

Communication: “Lift Yourself Up, Lift Up Someone Else”

In this letter, I focus on internal University communications. I believe that internal communications drive the community culture directly and profoundly. I have also heard from faculty and staff here at Caldwell that improving communications and increasing transparency are important at the University and they should be the focus of improvements.² This will require all of us to focus on communications, creating good communications and engaging with alacrity in the same.

Good communication is an essential practice in successful organizations including Universities. Good communication requires, at its most basic, a sender and receiver who both participate and who are open to communicating. I use the Booker T. Washington titular quote above to encourage us to see communication as a two-way street that we all have a stake in. More specifically we all can, as part of our communication practice, listen more respectfully to each other so we can hear, so we can understand and in order to help to strengthen our university community.

I believe we must have the patience and resilience to continue to focus on improving our communications with every opportunity even when we have a difficult situation to communicate or the communication does not work. Sometimes communications will be misunderstood and either the sender(s) or receiver(s) are confused or reject the substance of the communication. We should, and must as members of the University in my opinion, work to get on the same page whenever possible. In order to do so, we should assume good intentions rather than ill-intentions and must adopt the view that we all want the best for our university and students. At the same time, it is perfectly acceptable to disagree and to continue to hold one's viewpoint. It is not, however, acceptable to be disagreeable with others.

I have often heard at my universities over the years people say that “they” will not react well if “I” disagree. That “they” are not telling us the full story or the truth. My view is that we should not focus on a “they” argument here at Caldwell. The reason I believe this is the case because I believe a “they” does not exist. We are all free, professional and thinking members of this community that can communicate openly with each other. There is no vague group of “they” that imposes anything on our operations or planning that we do

¹ Each semester it is my intention to provide a focused letter on an issue that I would like the entire University to think about, consider and talk about. My focus in these short pieces is to raise issues that I think are important for us and in a concise manner as well as in a way that everyone can understand and perhaps act upon, contemplate or study.

² The September 2023 all-faculty and staff survey revealed that all respondents saw salary and benefits as the most important area of focus (37.72% of all respondents), the second most important item was to build transparency and improve communications (29.82% of all respondents).

not allow to occur. If anyone has a question, it is their responsibility to raise that question with their leadership/supervisor rather than throw up their hands and blame it on the “they.” I believe that we need a culture of taking responsibility for our communications. We are all responsible for improving communications as communicators and receivers of communications.

One of the most insidious realities of human communities is that people gossip regardless of whether there is any truth behind what they are saying. Bechtoldt and others argue that gossip occurs when people talk about others who are not present and that this is very common.³ People in professional roles (e.g., every single employee at the University) should not be engaging in speaking negatively about any of their colleagues. Just my opinion, but I believe we all should want to work directly to stop rumors from spreading in our areas, departments, divisions or at the University. This sort of matter is not the transparency that this community desires or deserves.

Communications that are consistent with our value of integrity will involve facts, information and data rather than only beliefs and feelings. We all need to ask questions and help one another to communicate honestly and respectfully. Should anyone hear negative gossip, I would hope they would ask the person communicating it to stop and encourage them to speak to the person they are gossiping about to resolve any misunderstanding. I would also posit that understanding past communications successes and failures is important. And while Shakespeare wrote that the “past is prologue,” seeing the present only through the lens of communication failures of the past, or seeking to see past failures in every statement in the present, is not productive, or logical nor will it lead to improved communications and a new era of transparency at the University.

At present, we have deployed a few formal structures to improve communications at the University. These include *Monday Morning* which is intended for all faculty and staff. It provides details about events and happenings across the University and it is intended to be a one-stop communication for weekly information. The Office of Student Affairs also shares the *Weekly Forecast* which provides details about student activities on campus and the Athletics Calendar provides particulars about athletic contests. Please let me know or your vice president or supervisor know if you have ideas or other ways we can communicate better for the benefit of the University. Let’s all work together to lift ourselves up and lift others up in the process to a new level of effective communication and become a model community that we all know we can be!

Sincerely and May God Bless You All,

³ Bechtoldt, M.N. (2020). Editorial: Why People Gossip and What it Brings About: Motives for, and Consequences of, Informal Evaluative Information Exchange. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 27, January.

Jeff Senese, President