

# Twenty-First-Century Communications *versus* The Illusion of Control: *An Epic Battle*

by Ruth McCambridge

If there were one thing you might want to take to heart regarding twenty-first-century nonprofit communications, it is that if you ignore the reciprocity principle, you may risk your organization's survival.

**Editors' note:** *The following article is a collection of ideas about organizational communications that are actively in play across all sectors. It is neither exhaustive nor definitive, but is meant to encourage consideration about the relationships between nonprofits and philanthropy and their publics.*

SINCE EARLY AUGUST, A REMARKABLE SCENE HAS been playing out in Boston. The CEO of the local grocery chain Market Basket was ousted in late June 2014, the result of a family feud. It could have ended there, but apparently this CEO had treated his workers fairly, providing good salaries and benefits (resulting in some long-term, dedicated employees), and his customers fairly, providing good products at low prices. And it seems these stakeholders have a sense of a shared future together, because after Arthur T. Demoulas was fired from the helm, protestors took to the streets, with work stoppages,

boycotts, and press events seeming to emerge out of nowhere. Workers don't show up, warehouses have become clogged with undelivered products, past customers are taping receipts from competing markets onto the store windows, and shelves are bare of perishables. At the time of this writing, the company is losing millions of dollars daily. While the board says there are multiple suitors for the company, it may well be that the defining bid goes to Arthur T. Demoulas—because the community wants *him*.

This kind of support would make most nonprofits proud beyond measure. I am reminded of articles we have published by Buzz Schmidt, who asserts that “all enterprise is social”—that, in its entirety, it has impacts, both positive and

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negative.<sup>1</sup> It takes from community, on balance, or contributes to it.

The story of Market Basket helps us to understand the multiple ways in which every enterprise has an impact on its community. Many thousands of people feel that they have partial ownership of Market Basket's fate, and that level of involvement can be an organization's biggest asset or worst nightmare, depending on how one honors it. We have seen this kind of engagement emerge in the nonprofit sector, such as when stakeholders voted with their feet, wallets, and energy during the Susan G. Komen for the Cure debacle. And, it may be that the changes in governance we have all been sensing will continue to cut across sectors as people begin to understand and use their collective power in guiding institutions that they care about. But if we don't know what our stakeholders are thinking and experiencing, we will be at some risk.

### **Segregating Communication Is So Five Minutes Ago**

The degree to which nonprofits neglect or marginalize their communication functions seems, if you believe in the notions of public benefit and the common good, both wasteful and immoral: communication is, after all, core to the associational and democratic purposes of the nonprofit sector. Communication helps build the intelligence of whatever enterprise one is engaged in. It creates energy and interest in that enterprise; builds an understanding of issues and of ways to take people-supported action on those issues (reframing when the public impression of the issue is off-kilter); and, of course, helps advertise the enterprise to those who might support it. Communication also serves to provide those who are meant to benefit with a way to help guide the enterprise.

These seem like functions that are too multiple and important to be marginalized. Yet even when a nonprofit has a paid, professional communications staff, both the organization and the staff often misunderstand their role as one of advertising—convincing and informing rather than engaging. By engaging, I mean involving stakeholders as part of the intelligence and energy of the enterprise in a way that respects them, integrates their thoughts and ideas, responds to them,





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and encourages them to respond to one another while advancing cause and knowledge.

### Get with the Program

Over the past half decade, we have seen a virtual explosion of journalism sites in our sector. They run the gamut from investigative strongholds like ProPublica—and state and local sites focused on policy issues and local issues, respectively—to sites that provide venues for lay journalists to contribute to the public intelligence. Some of this latter category involves journalism under the extreme conditions of a suppressed free press (in an international context), and it provides information in a different form that is even more iterative than journalism has been in the past. Thus, the truth is pieced together for people to act upon.

In pioneering organizations like Wikipedia, MoveOn.org, and Change.org, people act and create together on a shared platform, and the results have changed the face of interactions between people and information and institutions. This and other factors invite us to rethink the role and style of communications in our work.

### Communicate at or with? Reciprocity

Communication, as we are looking at it here, requires reciprocity. This reciprocity extends beyond the message sent and received fairly accurately to a deeper and longer negotiation of sorts: a searching out of common interests, topic, and form that ends in a sharing of intelligence toward a common end and the common good. This is, at its essence, a different practice from telling people something they ought to know or do. It is different even from devising focus groups to figure out how to tell someone something that will resonate. Instead, it is at its best an invitation to engage with a community of interest—and through that engagement, a powerful social contract of sorts can be built to advance a cause.

Of course, we all have a contextual way of hearing and knowing that emerges from our own experience of things. A “community’s” understanding of issues is therefore both local and diverse; still, there are some common archetypal stories that speak to large portions of the population in very much the same way.

Our pluralistic democracy is, then, a garden of voices, identities, and points of view, and of ways in which people can be called to action when an important aspect of their identity is addressed in a respectful manner and given play to express itself with others. This is what the soul of communications can and should be in the nonprofit sector.

This playing with ideas in a common space is, of course, aided by technology, which calls on us to act differently in that space and bring a practice ethic to it that strives not for low common denominators but rather the highest of aspirations, even seven generations out.

### Pacing

In an interview *NPQ* conducted with Mark Jurkowitz in 2009, Jurkowitz pointed out that there is no longer a news cycle and that instead there is a 24-hour, 365-day-a-year, never-ending potential to break news—and this can potentially be done virtually free of an institutional intermediary. It’s a new communications world with different pacing.<sup>2</sup>

Keenan Wellar, author of “Social Change and a Welcoming Environment for Youth in the Nonprofit Community,” notes that today’s communications require what he calls “transparent pacing.” He writes,

Our volunteer coordinator receives frequent feedback from volunteers who were excited to contribute time and ideas to a particular cause but who come away feeling rejected—even in cases where they were responding to an agency calling out for volunteers. Volunteers report feeling as if they were distracting staff from other work or, in some cases, they never heard back at all. Other complaints include training and orientation that is offered infrequently, and/or once training is completed, limited opportunities and no room for creativity.

At LiveWorkPlay a volunteer inquiry typically receives a same-day response, and rarely will more than 48 hours pass. After a telephone or email exchange, moving to the next step of a face-to-face meeting with our coordinator is usually a matter of days, and the first opportunity for a formal orientation and training takes no longer than a month. While these necessary processes

are underway, our coordinator is already working with the candidate to come up with a plan, and collaborating with other staff and volunteers about the possibilities. This may all seem very obvious, but we have amassed substantial feedback that indicates it is far from common practice.

When the process works well, it's no surprise that the digital generation appreciates this type of transparent pacing, and that they share their positive experiences with others.<sup>3</sup>

Weller writes that this responsiveness pays off in many ways because, "The best form of volunteer recruitment is also the oldest: person-to-person recommendations. Today's networked youth have the ability to amplify their recommendations to friends, family, and coworkers in a matter of minutes."<sup>4</sup>

## Integrity and Trust

To be in a communications space that is reciprocal over the long term requires that your nonprofit be trusted to manage, and even be in, that space responsibly. There are some characteristics that you may want to look to in self-examination:

- *Stance.* Do we have a clearly understood "identity," with a point of view that can act as the foundation for discussion? In "Mechanisms for Stakeholder Integration: Bringing Virtual Stakeholder Dialogue into Organizations," Paul Driesen, Robert Kok, and Bas Hillebrand describe this characteristic as follows:<sup>5</sup>

Organizational identification refers to the degree to which internal and external stakeholders share beliefs about the central and enduring characteristics of the organization and reflects a bond between the stakeholders and the organization (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002; Maignan & Ferrell, 2004).<sup>6</sup> . . . In a virtual context, organizational identification is a particularly important organizational outcome, as organizational identification represents the "critical glue" that links stakeholders to organizations in the absence of physical meetings (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 1999).<sup>7</sup>

- *Platform for inclusion.* Again, the authors are clear on the importance of ensuring that the capacity is present to manage conversations:<sup>8</sup>

Organizations should match their coordination mechanisms to the high intensity and richness of virtual stakeholder dialogues. Organizations without proper internal coordination are prone to act incoherently on the issues raised by its stakeholders and likely to face poor organizational identification among its stakeholders. These organizations may not live up to the expectations raised during the dialogue. . . . Without suitable coordination mechanisms, engaging in virtual stakeholder dialogue is a superficial attempt to present a favorable appearance. Managerial practices that are only adopted for ceremonial reasons have low effectiveness (Kostova & Roth, 2002).<sup>9</sup> Adopting virtual stakeholder dialogue without suitable coordination mechanisms has detrimental performance consequences.

- *Openness to suggestion and dialogue.* The authors call this "bandwidth," and write:<sup>10</sup>

Higher bandwidth structures provide more capacity to accurately exchange information, making responses to stakeholder issues more effective (Van de Ven, et al., 1976).<sup>11</sup> With virtual environments moving the locus of activity more towards the periphery of the firm, structures where the coordinator is located far from the issues at hand (low bandwidth) are not likely to be effective for coordinating all issues (Eisenhardt & Brown, 1998; Nambisan, 2002).<sup>12</sup>

The key to greater bandwidth is a plan to get you there. While not rocket science, it does take design and a commitment to a less centralized leadership environment.

## Curation

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curation of this space between organizations and constituents parallel the challenges of a learning organization (or any kind of community of practice) in that beyond the discussion, people need other kinds of information—such as research and other points of view—that feed their knowledge and opinion.

### **Frames, Communicating with the Press, and Repetition**

If you believed that key press contacts were likely to be important to you, you would probably try to form some kind of relationship with them. And, because they must communicate with the larger public, and may be seen as being more objective than you about your work, you would likely want them to understand the frame through which you view the work that you do. Why? Because the media still, at least in part, set or reinforce the frames through which the public views an issue. But many reporters are besieged by self-serving press releases that signify nothing. Organizational profiles, then, told from an organizational, exceptionalist perspective, might be less interesting to the media than, say, a story that notes a trend or important piece of national research, and then makes a local connection that is not simply a way to self-appreciate—for instance, a recent piece of research on nursing homes that suggests nonprofits are generally rated more favorably than for-profit facilities.

If you had a relationship with a local reporter, you could pass that information along—perhaps with a suggestion that local residents may be interested in the ways in which nonprofits differ, as far as nursing homes are concerned. And then you might suggest that there are, indeed, some fields in which nonprofits undeniably perform better. These kinds of efforts can be far more effective than self-aggrandizing press releases, which accrue to your credibility usually not at all. But such efforts, of course, require that you pay attention to your field.

They also require that you understand how commonly assumed frames of reference may not be serving your cause, and then you must embark on a campaign to reframe an issue—a profound act of systems-changing guerrilla warfare: by seizing the

frame of reference, you take control of the field. In Donella Meadows' classic article, "Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System," she describes a frame, or paradigm, as follows:

The shared idea in the minds of society, the great big unstated assumptions—unstated because unnecessary to state; everyone already knows them—constitute that society's paradigm, or deepest set of beliefs about how the world works.

There is a difference between nouns and verbs. Money measures something real and has real meaning (therefore people who are paid less are literally worth less). Growth is good. Nature is a stock of resources to be converted to human purposes. Evolution stopped with the emergence of Homo sapiens. One can "own" land. Those are just a few of the paradigmatic assumptions of our current culture, all of which have utterly dumfounded other cultures, who thought them not the least bit obvious.

Paradigms are the sources of systems. From them, from shared social agreements about the nature of reality, come system goals and information flows, feedbacks, stocks, flows and everything else about systems.<sup>13</sup>

But an issue cannot be reframed just one time and that should do it. Reframing takes repetition from many points in a system, stories, and research that reinforce the issue's validity. Framing is a powerful act, and repetition drives it deep into our psyches, where our ideas reflect back upon the new surface for reconsideration.

### **Making Sure You Are on the Same Page—The Definition of Terms**

The extent to which we agree to misunderstand one another can be staggering. In a Discover card commercial, a guy calls the credit card company to say he has heard that it provides frog protection. He is holding a plump frog that, clearly, he deeply cares for. The guy on the other end of the call says, "Oh yeah, fraud protection? You bet!"—and even when they check back with one another about being on the same page, apparently they are just willing to agree to let stand whatever misunderstanding exists.

This, I believe, happens all the time, and it dumps a load of disappointment in the middle of a relationship.

## A Governance Surprise

More and more often, we see examples of boards of corporations that have not come to terms with the reality that their power is increasingly enjoyed only at the pleasure of their stakeholders, who have opinions. The ease with which one group of stakeholders can communicate their case to another group is mind-boggling. This communication makes it harder to hide things internally and easier to organize externally for institutional change. What does communication have to do with this? The lack of communication can cause serious errors in judgment regarding actions that the board thinks it can take without serious blowback.

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Communication is a function that cannot be segregated, and its deployment should be strategic: How broad a bandwidth do you want? What are you promising in terms of responsiveness, and toward what end? Who is involved? The answer to that last question is, I suspect, “everybody.” In the same way that many advocate for a “culture of philanthropy,” where everyone attends to funding, we may need to promote cultures of communication, community learning, and action. After all, isn’t that what we are here to do?

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Buzz Schmidt, “All Enterprise Is Social: Measuring the Impact of Endeavors across the Profit Boundary,” the *Nonprofit Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 18–23, <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/management/24167-all-enterprise-is-social-measuring-the-impact-of-endeavors-across-the-profit-boundary.html>.
2. “Nonprofits and Journalism: An Interview with Mark Jurkowitz,” the *Nonprofit Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 53–57, <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/management/1600-nonprofits-and-journalism-an-interview-with-mark-jurkowitz.html>.
3. Keenan Wellar, “Social Change and a Welcoming

Environment for Youth in the Nonprofit Community,” the *Philanthropist* 25, no. 2 (2013): 114.

4. Ibid.

5. Paul H. Driessen, Robert A. W. Kok, and Bas Hillebrand, “Mechanisms for Stakeholder Integration: Bringing Virtual Stakeholder Dialogue into Organizations,” *Journal of Business Research* 66, no. 9 (2013): 1465–72.

6. C. B. Bhattacharya and Kimberly D. Elsbach, “Us versus Them: The Roles of Organizational Identification and Disidentification in Social Marketing Initiatives,” *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 26–36; and Isabelle Maignan and O. C. Ferrell, “Corporate Social Responsibility and Marketing: An Integrative Framework,” *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 3–19.

7. Batia M. Wiesenfeld, Sumita Raghuram, and Raghu Garud, “Communication Patterns as Determinants of Organizational Identification in a Virtual Organization,” *Organization Science* 10, no. 6 (November–December 1999): 777–90.

8. Driessen, Kok, and Hillebrand, 20.

9. Tatiana Kostova and Kendall Roth, “Adoption of an Organizational Practice by Subsidiaries of Multinational Corporations: Institutional and Relational Effects,” *Academy of Management Journal* 45, no. 1 (2002): 215–33.

10. Driessen, Kok, and Hillebrand, 11.

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12. Kathleen M. Eisenhardt and Shona L. Brown, “Competing on the Edge: Strategy as Structured Chaos,” *Long Range Planning* 31, no. 5 (October 1998): 786–89; and Satish Nambisan, “Designing Virtual Customer Environments for New Product Development: Toward a Theory,” *Academy of Management Review* 27, no. 3 (2002): 392–413.

13. Donella Meadows, *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System*, The Sustainability Institute, 1999, 17–18, [http://www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Leverage\\_Points.pdf](http://www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Leverage_Points.pdf).

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More and more often,  
we see examples of  
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who have opinions.

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