

This is an expanded version of a column first appearing as Thoughts on Leadership in the September/October 2009 issue of *Wildfire* magazine, the official publication of the International Association of Wildland Fire, published by Penton Media.

## ***More Reasons to Hang Up and Lead***

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In the May/June issue of *Wildfire*, I encouraged would-be leaders to “hang up and lead.” I meant that our personal communication gadgets don’t seem to be contributing to leadership and teamwork, inherently interpersonal activities deeply rooted in trusting relationships and persuasively influencing people. Without doubt, trust and influence evolve from collaboration, interaction, and shared experiences between people. Relationships develop when people get to know one another, spend time together, trust one another, prove trustworthy, and gain respect for each other. As I’ve said before, this takes time, focused attention, and interaction on a personal level.

An organization’s leadership can benefit from our communications technology. After all, e-mail; voice mail; cell phones; tweets and posts at social networking sites can help busy people stay in-touch. However, as I contended in my previous column, on balance, they look more and more like obstacles in the path to good leadership.

Previously, I disparaged three trends that I had observed; people becoming slaves to their technology, breeding dependence in organizations, and communication technology degrading our situational awareness. How we communicate affects our leadership and, in today’s workplace, the challenge remains to stay connected without hiding behind our personal communication technology when we really should be interacting with each other on a more personal level. Now, comes new evidence that we should hang-up and lead.

According to a recent article by Sharon Jayson in *USA Today*, a new poll of college students, conducted by the organization Ypulse, found that social networking makes them more self-absorbed. In fact, more than half the poll respondents said their peers used social networking sites to promote themselves, as narcissism, or to seek attention. Fully two-thirds of the students polled consider the members of their generation more self-promoting, narcissistic, over confident, and likely to seek attention when compared to others.

When it comes to leadership, we talk about all kinds of traits, characteristics and behaviors that people find desirable in their leaders. I

have read tens of thousands of pages of leadership literature and have talked to hundreds, if not thousands, of people about leadership and what people expect from their leaders. Not once have I read or heard someone say “I just wish my leader was more into himself,” “If only we could find someone more self-absorbed” or “We just wish she would come around less and send us more e-mail.”

Leadership is personal. It is about character and credibility; interpersonal trust and active dialogue. The authentic leaders I know, those people who can really move an organization and its people, understand that they succeed by focusing on their relationships and by interacting with people in ways that matter. Others are just too busy trying to look like the leader to be a leader, all wired-up and ready for road warrior battle.

In a related *USA Today* article, Jon Schwartz cites a new study by Pear Analytics in which they characterized 40% of tweets on Twitter as “pointless babble” and only 9% as “moderately interesting.” More importantly, Schwartz also cited a very recent survey conducted by Brightkite and GfK Technology in which 87% of respondents in a survey of adults said they prefer to deal with other people directly rather than via computer or smartphone.

Teamwork experts know that people in work teams rely on visual, verbal and non-verbal communication clues to understand each other’s intentions. Those experts view opportunities for people to interact with one another using those clues as sources of trust-based relationships between organizational members. It’s pretty clear that relationship building occurs best in a face-to-face context and that frequent and meaningful interaction allows a deeper kind of relationship to develop than text messages or phone calls possibly could.

People pick up on the signals that would-be leaders send and those signals form lasting impressions. When the signals say “I don’t have time for face-to-face interaction with you,” leadership suffers. Leadership represents a reciprocal relationship, a partnership of sorts between people who choose to lead and people who choose to follow. People decide to follow another person in part because would-be leaders treat them with respect, take interest in them as people, when needed, and give them their undivided attention.

Nothing in my experience suggests that people will feel this way if you give them less than the courtesy of your undivided attention, interrupt a conversation with them to take a call or check a message, text while talking with them, e-mail when you could have called, call when you could have sat down next to them. Nothing says “You’re important to me” like a 140 character tweet, especially if it’s about you!

In modern organizations, leadership and teamwork requires essentially interpersonal activities made up of trusting relationships and persuasive influence. People develop healthy leadership relationships and can influence one another positively when they get to know one another, spend time together and develop trust and respect for one another.

Leadership is personal. Unfortunately, too much of our communication technology makes our communication not only impersonal, but somewhat anti-social, just the opposite of what we want. Apparently, even heavy social network users believe that social networking leads to narcissistic behavior. Even communication technology companies think too many messages are nothing more than useless prattle. People are starting to resent those self-promoting and vain messages that have become so common. And finally, people would rather talk to you face-to-face than get your text message. More reasons to hang up and lead!

## ***Biography***

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