

# The California Psychologist



Spring 2020 ■ Volume 53 ■ Number Two

**CPA  
2020**

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**Convention Preview**  
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# Holding Their Feet to the Fire

Mark Rittenberg, EdD



## Mark Rittenberg, EdD

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In 2005, a woman with long blond tangled hair sat in her wheelchair, a red and green tartan blanket tucked tightly over her knees. The scene is from *Duet for One*, by Tom Kempinski, and the character of Stephanie that Betty played is based on the world-renowned cellist Jacqueline du Pré, who contracted Multiple Sclerosis and was no longer able to play. Standing behind her is her 'psychiatrist' Dr Louis Feldmann looking really earnest. Stephanie is talking about her father who never believed in her musical skills.

Feldmann asks gently..

*And yet, wouldn't you have liked to please him (her father) if it had been possible, if you could have, perhaps.*

Stephanie spits out the words ...

STEPHANIE: *I know you're the expert on the subconscious goings-on-here, Dr. Feldmann, and maybe I did want to please him, but if I did, I didn't let myself know it. I didn't let it get into my thoughts. I knew what I had to do.*

*It was meant, see. Meant. It was meant. And no handmade chocolate maker was going to stop me playing, see.*

*Not my father, not the Pope, not the Chief Rabbi, not even God, if he'd joined in the objections. I knew where I was going (her voice rises). You won't be surprised to hear that I can't eat chocolate...*

FELDMANN: *So you won?*

STEPHANIE: *Yes! I won. Bach or Plain Assorted. Which do you think's for people's spare time. Oh yes. Definitely. I definitely won.*

The lights came up and the actors hugged each other, crying as they stood to take a bow. The audience was on their feet, cheering and crying at the same time. The love between these two South Africans seemed nothing short of a miracle, because on Monday morning when Betty arrived at the Avis Brand Ambassador workshop and realized she would be in a workshop with a range of South Africans of all races, nationalities and positions within the company, she called her husband and asked him to come and fetch her. He said, 'Stay until lunchtime and if you still want to go home, I will come and fetch you'. Three days later Betty had just played Stephanie opposite Thabo, an Afri-

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can man and a branch manager at Avis, who played Dr. Louis Feldman. As the leader of this workshop, my team and I were trying to break down the barriers left by 50 years of apartheid. In this case we managed to create a dialogue that meant people could really see the humanity in each other across the divide.

What had happened in this three-day workshop to break down the barriers? It started with the vision of the CEO of Avis, Grenville Wilson. He wanted to create a culture where the values of empathy, honesty, and humanity were both the signposts, as well as the direction, of the company. He believed that everything happens because of the values you live as you interact with the customers. Together, we created a 5-year Brand Ambassador Cultural Transformation Program and this workshop was part of the program.

Grenville and I met by chance at a health retreat near Cape Town, South Africa. He was fascinated with my work that facilitates people becoming powerful communicators, working together with 'No Blame, No Judgement, Showing Up and Choosing to Be Present (Arrien, 1993) and in the spirit of diversity and acceptance by all of the people. We engineered a five-year project where everyone would become Brand Ambassadors. Instead of spending vast fortunes on advertisements and media, the plan was to have 1,200 men and women who were 'stewards and guardians' of the Avis mission and vision. There were workshops for everyone from the CEO and CFO to the tea lady and the receptionists at the branches, with everyone working together in community.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Dr. Rittenberg is one of the invited Master Lecturers for the CPA 2020 Convention. His presentation, **Leadership is Love. The Power of Human Connection**, will be Saturday, April 25 from 11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

The Brand Ambassador 1 workshop focused on the Avis 'Values and Vision'. Brand Ambassador 2 workshop was called 'Leading Others' and focused on customer service workshops led by the managers. Workshop 3 was 'Leader as Champion' where participants learned how to become 'stewards and guardians' and to lead the workshops. There were also special 'Leader as Coach' workshops for managers. Over a 5-year period the results were clear; Avis Southern Africa, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden had moved from third to the first position in the marketplace.

We commissioned Markinor Market Research to evaluate the changes in the organization over several years. They found not only vast improvements around employee satisfaction, but they observed that communications redefined Avis employees to a level not often seen in a major corporation. They reported that "This is an extremely unusual finding. For most companies communication scores are low and have a significant effect on loyalty. It appears the Brand Ambassador Program has had an effect in an area where most companies struggle."

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For over 30 years, I have helped organizations create communities of excellence among their people and empower individuals to become true leaders with the ability to actualize a vision – all through the power of communication. I believe that important personal, social, and business problems can be effectively addressed using the Active Communicating methodology I developed. It draws upon the actor's discipline of engaging, creative and effective communication.

My work in this area started in Israel in the 1970s and 1980s, where I used my knowledge of arts-based activities to build cultural bridges and develop mutual respect among the Israeli and Palestinian students in my workshops. Out of this work with Palestinian and Israeli students, where there were barriers of mixed classrooms, with prejudices and old biases, I

wanted to create a community of learners who would begin to develop mutual respect and trust for each other. The students came with heart breaking, anguished stories, and biases and hatreds that were generations old.

Students described the powerful events in their lives that made them the people they are today. Harber (2013, personal communication), in interviews conducted with the students, observed that “Very often they would share tragic situations that had radically changed their lives, bombs were blown up in cafes and buses, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and relatives lost. They spoke of degrading situations, where they’d experienced humiliating racism at the hands of young Israelis soldiers at border posts and in their villages. An Israeli spoke about feeling ashamed while watching an old, wizened Palestinian woman at the Ben Gurion Airport being virtually strip searched in the open air without curtains, and having everything in her suitcase minutely examined and left in a pile.”

Slowly the barriers broke down and the Palestinian and Israeli students realized that “That person next to me also has a brother and a sister” and it took on the idea that “you start getting rid of the old labeling and the possibility of forging new friendships and new relationships becomes possible.” (Harber, 2013). Using drama, music and art we brought the students together to create a ‘humanistic community’ based on mutual respect and forgiveness.

This work led to my methodology and body of work called ‘Active Communicating’. While living in Israel I was invited to do similar work in apartheid South Africa, as a Professor of Education, specializing in teacher-training workshops in arts-based education and as an interventionist working with at-risk youths in disadvantaged situations. I later received a Fulbright Scholarship and traveled to post-apartheid South Africa to rebuild the self-esteem and confidence that had been shattered in Black communities during years of segregation. I have had the privilege of working as a mediator and communication specialist for the UNESCO Middle East Peace Process Forum, and have worked with leaders from Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Egypt on peaceful solutions to the Middle East conflict. Part of that work was to lead a special interest group symposium on arts- based programs for disadvantaged youth for use in community centers in the four countries.

The work we did at the Avis Workshop in 2005 has been replicated all over the world in Fortune 100 companies, start-ups and small not for profits, and community groups. The tipping point comes when people find their mutual humanity in one another whether it’s in Abu Dhabi, Bangkok, Moscow, Ulaan Bataar, Johannesburg, Singapore or in Silicon Valley. The active and participatory programs develop participants’ quality of leadership presence, resulting in leadership that is powerful in its ability to communicate values of respect, trust, credibility, and integrity.

I hope you will join me at the CPA convention in April to explore how our human connections can lead to better communication and successful leadership! ■

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Complete references for this article can be found at [www.cpapsych.org](http://www.cpapsych.org) – select *The California Psychologist* from the **Professional Resources** menu.

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