

Staying ahead of the curve

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ABSTRACT

The following are keynote remarks by Heath Applebaum delivered on Saturday, October 24, 2015, at the Master of Communications Management Autumn Gala Dinner, in Hamilton Ontario at the Hamilton Club. Applebaum is professor of public relations at the University of Guelph-Humber and president of Echo Communications Inc., a leading reputation management consulting firm based in Toronto. The author shares his insights into the necessary evolution of public relations to help their organizations successfully navigate risky waters. Successful organizations in the future will be those that are adapting to disruptive changes and cultivating authentic relationships. In these volatile economic times, reputations are proving to be more valuable and vulnerable than ever.

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Thank you, Philip, for your kind introduction. Students, faculty, and alumni, it is a genuine pleasure to join you here at the Hamilton Club tonight. As I was preparing a few thoughts to share with you, like any savvy communicator, I wanted to get at least a peripheral sense of my audience and tailor my remarks accordingly.

What I discovered when I delved into the bios of the current students and faculty in the McMaster-Syracuse Master of Communications Management (MCM) program was a very impressive and diverse group of professionals doing fascinating work. It revealed students actively working in the corporate, education, healthcare, government, and non-profit sectors. A plethora of communicators from across the country gainfully employed for organizations large and small, from financial and insurance companies to universities, public sector roles, or modest charities. I would be remiss if I did not mention the head of communications for Canada's preeminent plumbing supply company.

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It was a reassuring reminder to me that communicators are everywhere, embedded deep within the heart of organizations in every industry. Often we are the proverbial pipelines that connect people, departments, functions, geography, helping to conceptualize and articulate strategies that inspire action.

Throughout my colourful 20-year career, I have been fortunate to earn a seat at the table and play crucial roles within local, national, and multinational companies. I began my career in the PR agency world, and in many ways, it has come full-circle in the reputation consulting work I now do for a variety of interesting clients. I also have an opportunity as a professor to inspire the next generation of communicators. Communicators that will graduate in tumultuous economic times and an evolving media landscape that is transforming the entire public relations industry.

As a consultant, it feels good to be trusted to douse the flames of a crisis and help a client manage contentious issues, but I try to remind my clients that it is far cheaper to prepare and prevent than to repair and repent. As the expression goes, the seven most expensive words in business are, “because we have always done it that way.” Unfortunately, it often takes a crisis for some executives to finally heed the advice of their communications team and invest the resources needed to prepare adequately for the next one.

Several clients have affectionately nicknamed me their ‘reputation doctor,’ because I urge them to focus on prevention rather than mere damage control. I prefer to identify the symptoms early enough to avoid acute or terminal organizational health issues. While I admit I enjoy the adrenaline rush of stick-handling a crisis, I genuinely prefer to be the smoke detector; to get involved early, to diagnose the root causes of business problems and identify risks before they escalate into costly, raging infernos.

As billionaire Warren Buffet astutely reminds his executives, “It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.” Unfortunately, few executives realize this. They are either too far removed from the day-to-day realities of their business or too close to the problem to realize what ails them.

As communicators, we are thrust into many pivotal roles and wear many hats—we are crisis firefighters; we are employee engagement champions, change agents, storytellers, and trusted strategists. We provide the most value when we can forecast trends that will confront our organizations and clients on the horizon. In my experience, it’s not a question of whether an organization will face a crisis, but when.

When I was a shy, impressionable six-year-old kid, I recall how my mother posted a magnet on our avocado-green fridge. It read, ‘The five P’s

to success: proper, preparation, prevents, poor, performance.' I never forgot this simple piece of advice, not as a student, traveler, communicator, business owner, professor, or parent.

It's true, as communicators we must be prepared for just about anything, anticipating issues as if we are clairvoyant, with a crystal ball to the future. Or, alternatively, to monitor your social media landscape.

We have to be air traffic controllers too—managing multifaceted programs, both incoming and outgoing communications, meticulously timing when they land and when they launch. Only then can we ensure that messages have the best chance of resonating and safely reaching their intended destination, influencing the stakeholders whose success your business depends upon.

As Nobel Prize-winning playwright George Bernard Shaw succinctly put it, "The greatest problem in communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished." Messages are rarely understood exactly as we intend; they pass through the proverbial paper shredder, and if they are not simple and memorable like my fridge magnet, the messages are often misinterpreted or, worse yet, entirely ignored by stakeholders. Just because we tweet something to 100,000 followers doesn't mean much. It is merely an output, not an outcome.

It's true that with the unprecedented technology available to us, messages can instantaneously reach a global audience with the click of a mouse. Social media has also empowered audiences, who can become powerful allies or dangerous reputation assassins. However, we should never mistake technology for communication. A digital avalanche of information, rumours, and clickbait bombards our audiences. The velocity and volume of information make it that much more challenging to break through the mind-numbing noise and be heard. Never mind the behavioural outcomes we seek, such as persuasion, sparking sales, votes, donations, or volunteers, to tangibly prove a return on investment.

Throughout my career journey, I have often found myself thrust into the role of the *de facto* ethical conscience for the organizations that employed me. I was the eyes and ears of the organization, like a radar detector, sensing inherent dangers long before others. I envisioned what the headline in the *Globe and Mail* would read if the news became public, and I diligently prepared for the incessant ringing of my phone—a reporter hungry for a quote or soundbite.

It has been said that the difference between school and life is that in school, you're taught a lesson and then given a test. In life, you're given a test that teaches you a lesson. Perhaps as communicators we have learned out of

necessity. As professionals courageously returning to school to complete your Master's degree, you will be that much wiser.

As a proud MCM alumnus, I can now see that many of us have developed this survival intuition as a natural by-product of our work. Communicators enjoy a unique vantage point: we have cross-disciplinary, boundary-spanning roles, and the best communicators are usually the most active listeners.

If you have worked for an organization or client long enough, you understand your stakeholders and can anticipate the way the outside world is likely to react. To protect the brand and reputation, we know the importance of preparing leaders, cultivating dialogue, adapting to changing circumstances, and behaving ethically. That's important, because the days of sweeping issues under the proverbial carpet are long gone.

Ultimately, actions do speak infinitely louder than words alone; no organization is beyond the scrutiny that emerges from the unforgiving court of public opinion. The rise of corporate social responsibility has now become an expectation, rather than a superficial image-booster for the wealthy few. We know that communication is not about pushing out information, but breaking through. It's what comes back from our audience that really counts, that provides crucial insights on what works and what does not.

As enlightened communicators, we must reinforce to c-suite executives that trust is not a message. Trust is an outcome of that dialogue, requiring a long-term commitment to align actions and words. Only then will employees, investors, consumers, or regulators truly believe what we have to say. The bigger the gap between stakeholder expectations and the actions of your organization, the more that reputation risk escalates.

We know that we can only prove our true value when we conduct solid research upfront, extracting insights from the findings and using measurable, time-bound objectives to prove the impact of our work. As a frequent judge of industry awards for both CPRS and IABC, it surprises me how few campaigns have fully embraced this standard expectation.

Ultimately, communication has to spark action, to change peoples' behaviour, and to advance a cause or business objective. If you want to secure more budget, staff, and organizational respect, you must aspire to be more than just a wordsmith who churns out news releases, speeches, or intranet copy. When we are strategic, we earn accolades, get promoted, and build teams. We go from being tacticians to trusted advisors.

By a quick show of hands, how many students here have kids? That's wonderful. I have an adorable four-year-old son named Ethan, who is the light of my life. Every day, he inspires me, surprises me, makes me laugh, and

makes my wife and me proud beyond words. The other day I was playing a classic board game with him, Snakes and Ladders, and it got me thinking, our careers are rarely a straight line progression. Rather, it is a series of unpredictable triumphs and setbacks. There is rarely an elevator to success; you have to take the stairs, prove yourself, work hard, and never give up.

I'd like to talk a bit about that because I imagine many of you are pursuing your master's degree, because you want to get ahead, you want to learn, but you want to strive for something bigger.

So what's my story, and why am I here speaking to you tonight? When I started the MCM program back in 2007, part of the very first class with six other brave students, I was the youngest in the program, working 70 hours a week as the corporate communications manager for a \$30 billion multinational real estate company. I was highly motivated to raise my game and raise the company's game because there was potential for so much more. Fortunately, I had a CEO that believed in me and the power of communication.

During my graduate studies, I was promoted twice, tripled the size of my corporate communications team, and I was able to persuade executives to quadruple my operating budget. I also managed to win a global IABC Gold Quill Award, all in the midst of the great recession.

I hope you too will achieve success however you define it. Ultimately, your desire for success must be infinitely greater than your fear of failure. Graduate school made a big difference in my career and personal maturation, and I know it will make a difference for all of you too.

I was excited to sponge up as much knowledge as I could from the expert faculty. The experience lit a spark inside me that gave me the confidence and knowledge to take my career to the next level. I learned what it meant to think and plan strategically, to look at my work through a wider-angle lens. It provided me with the business foundation to contribute far more to my employers, as well as my clients now that I run my own company.

By investing in yourself and graduate studies, you have already taken a crucial first step in your journey. A journey to become life-long learners, because these days we all have to be. Our industry is experiencing rapid and constant changes. A volatile economy and evolving media landscape have made it necessary for communicators of all stripes to become agile and embrace real-time learning. Those who do not adapt are quickly left in the dust.

With this in mind, I'd like to talk about just that: life-long learning and adapting - the importance of staying ahead of the curve. We are living in times of economic, social, political, environmental, and technological upheaval. Perhaps the iconic Bob Dylan said it best, "The times, they are a changin'." If you

are not moving forward, you will be left behind. Even if you are on the right track, you cannot stand still, or you risk being run over.

As communicators, if we want to win in a fast-paced and unpredictable future, we must be more agile, more innovative, and more creative. We need to spark crucial conversations to help our leaders and clients realize that they need to adapt and change or risk becoming obsolete.

Think of the Kodaks and Blockbusters of our past; think of the VCRs that they used to fill. Now, digital photography, Netflix, and digital on-demand programming have rendered them a relic of the past. Think of how Uber is changing the way people travel or how Amazon has changed the way we shop. We need to persuade the c-suite that they cannot build today's company with yesterday's strategy and still be in business tomorrow.

Look at the state of journalism today. It has been decimated; we can see this in the quality of coverage, the number of staff, and the way they overlook many substantive issues. Google seems to have replaced the concept of reading for a new generation. The times, they are a changin'.

The good news is that these changes also present huge opportunities for communicators who have adapted. We must strive to be great storytellers, and we often have access to interesting and knowledgeable executives who can help feed the constant thirst for fresh digital content.

To quote hockey legend Wayne Gretzky, "We have to go where the puck is going to be, not where it is now." We must embrace new technologies, identify emerging trends, and advise our clients or employers to leverage them. We must be early adopters, rather than casual observers. We must anticipate opportunities. The times, they are a changin'.

Across North America, we are seeing stand-alone PR departments swallowed up and merged with marketing departments, which undoubtedly impacts our influence; it takes us out of the driver's seat. The expectation of integrated campaigns, the rise of content marketing and visual storytelling, CSR, SEO-optimized content, and online reputation management are coming to the forefront. Many savvy PR agencies have adapted already by necessity.

There is a turf war happening right now across this country and globally. Everyone wants a bigger slice of the pie; they want ownership of social media. Most big and mid-sized agencies now have in-house creative teams to feed the media's insatiable appetite for video, infographics, and high-impact photography.

As industry insider Paul Holmes puts it, "For marketers, social media has changed everything. For good PR people, it has changed absolutely nothing." An oversimplification for sure, but it speaks to the fact that we are the

experts at cultivating relationships, collaboration, and dialogue, so we should be at the forefront of social. It is at the core of what we should have always been doing: using new technologies to listen and communicate.

The truth is, I believe we have evolved beyond the very words, “public relations,” because we do so much more than what the world perceives that to be. Instead, we must be the flagbearers of reputation, which encapsulates far more of who we are and what we do.

There has been a paradigm shift, and we need to transcend old notions of what PR was. Why? Because we now live in a digital era of transparency, where there is nowhere to hide and spin is dead. In our digital age, there has been a pervasive and fundamental power shift—consumers, investors, and employees have the power to influence and tarnish reputations with the click of a mouse.

I also passionately believe that reputations are built from the inside out, and I have been speaking at conferences around the world about this for the past 10 years. Research shows that 82 percent of crises are caused internally by a company’s employees and management. Employees can be your loudest and proudest ambassadors, or they can be disengaged reputation assassins, leaking confidential information, stealing and posting damaging content anonymously via social media.

A recent study revealed that that 35 percent of Canadian employees are actively disengaged, essentially sleep-walking through their days, wasting company money, doing the bare minimum. Workers feel taken-for-granted and disconnected from the organization’s mission, vision, and values. They don’t trust their leaders. Even worse, they will actively undermine the company and poison morale for those who do want to work there.

Another challenge companies are facing is the tidal wave of information overload—I’m sure everyone here can relate to exploding inboxes and constant social media distractions.

According to the Digital Universe Study conducted by the IDC, the average office worker is being attacked by 281 exabytes of information per year (Gantz & Reinsel, 2012). That’s 18 zeroes worth of emails, voicemails, social feeds, meetings, PDFs, intranet file sharing, webinars, white papers, and thought-starters, and it’s all growing by 30 percent a year. Imagine what that is doing to productivity. Employees are drinking from a fire hydrant, not a water fountain.

As communicators, one of our new challenges is helping employees to surf on top of that tidal wave, not just by creating more information but by simplifying, filtering, and curating the most important things people need to

know to be productive.

Now, to the power of social media. Stories live forever online—sometimes they can be suppressed, but to try and get negative commentary removed online is like trying to get pee out of a swimming pool: good luck. Every profession, product, and service is rated these days, sparking a rise in advocate marketing.

There is nowhere to hide, and the result is the naked corporation. This transparency is forcing companies to do the right thing or risk being humiliated, just like Volkswagen and their dirty emissions scandal that affected 11 million vehicles and slashed \$35 billion from its market value.

Now, in closing, I'd like to touch upon the theme of overcoming adversity. While I have enjoyed incredible success in my career, I have also faced adversity. I bet everyone here tonight has faced some big personal and professional challenges that you have overcome. Communicators are tough. We adapt, and we persevere.

I want to reinforce four thoughts for staying ahead of the curve, because I know that your careers will also have their share of Snakes and Ladders:

1. Nothing is more important than your professional integrity. Work hard, but also work ethically.
2. If you want to persuade people to support your ideas, involve them in the process. Your ideas need to be stronger than sandcastles; otherwise, they will get knocked down.
3. Don't ever let someone tell you what you can achieve in your life and career. Let it motivate you to prove them wrong.
4. Finally, never stop learning and adapting. Heed the wise words of Charles Darwin: "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change."

Thank you.

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