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What Do People Do All Day?

Sarah McArthur

With more than two decades of experience in publishing, most prominently as a writer, editor, and writing coach, Sarah McArthur is continually striving to enhance her knowledge and expertise about the rapidly changing business of publishing and to share it with others who have a message to share.

*Founder and CEO of *sdedit, her fields of expertise are management, leadership, executive and business coaching, and human resources. She has authored and edited numerous books including, Coaching for Leadership: Writings on Leadership from the World's Greatest Coaches with Marshall Goldsmith and Laurence S. Lyons, The AMA Handbook of Leadership, co-edited with Marshall Goldsmith and John Baldoni (chosen one of the Top 10 Business, Management, and Labor Titles of 2010 by Choice), the Optimizing Talent Workbook with Linda Sharkey, and Global Business Leadership with Dr. E. S. Wibbeke.*

In addition to her own works, Sarah has played significant roles in many other book projects including Marshall Goldsmith's New York Times bestseller Triggers, all three editions of the bestselling management classic Coaching for Leadership, and Marshall's Amazon.com, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal #1 bestseller, What Got You Here Won't Get You There.

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One of my favorite books is *What Do People Do All Day* by Richard Scarry. My parents bought it for me in London when I was about 5, and I studied it intensely for a year, sitting in the back of our VW van with my sister as we drove across Europe, Russia, and Africa. I still have it. It is tattered, worn, the cover is barely attached, and my young child scribble is on many of the pages – my notes for this chapter, it seems.

A mixture of written story and illustration, *What Do People Do All Day* is set in a town called Busytown. The characters are diverse. Mayor Fox, Farmer Alfalfa (a goat), the Grocer cat family, Doctor Lion, Mommy Stitches, and Abby Rabbit. Everyone plays a part in the functioning of the town. “We are all workers. We work hard so that there will be enough food and houses and clothing for our families.”¹

To me, this book is the essence of work is love made visible – working together for the functioning of society and the well-being of people around the globe. Its message is that we all contribute to society; everyone has a place, everyone is included, everyone participates. Humanity is a big network of people working together; there is no disconnect caused by poor communication.

There are chapters such as, “Building a New House,” “Mailing a Letter,” and “Firemen to the Rescue,” which illustrate the different roles for each project. For instance, in “The Train Trip” chapter, a sweet little family of pigs takes a train to visit their cousins in the country. Along the way they buy magazines to read from the friendly porcupine’s newsstand, the hard-working dog and mouse fuel and oil the train, a welcoming fox engineer drives the train, and the focused pig switchman changes the tracks, so the train goes to the right place. Busytown is a town of cooperation, organization, and productivity based on simpler times when we communicated with the people around us rather than ignoring them to scroll our feeds. You wouldn’t see Abby Rabbit taking selfies and posting them to SnapChat during Algebra class.

This is what I see now when I look out the window. I see a breakdown of communication caused by information technology. While it is a great advancement for society, when poorly used it is destructive and

can have significant negative consequences. The breakdown is caused by (1) the rapid pace of information technology, which among other things, causes important stories to quickly get lost in the next day's media flood; (2) a frequent lack of courtesy and respect in the social media chatter; (3) a lack of ethics on the part of some caused by the ability to self-publish and the diminishing role for the gatekeepers (publishers) who used to review our content before it went public; and (4) an addiction to a constant influx of digital information that is overpowering our reliance on each other for personal connection and passing on our knowledge.

- *Speed*: The speed of communication technology is astounding; in fact, it is exponential. “According to the law of accelerating returns, the pace of technological progress – especially information technology – speeds up exponentially over time because there is a common force driving it forward.” Being exponential, as it turns out, is all about evolution.... [Ray] Kurzweil wrote in 2001² that every decade our overall rate of progress was doubling, “We won’t experience 100 years of progress in the 21st century – it will be more like 20,000 years of progress (at today’s rate).”³
- *Courtesy and Respect*: Frances Hesselbein famously says that the best advice she ever received is to have respect for all people. This great leader also says, “Language is the greatest motivating force. You can phrase something positively and inspire people to do their best, or negatively and make them feel worried, uncertain, and self-conscious. ... I try ... to use my own voice in a way that shows caring, respect, appreciation, and patience. Your voice, your language, help determine your culture. And part of how a corporate culture is defined is how the people who work for an organization use language.”⁴ The language we use in our global communications is creating our global culture. What do we want our global culture to be like? Respectful and courteous, kind and inclusive, or contrary and definitively embattled faction against faction, department against department, personality against personality (think Jolie versus Aniston, Swift versus Perry).
- *Ethics*: According to Tom Kolditz, in his essay for this book, “The 2017 World Economic Forum (WEF) articulated and addressed the advent of changes related to technology as the ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’ (or 4IR). From the proceedings of the WEF’s 2017 Annual Meeting of New Champions,⁵ there is a shift in competencies that new leaders will need to master to adapt to the powerful social and economic trends in the next 10–20 years.... [One is that] Leaders will need to be savvy to deceit, malfeasance, and illegality – especially in terms of behavior

conveyed by digital and informational means. They must protect their organizations in a world disappointingly tolerant of unethical behavior. Having strong personal ethics is simply not enough; new leaders must have a strong awareness that others may not share their commitment to doing what is right.”⁶

- *Addiction*: Even at the time of this writing, we’re still debating whether or not there is such a thing as a *social media addict*. In January of 2018, the World Health Organization announced that it will list video gaming as a mental disorder. Social media addiction has yet to make the list. Mark Griffiths at Nottingham Trent University, who has been researching gambling and internet addictions as well as the overuse of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, believes that social media can be “potentially addictive.” He has found “a technological compulsion like ‘social media addiction’ comes with all of the behavioural signals that we might usually associate with chemical addictions, such as smoking or alcoholism. These include mood changes, social withdrawal, conflict and relapse.”⁷

Solution to the Breakdown

What can we do to repair this communication breakdown and prevent future ramifications from it? One thing that I do to repair and address this challenge is ask myself: *Am I being heard?* Frances Hesselbein often says, “Communication is not saying something; communication is being heard.” I take this to heart in all of my communications, written, oral, digital. If I am not heard, I have not communicated.

How can one be heard by the most people? Three things are paramount.

1. *Have a message*. The first key to being heard is to have a message, something to say that you feel is important to be heard. Great leadership messages are most often inspirational, hopeful, and engaging. As with this section of our book, we’ve instilled hope and engagement with its inspiring title – Bright Future!
2. *Be courteous and have respect for all people*. I can think of no better way to phrase this than that expressed by Frances Hesselbein in *My Life in Leadership*. She writes, “Today, when we observe the lowest level of trust and the highest level of cynicism, the call for leaders who are healers and unifiers must be heard. Wherever we are, whatever our work, whatever our platform or forum, we must find the language that heals, the

inclusion that unifies. It is a critical time for leaders at every level to make the difference, and demonstrate that respect for all people is a paramount value. 'For if the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?' should be a powerful reminder for all of us."⁸

3. *Be clear and concise.* This is a skill of the best communicators, leaders, writers, and speakers in history. It is in large part learned and in some part natural talent. Being clear and concise means choosing your words deliberately and carefully, and it leads to the simplification of the most complex ideas, so that they can be understood by the broadest audience. Clarity equals Coherence. We learn this skill from others and when we practice it in our own communications. For instance, those of us who are sensitive to our *audience* or conversation partners, pick up on nonverbal cues that we are not being heard and rephrase or pause. A coherent message and the ability to deliver it in a way that makes sense to the broadest audience is very advantageous to being heard.

Interestingly, communication breakdown is a significant challenge in the Information Age. One might think that with such incredible tools for communication at our disposal and the abundance of information at our fingertips, we would be well on our way to utopia. We're not quite hitting the mark yet, but many of us are working toward it by being positive. We are deliberately choosing our words to create an inclusive global culture and actively phrasing our language to be forward thinking, respectful, and clear. We are not engaging and indulging the rapid-fire flood of negativity that has come with these great advancements in our communication system. In focusing on the positive, we are actively creating for humanity a Bright Future and we call on you and everyone across the world to join us!

Reflection Questions

1. Do you notice communication breakdown in your personal and/or professional life?
2. What can you do to repair this breakdown and prevent it in the future?
3. How will you know if you are being heard?
4. How can you use your words to create a positive environment for yourself and those around you?

Notes

1. Richard Scarry, *What Do People Do All Day?* (New York: Random House, 1968).
2. Ray Kurzweil, March 2001, www.kurzweilai.net/the-law-of-accelerating-returns.
3. Alison E. Berman and Jason Dorrier, March 2016, <https://singularityhub.com/2016/03/22/technology-feels-like-its-accelerating-because-it-actually-is/#sm.00000jlmvildgnd5uymy2x1clcu0d>.
4. Sally Helgesen, *The Female Advantage* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, June 2010), 81–82.
5. Thomas A. Kolditz, “Why You Lead Determines How Well You Lead,” *Harvard Business Review*, July 22, 2014, <http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/07/why-you-lead-determines-how-well-you-lead/>.
6. Thomas A. Kolditz, Chapter 24, this volume.
7. Sophia Smith Galer, “How Much Is ‘Too Much Time’ on Social Media?” January 19, 2018, www.bbc.com/future/story/20180118-how-much-is-too-much-time-on-social-media.
8. Frances Hesselbein, *My Life in Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 27.