Greetings,

I hope you enjoy these articles from past issues of Perceptions & Realities. They are among the articles readers have described as their favorites.

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COMMUNICATIONS

Getting People's Attention

If your written material invariably and predictably gets people's undivided attention, skip this article. Otherwise, read on.

Let's say you face one of these situations: You want your management to read your proposal and preferably sooner rather than (the more usual) much, much later. Or you want your customers to read and heed your guidelines. Or you wish those dudes upstairs would follow the instructions and explanations you meticulously prepared for them.

When people face an information overload, and their in box is buckling under #1 priorities, and they need a speed reading course just to get through their email, conventional methods of gaining their attention won't work. You have to *have* their attention before you can *hold* their attention. That means you have to be creative.

Tantalizing titles

One way to be creative is with titles. Authors know that the right title can make a difference between a book buyer and a passerby. Titles I especially like include *Why We Buy* by Paco Underhill and *How We Know What Isn't So* by Thomas Gilovich. Notice the titles that intrigue you, and think about how you can apply the same idea to your material. Aim for titles that will grab your readers' interest, whet their appetite, and pique their curiosity. What about a proposal entitled *How to Benefit from Customer Complaints* or guidelines entitled *Three Surprising Simple Steps for Spectacularly Savvy Service*?

The same idea applies to email messages. If you want your messages to stand out, make the subject line enticing. "An idea with particular pizzazz" is more likely to catch the recipient's attention than merely "Ideas." Create subject lines that are both meaningful and clever, and you'll find that more recipients will notice your messages — and actually read them.

Good looks

A second way to grab readers' interest is to give your material a captivating look. Fair warning, though: A catchy look is not necessarily a readable look. For example, many print ads for high-tech products fall short because the complexity of the images masks the intended message.

The problem with business material, though, is just the reverse: important material with exciting ideas or critical information and a look that's positively yawn-

producing. Spruce up the look of your documents. Why limit clip art and word art to presentations when you can just as easily use them in your documents? Make your material look lively, and people will feel lively reading it.

Now opening . . .

A third way to gain readers' attention is with opening lines. One of my favorite opening lines is this one: "On a cold blowy February day a woman is boarding the ten A.M. flight to London, followed by an invisible dog." That's the opening line of Alison Lurie's *Foreign Affairs*, the 1984 Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction. I don't have the patience for books in which I have to wade through 100 pages before the plot begins to thicken. I don't even want to wade through page 2. I want to be hooked by the end of the first sentence, and Lurie's book did that for me.

Consider how you might use similar opening-line attention-getters in your reports, proposals, instructions, memos and newsletters. For example:

- If you think 1,500 calls per month to the Help Desk is a lot, wait till you read what customers have been able to accomplish as a result of our help.

- This is a set of guidelines about security procedures for people who hate to read guidelines about security procedures.

Documents as snooze-inducers

Of course, all these techniques are worth little if what follows could cure insomnia. So steer away from the pompous professional prose that's so rampant in business material. It's a misconception that business writing must be formal. A conversational, down-to-earth style will win you more readers — and more *eager* readers — than stodgy, passive-voice writing. Be yourself and dare to write as if it's *you* doing the writing. Remember: Mind-numbingly idiosyncratic multisyllabic circumlocutions will impress people on for as long as it takes them to crumple your document and toss it. Obfuscate at your own risk.

If you have something important to say, grab people's attention right from the start. Then give them a reason to want to read it and a style that'll make it enjoyable to read. They may even read it all the way to the end. Just as you have. ☺

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

We All Surf the Web Surreptitiously

At a national conference in Atlanta, I sat down next to a woman I'd never seen before. We started chatting. She said she had spent most of her life in the northeast. I said same for me, whereabouts? She said she was born in Connecticut. Gee, me too, where? New Haven, she said. Really? So was I. Yes, she told me, I was born in New Haven Hospital. So was I!!!

I'd love to report that we were born on the same day, but no, it wasn't even the same year. In fact, it'll be a decade till she's as old as I am, and by then I'll be a decade older. Still, what are the odds that two total strangers have something so life-specific in common?

I believe the odds are high. While immersed in the squabbles and stresses of the typical work day, we sometimes become so focused on our differences that it's hard to believe we're alike in any way at all. But in fact, any two of us, or any three, or even any five or more, have more in common than we might ever imagine.

There's an easy way to demonstrate this point. Form a group of 4 to 8 people, and in 10 minutes come up with at least 3 non-obvious things you have in common. Saying you're all in the same room or the same city is obvious. It must be non-obvious, and the more unusual or far-fetched, the better.

I've used this activity numerous times in team-building sessions, and the results are often hilarious. The things groups report having in common range from having obstreperous kids, a craving for chocolate, and a fear of flying, to having the same favorite font, disliking furry critters, and knowing that broken cookies have no calories.

One group claimed that the chief thing they had in common was that none of them had the same first name. Another group said that none of them had ever been to the South Pole in August. A third group claimed to be wearing the same color underwear! (I resisted the urge to ask how they knew.) But that's what makes it fun. People abandon their defenses, and zaniness takes over as they strive (quite noisily, I might add) to discover ways in which they're alike. The very process of being silly together gives them something in common.

But this is not just a trivial exercise. The discovery of similarities helps not only in building new relationships, but also in repairing relationships that have gone awry. For example, I was working with four technical support groups whose responsibilities required them to interact extensively, but whose relationship was plagued by conflict. During a small-group activity in which I placed two of the fiercest adversaries together, I heard one of them say to the other, "You went to college there? So did I."

How the subject came up, I don't know. But suddenly, and perhaps for the first time, these two individuals saw each other not as adversaries, but as human beings, people who had lives separate from their work . . . lives not altogether different from their own. They suddenly realized that for all their differences, they also had some things in common.

Did this discovery resolve all the problems between these groups? Of course not. But it was a stepping stone. And by the end of the session, the four groups were not only talking to each other; they had put their heads together to identify their biggest obstacles in working together. And — at their own request — they had developed a list of steps they wanted to take to learn more about each other's work and to help each other. As the session concluded, several of them commented that they wanted to get together more often. This type of relationship reversal is not at all unusual when groups take time to get to know each other better.

What do you have in common with the next stranger you meet? Could be more than you think.

ATTITUDES

How to Get Rich Quick

Retirement may still be eons away, but it's never too soon to start planning. I decided to figure out how much money my husband and I have to accumulate so that when we retire, we can live beyond our means. I set up a spreadsheet to calculate the impact of investing various amounts over various periods of time at various rates of growth, and plugged in some numbers.

When I looked at the bottom line, I was delighted. More than that, I was ecstatic. It showed that if we put away $50 a month at 5% from now till the Age of Retirement, we would be worth seven billion dollars. That's what it said: seven billion dollars. Amazing what you can accomplish with sound fiscal management.

Then the little help desk in my head said, Hold on just a second. Does this result make sense? At first I ignored the question, because I was so enjoying the prospect of rolling in dough. But the help desk was persistent, and finally I had to admit that the total did seem to be off by maybe a zero or two. I double-checked my logic and found one very minor glitch. Couldn't make much of a difference, I said to myself, hoping and praying.

I corrected the error and looked at the bottom line. Let's just say it was closer to seven *thousand* dollars than seven billion. Gone were the visions of a delectable future of summer ski trips to New Zealand, generous donations to my favorite causes, and frequent dining at restaurants where you don't have to stand in line to give your order.

Do you question the reasonableness of the results you get when you do your own calculations? And if you provide computer support, do you encourage your customers to question the reasonableness of their own results and those they review? One of the most compelling features of computers is the speed with which data can be manipulated and twiddled and tweaked and queried. But it's this very speed that lulls people into complacency. It's so easy to become mesmerized by the immediacy of a result that you don't question its validity.
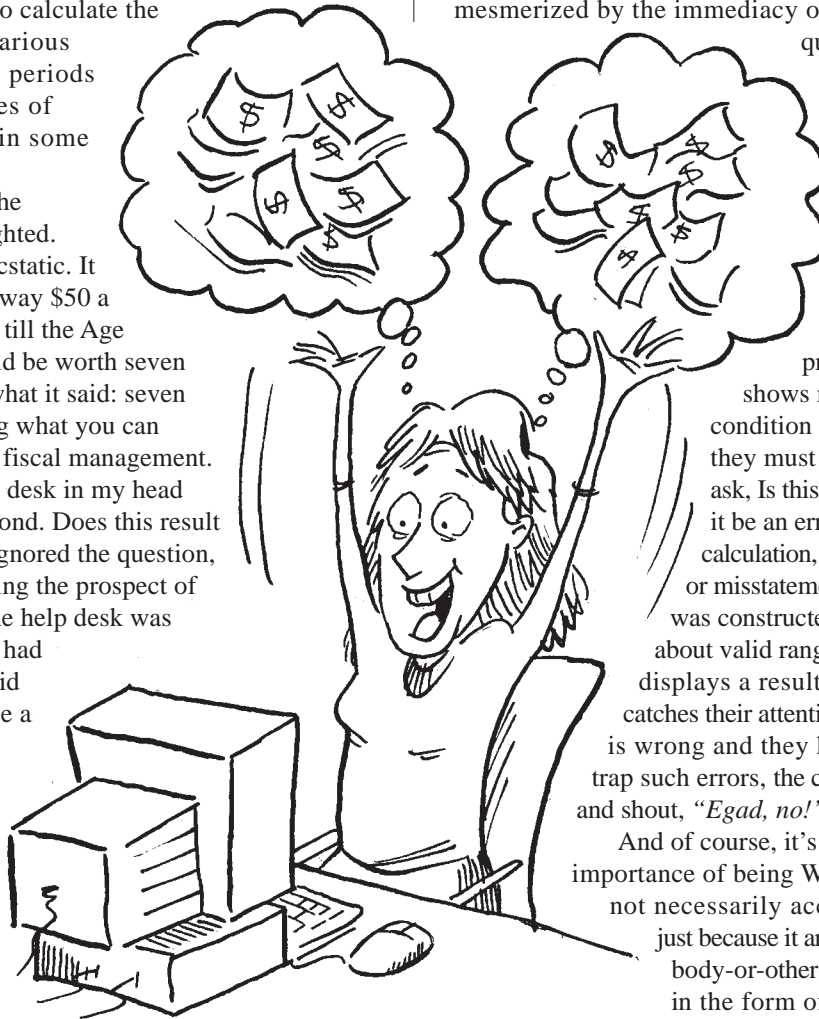
That's why it's a good idea to help your customers develop a healthy skepticism of computer-generated information. Encourage them to think about the reasonableness of their results. When they produce a report that shows more instances of some condition than they anticipated, they must learn to automatically ask, Is this result accurate? Or could it be an error caused by a miskeyed calculation, misplaced decimal point, or misstatement in the way the query was constructed? They need to think about valid ranges so that when a report displays a result outside that range, it catches their attention. After all, if the result is wrong and they haven't taken steps to trap such errors, the computer won't stand up and shout, *"Egad, no!"*

And of course, it's a good idea to stress the importance of being Web-wary. Information is not necessarily accurate, valid or helpful just because it arrives via email or somebody-or-other's snazzy site. Gullibility, in the form of instant acceptance, is escalating, yet a small dose of skepticism and a questioning attitude can save you from passing misleading or damaging information to others or acting on it yourself as though it were The Truth.

If nothing else, periodically remind your customers (and yourself!) to eyeball results and ask, Do these numbers make sense? Does this result seem sound? Is this information believable? Thanks to computers and a splendid spreadsheet snafu, I've had the opportunity to be very, *very* rich. Yet how glad I am that I questioned my results while still young enough to survive the shock of learning the truth.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Be Calculating

If you're a service provider, customer expectations can pose a major challenge. That's because expectations are wondrous creatures: They grow, they shrink, they change shape, they change direction. They shift constantly, and they shift easily. And just because you know what they are today doesn't mean you necessarily know what they'll be tomorrow. Yet, how satisfied — or dissatisfied — your customers are is determined by these expectations and how well you succeed in meeting them.

Let me count the ways
If expressed as a calculation, customer satisfaction might look something like this formula:

$$\text{Customer Satisfaction} = \frac{\text{Your Performance}}{\text{Customer Expectations}}$$

Of course, the situation is not quite this simple. Customer satisfaction is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, such as past experience, changing priorities, management demands, communication preferences, provider competency, the urgency of the need, and whether the toast got burned this morning.

An additional factor revolves around the psychology of dissatisfaction: When customers become dissatisfied with a service attribute that's particularly important to them, they are likely to also become dissatisfied with aspects of the service that might otherwise remain below their anger threshold. For example, when cancelled flights and delayed departures lead to increases in passenger complaints, passengers also complain more about the piddly packages of peanuts — even when peanut packaging has remained unchanged. And when people spend eons on hold waiting for someone who can help them, they tend to be less satisfied with the service they ultimately receive — even when it's service they might otherwise be pleased with. As customers, we may be willing to let the little things slide, but disappoint us about the big things, and our satisfaction level with all related things is likely to plummet.

Given all these factors, customer satisfaction is hardly as straightforward as plugging numbers into the numerator and denominator and calculating the result. In fact, this formula isn't about numbers at all; it's about the relationship between performance and expectations and how these two factors intertwine so as to influence customer satisfaction.

In particular, this formula serves as a reminder that no matter how satisfied your customers may be, their satisfaction level can be affected by changes in either their expectations or your performance. That means you have to pay attention to both. If their expectations change so as to exceed your performance, then their level of satisfaction is likely to decrease. And if your performance falls short of their expectations, you can reasonably expect their satisfaction level to drop.

How they see what you see
And that's where things can get tricky, because how *you* perceive your performance may differ from how your customers perceive it. In fact, discrepancies between your perceptions and theirs occur more often than you might think; I routinely encounter such discrepancies when I interview both service personnel and their customers. Strikingly often, service personnel think they're doing a great job, while their customers think otherwise. So, even if you're working yourself to the proverbial bone, if customers view you as unresponsive, then you are unresponsive — in their eyes.

The reverse is also true: If you really *are* unresponsive, but customers perceive that you deliver superior service, then you do — in their eyes — and you gain little by trying to convince them otherwise. I'm not advocating bumbleheaded service, of course, but merely emphasizing that customer satisfaction is driven by *their* perceptions, not yours. Their perceptions are their reality, and any overlap between their view of the world and your own may simply be one of those delightful coincidences.

Watch for changes
What all this means is that you have to pay attention. If your customers' satisfaction level is changing, find out what has happened to affect their expectations or perceptions. Whether that change in satisfaction level is skyward or in the direction of the bottomless pit, analyze what's happening. If satisfaction is rising, find out what they perceive you as doing well, so you can continue to do it; if satisfaction is slithering downward, figure out how to reverse the situation before that satisfaction level falls off the chart.

Make sure you don't get so wrapped up in delivering services that you lose sight of your customers' expectations and how well they think you're meeting them. Be conscientious in observing what's going on in your customers' environment and your own that could affect their satisfaction level.

Just a caution from the We Can Always Dream Department: If you're among the mathematically inclined, don't make the mistake of concluding from the above formula that if customer expectations decline to zero, customer satisfaction will rise to infinity. Math works that way, but customers don't. Sigh . . .

Splish Splash, I Was Takin' a Bath

When I checked into a hotel recently, I was delighted to find that my accommodations featured a jacuzzi bathtub. With its several nozzles for creating swirling water, this would be a real treat.

Over the jacuzzi timer was a sign that said, "Fill tub before setting." Why, I wondered. As one possessed by a profound sense of "what if?" I turned the timer, curious to see what would happen. The answer: nothing. Odd, I thought, why would they post a meaningless instruction?

I filled the tub part way, covering all but two of the nozzles. I set the timer, noticing that once again nothing happened. Foolish sign, I thought, and settled into the soothingly hot water. Thus ensconced, I pushed the "jacuzzi on" button. Be aware, dear reader, that up till this moment, the rest of the bathroom was dry.

Suddenly, instead of the underwater swirling I was anticipating, water from the nozzles sprayed fiercely in all directions. Quickly, I pulled the shower curtain closed, but the projectile-like jets of water blew aside the shower curtain and drenched the entire bathroom. In the few moments it took me to turn the jacuzzi off, all the towels were soaked, along with my bathrobe, the floor, walls, ceiling, and a swath of carpet in my room.

Ah, I realized (too late, of course), the cryptic sign was intended to prevent just this sort of water-ific situation: Fill the tub, it was warning me, because if you don't, the bathroom floor will become a training ground for ducklings. But given the sopping wet consequences of ignoring its advice, surely the sign would have been more effective if it had explained the "why" behind the warning: Instead of a lackadaisical "Fill tub before setting," perhaps something like "To avoid damage or flooding, fill tub above nozzles before turning jacuzzi on."
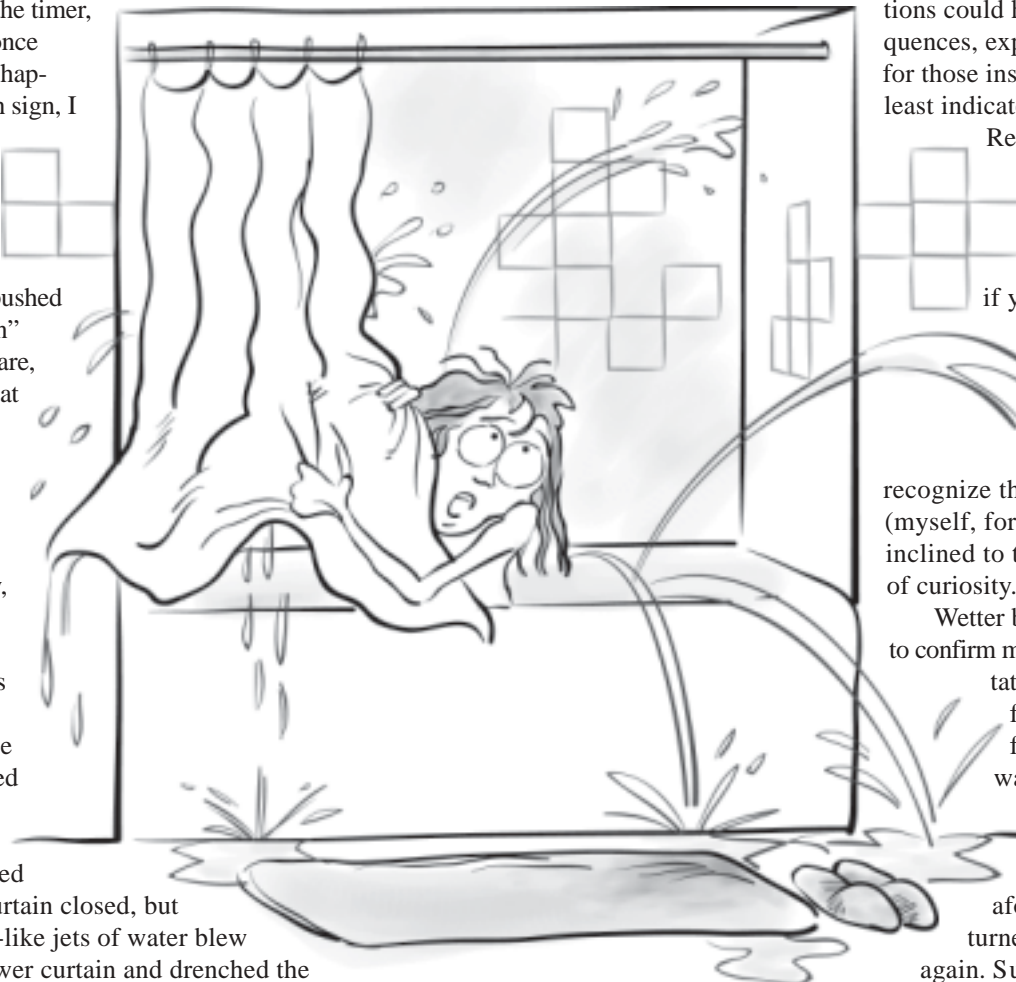
There's a larger lesson here than mere jacuzzi-izing: Don't assume that others will follow your instructions simply because you've provided them. If their failure to follow your instructions could have dire consequences, explain the reasons for those instructions. Or at least indicate that these are Really Important Instructions and they'd better pay attention. And if you haven't explained the consequences of failing to follow the instructions, recognize that some people (myself, for example) will be inclined to test them, just out of curiosity.

Wetter but wiser, I wanted to confirm my revised interpretation of the sign. I filled the tub further, till the water covered the remaining nozzles, and with trepidation aforethought, I turned the jacuzzi on again. Sure enough, it behaved flawlessly, creating exactly the sort of underwater turbulence that a well-behaved jacuzzi should. After a pleasant soak, I bailed out the bathroom, returning it to its former state of unsogginess.

Happily, I found that the jacuzzi was a luxurious stress-reliever, even if the stress it relieved was caused by my attempt to use it in the first place.

MANAGING CHANGE

That's Right — I Mean Left!

Have you ever driven on the other side of the road? I don't mean like here in Boston, where they do it for sport. I mean in a country where they drive on the opposite side of the road from what you're used to. It's an eye-opening experience when something as familiar as driving suddenly becomes so unfamiliar.

That was my experience on a trip to Scotland with my husband, Mr. Honk-If-You-Want-To-See-Aggressive-Driving. With confidence aforethought, Mr. Honk-If pulled right out into rush-hour traffic, as if he'd been doing alternative-side-of-the-road driving all his life.

For the first part of the day's outing, I opted to serve in a support capacity, which consisted of screeching, "Keep left! Keep left!" This I interspersed with high-decibel shrieking when I thought a car coming toward us was going to smack into us. I shrieked a lot that day.

Then it was my turn to drive. "Just keep left," I told myself a few million times. At first, it was like doing something old and familiar but at the same time strangely new and different. I had to quickly unlearn old habits (or at least temporarily file them away) and substitute new ones.

Driving on the other side of the road proved to be easier than I expected. But not so driving on the other side of the car. When Boston drivers drive on the other side of the road, they stay on the same side of the car while doing it. But in most countries where you drive on the other side of the road (left, in this case), you also switch to the other side of the car (right, right?)

After some initial shrieking — having excelled at it as the passenger, I kept it up as the driver — driving became more intuitive. However, in focusing so intently on the left side of the road, we each veered too far left a few times, thereby grazing an assortment of immovable objects. We spent a goodly portion of the day in traffic circles going round and round, trying to figure out how to exit gracefully (which is to say, unsmashingly). But to our surprise, we found that the toughest driving was not in traffic, where you can simply follow the car in front of you, but when there was no one else around to imitate. Shriek! Screech!

The most striking part of the experience was how tiring it was. We were doing something that was as familiar as could be, and yet so unfamiliar as to require intense concentration until new habits began to form. The experience reminded me how mentally and emotionally demanding it can be to adjust to change.
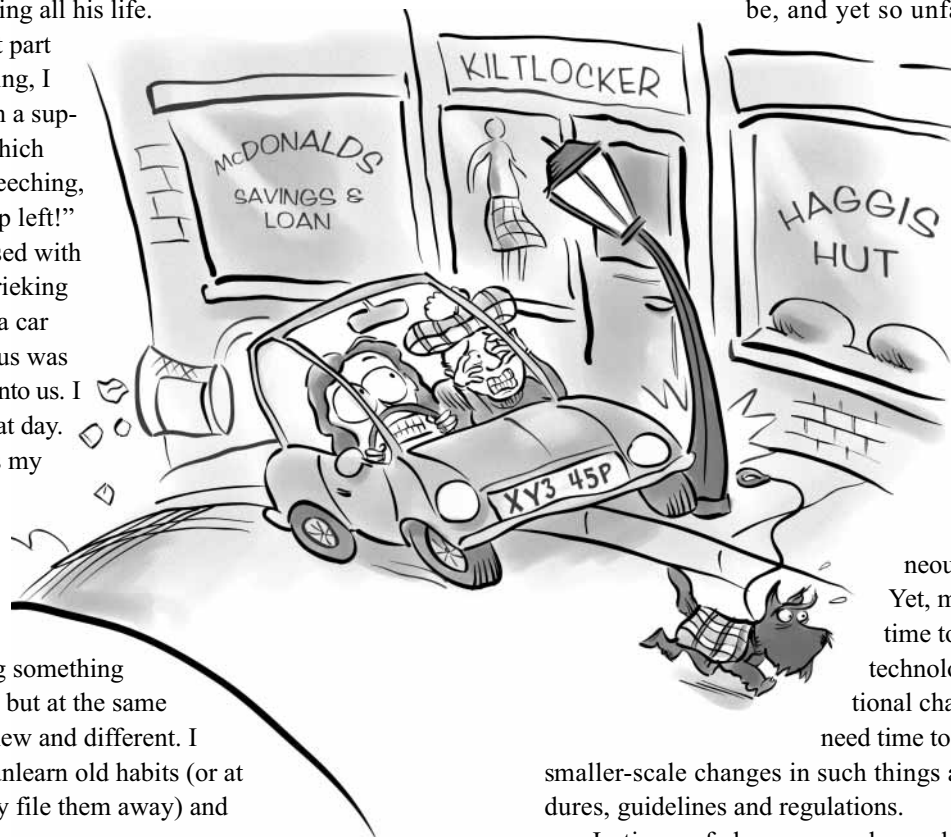
In the workplace, managers often expect people to instantaneously adopt change. Yet, most people require time to adjust to large-scale technological and organizational change. They may also need time to adjust to seemingly smaller-scale changes in such things as standards, procedures, guidelines and regulations.

In times of change, people need information to help them understand what's different and how they'll benefit, balanced by empathy to help them feel less alone and appreciate how they'll be affected. People need time to part with what was familiar and comfortable and to form new habits. And just as with traffic circles, they may go round and round before the new ways become intuitive.

Astute managers understand this adjustment process, allow for it, and help their employees through it. And they recognize the sounds of change, and respond accordingly. Shriek! Screech!

LISTENING

What Most People Need

One of my favorite sources of wisdom is greeting cards. Check out a few and you'll see what I mean mean. For example, one card that I came across said, "What most people really need . . . (and on the inside) is a good listening to." So true, and what a powerful message simply stated. This card led me to speculate that, in this can't-you-see-I'm-busy world, people rarely take the time to really listen to each other.

Still, I suspect that most people would insist that they *do* listen to each other. But what many people view as listening is no more than mere hearing. And hearing — that is, being fortunate enough to have functioning ears — is only part of the listening process. People who want to convey that they are truly listening respond in a way that communicates that they really did hear.

An example of non-listening
Consider this interaction that I overheard at the gym between two women on adjacent cross-trainers:

Person A: I caught my finger in the car door last week. Ouch, did that hurt!
Person B: My car didn't start this morning.

Did Person B (let's call her Ms. Car-Stuck) hear what Person A (Ms. Finger-Ouch) said? Probably, since her response was car-related. But was she *listening*? Hardly.

A true listener in this interaction would have referenced Ms. Finger-Ouch's painful plight by saying something like: "How awful! Are you OK?" or "That must have been excruciating!" or even "My goodness, what a stupid thing to do!" — though this last response, despite indicating listening, would not have earned many empathy points.

Abruptly changing the subject is a strong sign of *not* listening, yet it's just what people often do, voicing an unrelated response so quickly as to dismiss what was just said. By commenting on her car's not starting, Ms. Car-Stuck probably ensured that she too wouldn't be listened to because Ms. Finger-Ouch was still pondering her pain.

That's nothing, I . . .
Another sign of non-listening is a response that sounds like an attempt to one-up the other person. There's no question that people who respond this way have heard what the other person said, but their response sounds like an attempt to discount, belittle, dismiss or ignore the other person's statement and to redirect attention to themselves. For example:

Person C: I found a great bargain on shoes.
Person D: That's nothing. I found a laptop for half-price.

Or

Person E: We had to outrun a hungry-looking bear. Boyoboy, was that terrifying!
Person F: You think that's something? I almost hit a moose on Route 50.

Or

Person G: Wow, I was able to do 10 push-ups!
Person H: Well, it'll really count when you can do 50.

In responding as they did, Persons D, F and H displayed three serious listening flaws: First, they didn't acknowledge what the speaker said. Second, their responses lacked empathy, that wonderful quality that conveys caring. And third, their responses instead focused on something in their own world that was purportedly bigger, braver, or more important than what the speaker had just described.

Most of the time, when people respond as Persons D, F and H did, they are simply giving voice to thoughts that popped into their head. And there's nothing wrong with such thought-popping. But before voicing such thoughts, people who want to convey that they're listening would focus attention on the speaker.

For example, Person D could have commented on the great shoe bargain — or on how pleased Person C was to have found the bargain — before redirecting the interaction to himself.

Person F could have asked about the bear-ish experience and then offered an I-really-heard-you transition, such as "Your experience reminds me of one of my own . . ."

And Person H could have simply said "Congratulations! That's great!" which, of course, is what Person G wanted to hear.

I hear you!
If you want to be respected as a good listener, make sure you give the speaker your full attention. And signal that you're really listening by responding in a way that focuses on the speaker, stays on the topic, and invites the speaker to say more. Remember, what most people really need is a good listening to — and who better than you to model how to do it?

MANAGEMENT

Totally Outrageous Screw-Ups Permitted Here

What's a good way to encourage open and honest communication among your staff, especially regarding problems they face, mistakes they make, glitches they create, and things that just plain seem to go wrong? When I was a client support manager, I tried a light-hearted approach that worked wonderfully. You're welcome to use this technique, but be forewarned: It'll help if you're already known for being a little zany.

It was a few days before year end. I bought some peel-and-stick stickers — the kind that come in different sizes, shapes and designer colors. I selected round, aqua stickers in two sizes, medium and large. I wrote the name of each person in my department on two medium-size stickers and one large sticker.

I called my staff together and told them I wanted to acknowledge their efforts over the past year by giving them something special they could use during the coming year. I then gave them each the three stickers with their name on it.

I explained that these stickers entitled each of them to two medium-size screw-ups and one totally outrageous screw-up during the next year without fear of repercussions. In my sternest mock-serious voice, I explained, "By turning the appropriate sticker in to me at the time of the screw-up, you'll be let off the hook, provided you follow some important rules." I then advised them as follows:

1. To be let off the hook, you must turn the sticker in at the time of the screw-up, or as soon thereafter as you learn about it.

2. Two medium-size stickers are equivalent to one large sticker, entitling you, if you so choose, to two totally outrageous screw-ups rather than one outrageous screw-up and two medium-size ones.

3. Any glitch or goof that I don't know about won't count as a screw-up. However, if you withhold information about a biggie and I come to know of it anyway, you'll forfeit all your stickers, and possibly much more.

4. If a screw-up results from the combined efforts of two or more of you, you can each turn in half a sticker. Fractions less than one-half will not be accepted.

5. Since we're all extremely busy, minor screw-ups should just be fixed without any special fanfare.

6. At the end of the next year, all unused stickers will become null and void. There will be no carry-over stickers, therefore no advantage in exhibiting a year's worth of exemplary behavior in hopes of retaining stickers for use in subsequent years.

In closing, I reminded them that the sticker effective date was January 1st, and any screw-ups during the last few days of the current year were at their own risk.

They got the point: I neither expected nor required perfection. We had a role that entailed tackling difficult situations under stressful conditions and problems would occur. When they did, our approach would be to openly acknowledge them, accept responsibility, resolve them, and do our best to learn from them.

This type of Sticker Strategy doesn't work with people who take themselves too seriously. Fortunately, we didn't suffer from that affliction. We had demanding customers, constantly changing priorities, and critical deadlines, and we all agreed that creating an environment in which we could laugh at ourselves and with each other was an important key to maintaining our sanity.

I made only one mistake. I forgot to allocate stickers to myself. That proved to be a Totally Outrageous Screw-up.