# COMMUNICATION AGGRAVATION

I was invited to give a workshop for a group of high-powered executives. It was held at a small lakeside resort on a sunny day in June - an idyllic setting for talking about work-life balance and values.

At the mid-morning break I noticed three group members chatting out on the driveway. But they weren't talking to one another. Each had a phone against his ear, presumably talking business. "Well," I thought, "maybe some things can't wait." But then I looked out the lakeside window at another group on the deck. Despite the lovely view, they also had phones stuck in their ears, each preoccupied with a seemingly important conversation. I wondered: "What's wrong with this picture?" We're gathered for a peaceful retreat on a beautiful lake to get some perspective on their lives - and they're trying to fit business into the cracks.

This is not an isolated incident. I've asked people to turn off their laptops during seminar breaks. They reply that if they don't pick up their messages continuously, they'll have 100 emails to deal with by the end of the day.

We live in a wired world. It's a mixed blessing. I remember the big breakthrough when doctors got pagers. They allowed us to be out and about when we were on call instead of being tied to a telephone. What freedom! However, in today's world, pagers, cell phones, voice mail and email, have created an electronic leash instead of liberation. As David Brooks put it in a recent Newsweek article, "Never being out of touch means never being able to get away."

And this isn't the only kind of communication aggravation. We've all been on trains and buses where one insensitive passenger with a cell phone and a loud voice can infuriate dozens of travelers who only want to read or sleep. We also get to learn far more about the exhibitionist than any of us wanted to know.

Here's another scenario. I recently called the help line for one of my office techno-gizmos that was on the fritz. I was then led through a maze of voice mail menus the likes of which I'd never encountered before. They were so multi-layered you needed to draw flow diagrams to keep track of all the options. The meta-message it conveyed to me was, "We've already made the sale. We're not interested in your problem. Go away!" After three rounds of this charade, I hung up, called the dealer from whom I'd bought the equipment, and said, "I'd like you to handle this. Your supplier doesn't seem to be very customer-focused."

Then there's the steady stream of misdirected faxes I receive that are meant for a professional office in town with a fax number similar to mine. This leads to questions of "fax etiquette." Do I ignore them (and risk being a bad citizen), resend them to the proper number (which takes time - some of these documents are 10-20 pages long), call the sender (or intended recipient) to tell them their message went astray? And who should pay for all the paper and ink these unwanted faxes consume?

And while we're at it, unsolicited marketing faxes are another plague, adding to your overhead costs while the advertiser incurs no expense at all. Great racket - no wonder there's so much of it.

Then there's the "hurry-up" factor. A lawyer told me: "I used to get letters asking for an opinion. I'd think about it and mail back a reply. Now I get a fax asking for a response by 2:00 p.m. today. Then I receive a phone call an hour later, asking, 'Did you get my fax? What do you think?'" This expectation of accelerated turnaround is not only stressful, but often precludes any time for

reflection, and e-mail has only pushed this phenomenon into overdrive. We're expected to react rather than respond. And unless we do something about it, it's only going to get worse.

And finally, my favourite: call waiting - (which I label "call aggravating"). I understand the need for businesses to answer each call, which sometimes means putting people on hold. But residential phones where each incoming call beeps a signal to interrupt? Persistently? Every time a phone partner says, "Oh, just a second, let me get this call." I feel like they're really saying, "Hold on a sec - this call might be more important than you." What a great technological innovation! How did we ever get along without it?

Did I mention spam emails that take several minutes to download? Or those error messages that come up to tell you that you can't connect with your Internet server - just as you're tidying up to go on vacation? These are some of the joyous wired-world experiences I call "Communication Aggravation."

**Suggestions for dealing with information overload and techno-irritation.**

Decide what technology you want to use and how you want to use it. You don't need every gadget just because it's available. For example, I choose not to carry a pager, electronic organizer or laptop. I use a car phone for emergency calls only. I have caller I.D. and take calls selectively during high-concentration work. I don't have a fax machine at home. These choices suit my business practice and lifestyle. Choose what works for you.

Tell people your favoured method of communication. I prefer telephone first, e-mail second and fax third. I inform people that I only check my e-mail twice a day so, to reach me quickly, telephone is best. We ask people not call us after 10:00 p.m. Notify others about your preferences.
Treat people the way you want to be treated. Don't spam others if you don't like them spamming you. Don't use your cell phone like a megaphone in public places.

Be selective about who you give your cell phone number and e-mail address to.

**Voice Mail**
**A. Receiving calls.**
Keep it short. Identify your name or company and invite a message. You can say "I'm sorry I missed your call" but don't list a bunch of reasons - it doesn't matter if you're on another line, in a meeting, out for lunch, taking a walk, or in the bathroom. The point is - you're not available. My two favorite "cut-to-the-chase" (residential phone) messages are "Speak at the beep" and "You know what to do."
Tell callers if your machine has a time limit so they don't get cut off in mid-sentence.
If you require a long message, use a bypass system that allows callers to get right to the "record" tone.
Avoid cliches - everyone's busy. My own pet peeve is "Your call is important to us," - usually used by companies that never answer with a live voice.
If you're away, tell callers when you'll be picking up messages and calling back.
During high-concentration tasks, avoid the temptation to answer the phone. It's a discipline - you may break out in a cold sweat - but it will protect your most productive time.

**Leaving messages.**
Be brief. Anticipate a recorded greeting and plan your message in advance. Most of us don't think fast enough to leave a concise message instead of rambling.

State the purpose of your call and the best time to call you back.

Repeat your name and phone number at the end of your message (and say your number s-l-o-w-l-y)

Leave only one message - even if you call back 2-3 times.

**Fax.**

Don't send unsolicited marketing faxes.

If you ignore #1, at least indicate how recipients can get off your mailing list.

Ask if people require a cover sheet and tell them if you don't need one. It saves a lot of time, ink, and paper.

Be respectful of privacy. Don't send highly confidential information by fax. Unopened or misdirected letters are sealed. But faxes are open to anyone and may lie around for days.

**E-Mail**

Check e-mail only once or twice a day. It's a tempting toy, but a sinkhole for time and energy.

Don't open your e-mail first thing in the morning if you're a morning person. You'll end up giving away your best 30-60 minutes/day, when you're freshest and most productive.

Turn off the sound on your computer that signals the arrival of each new e-mail.

Don't respond to messages unless you have to. Your quick "Thanks Bernie--have a great weekend." Is just one more message for him to download and open. It can be a greater courtesy not to reply.

Keep your messages short -saves time for everyone.

If you're sending the same message to multiple people, use the "blind cc" option so the recipient only sees their own name. I once received a 4-line message that was preceded by 16 lines of e-mail addresses of other people.

Use high or highest priority designations only when you really mean it. I once got a message marked "highest priority"- only to find a solicitation for a charitable donation.

Get your name taken off as many e-mail lists as possible. This includes joke lists--- unless the jokes are really funny.

Use filtering programs if you're inundated with unwanted e-mails.

Be your own filtering system. Before you press send, ask yourself if this message really needs to be sent at all.

Communication is a great thing. Over-communication is a blight. Use your toys wisely - and encourage others do the same.