

We dance *but* we don't touch

Recently, *The Washington Post* ran an article pointing out that person-to-person communication just isn't what it used to be. William Eadie, associate director of the Speech Communication Association, was quoted as saying, "Many years ago, it was easier to have conversations



because we only conversed with people who were like us. Today it is different and we have to make adjustments, we have to renegotiate with those differences."

I do believe that the diversity we face in our society—people from differing age groups, cultures, and gender—is partly to blame for the communication gap today, but it is by no means the entire reason.

The main problem lies not in our *inability* to communicate, I suggest, but in our *reluctance*. And this despite the fact that as members of the association community, we know our effectiveness is dependent on our ability to communicate openly and honestly about things that really matter.

Superficial communication is easy and, thus, far more common. Think about the most recent association committee meeting you attended: The chair welcomes the group, the committee members introduce themselves, they talk about some issues and reach some decisions, the chair thanks everyone for coming and compliments them on their input.

In the same vein, review in your mind's eye a recent staff meeting: Issues are discussed, matters are brought to the table, and efforts are made to address them.

These two scenarios have the

appearance of success; they may even be productive. But how many times do we acknowledge the dead moose lying in the middle of the conference table? And if we do acknowledge it, are we willing to dialogue on a deep and meaningful level to

resolve the issue? We go so far but no further. Our communication stops short as if a wall has gone up, and we just do not take that next step toward exposing ourselves to the world.

What stops that from happening? In part, it may be lack of know-how—inexperience with pushing the communication effort to its end result. It may also be too much thinking—thinking about what you are going to say at the expense of how you feel. But in my opinion, the answer most often revolves around fear—fear of hurting someone's feelings, fear of conflict, fear of stepping outside of what is "politically correct," fear of losing our jobs.

The flip side of this communication issue, then, is trust. Do we trust ourselves and the people with whom we need to communicate enough to take that risk and truly say what is on our mind? I am not talking about saying hurtful things. I am talking about speaking the truth.

This is a hard subject to write about. Because what I'm really saying is that we often don't have the courage—nor the encouragement from our peers—to raise the uncomfortable big issues. And if we want to move ourselves and our profession forward, we must.

I know we can dance *and* touch more often.