

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR EMOTIONAL WAKE

A friend describes his home at the foot of San Diego Bay, where all of the houses have docks. The speed limit in the bay is five knots. Once in a while, some cowboy rips through the area and rocks all of the boats, knocking them up against the docks. The person might not have done this on purpose. However, if a boater causes damage, he is responsible for it. Yes, the other boats should have bumpers, the right-sized bumpers; still, each boater is required to take responsibility for his own wake.

The question is not whether he can boat in those waters. Of course he can. The question is at what speed.

One of the principles of fierce conversations is: Take responsibility for your emotional wake. Emotional wake is what you remember, what you feel after I'm gone, the aftermath or aftertaste. Our individual wakes are larger than we know. As a leader, teacher, colleague, parent, there is no trivial comment. Something you may not remember saying may have had a devastating impact on someone looking to you for guidance and approval. By the same token, something you said may have encouraged and inspired someone who is grateful to you to this day.

One conversation at a time, we are building relationships we either enjoy or endure. Each conversation is a link in the chain of events called life. Conversation A leads to result B, which ultimately produces C and so on, like Rube Goldberg's simplified pencil-sharpener, at right.

While our conversational paths may sometimes seem as haphazard as Rube Goldberg's invention, they aren't, not really. Our careers, our companies, our relationships and our very lives, succeed or fail,

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one conversation at a time. We enjoy or suffer the consequences of every successful or failed conversation we've ever had. When we become aware of the impact of our emotional wake, we can begin to make sense of past results and improve them from this moment on.

Whether deliberate or unintentional, a negative emotional wake is expensive. Individuals, schools, students, and ultimately, the communities in which they live and work pay the price.

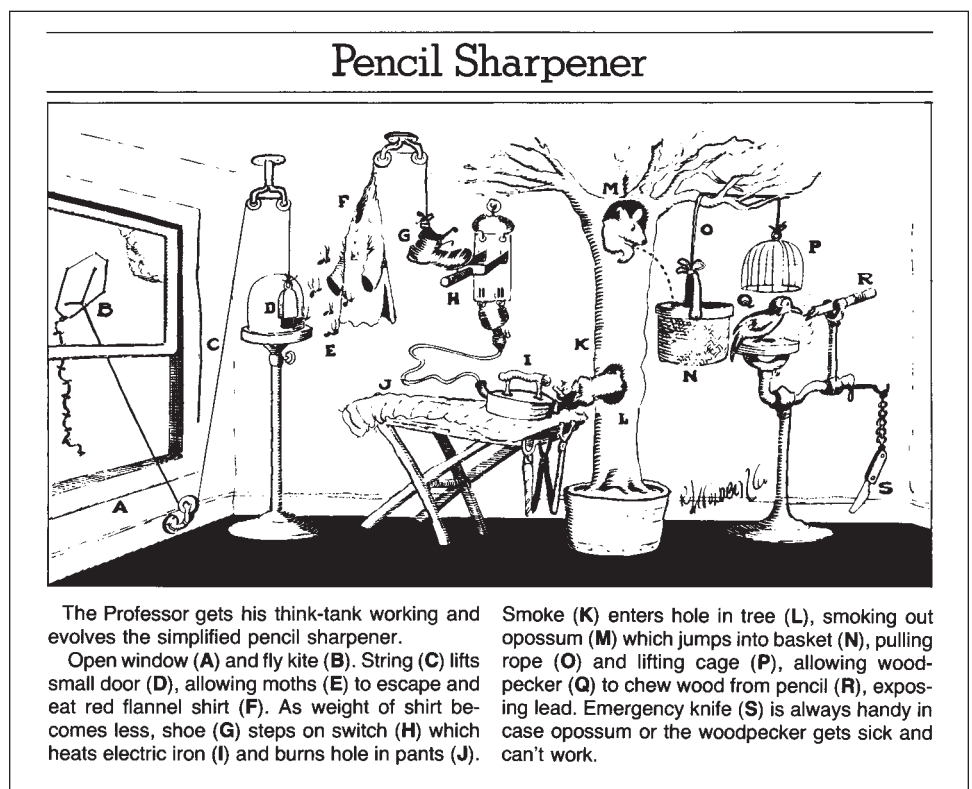
We must learn to deliver the message without the load. Loaded messages come in many guises. No matter how much sugar someone sprinkles throughout a loaded message, we read the underlying intent loud and clear. The principal or colleague who says, "That's good, but next time why don't you ..." is delivering the message: "Nothing you do is good enough." Each of us has a unique fingerprint, the load we might attach to a message, such as ...

- **Blaming.** "This is your fault." "You really screwed this up."



In each issue of *JSD*, Susan Scott will explore aspects of communication that encourage meaningful collaboration. All columns are available at www.nsd.org.

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The Professor gets his think-tank working and evolves the simplified pencil sharpener.

Open window (A) and fly kite (B). String (C) lifts small door (D), allowing moths (E) to escape and eat red flannel shirt (F). As weight of shirt becomes less, shoe (G) steps on switch (H) which heats electric iron (I) and burns hole in pants (J).

Smoke (K) enters hole in tree (L), smoking out opossum (M) which jumps into basket (N), pulling rope (O) and lifting cage (P), allowing woodpecker (Q) to chew wood from pencil (R), exposing lead. Emergency knife (S) is always handy in case opossum or the woodpecker gets sick and can't work.

Rube Goldberg is the ® and © of Rube Goldberg, Inc.

- **Name calling, labeling.** “You’re an insensitive narcissist.” “You’re a liar.”
- **Using sarcasm, black humor.** “Apparently, your life goal is to live on the cutting edge of mediocrity.”
- **Attaching global weight to tip-of-the-iceberg stuff.** This small thing happened and it means this huge thing! “You don’t love me and never did.”
- **Threatening, intimidating.** “Guess you don’t value your job.” “You’ll never make it to college.”
- **Exaggerating.** “You always do this.” “This is the hundredth time ...”
- **Taking a position of superiority.** “You don’t get it.” “I can’t get through to you.”
- **Saying, “If I were you ...”** “Why can’t you be more like me?”
- **Gunny sacking, bringing up a lot of old baggage.** “This is just like the time when you ...”
- **Public assassination.** This is cowardly, and we usually try to get away with it by pretending it’s funny. “OK, John, apparently you have all the answers.”
- **Negative facial expressions.** Despite our polite words, how we feel is written all over our faces.
- **Ascribing negative motives.** “What you’re really saying is ...” or “What’s really going on is ...”
- **Being unresponsive.** Refusing to speak, the cruelest load you can attach. It demonstrates a lack of caring, a lack of validation.

So what should we do? Ultimately, the problem belongs to both participants in a conversation. However, since you and I have little control over how others will react, the most effective position to take is to focus on our own actions. We can say to ourselves: “This is my problem. From this day forward, I will take responsibility for my emotional wake.”

Take a moment to recall a conversation that did not go well. Forget about the other person’s ineffective behavior. Focus on yourself. Revisit the conversation. See the expression on your face. What was your body language? Replay your words and listen to the tone with which they were spoken. View the part of the conversation when your partner, colleague, or student became upset or angry. What did you say or do that triggered your partner’s response? What load did you attach to your message? Is that your typical, unique fingerprint? What effect did it have on the conversation?

Given that one of the purposes of fierce conversations is to enrich relationships, we need to acknowledge our load if we have one. If you need help recognizing the load you sometimes attach to your messages, just ask the people who work or live with you. Let them know that you’d like to understand what it is you do or say that causes a negative emotional wake. Then shut up and listen! Don’t argue,

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defend, or explain. Encourage them with, “Say more about that, please.” And mean it.

The danger in receiving frank feedback may be in going too far over to the other side. Withholding the message is as dangerous to the relationship as delivering a message with a load attached. For each of us, the challenge is to reconcile being real and doing no harm.

The key is in your attitude, not necessarily the words, though, of course, words are important. What I’ve noticed is that the people who consistently leave a positive wake tend to:

- View and talk with others, all others, as their equals.
- Invite and consider multiple, competing realities.
- Seek to be influenced by others, versus seeking only to influence others.
- Put the greater good ahead of self-serving agendas.
- Be “here” (in each conversation) prepared to be nowhere else.
- Tell the truth, with good intent.

You can’t fake “fierce.” Hang in there. See your conversations through to completion. If you create a mess, either single-handedly or in partnership with someone, do not bolt when things get emotional. Sometimes you just need a well-oiled reverse gear. “I was wrong. I’m sorry.” These are important words that too often remain lodged in our throats, even when we know they are desperately needed. People who are never wrong are likely teetering on the edge of a relationship in danger of crumbling.

ASSIGNMENT

Ask yourself: To whom do I need to deliver a message, and what is the message I wish to deliver? What is my intent? In other words, what do I want of this relationship?

Accept the responsibility to be present, aware, authentic, appropriate, truthful, and clear. Keep in mind that being in a relationship with the persons close to you, including each teacher in your building, is more important than being right all the time. Say less and listen more.

When you begin to hear your students, your life partner, and your co-workers at a deeper level, you’ll start getting far more information from them. The quality of your listening will allow your colleagues to discover who they are and to value themselves. They will know that you care about them, and will commit to their dreams for themselves. And who wouldn’t want that as an outcome for all of us? ■