

# CEO TO CEO

Assisting business leaders as they navigate critical passages

April 15, 2009

## The INSOMNIA Factor

What keeps CEOs **AWAKE AT NIGHT**  
—and what to do about it.



### The Executive Composer

By Robert Sher

Communication is like a musical composition, and the CEO is both the composer and one of the musicians. Random communication, in the absence of a composition is a huge contributor to poor business performance.

By random communication I mean unplanned, un-thought through communication. Things like:

1. Getting angry in a meeting without planning it.
2. Sending emotional e-mails, or otherwise using the wrong channels.
3. Not communicating regularly with your top team, staff, clients or any group you wish to influence.
4. Showing your moodiness, including being withdrawn.
5. And much more.

Random communication causes lots of insomnia, not just in the CEO trying to figure out how to “fix” the situation they may have caused, but in the recipients, who are sometimes upset, afraid, or demotivated.

Back to my music analogy. People hear music and it often triggers an emotion. Growing up, I loved Elton John’s music (still do), and my 13 year old musically inclined son loves it now too. (Parenting tip from my wife—try and get your kids, if musically inclined, to like the music you like! It makes listening to the practice much more bearable.) So Ben recorded a CD from his iPod for me to play in the car, and the relationship between musical composition and communication hit me.

I sat with Ben in my car in the garage after picking him up from a band practice and we listened closely to Goodbye Yellow Brick Road. Since Ben is beginning to compose his own songs, we talked about how every note seemed planned. Each instrument filled different auditory spaces, but never crowded each other out. We saw how for a few bars the song might be more quiet, then build toward a crescendo, lifting our emotions with it. From the moment the song started, we were in Elton John’s care, and he was shepherding us through an emotional experience. Elton was communicating to us with his music.

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Executives need a similar level of skill, but with words and actions. But too often, we come across like a few bars of punk rock followed by a few bars of classical, followed by a few bars of bagpipe music. What does that do to the recipient? Based on that experience, what can they expect from us next?

The executive composer's "music" isn't just a three minute song. Sure, speeches, e-mails, phone conversations are all mini-compositions too. But the bigger composition begins the first day an employee starts and ends a few months after they've left the company. It begins the day you're appointed CEO by your board, includes every board communication, and ends the day you leave your post. For customers it began the first day they became aware of your firm, even before you were CEO, and will continue after you depart. The executive composer is writing the music for many compositions simultaneously, and watching them play out every day. So being strategic about it is critical.

If a listener (stakeholder) ends up in a bad place (angry with you or your firm, apathetic, falling in love with the competition, unmotivated) you'll have the burden of composing communications that will take that into account and bring them back on board. It is true that sometimes you get dealt a bad hand and it wasn't your fault at all. But often, we can do a better, more proactive job of managing the composition of communications over time to a given person or group, and keep them in the space that is best for the business.

But there is more than one composer they are listening to. The news media is playing its tune to your stakeholders. Co-workers and ex-coworkers are affecting your team. Competitors are knocking on the door, playing their music to your customers. A great composer takes into account all the music out there and asks, "How can I stand out from the cacophony in a way that I get listened to, and followed by a group of fans?" Elton John has done pretty well for himself, over a long career.

I'm working up a webinar on this topic, and in that longer presentation, I'll address communications to your team, to individuals, to customers, to the Board, to competitors and to key vendors (including the bank). But so far, I've identified seven commonalities that can help the executive communicator get better results in all areas.

1. **Be personal, not corporate.** Corporations can't communicate, their people do. And all people react more favorably to communication from other people, not from organizations. Think about your tone; think about if your picture is appropriate; about using "I" and not just the royal "we". Don't be afraid to say how you feel, as opposed to the official position.
2. **Communicate for their benefit.** I'm sure Elton John doesn't always feel like performing and he might be in a nasty mood, but still puts on a good show. When you communicate, it's what the other party takes away that counts. Making yourself feel good for having "gotten it off your chest" is often a costly indulgence for the leader. Jim Kelley, of KSG Transform, in a conversation just yesterday said he likes the, "What will they think, what will they feel, what will they do" approach. But it's all about them.
3. **The homogenous audience.** If we are to tailor our communications for the recipient (yes, we are), then in a group setting it's ideal to have the audience in a similar emotional/mental place.

The more mixed the audience, the more challenging it is to communicate effectively. The recipient list for this newsletter is NOT homogenous, so I have to think it through carefully. As a CEO, I often addressed different departments separately when my message, or the delivery of the message needed to be different.

4. **Plan your presentation.** Sometimes that means planning an employee review, or a conversation with a customer, or a board presentation. It always means thinking about the mindset of the recipient at the start of the communication, and where you want them to be at the end. It certainly includes how you'll communicate (face to face, phone, e-mail, speech, meeting, video). It might take you just a minute, or it might take hours to construct your plan. The plan might span a year's worth of communication, or be just about the upcoming communication.
5. **Link, then Lead.** Recipients must feel like you understand them, and empathize with them. If they're not convinced, you'll lose control, and they'll look disconnected from their reality. But if you can link with them, show them that you get them, and feel for them, then they'll let you in and you have a chance of moving them toward your position. If they're afraid, and you show up totally happy, giddy and ready to risk more and charge ahead, they'll think you're weird and won't follow. But if you talk about their fears, and admit that you have some fears too, then they'll listen. You'll tell them how you dealt with your fears, and how you're now ready to charge ahead, with them.
6. **Consistency.** Over time and in each conversation, you must be consistent. Most people won't play Russian Roulette because it's so unpredictable. You just can't trust that gun. People respond best if you communicate regularly, and they believe they won't be surprised by you often. Suppress moodiness if you can. Your approach and your tone should be similar over time. Create transitions when change is important, don't just do an about-face all of the sudden. Think again of great musical compositions.
7. **Authenticity.** Planning communications and presenting it well is critical, but authenticity in what you communicate is the real power punch. Faking it—"putting lipstick on a pig"—usually doesn't last long, and the closer the recipient is to you, the worse faking it works. Mean what you say, walk your talk, and present it well. Doing all three is powerful.

Please aspire to be a communication maestro. As leaders, we get our most important work done through others. It takes work and discipline to be a communication maestro, but the result is well worth it, not just in the reduction of insomnia, but in the acceleration of the achievement of your most important goals.

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