

UPDATE

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Trying To Stay Balanced (or “ How To Avoid WACM”)

By
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In September I began my fourth year as Chair of the department of communication. Chairing any department is a challenge, but as the department of communication houses 40 faculty and staff in 4 areas (Theater, Speech Communication, Radio/TV/Film, Communicative Disorders), being Chair can sometimes be overwhelming

What makes the Chair's job stressful struck me some time ago while watching public television. Author and “stress humorist” Loretta LaRoche told her audience that humans tend to respond to stressful situations in four negative ways: whining, awfulizing, catastrophizing, and moaning (WACM). In my opinion, what ignites WACM in academia are the same things that ignite it in most workplaces: real or imagined slights, placing too much stock in gossip and rumors, and frustration with the dehumanizing aspects of bureaucracy. Negative comments on an annual review, for example, even if sandwiched in between a mountain of accolades, can be enough to send some individuals into a state reminiscent of the late New York Yankees' manager Billy Martin. Billy would frequently storm out of the dugout in a rage, scream at the umpire, and then kick dirt on him. True, academics will usually reveal aggression in a more “passive” way (slinging e-mails are now a favorite), but the net effect on the target is the same as if s/he had been screamed at or had dirt kicked in the face.

As LaRoche described the characteristics of whiners, awfulizers, catastrophizers, and moaners (WACMers), I realized that a Chairperson is a chief target for such folks. Worse, because the Chair occupies a middle level between students and staff on one side and upper administration on the other, s/he is often the target of WACMers from below and from above. When under a steady barrage of WACM from all sides, a Chair can easily fall him or herself into a debilitating WACMer state.



Trying To Stay Balanced (or “ How To Avoid WACM”), Continued

Now I am not saying that we should never whine, or that we should always avoid awfulizing, or that nothing is ever catastrophic or worth moaning about. What I am saying is that an individual in the WACM mode is “off balance.” To avoid WACM temptations, it is vital that during the course of a day a Chair (or anyone else, for that matter) seek out mental stimulation that reminds him or her “why we are here” and contributes to a more balanced perspective on the daily irritants that we face. In the remainder of this essay I want to expand briefly on “why we are here” and then discuss three mental stimulants I have found helpful.

The Select Mission of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh (p. iii in the *Faculty and Academic Staff Handbook*) provides guidance as to why we are here. I like the final part: “To develop and offer programs and services responding to the needs of the people, institutions, and communities which we serve.” How can I respond to such needs if I am in a constant WACM state of mind? Responding to the needs of people requires the ability to develop trusting relationships with them. When I am off balance or “WACMed Out,” I am not in a position to experience the joys of such relationships and/or the pleasure of developing programs and services. Now let me discuss three things that help me to stay balanced and focused on the mission: “Commentary,” The Communication Thought for the Week, and *The Tao Of Leadership*.

“C o m m e n t a r y ,” is a public affairs television talk show produced on campus. I co-host the program with Jim Mather, former Mayor of Oshkosh. As my professional area of scholarship is Rhetoric and Public Address with an emphasis on political communication, working on “Commentary” exposes me to the “real world” of political communication. In order to produce an interesting and provocative program, I have to research and keep up to date on issues facing the community and nation, and I must also establish relationships with a significant number of individuals outside of the university. These two requirements of making a successful program research and establishing relationships have helped minimize my own WACM tendencies. Additionally, I spend 15 minutes per day or more updating the Commentary web site (http://www.uwosh.edu/faculty_staff/palmeri/Comment.htm), an activity that guarantees that for at least part of the day I will have my mind on matters not related to the workplace.

Another “balancing” activity for me is the “Communication Thought For The Week.” Since 1997 I have, every week, during the fall and spring semesters, posted on the department’s e-mail discussion list a “thought” related to issues in the field. The mere act of searching for the thoughts has proven to be an invigorating and stimulating activity in that I am compelled to stay engaged in my field and communicate in a meaningful way with my colleagues. On occasion, the department has had some engaging e-mail discussion sparked by a thought. The thoughts for the week are archived at <http://www.uwosh.edu/communication/fftw.htm>



A few years ago I read an interview with Phil Jackson, one of the most successful coaches in the history of the National Basketball Association.

In the interview, Jackson said that a major influence on his life was

John Heider’s book *The Tau of Leadership*. I happened to find the book at the Starseed Shop on Main Street in Oshkosh. I’ve never been a fan of modern adaptations of ancient wisdom, but in this case I must say that Heider’s application of Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching* to contemporary leadership situations is inspiring.

Almost every passage in the book’s brief 81 chapters has some relevance for leaders. I now find myself placing a passage at the end of a list of announcements I provide department members at our monthly meetings. Heider even has good advice for dealing with an angry WACMer: “The person who initiates the attack is off center and easily thrown. Even so, have respect for any attacker. Never surrender your compassion or use your skill to harm another needlessly . . . In any event, the more conscious force will win.”

A university can be such an all-encompassing space that it literally becomes a person’s entire life. If that should happen, then no amount of mental stimulation can help a person to achieve balance. The advice I’ve provided in this essay is not a substitute for having a life outside of academia that includes meaningful relationships with family and friends.

Tony Palmeri is chair of the department of communication and President of the Faculty Senate for the 2000-2001 academic year.

Test your Knowledge of Employee Assistance Services.

True or False

1. You can be seen for five problem solving consultations in EAP.
2. Information about your EAP visit is not available to Human Resources.
3. Your supervisor will know about your EAP visit.
4. There are exceptions to confidentiality.
5. Evening hours are available for you to see an EAP staff member.
6. Family members are eligible for EAP service.
7. You have to be pretty troubled to go to EAP.
8. A three-year study of a large corporations showed that 60% of employee absences were due to psychological problems.
9. You have access to a tape of almost any Brown Bag Seminar offered by EAP during the past three years.
10. If a supervisor says I should go to EAP, I have to go or I'll lose my job.

(Answers)

1. *True.* EAP will see employees for up to five sessions without charge.
2. *True.* The fact that you made a visit to EAP, as well as what you discussed remains confidential within state and federal guidelines. A visit to EAP does not jeopardize your promotional ability or become a part of your work history. A copy of the EAP Confidentiality Policy is available for anyone who would like a copy.
3. *False.* At times it might be in your best interest for YOU to tell your supervisor that you made a visit to EAP. However, whether or not you tell your supervisor is entirely up to you. EAP staff are not at liberty to talk with your supervisor about your visit without your written authorization.
4. *True.* There may be an exception to confidentiality in extreme instances such as when your safety or someone else is threatened, in the case of child neglect or abuse or court orders.
5. *True.* The EAP Office offers appointments on Monday and Tuesday evenings during the academic year.
6. *True.* Family members are eligible for EAP assessment and referral when seen with the university employee. Since partner and spousal problems effect the employee, a joint consultation may be beneficial to both individuals.
7. *False.* EAPs central focus is on prevention and wellness. EAP sees people for the kinds of ordinary concerns we all have, how to meet new people, grieving, taking care of older parents, writer's block, stress. When small problems are ignored, they can balloon into more severe problems. EAP can help you address those as well.
8. *True.* Source: American Psychological Association: *"The Costs of Failing to Provide Appropriate Mental Health Care."*
9. *True.* EAP keeps a tape library of all Brown Bag Seminars so if you'd like to sign a tape out, stop by and do so.
10. *False.* When your supervisor suggests EAP as a resource, you have the option to come to EAP. Consultations are voluntary and do not affect your job security. EAP is a resource to help you. You may decide to make use of other resources. However, your supervisor will require you to meet job performance expectations. Participants being seen in EAP should not expect special privileges or exceptions to normal rules or performance standards.



News on Treatment of Depression

"Exercise Found Effective against Depression"

A study released from Duke University Medical Center found that exercise alone, or exercise in combination with the drug Zoloft, was equally as effective as Zoloft alone against major depression disorders. Furthermore: "Exercisers who had been in remission after four months were far less likely to see their depression return after 10 months, compared with people taking the drug or a combination therapy..."

New York Times Science. 10/10/00, D12.



The Gender Specific Battles of the Bulges

Men and women think about their extra poundage in different ways reports the New York Times Science Section (September 12, 2000- D8). A survey suggests that women see their fat as a character flaw and men do not account it to their fault but rather to "damn business lunches." The survey was conducted by the Calorie Control Council an association of manufacturers of low-fat or low calorie foods. Women are twice as likely to link eating to emotional needs. Almost half of the women in the survey were more likely to claim appearance as a central motivation to diet, compared to about a third of the men.



HELP YOURSELF

Chancellor Wells has recommended two books in his talks on campus.

- *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes.*
William Bridges, Perseus Books. 1980.
- *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change.*
William Bridges, Perseus Books. 1991.

They are now available on a sign-out basis through the Employee Assistance Program Self-help library.

UPCOMING

EAP Brown Bag Seminars

January 31, 2000. Noon-1:00 PM

For Supervisors, Department Chairs, Team Leaders and Directors.

"What to do When ... An Employee is Depressed"

Susan Barbour, Ed.D.

Reeve 219

Many employees are effected by mild to severe depression.

This program will outline prevalence and signs of depression in the work place and discuss issues that chairs and supervisors meet when employees are depressed. Will discuss ways to help the employee access assistance.

February 14, 2001. Noon-1:00 PM

Choosing and Using Herbal and Vitamin Supplements for Health and Vitality

Fran Nelson, Ph.D.

Reeve 219

This program will review the best choices in the herbal, vitamin and supplement market to prevent illness, promote great health and vitality and treat chronic illness. Information on quality, price, safety and access will be included as well as resources for further study.

March 28, 2001. Noon-1:00 PM

Ten Days In Beijing

Paula Hayford

Reeve 219

Visit the delightful city of Beijing through a slide presentation. Paula will enhance her presentation by including how Traditional Chinese philosophy permeates the entire culture and structures of one of China's most beautiful cities.

April 12th, 2001. Noon-1:00 PM

Myths, Fads and Facts of Exercise Health

Dan Schmidt, Ph.D.


Reeve Union 220

This brown bag will consider the "top ten myths" of exercise and discuss the merits and misconceptions of various gismos, gadgets and exercise fads. There are cheap, effective ways to loss weight, build cardiovascular fitness, improve muscle tone and build muscle strength and endurance. Recommendations and approaches to improving general fitness will be outlined.

Letters to the Editor

EAP Update invites comments related to EAP articles of interest to employees, or relevant to the University community. Space limitations may prevent all letters from being published, however, every effort will be made to accommodate submissions. Letters must be constructive, civil, and present a serious discussion of your point of view and suggestions. EAP staff retain the sole right to edit provocative, inflammatory, and devaluing usage or refuse publication that would fuel controversy in a counterproductive manner. Submit letters of 250 words or less in Microsoft Word to

Barbour@uwosh.edu
or by campus mail to 201 Dempsey Hall. Anonymous letters will not be published.



**Don't forget the
Annual Wellness Fair in
March!!!!**

EAP Update Staff:

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