



Sayre Darling

## An Interview with Sayre Darling, Leadership Coach and founder of Courageous Communications

By Chris Wierman, Team Internal Communications Lead, St. Jude Medical

**Sayre Darling** has 25 years of strategic marketing and communications experience in a variety of industries including health care, insurance, IT and medical technology, as well as associations and non-profit organizations in health care, professional services and the arts. She is accredited by the International Coach Federation and received her coaching certification from The Hudson Institute, recognized as a premier leadership and coaching training institution. She received her Master's in Business Communications (MBA with a communications focus) from the University of Saint Thomas, Minneapolis, and a Bachelors of Arts in Journalism from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. If you would like to learn more about Darling and her business, Courageous Communications, you can find her web site at [www.couragecom.com](http://www.couragecom.com).

### To enable sustainable change, try the four Cs—connection, context, curiosity and courage

Author and biochemistry professor, Isaac Asimov, once noted that, "It is change, continuing change, inevitable change that is the dominant factor in society today." Sayre Darling, Leadership Coach and founder of Courageous Communications, agrees and adds that, "Enabling sustainable change should be the primary focus of today's organizational development practitioner." Darling brings more than 25 years experience in strategic business communication and change management to bear on that observation.

So what, you might be asking yourself. It's not like we haven't heard that before. That's when Darling lights up. You've just given her an opportunity to engage you in conversation. And that moment is at the heart of what Darling wants to teach leaders of organizations...the power of communicating using connection, context, curiosity and courage and how leaders can use them to more effectively sustain change.

### Can you hear me now?

First, connection. "Today, we try to communicate without connecting," says Darling. Think about it. How many times today did you rely on sending an e-mail, rather than walking over to someone's desk or calling him or her on the phone? E-mail strips your ability to effectively connect. There's no eye contact, no body language, no tonal differences to help enhance and inform your connection to another human being. "People want to connect; it's fundamental," Darling says. Physically connecting with a colleague or customer gives you deeper insights about how to more effectively meet their needs. Connection opens the door to richer dialogue.

"Leaders in particular should understand that communication is the glue that holds everything together," Darling says. "Their ability to create connections through communication is how they build relationships, generate influence, and enhance others' performance."

### The detachment of domestication

There's another insidious lack of connection in the workplace today—between the heart and the head, spirit and mind. Darling cites work done by David Dibble to illustrate this point. In his book, *The New Agreements in the Workplace—Releasing the Human Spirit*, Dibble writes that business leaders help "domesticate" our minds by encouraging us to accept certain business norms, which often discourage connection. "When you want to fit into a culture, you detach when you see other people doing it," Darling says. "We adapt our own perspective perhaps without even realizing that it's based on someone else's." To be fenced in by these norms (to be domesticated) is as comforting as it is ineffective. And it quickly becomes how we teach others to act. And leaders are an organization's teachers.

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## Voice of the thought leader

What to do? Help people connect both their heads and their hearts when they're at work. "Many people leave their hearts at home," said Darling. "As a result, they leave behind a source of tremendous wisdom." Companies benefit from helping employees make this vital connection. "We're being paid to be fully present," she said. "So it needs to be okay for employees to say to one another, 'I'm having a really bad day, can you help me refocus? Or to tell their managers, 'My feelings were hurt today, can we have a moment?'" And the response should be, "OK, let's get some coffee and talk about it," *not*, "I don't have time. Just suck it up."

### Is it bigger than a bread box?

From connection, we move to context. "Communicating without context doesn't add up to much," says Darling. "You have to answer the question, *within the scope of human events, how big is this?*" There's a significant amount of the Chicken Little Syndrome in today's change-crazed workplaces. The minute something feels different, employees begin running around concerned that, "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" Leaders need to provide enough context for a change to help employees understand its impact. Often, Darling added, context and perspective are the most valuable components of a change communication. "It helps us respond appropriately," she said.

### Chicken Little vs. Curious George

If we can stretch an analogy a little further, Darling suggests that during periods of change, we should all become more like Curious George than Chicken Little. This is perhaps where Darling's notion of changing the conversation about change is the strongest. To be curious is to ask questions. When confronted with change, we need to do what Darling describes as "unwrapping our feelings and beliefs" from our conversation to help open our minds. What does that look like? "Let's say a company wants to divest a division," Darling notes. "You have some good friends in that division. You feel strongly about the decision because you don't want your friends to leave. As a result, you condemn the divestiture. Loudly. Say instead, 'I know someone in that division. I'm going to get her opinion about the situation.' Did you see what happened? You unwrapped your own feelings and beliefs from your conversation and left the door open to further discussion about the change. That actually serves two needs. It can help you get better information about the divestiture and enables your friend to talk with you about it. Who knows? It may be a very exciting opportunity for her."

All of what Darling suggests requires the fourth and final characteristic of effective change communication—courage. "It takes courage to know yourself, to know what you want and to

speak up for it," she said. "When you do that, you're coming from a place where your head and heart are strongly connected." It also takes courage to go against the "domestication" that occurs in the workplace today. To recognize that someone else's norms may not be your own. Organizations dealing with change need people who are fully present to what's happening, not numbed by someone else's perspective. She also suggests that when you do have an opportunity to communicate, choose the method that gives you the most ability to connect. Or, if you have to use the phone or e-mail, show up more fully in that conversation. Ask questions. Give your recipients an idea about how you're feeling, even if it's just a glimpse into something you found interesting along the way.

"I teach people how to communicate to build influence inside their organizations," Darling noted. "I help organizations initiate change with new, more meaningful language. OD professionals need to understand that communication skills need to be taught. People don't come to the table knowing how to do it well. Communications is the least expensive, most effective tool for creating happier, healthier, more highly functional workplaces." And from Darling's perspective, good communication depends on the four Cs—connection, context, curiosity and courage.