



Beyond the Babble

Leadership Communication That Drives Results

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

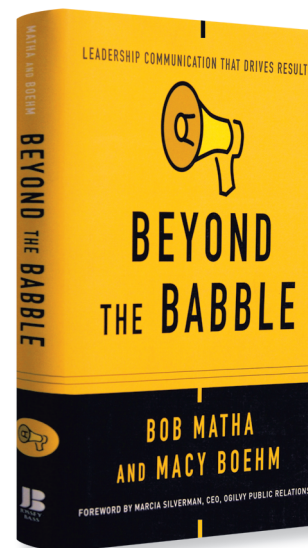
The CEO takes the podium and begins to speak. It's a polished presentation and he looks impressive. As he talks, people nod their heads in apparent agreement, but after the applause dies down, the painful truth is revealed. His message didn't get across. It was all just so much babble.

Leadership communications experts Bob Matha and Macy Boehm offer a strategic plan for addressing one of the most difficult challenges any business leader can face: engaging employees to take action. Written for all those who lead groups — including supervisors, managers, HR and communications professionals, executives and CEOs — this practical resource describes how to put in place proven communication principles that do just that. Matha and Boehm's "On Strategy" communication plan focuses on one critical employee question: What do you want me to do? And it gives leaders the tools they need to mobilize a team of 10 or an organization of thousands.

Filled with examples from the world's top companies, *Beyond the Babble* explores the critical role communication plays in driving performance, how to leverage it and how best to measure results.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to clarify direction to the organization and make it relevant to employees.
- How to prepare leadership — from top to bottom — to deliver direction and engage employees.
- How to communicate to the larger organization about strategy through an ongoing "conversation" with and among employees.
- How to get business results by improving communications.



by Bob Matha
and Macy Boehm

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: BEYOND THE BABBLE

by Bob Matha and Macy Boehm

The authors: Bob Matha and Macy Boehm are principals and co-founders of Basics 3, a leadership communications and employee engagement firm headquartered in Chicago, and they also provide counsel to clients of Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide. Matha and Boehm have been featured speakers at the Arthur Page Society and the Advanced Learning Institute.

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The Power of Communication

Babble is big in business today. It's the tendency for executives to talk about important issues in convoluted, evasive or empty terms, and it's evident every day in the newspapers and on television. However, it's much more insidious inside companies than outside them. It corrodes an organization's ability to achieve results, derailing leader and employee alike.

Babble is a key reason behind employee antipathy toward management and apathy about strategy execution. More than half of employees in the United States are "not engaged" in their work, according to Gallup Research. They take a wait-and-see attitude toward their jobs, and results suffer. Even more detrimental to performance is the approximately 15 percent of employees who are "actively disengaged." According to Gallup, "These employees aren't just unhappy at work; they're busy acting out their unhappiness. Every day, these workers undermine what their engaged co-workers accomplish." According to Gallup's Curt Coffman, a key problem is a lack of clear communication from leadership.

Babble isn't a challenge just for senior executives. Functional leaders, middle managers, team leaders, frontline supervisors — anybody who needs to lead people to get things done can be sidelined by babble.

On Strategy Communication Cuts Through Babble

On Strategy is a term for effective leadership communication. It explains where the company is headed and how it will get there, what employees need to do to make it happen and why it's important to the business and to them. It's about the business

and the realities that affect it.

On Strategy communication frames complex business direction in simple, straightforward, motivational terms, so everybody, from the CEO to frontline supervisors, can understand and discuss it. As a result, On Strategy communication makes strategy the topic of conversation in an organization, as employees and managers alike engage in an ongoing conversation about how to execute plans to achieve common goals.

The heart of On Strategy communication is in leaders and employees talking to each other — every day — about strategic information and perspective that help them do their jobs and do them well. It depends on not only senior executives, but also leaders up and down management ranks — including frontline supervisors. Local leaders are critical because they have continuous and direct interaction with employees. They also are the people best equipped to translate strategy into actionable terms for employees.

What Do You Want Me to Do?

On Strategy communication thrives on simplicity. People focus well on a handful of priorities, but they lose their way if the list is too long. On Strategy communication focuses on answering one critical employee question: What do you want me to do? Then it motivates them to act.

On Strategy communication is emotional. People talk about — and execute — what they care about. Employees in every organization have some sort of motivational connection to their work. Good leaders tap that connection to drive action. It's what gives work a special meaning.

The On Strategy approach requires leadership com-



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service@summary.com

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Rebecca S. Clement, Publisher; Sarah T. Dayton, Editor in Chief; Christine Wright, Senior Graphic Designer; Chris Lauer, Contributing Editor

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mitment, process and discipline. The On Strategy approach is a specific leadership activity. The communication and human resources departments can help orchestrate leadership communication, but the ultimate accountability lies with the leaders themselves. ●

On Strategy Communication: An Overview

The On Strategy philosophy, process and tools provide leaders with a way to improve communication. It not only delivers leadership's message to the organization so it is inescapable, but it also makes strategy the topic of conversation from the meeting room to the water cooler to the assembly line. The On Strategy approach organizes and articulates leadership's direction so employees can hear it and understand what they are supposed to do. It makes strategy accessible and tangible for employees and connects it to employees' motivations so they take action. Finally, it orchestrates communication as a business process and management discipline.

Leaders implement On Strategy communication in three steps. Step One ensures that leadership's message is about strategy, understandable, relevant and motivational. On Strategy content is driven with the *Action Equation: Know + Feel = Do*. This equation is simple: What people know, plus what they feel, inspires them to take the right actions to execute strategy. With this in mind, On Strategy communication first determines what employees have to know and feel in order to act. Then Steps Two and Three prepare for and orchestrate how leaders actually communicate. Through a discipline called the *People Channel*, leaders from the CEO to frontline supervisors engage employees in conversations to deliver direction, perspective and information, and to pull feedback up from the ranks. In this way, On Strategy communication helps leaders lead.

The Action Equation

The Action Equation organizes *what* leaders need to communicate to employees. It begins by focusing a leader's thinking on what employees need to *do* to execute strategy or support the company's position on an issue. Then it expands that thinking to address what employees need to *know* and *feel* so they take the right actions. Moreover, it helps identify what is critical to communicate, and it filters out communication that wastes time, or worse, could be counterproductive to driving action and results.

The Action Equation involves research and analysis

done *before* communication begins. Building the Action Equation can take some time, but if you skip the work required to adequately inform all three parts of the equation, your communication will be less effective, and you will miss a valuable opportunity to drive execution and results.

Here is how it works:

- **The Action Equation Begins With Do.**

Informing the Action Equation starts with a leader determining exactly what he or she wants the organization to accomplish and, just as important, what employees need to do to make it happen. On Strategy communication seeks a simple, clear answer to two key questions every employee is really asking: What are we trying to accomplish, and what do you want me to do?

- **Know Creates Understanding.** Leaders inform the *Know* portion of the Action Equation as they determine what they need employees to *Do*. When they frame this direction in the context of the overall organization, they also “connect the dots” for employees between what individuals are doing, what the larger organization is doing and what's happening outside the organization. Employees need to know what to do and why it's important.

- **Feel Drives Action.** Employees in nearly every situation can have a connection to their work that gives it special meaning. It's about more than pay, recognition or opportunity (although those things are important). It involves what people do because they want to do it, not just because they are paid to do it. These intrinsic motivations can include an affinity for customers and products, energy around the substance of the work itself or the relationships employees have with their teams.

The People Channel

On Strategy communication aligns leaders up and down an organization — the People Channel — to deliver a consistent, strategic message to employees. More than that, it equips them to deliver information in conversation, in the context of local work issues and “in the moment” when employees ask questions and are making decisions about their work.

The People Channel generates an active interchange of knowledge and ideas among employees and leaders, rather than a passive cascade of information. It provides processes and tools to help engage leaders and employees in an ongoing conversation about strategy, so people have an opportunity to increase their understanding of strategy and offer their ideas and perspectives on how to improve and execute it better. ●

Do: What Do You Need Employees to Do?

Effective direction begins with telling employees what the organization needs to accomplish and how, and what employees need to *Do*, which is one part of the Action Equation: Know + Feel = Do. It's very actionable — the difference, for example, between telling the sales force they need to increase revenues by 10 percent (an outcome) and telling them they each need to make 200 additional sales calls (an action). Good direction also makes the tough decisions between priorities, as opposed to putting them all on an equal footing and making employees decide, when they come into unavoidable conflict, which is more important.

For example, good direction tells employees that ultimately quality is more important than volume, customer satisfaction is more important than cost reduction and growth is more important than margins (or vice versa), so they make the right decisions when they have to. Finally, good direction also includes specifics around critical outcomes of non-negotiables, such as safety, maintenance, customer satisfaction and ethics. These are the kinds of things that leaders may assume they can take for granted but can be compromised as employees pursue other goals — sales, returns, efficiency and the like — that are more dominant in communications (and in performance management tools, recognition, advancement, and so on).

Simplify Direction

Business plans usually outline all the goals, objectives, strategies, initiatives and resource allocation. Because of their complexity and length, they are not good communication documents (even though they may be great planning tools). Therefore, leaders must simplify direction into a handful of key concepts they must communicate. In fact, good direction usually can be distilled into a message of 500 words or less, one that simply tells employees what the organization needs to accomplish and how, and what the employee population is supposed to do.

Good leadership direction is about what leadership does, not just what it says. Words and actions have to match. This means the objectives leadership stresses in communication must be backed up by resource allocation, initiatives, attention and compensation — the concrete actions employees see that make the talk walk.

Know: What Do Employees Need to Know to Take Action?

Everybody in an organization should know where the company is headed and how it's going to get there. Some employees, however, need to know more in order to do their jobs. Leadership must communicate on strategy to those groups in deeper, more actionable terms.

Ensuring that employees know what they are supposed to do is an essential role of leadership communication. If leaders communicate this alone, they will be ahead of many companies. But there's more to leadership communication than that. Employees need to know the reasons behind goals and strategies. Answering their “why” questions helps reduce the distractions that come when they try to figure it out themselves.

Employees want to understand not only why certain strategies were chosen by leadership and how those strategies are intended to benefit the business, but also how execution against the strategies will benefit them personally — the eternal “What's in it for me?” The reasons could be financial requirements, competitive factors, societal issues, industry trends or customer trends. Relevant answers to the “why” questions can build confidence in leadership in the minds of employees and give a context to strategy that helps employees make decisions and trade-offs when they're needed.

Determine Who Needs to Know What

Every leader in an organization should know the organization's strategy. In addition, certain groups of employees have a disproportionate impact on the execution of certain strategies, and leaders must consider this as they communicate. Some people need to know more detail than others. Research and development people, for example, have a significant impact on strategies involving innovation and product leadership. Employees in manufacturing have a significant impact on quality and cost strategies. Leaders must consider this in developing their communication to ensure that specific groups have the opportunity to understand strategy at the level appropriate for their roles.

Conversations about strategy among leaders and employees not only help the employees be more effective in their jobs, but also bring insight and information on strategy and its execution to leaders.

Feel: What Do Employees Need to Feel to Take Action?

Emotional communication is anything but soft and fuzzy. Take the Marines. As a matter of doctrine, they build in their “employees” an emotional commitment to their teams — the frontline squads that form the backbone of the fighting force. From the time a Marine first puts on a uniform, his or her drill sergeant begins to instill that commitment to team, along with other emotional connections to the organization such as pride in the Corps and elitism. That commitment goes well beyond the “rational” reasons why a soldier should walk into harm’s way — to achieve mission objectives, to protect the country and others. Actually, the fundamental reason men and women risk their lives in battle is because of the men and women who surround them. They do it for each other, for the team. If emotion isn’t soft and fuzzy to the Marines, surely every business leader can embrace emotion as a legitimate part of leadership communication.

Leverage Intrinsic Emotional Connections

The rational elements of leadership communication are just one piece of the puzzle. Truly effective leaders also seek to understand and leverage the intrinsic emotional connections employees have with the company and their work. People will work for a paycheck, but they’ll die for a cause — and every organization can find a cause.

Nearly every job — even assembly line work and flipping burgers at a fast-food restaurant — has a motivational connection for employees. It might involve being part of a team, making cool products or saving lives, but *something* can motivate an employee to do more than just clock in. It’s a leader’s job to find out what that is and tap into it by connecting strategy execution to that intrinsic motivation. That intersection between strategy and employee motivation is a key to performance. Communication can leverage it to drive results. ●

The ‘Why Not’s’: What’s Getting in the Way?

A person’s *experiences* shape his or her *beliefs*, which shape his or her *behaviors*, which drive *results*. These linkages make up the Behavior Chain. Leadership must consider the Behavior Chain in developing On Strategy communication. It provides the insights necessary to address the reasons why people don’t take action — the “why not’s.”

Two Common ‘Why Not’s’

Analysis of the Behavior Chain reveals a number of “why not’s.” Employees cite experiences that shape beliefs that make it difficult for them to change their behavior in order to follow leadership’s direction. Two prevalent beliefs are as follows:

- **“This will pass, just like the last program of the month.”** This belief blocks leadership’s attempts to drive new behaviors, as employees continue past practices while waiting for new strategies to die on the vine.

- **“They didn’t ask me, so why would it work?”** This is what employees often say about strategies developed for their work areas without their input. Experience tells them that the programs don’t work well when they have not been involved in developing them. Even if they might work, employees often undermine them because they were not included in the process, and the expectation of failure becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Just as there are reasons why employees will take action, there are reasons why they won’t. These are the “why not’s.” They often involve deep emotions around employee perceptions of management regarding issues such as trust, commitment and competency. “Why not” issues are a significant challenge to employee motivation and a barrier to strategy execution.

The Behavior Chain

The “why not’s” usually can’t be talked away. When employees believe they have been lied to by management, for example, leadership can’t simply say “Trust me” and expect employees to respond with the needed behaviors. Instead, leaders must address the root cause of the belief, identifying the experiences that shaped the negative belief about trust. This connection between experiences, beliefs and behaviors is the Behavior Chain.

Leaders can get a picture of their employees’ beliefs and how they affect behavior and results by reviewing many of the responses on their employee surveys as well as by conducting qualitative research among employees, typically through discussion groups.

The Experience Link

To reverse a “why not,” leadership must address the experience link in the Behavior Chain. For example, to overcome the barrier of established mistrust, a leader might begin by telling employees that he or she will

always tell the truth in a straightforward manner. Then the leader must prove it through visible, demonstrable actions — telling the truth about difficult subjects, for example. Finally, the leader must remind employees that he or she told the truth. This words-actions-words cycle creates a new experience for employees, which in turn shapes a new belief. After enough cycles of telling the truth (and reminding employees of it), employees will begin to trust leadership's words again.

Leaders have been successful using this approach to address a wide variety of “why nots.” Removing the “why nots” as a factor in the minds of employees puts leaders firmly on the path to successful strategy execution. ●

Package: Turn the Action Equation Into a Conversation

Effective communication happens in the moment, when people are talking about the business and making decisions in their work areas. To enable leaders — from the CEO to a frontline supervisor — to communicate about strategy in the moment, they must be equipped with a message they can remember and deliver. That means the message has to be short — about five chunks of information. This five-chunk limit is driven by human short-term memory capacity.

The Conversation Platform

The five chunks must be constructed to cover the key points of the Action Equation in the form of a very short story, not a separate laundry list of thoughts. The information must be articulated in the vernacular of day-to-day conversation, not corporate language. In fact, the chunks should be viewed as concepts employees can put into their own words, as opposed to lines of a script or slogans. This overall story is the Conversation Platform.

The Conversation Platform is one of the most valuable and versatile tools leaders have at their disposal to improve leadership alignment and communication throughout the organization. It simplifies concepts to a point where they are easily remembered and articulated by top leaders, managers, supervisors and employees alike. It enables all leaders to boil down the essence of where the organization is going and how it's going to get there (or to discuss complex, difficult issues facing employees and the business) in a short communication that could be delivered in an elevator ride or form the basis for a three-day conference on strategy and issues. ●

Align: Make Sure All Leaders Are On Strategy

Top leaders need help communicating with their organizations — they can't do it alone. Therefore, a leader must align his or her leadership group behind strategy and communication, starting with top leadership and then extending the alignment all the way down to frontline supervisors. Without this kind of alignment, employees head in different directions, work at cross-purposes and derail strategy execution.

The first step in aligning leadership behind strategy and communications is to begin with the senior leadership team. Experts recommend enlisting the help of a seasoned, trusted facilitator to interview each member of the leadership team, using the Action Equation as a basis for intake. These intake sessions identify differences in understanding, perception, philosophy and other factors that may divide the leadership team. They also will uncover deeper motivational issues around trust and commitment that can inhibit collaboration. The output from these meetings helps drive productive discussion among the top leaders to resolve their issues and get on the same page.

Test Messages in the Field

Once top leadership is aligned, take messages (in the form of the Conversation Platform) to the field and test them with line managers and supervisors. This determines whether line managers will support the strategy and how leaders want to communicate it.

Just as a good marketing company wouldn't introduce a major new product without testing it with customers, leaders shouldn't take important messages to the organization without first ensuring that they will work. In working to align the organization behind the strategy, don't miss one of the most important constituencies — the informal leaders to whom those individuals turn for information and perspective. They may or may not be found in the leadership boxes on the organizational chart, but their influence in the organization is undeniable. ●

Equip: Give Leaders the Tools They Need to Communicate On Strategy

Businesses train top leaders, managers and supervisors in many things, but seldom provide training about strategy and how to communicate it. Train with this purpose. This isn't skill training, but content training, and as such should be a prerequisite of any leader's

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participation in the management of the business. Moreover, because it's content training — it's about strategy — leaders should be active in delivering the training.

Develop a training approach organized around the Conversation Platform and Action Equation, focusing on the core message or “cause,” the building blocks and the proof points. This helps create a common understanding and delivery method for strategy communication (it also helps deepen the understanding managers and supervisors have of strategy). With the platform as a foundation, the training should be used to:

- **Develop a solid understanding of strategy among managers and supervisors.**
- **Ground leaders in what the Conversation Platform is and how it's used.**
- **Build understanding of the communication processes the organization will use to communicate strategy and support managers.**
- **Get feedback.**

In addition to training, provide ongoing communication support tailored specifically to managers and supervisors. This includes a communication process or vehicle to keep them updated on strategy so they know news before the rest of the organization and therefore can help communicate and provide perspective. This should include the opportunity to ask questions. Concerning skills training, focus on interpersonal rather than communication techniques. Improving in that area will provide the most benefit, because On Strategy communication asks people to talk to each other not just make presentations and speeches.

Some managers will not become effective enough in communication to deliver On Strategy messages — at least in time to have an immediate impact on performance. In those cases, pair those managers with others who are effective communicators. That way the leaders serve immediate communication needs relative to performance, help the deficient leader learn how to communicate better and show the rest of the organization that communication is recognized as a critical leadership capability. ●

Drive and Support: Orchestrate and Sustain On Strategy Conversation

Once you have informed the Action Equation, built a Conversation Platform, trained and equipped your managers and launched the People Channel, it is time to kick-start communication and step on the gas. This happens through the various communication channels avail-

able in most organizations, which include traditional communication vehicles — such as the company newsletter, intranet and town hall meetings — as well as the operating vehicles that managers and supervisors use to run the business, such as departmental meetings, reporting documents, memos and e-mail.

To communicate on strategy, you can use these vehicles to produce a continuous drumbeat of information about strategy (based on the Conversation Platform) and occasional campaigns that turn up the volume of communication for specific, short-term purposes. You can create a drumbeat by keeping the content of every vehicle related to and in support of strategy. Even simple communication such as a personnel announcement can contribute to the drumbeat and reinforce the Conversation Platform. By setting up a communication calendar to track all of the organization's key deadlines, activities and events, you can use every opportunity to its fullest.

Generate Conversation

As you create the drumbeat, it's important to use communication that generates conversation by its nature — communication that has some level of controversy or is provocative, not the normal fare. The On Strategy approach is an ongoing conversation with employees, not a monologue, and the best vehicles generate and promote that conversation.

The communication department is a valuable resource in delivering On Strategy communication and achieving business results if you establish and use it strategically. It's best to populate the communication function with people who are both good businesspeople and passionate about communication. The combination can be very powerful in driving new thinking about the role communication plays and how leaders use communication to deliver business results. Communication people also provide valuable tactical support in delivering communication.

Involve People in the Entire Process

To make the most of your communication people, you should involve them in the entire process of strategy development, so they can contribute to and understand strategy in the deepest ways. Understanding strategy helps them prioritize their work and concentrate on strategic essentials as opposed to providing communication support and services. Tying their advancement and compensation to business results, rather than intermediary communication results or the production of materials, puts them in the lifeboat with you, where they belong and can help the most. ●

How Top Leaders Manage the People Channel

When managing the People Channel, top leaders focus on:

- **Measurement.** The ultimate measurement tools are your business metrics. Communication should influence results, or it will not (and should not) be a priority. Relate communication to performance metrics.
- **Reward, recognize and hold accountable.** It is important to follow up with employees with the proper rewards, encouragement and reinforcement. Recognize managers who are setting an outstanding example.
- **Prioritize.** Beyond managing the People Channel, a leader must also manage his or her own communication focus and activity. This begins with prioritizing where the leader spends time and resources.
- **Lead by example.** Top leadership must provide clear and consistent alignment at the top of the organization. Few things are more likely to discourage a manager from communicating with his or her employees than confusing and contradictory messages from leadership.

You: The Top Leader's Role

The People Channel is the sum of its parts: all of the managers and supervisors up and down the leadership ranks and informal leaders in and out of management. Its effectiveness is a direct result of top leadership's commitment to it. The People Channel spreads the responsibility for strategic communication across all leaders, thereby making communication more effective and less of a burden on top leadership. However, the top leader's role is indispensable in forming, shaping and sustaining the People Channel. In that role, top leaders must manage the People Channel, beginning with setting high expectations.

Never Assume and Always Monitor

You must outline the specific actions you expect managers to take at every communication juncture.

It's important to be specific about expectations for each major communication action. For example, if you are providing an update on your organization's performance and want managers to first attend a meeting with you to review and then sit down with their employees in small groups to review and discuss the information, tell them that. Don't assume they know what the next steps are just because you've done it a certain way in the past. Accompany each major communication opportunity with a clear set of expectations, as well as a process to

determine whether or not managers and supervisors meet those expectations.

Orchestrate Communication Delivery

In addition to setting expectations for major communication events, top leadership must also lead by example as active members of the People Channel and participate in the campaigns required to drive On Strategy communication. At the same time, top leaders must play a visible role in managing the People Channel. That involves establishing measurements, allocating resources, recognizing good communication performance and making communication a priority task, not only for the organization, but also for you. ●

'How to' Resource Guide

There are a number of processes that help leaders deliver on the On Strategy approach. Here are two of these "how to" processes:

- **Conducting discussion groups.** Use discussion groups as a research tool on a frequent and ongoing basis (so long as you do something about the findings and tell employees that you did). To lead the groups, it usually makes sense to use a third-party facilitator from outside your direct business or organization. An unbiased party helps to encourage dialogue that is more open.
- **Identifying informal leaders.** Incorporate informal leaders into the People Channel in a number of ways: as people to bounce ideas off of, to provide ongoing reality checks, as part of the day-to-day communication process and more. Informal leaders in your organization can be identified by asking yourself: Who do I go to for the inside scoop, and who do I listen to and trust — at every level of the organization? Then ask the same questions of others in your organization. If you follow that path, you'll quickly identify the informal leaders in your organization.

Walk through the physical space to see which vehicles will work best to trigger conversations. The opportunities are plentiful. There's no substitute for the real thing — so experience it with a real visit. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Beyond the Babble*, you'll also like:

1. ***True North* by Bill George and Peter Sims.** Learn how to follow your internal compass for authentic leadership.
2. ***The New Boss* by Peter Fischer.** A thorough guide for newly appointed senior managers. Fischer illuminates the seven building blocks of an accomplished transition offering helpful case studies.
3. ***Crucial Confrontations* by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler.** Master the skills needed to resolve the complex issues involving failed promises at work and at home. This is a guidebook to healthy relationships and career success.