

Avalanche

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Communication

Hard Slab

30x24 acrylic on canvas by Erin Ashlee
For more about Erin's art, see page 20.
www.erinashlee.com

Story by Doug Krause

What if there was a mystical skill set that would help us address all the human-factor challenges we face in avalanche country? Such a set would address situational awareness, decision-making, error management, leadership, and a host of other challenges. We might as well make this dreamy skill set applicable to all facets of our lives. Let us make it something that is really easy to practice – maybe even something that we already use without thinking about it too much. This skill set will make us rich and powerful and beautiful and intelligent and rich and powerful and beautiful! Let us name the skill set. Perhaps we can call it...**communication**.

We share a fundamental responsibility to actively practice and refine our communication skills, though I believe few of us are actually doing so. I think that's crazy. These skills are easy to practice, and we all have some experience with them. Effective communication has the potential to mitigate every human-factor challenge we encounter in avalanche country. Here are a few simple ideas on communication challenges and how we can address them.

See "Magic Beans" continued on page 28 ➡

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Engaging in risky behavior so that others will notice us is not a new concept that has only emerged with the millennial generation. What is new, however, is the nearly constant "virtual presence" of the others who we are trying to impress.

—Jerry Isaak, *Impact of Social Media*, pg 24

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Magic Beans

The Elusive Power of Speaking and Listening

Story by Doug Krause
continued from cover

When to Communicate

The person who won't read has no advantage over the person who can't.

—Mark Twain

A weird, stinky, ostensibly wise man once said to me, "Here's your radio; learn how to use it, then don't." My excitement at receiving my first radio deflated with a slow high-pitched scree, but he had a point – a point obscured by the blunt condescending tone – but a valid one nonetheless. We have a responsibility to communicate, but effective communication requires good timing. There is a time to speak up and a time to pipe down. Learning the difference is our first step.

Speak up when you don't understand or feel like you are missing something. We have a responsibility to inquire. If you don't get it, don't just assume you will figure it out later. Do you need to know now? In a dangerous and dynamic environment, confusion indicates that immediate inquiry may be warranted. As in, "What's that loud rumbling sound coming from above us?" In less urgent circumstances, identify convenient opportunities for asking what the heck is going on. "Why are we taking this route instead of that one?" Understanding shit is important; **this is the inquiry requirement.**

Speak up to express your opinion. Advocacy is also a responsibility, one that weighs on the novice and veteran alike. Someone with no opinion is just along for the ride. Hopefully they brought gas money or at least some beer and a corn dog. The novice has a responsibility to participate, and the veteran needs to support that. Conversely, a leader that shirks communication is driving a bus along the cliffs of Bolivia's Old Yungas Road. The disenfranchised passengers shudder and pray, wallow in blissful ignorance, or pretend not to notice the precipitous shoulders. Veterans and greenhorns both have a



Tucker Chenoweth practices nonverbal communication with Brad Carpenter.

Photo by Doug Krause

responsibility to articulate the components of their decision-making and situational awareness; **this is the advocacy requirement.**

The responsibilities for inquiry and advocacy have to be balanced with relevance. Does your question or information require immediate expression, or can it wait? Note the difference between critical and casual opportunities for communication. The insufferably assertive use communication as a cudgel, and the relentlessly inquisitive use it as a crutch. The wise grasshopper favors the quiet word in an opportune moment yet reserves the right to shatter your glass with an urgent warning cry.

Poor timing transforms communication from an asset into a distraction and undermines its value. Well-timed inquiry or advocacy highlights urgency and enhances situational awareness. Err on the side of caution and use opportune moments to share observations, to hazard opinions, and to ask questions. Take the next step and discuss communication issues; that process refines our understanding of relevance and urgency. With practice we get better. Our sense of timing becomes more acute.

If you are new to all of this, irrational exuberance or doe-eyed silence are equally inappropriate. Learn when to pipe down and when to speak up. If you have been hunting avalanches for eons, chances are good you know more than port from starboard. Share your knowledge.

What to Communicate

Is the noise in my head bothering you?

—Stephen Tyler

Effective and efficient communication requires a moment of planning to define and organize message content: what needs to be in the message and what does not. With practice, this becomes an intuitive moment. If you have a lot to say, break it down and give each idea a bit of elbow room. If you have multiple ideas (congratulations), consider sending separate messages for each. Communication without forethought may be referred to as spew, blather, or prattle. Conveniently, all three of these terms can be used as verbs or nouns. They compromise your message. Your listener gets lost or is forced to compensate by spending extra time interpreting the message. So practice deciding what you are going to say before you speak. *Que loco, si?*

Your moment of planning what to say should result in messages that contain clear, concise, and complete information. This is harder than it sounds. Goal and problem statements add context to an idea. Use them as necessary to enhance clarity. "We need to be over there. I wanna blow up this hanging slab of death so we can get over there safely." Precise use of professional nomenclature also enhances clarity. Practice efficient communication by summarizing information without sacrificing clarity or content. Practice using the right terms. Practice and it becomes natural.

Understand the difference between an opinion and an observation. If an opinion is called for, ambiguity is weak sauce. If you don't know, that's okay. Say so. If you don't know but choose to express that with a two-minute soliloquy full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, you are part of the problem. Blathering on with vague prattle is counterproductive.

Nonverbal communication is part of the message content. Tone and body language convey information. If the listener is confused, they may default to prioritizing the nonverbal content. "I don't know what you're talking about, but it's loud and sounds urgent. I'll go ahead and jack up my heart rate and ignore my confusion, because it sounds like the sky is falling and I better run." Sometimes the sky is falling. When it is not, don't make it sound so.

How to Communicate

*I keep pitchin em and you keep missin em.
You gotta keep your eye on the ball, son!
Eye! Ball! Eyeball!*

—Foghorn Leghorn

Many moons ago, I was asked to list as many ways as possible that one could pass through a door. I came up with 108: *sashay* and *ease on down* are my favorites.



Doug Krause and Steve Mead sussing a line.

Photo courtesy Doug Krause

Who doesn't love *The Wiz*? The point is that there is a massive variety in the way you can convey similar information. Check this out:

Get back now!

We should stand farther back.

Maybe we should stand farther back.

Do you think we should stand farther back?

I would feel better if we were farther back from that cornice.

I wonder if that cornice might fail and send us to our doom.

All of these messages convey similar information but with varying levels of urgency and assertiveness. There is a continuum from the command down to the hint. The person you are addressing and the urgency of the message will dictate the most effective delivery tactic. This is mitigated speech. It is the tool used to balance urgency with a gap in authority or experience between you and your listener. It enables a speaker to be constructively assertive no matter who they are speaking with. Using a command when a suggestion is more appropriate is overly assertive and will degrade effective communication. Using a hint when a suggestion is more appropriate is overly passive. Finding balance is the key to being constructively assertive. Practice on your boss or your special shmoozy.

You're short on ears and long on mouth!

—Big Jake McCandles

Listening is half of communication: arguably, the more important half. When someone speaks without being ready, it can be painfully obvious. In contrast, when someone listens without being ready, the failure often goes unnoticed. The number of obstacles to effective listening merits an essay of its own. I think, in general, we suck at listening.

If we accept communication as a responsibility, we have an obligation to improve our listening skills. Pay attention, prepare to listen, prioritize receiving the information. Be objective. Learn about and be conscious of the myriad ways we unconsciously filter information: confirmation bias, disrespect, extrapolation, etc. If the guy who is always spewing weights his message to confirm your original assumptions, don't assume you already know what he is talking about and decline your opportunity to clarify. Did you copy all those pitfalls? There are more. Being a good listener demands you actively respect the speaker and the message. If you choose to burden either of those with your own preconceptions, do so consciously, not out of habit. Confirm or clarify. That is active listening.

If you are unable to reconcile context with content when delivering or receiving a message, its value may be lost. Maybe the message was high and

outside. If you can't lean in and tap the relevant content of a message, its value is lost.

The responsibility for effective communication is shared between speaker and listener. Mitigated speech optimizes message delivery relative to person and priority. Active listening compensates for deficiencies in message delivery or content. That is teamwork.

Accept the Responsibility

And finally Monsieur, a wafer-thin mint.

—Monty Python

Communication skills are the magic beans that enhance situational awareness, decision-making, our actions, and our safety. They merit far greater consideration than we can muster in a short essay. Nurture communication skills with practice, and they will grow tall and mighty.

Practice the when. Differentiate critical and casual opportunities for communication. Get in the habit of leveraging those opportunities every time you venture into them thar hills. Walk the middle path between rampant inquiry and sticking your head in the sand. Find your happy place between assertiveness and being dead weight. Practice timing your communication for maximum effect.

Practice the what. Can you summarize your day in 100 words or less without sacrificing clarity or content? How about what you observed in the last 30 minutes in less than 25 words? What you see now in five words? Practice. Tweak your obs until you can deliver the essence without any superfluous shite. If Joey Windbag tells a nice story when an objective report is appropriate, kick him in the shins. Be conscious of your tone and body language, and be ready to get kicked. Leaders and educators are in an excellent position to emphasize proper what: clear, complete, and concise.

Practice the how. Target your manner of speech to the specific person and context. The dull of wit and obtuse of mien provide excellent opportunities for practicing speaking and listening. If somebody "just doesn't get it," challenge yourself – maybe you not 'splaining it so good. If somebody is spewing disjointed garbage, try to find the nugget of bacon in the grist, and maybe we can translate his or her message into useful information. "By gnarly pooch, do you mean a sensitive area of heavier load?"

These skills build on each other. We can start by figuring out when to say something, then figure out what and how. Make being a good listener a priority. With practice, these skills become intuitive. Communication breakdowns propagate through everything we are and may result in failure or tragedy. Communication expertise should facilitate the route to cranking face shots in the deep clover. Practice, please.

Doug Krause has been kicking shins and taking names to these many years as a skier, guide, patroller, forecaster, and educator in the Andes, the Rockies, and the Chugach. ❄️

PROFESSIONAL SURVEY

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In a different part of the survey, we asked respondents to assess their skills and decision-making. Overwhelmingly (>90%), they reported that they had good decision-making skills for being safe on the job. The contradiction is glaring. It seems accidents are caused by lapses in the solid decision-making skills we claim to possess – we just don't use them all the time.

Understanding the Problem is Half the Solution

Workplace accidents will occur. However, most are not random or "black swan" outlier events. Accidents can and are understood to be caused by knowable and manageable factors. In this survey, respondents identified failures of personal focus as a primary contributor to accidents. The positive take home message is that professionals appear to be self-reflective enough to accept fault and do not generally attempt to shift blame to organizational failure or lack of training. The causes (and potential solutions) are internal to individuals. Assuming this is correct, can we do anything about it?

If the primary cause of accidents as reported by respondents is one of maintaining focus, the solution clearly lies there; following procedures and maintaining focus in the face of complexity is a problem common to many high risk/high stakes professions. Atul Gawande, surgeon, writer, and public health researcher (gawande.com), has worked on this problem for many years. He draws a distinction between errors of ignorance (mistakes we make because we don't know enough), and errors of ineptitude (mistakes we made because we don't make proper use of what we know). Avalanche professionals' failures and errors appear to be rarely due to ignorance; instead, accidents appear to be failures of the second type. Human errors of ineptitude in emergency and surgical medicine have been revolutionized, in part, by the use of checklists (Gawande 2009).

Gawande writes some good stuff. The really important point he makes is often lost though – checklists are important because they cause you to pause before action. The list itself is useful, but the pause is likely more important.

Checklists serve two useful functions. They provide step-by-step procedural support for functions and regular components of the job (e.g., communications, personal protective equipment, snowpack assessment, explosives-handling procedures, hazard assessment). Very simply, they help us follow procedures in a proper order following generally accepted protocols. They also allow skilled practitioners to focus on the more complicated aspects of the job, knowing "the mundane" won't fall through the cracks.

Checklists cause one to pause and complete a sub-task before moving on and possibly committing an error. Where respondents report "Poor Personal Decision-Making" and "Loss of Situational Awareness" as causes of accidents, a checklist may provide a process whereby focus is restored in a distracting situation where radio traffic is heavy, weather causes discomfort, or time is an issue. Viewed this way, checklists create an opportunity for a new decision point. By stopping momentarily and running a simple checklist, we pause and focus on the task at hand. This may serve to cause you to rethink the decision before a mistake is made or before an important procedural step is taken. In the language of decision-making,



San Juan debrief.

Photo by Doug Krause

Continued on next page ➡