.

"Actuaries need to ensure that explanations are clearly understood and accepted by the profession's end users; to the extent that they are not, the end-users will be left to develop their own means for determining whether they will accept the actuary's results." Mr. Stark identifies one key consequence to ineffective communication—non-acceptance. I suggest that there is another consequence—undervaluing the actuarial profession. The good news is that the opposite is also true, i.e., effective communication leads to a higher value being placed on our profession.

Writing is like any other skill. Some are naturally gifted, and the rest of us work at it. Like any competency, writing skills can be learned and improved upon. My method for attempting to improve my writing ability was to simply jump in and try freelance writing. I submitted articles to outdoor sporting magazines to which I subscribed, until I discovered what content and presentation types were

purchased by editors. I have been publishing ever since. Because my learning style is more intuitive, this worked for me. If your learning style is more systematic, formal training is an option to consider. In any case, if you view each document you produce as an opportunity to improve your writing skill, you will improve. If you are looking for a quick way to improve your writing, try reading your memos out loud before you send them. I do this with my articles, and it has helped a great deal. It is best to do this in private so that you are the only one who experiences the roughness of the draft. Another improvement technique is to ask a peer or a targeted reader to proofread your work prior to distribution. This step will help you catch errors, but more importantly it enables you to see what kinds of things are commonly misunderstood in your writing. Such input is invaluable, particularly from a non-actuary.

Today I enjoy writing, though this was certainly not always the case. Whether you enjoy writing or not, constantly improving your writing skills will help you to maximize your effectiveness as an actuary. To the extent that we do so as a group, our profession will be better positioned to deliver the necessary performance after the image campaign brings us the opportunity. □

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