

# People. Systems. Truth. Trust.

by  
Les Landes

**I**n most organizations today, there is strong consensus from top to bottom that the quality of communication is both vital to success and in desperate need of improvement. Many professional communicators interpret that consensus as a personal mandate for more newsletters, magazines, videotapes, and employee meetings. What is needed, however, is not more output from “mass media and messages experts.”

Instead, the fast-paced, high-performance organizations of the future will require a basic shift in the way that people think about and conduct organizational communication. That shift will focus on equipping all employees with the mindset, skills, tools, and responsibility for operating with a “real-life, real-time” system of instantaneous access to reliable information. That system must be rooted in a profound understanding of the purest principles of trust and truth and their implications for organizational life.

## “KEEP A LID ON IT”

Until recent years, “telling it like it is” wasn’t much of an imperative in organizations when it came to sharing

**Few managers any longer doubt the power or importance of communications and positive public relations. But many mistake tactics — delivering more news releases, newsletters, meetings or media — as the solution to improving relations with key constituent publics.**

**Much better, says Missouri counselor Les Landes, is to concentrate on the integration of people, systems, truth and trust to enhance public relationships. The author breaks down these four elements into a strategic approach toward building relationships that can build an organization’s standing with its targets.**

information with employees. “Keeping a lid on it” was a more accurate description of the typical attitude toward communication.

Furthermore, management’s censored and sanitized version of truth and reality usually arrived in quarterly publications about 89 days after most people had already heard the “news.”

Organizational communicators have played right into the hands of that process — intentionally or not — by obligingly playing their three

main historical roles: reporter, promoter, and apologist. While a legitimate case might be made for such roles in traditionally managed organizations, they are neither sufficient nor compatible with what is required to foster trust and truth in a more open environment where everyone is responsible for effective communication.

More enlightened organizations talk straight to employees, plugging them into the “central nervous system” of corporate information, sharing the raw truth of unfiltered data on virtually every aspect of a company’s operations. Moreover, they provide those data as they occur, not weeks or even days after the fact. And, they are doing so within a strategic and operational context that provides relevance and understanding for people. Such a system, of course, requires that employees be treated as responsible adults who, with the proper training, know how to understand and use sensitive information appropriately.

## **WANTED: RELATIONSHIP EXPERTS**

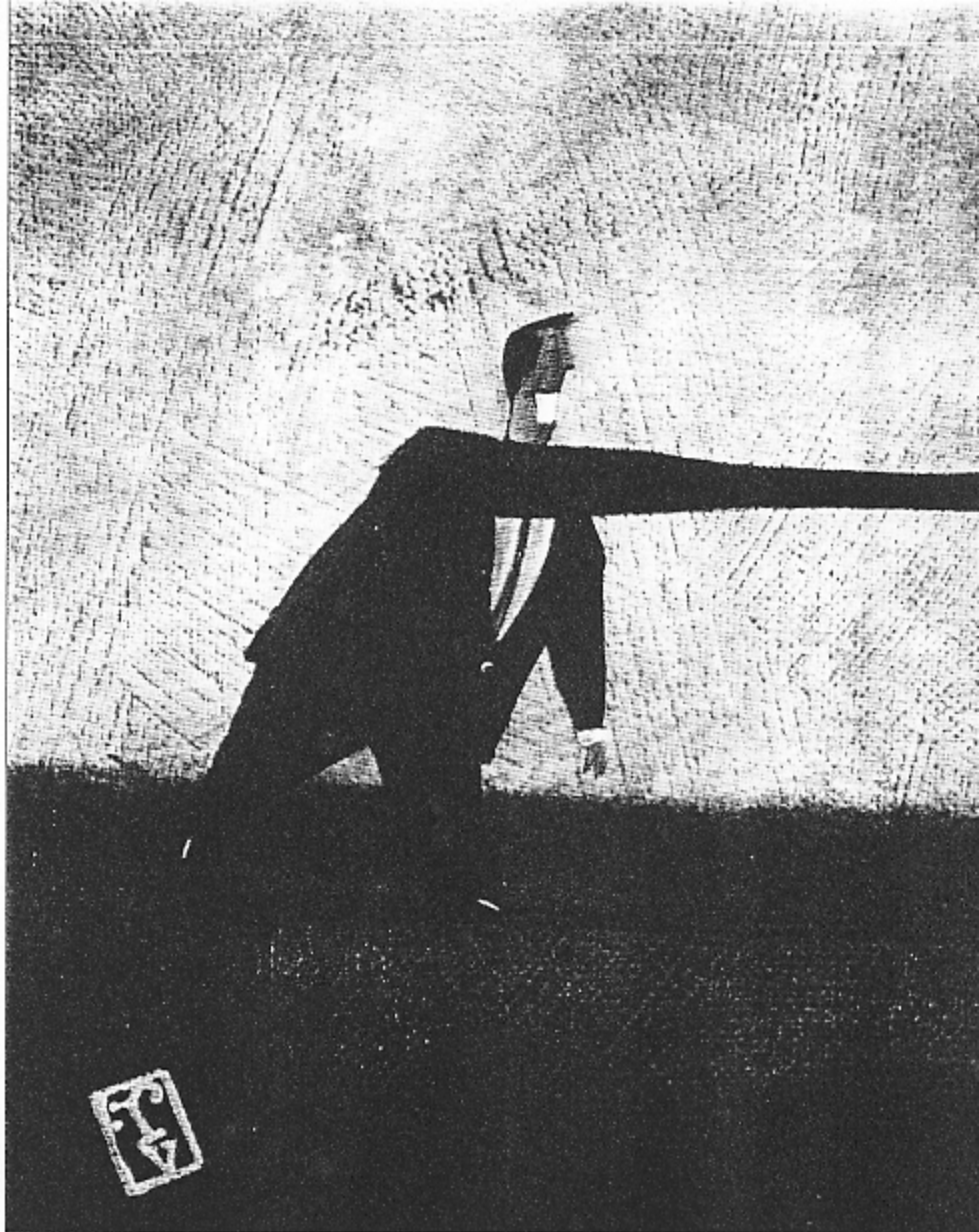
Within such an open system, communication must be viewed not as a functional responsibility for “communication practitioners,” but

as the basic fabric of organizational order for which everyone is responsible and in which everyone plays an essential role. Bottom-line communication is just too important to be left in the hands of professionals.

Organizations in the future, however, still will need tuned-in specialists who understand how all the communications pieces fit together. Those people also must possess the expertise to apply that understanding to day-to-day operations. The required expertise will consist of a special set of skills and knowledge about people and systems, as well as a deep understanding of what it takes to foster trust and truth and cooperation.

Such an environment represents an enormous opportunity for professional communicators. In fact, as we look to carve out sustainable roles in the workplace of the future, perhaps our brightest opportunity may be to serve as organizational experts in the essential relationships among people, systems, trust, and truth. To be taken seriously in that role, though, communicators must do three main things:

1. Shift our point of view from a tactical focus on the messages to be conveyed and the media to be employed to a strategic focus on the systemic relationships that need to be supported throughout the organization. This will require broader knowledge and credentials, not just in the area of communications, but in every aspect



- of organizational life. In particular, we will need to develop a much deeper understanding of group dynamics, psychology, and systems thinking and design. The "enlightened workplace" recognizes that the vast majority of all organizational problems are due to faulty systems and processes, not faulty people.

2. Develop closer working relationships with other departments such as human resources, information systems, and finance. Shaping those relationships can be challenging, but doing so constructively will serve to engender the very credibility that communicators need to play expanded roles.

3. Reshape our image. While the opportunities for communicators who can make the needed adjustment may be vast, the roles we have played in the past will cast doubt on our ability to serve with truth and trust. For communicators who have served the all-too-common mandate to sanitize the bad news and glamorize the good, credibility will not come quickly or easily.

### *AVOIDING THE GLITZ*

One of the most conspicuous ways that communicators undermine their credibility is by perpetuating the jumble of jargon that surrounds orga-



izational change efforts like "total quality management," for example. In order to become legitimate truth and trust experts, communicators will have to talk straight and avoid the seductive lure of glitzy programs designed to get employees tuned in and turned on. In particular, we have to avoid the tendency to be "jargonauts" for each new management movement that comes along. The price for failing to do so is the loss of truth and trust. As USC management Professor Warren Bennis has warned, "The use of these buzzwords anesthetizes you to the truth."

Is there any place at all for the old communicator's tool kit in the work-

place of the future? That all depends on how it is used. Periodic newsletters, videotapes, magazines, annual employee meetings — all can serve a useful function as long as they support the primary "central nervous system" of real-life, real-time communication.

The traditional tools work well for things like summarizing and disseminating data that are not time-sensitive. They also can serve well as a system-wide vehicle for sharing stories about lessons learned from successes and failures.

But in the world of work where the communications function has witnessed severe disintegration, per-

sisting with the old tools in the old ways is certain to have deadly consequences. In part, because the limited need for message and media expertise increasingly is being outsourced — in many cases to people who have been downsized out of the very organizations who are now purchasing their services. In that kind of environment, serving as experts in people, systems, truth, and trust is a far more certain path to security. The need clearly exists, and no other function is filling it adequately in most organizations.

Ultimately, the most important role for communications professionals will be to promote trust and belief in people and systems. Those who can discern the interrelated nuances of that role, who are willing to invest in developing an array of new skills and knowledge, who possess the courage to stand up for open and honest communications, who can press effectively for trustworthy systems and policies, who can forge essential alliances across departmental functions — they will thrive in an exciting new world of communications work. ■



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