

## Wrong Message, Wrong Mode, Wrong Moment, Wrong Minister

Message: (noun): 1: a communication in writing, in speech, or by signals

Mode: (noun): 4a: a particular form or variety of something

Moment: (noun): 1a: a minute portion or point of time

Minister: (noun): 1: agent

[The above definitions are taken directly from Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary ([www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary)).]

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Please extend professional courtesy and respect to the Dean and the Associate Dean by not just walking into their office spaces unannounced. With the heavy demands on their schedules, frequent interruptions causes their work to back log and lowers productivity. If you need to see one of them, please check with the front desk to see if they are available. (*An open door is not an invitation to walk in*). If you need to schedule an appointment with the Dean, please contact me to get on their calendar.

I would appreciate your full cooperation with this matter.

Thank you.

[Email from Sonia Gaines-Littles to CoB Faculty, 4/1/2009]

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In a world in which Lance Nail can ill afford serious missteps, the CoB Dean of nine months may have made (or, at the very least, sanctioned) one of the poorest decisions of his entire administrative career by authorizing construction and dissemination of the above email from CoB Dean's Office secretary Sonia Gaines-Littles to the collective CoB Faculty. The result of said email has been predictable to those who truly know the CoB and its recent history, and the incident represents a disappointing decision made by Nail, who, although he has made some significant changes in the CoB to date, has begun to frequently demonstrate that he "just doesn't 'get' it." The email above was the wrong message, sent in the wrong mode, sent at the wrong moment, and delivered by the wrong minister. Unfortunately for Nail, it seems that he's contracted a (currently) mild case of Bedeian's "Dean's Disease." Whether Nail can undo the reported damage done – not only to his support base, but also to CoB fence sitters – is a moot point. Whether or not Nail *wants* to make amends will tell the world quite a lot about his ability to lead a business school. One must assume that Nail ordered, authorized, or otherwise

sanctioned the email; to assume otherwise would be an equally troubling indictment of his leadership.

### Why is the email the wrong message?

The answer might seem obvious, though the uninitiated reader may have to comb through 3 years' worth of this website's editorials, reports, opinions, editorial cartoons, and submitted letters to the editor in order to gain true perspective. Let's begin, however, with a simple, straightforward treatment. The tone of the email indicates that Nail is too busy to be bothered with "off-calendar" "pop-ins," as his role as CoB CEO requires so much of his time. This mindset may seem reasonable to a reader who isn't intimately familiar with Southern Miss; to the more familiar, however, that single statement is rife with glaring issues.

The current Dean of the CoB cannot simply be a CEO. Although this is what Nail obviously desires and is working to achieve, it is an unreasonable status at this juncture, and Nail knew this when he accepted the job last year. The USM CoB Dean cannot simply be the Mayor of CoB-ville; he or she must also be the Sheriff of CoB-ville. Yes, the Dean will preside at honorary functions, glad-hand at fundraisers, and coordinate lunches with power brokers in the Hattiesburg community, but it is a requisite that the current CoB Dean establish "law and order" in Joe Greene Hall following the Doty Administration, which was notorious for allowing looters and frauds to have free reign. Abuses were and continue to be perpetrated in JAG, and injured parties need the opportunity to have an audience with the Dean to gain an informal resolution. Nail was warned about the problems that lay in wait within the CoB building's walls, and he accepted the job with that knowledge. To accept the job with that knowledge and to then claim CEO status so quickly is worse than obtuse, and it sparks a conversation within Greene Hall that Nail cannot afford to allow to continue.

Some question why a strict appointment requirement is unreasonable by this writer. Aside from the issues raised in the paragraph immediately preceding, there are some issues that should bear on Nail's self-interest, namely that Nail needs faculty help. Harold Doty's regime proved that a handful of administrators and two or three sycophants cannot make a business school a success. Broad faculty involvement is required, and Nail has done a good job of incorporating individuals from differing backgrounds in his leadership structure. However, those individuals need the opportunity to have discussions with Nail regarding their individual roles in University committees, College committees, Search committees, etc., and most of these types of discussions could be kept informal, quick, and to-the-point – hardly requiring a lengthy meeting and certainly giving Nail the opportunity to keep his finger on the college's pulse, an opportunity negated by the appointment-only policy. But then there's Nail's dirty little secret: he's never in his office. To flip a line from a popular 1990s sitcom: Day or night, he can reach the faculty, but the faculty can never get him.

Yes, some respond, Nail's job requires travel for fundraising and relationship building. Yes, Nail's job requires travel for AACSB-related activities. Yes, Nail's job

requires travel to the USMGC campus. Yes, Nail's job requires attendance at Dome-called meetings and official events. However, in the past nine months, Nail has built the following reputation in the CoB: "He's never in his office, he's not good about returning phone calls, and he rarely returns emails." Imagine the following situation: a CoB faculty member has an issue that he or she would like to discuss with Nail, but Nail hasn't been in Greene Hall in several days. The faculty member emails Nail with no response, even though Nail is an obvious BlackBerry addict. A telephone call gets no answer and no return call. Is it any wonder, then, that this faculty member, seeing Nail's vehicle in the parking lot, would "drop by" the Dean's suite to try to gain audience? Seeing an open door, is this individual deranged for peeking inside the Dean's office to assess the possibility for a quick meeting? Seeing no guest sitting in Nail's office, is it unreasonable to expect that the faculty member might attempt to speak to Nail directly? Under these circumstances, the faculty member's actions are reasonable, and this example circumstance has become the norm rather than the exception in the CoB. Yet the email's message clearly says, "I'm too busy for such activity."

Nail's productive faculty members may just be too busy to abide some stilted scheduling requirement designed to erect a protective cocoon around him. Productive faculty members have to teach classes at specified times – times during which they are unable to schedule an appointment with Nail. Productive faculty members have to schedule office hours at specified times – times during which they are unable to schedule an appointment with Nail. Productive faculty members have to devote large blocks of time to research – times during which they are unable to schedule an appointment with Nail without hindering the research agenda that Nail so desperately desires. Productive faculty members have to attend important committee meetings at specified times – times during which they are unable to schedule an appointment with Nail. Nail's productive faculty work six or seven days per week to build and maintain respectable careers, and the email message indicates that these faculty should rearrange schedules to accommodate Nail's erratic, ever-changing schedule, substituting their personal or research time for Nail's further benefit. It is no wonder that those who have spent months helping Nail's administration become a success have begun to question their allegiance to a dean who can't make time for them.

Nail, like many before him, seems to have forgotten that he is, first and foremost, a public servant and a faculty member in the CoB. Nail's forgotten that he's supposed to be an advocate for CoB faculty, not a one-way conduit of information and directives from the Dome. Gone forever, apparently, are the days of Ty Black's daily coffee breaks with faculty in the faculty lounge. The sad truth is that, nine months later, Nail doesn't know any CoB faculty well enough to know what their professional needs really are, and his tacit support of the email from Gaines-Littles says that he doesn't care to make that a priority. Sure, Fortune 500 employees don't approach Fortune 500 CEOs, but the CoB isn't a corporation and Nail's job requires more than simple CEO detachment.

For all of these reasons, the email message is the wrong message to send.

### Why is email the wrong mode of delivery?

Simply stated, email is another form of detachment – a layer of removal from the real world. Ignore the previous pages and assume for a moment that the email's message is legitimate. Why not deliver the message in a forceful, face to face manner? If the entire faculty is a problem, then Nail could have called a faculty meeting to address his expectations regarding demands on his time? Conversely (and far more likely), if only certain individuals are causing Nail a problem with their "pop-ins," then why not just address the issues with those individuals face to face? The email that was sent is the equivalent of keeping an entire elementary school class inside during recess because one or two misbehaved – a convention that has been identified as one of the most unprofessional and counterproductive behaviors possible. Yet here we are in 2009 with Nail treating CoB faculty like kindergarten students. It's time for Nail to earn his money and to get his hands dirty by actually doing some of the unpleasant tasks that need to be done in the CoB.

One of these unpleasant tasks is to create a culture of honesty and transparency by looking CoB faculty in the eye and telling the truth on an individual-by-individual basis, even if it means uncomfortable conversations; faculty would respect him more under those circumstances. To have those conversations, however, one must spend more than just a few hours each week in Greene Hall. Etiquette and society place greater weight on sentiments delivered in person when compared to the same sentiment delivered in writing. It's easy for a perpetrator to issue a written apology to a victim but much more difficult to deliver that apology eye to eye. It's easy to break off a relationship over the telephone and much less comfortable to do so in person. It's time that Nail stopped the habit of taking the easy way out. If individuals are wasting Nail's time, then he needs to address those individuals clearly and in a manner that leaves no room for doubt about his desires. Instead, all CoB faculty got an email.

For all of these reasons, email message was the wrong mode of delivery to use.

### Why was this the wrong moment to send such a message?

Nail needs support from CoB faculty. Aside from the looming AACSB hurdle in 2011-12, there are the matters of horrendous classroom standards, dreadful research productivity, widespread faculty detachment, attempted internal coups, disastrous (i.e., nonexistent) fundraising, limited senior faculty leadership, a Doty hangover effect from some of the best CoB faculty fleeing Hattiesburg, an Alvin Williams hangover effect with unqualified individuals being hired to teach scads of courses college-wide, etc., etc., etc. At a time when Nail needs all the support he can get, this is the wrong time to risk alienating those who constitute his support base. George Carter tried to organize a coup against Nail, Mark Klinedinst tried to rally the AAUP and the Academic and Graduate Councils against Nail's reorganization, and these and other individuals are no doubt continuing to scheme against the new CoB Dean. Those individuals will never support Nail, even if they might seem to be on his side for a given moment.

At a time when Nail needs to be building relationships with faculty who can and will support him, he's telling them to "take a number." Nail should remember those who supported his move to the front of the line when Danny Arnold was the Good Ol' Boys' preferred candidate in 2007-08 because they thought Nail represented a chance to clean up the CoB. Nail has asked some of those individuals to step up, and they have. Now his secretary is telling them to step back. Suppose they disengage. To whom will Nail turn next? Until he has a solid backup list, he can't afford to lose his first stringers.

There may not ever be a "right" moment to send that message, but the actual timing of that message definitely qualifies as the wrong moment.

Why was Sonia Gaines-Littles the wrong minister to allow or to use to send that message?

If for no other reason, Gaines-Littles is a staff member. This is not to say that staff members are a lower class of people than faculty are. There is no doubt that certain (again, isolated) individual faculty and administrators have abused staff members in the past. However, the wide majority of faculty treat and have always treated staff members with respect. Certainly, the number of faculty and administrators who abused staff members can be counted on one hand. That leaves more than 90% of CoB faculty who do not fall into the "abusive" category. Truly, with the advent of word processors, departmental copy machines, departmental Scan Tron machines, and the adoption of ERP software for grade reporting/student withdrawals/roster reporting, faculty are performing more traditional "staff" tasks for themselves than ever before. Yet when Lance Nail arrived in 2008, he was reportedly bombarded with stories of how badly staff had been treated in the past. In this instance – as in others – Nail decided to go overboard to prove to staff that he is different, elevating staff to levels apparently superseding those occupied by faculty.

Staff and faculty are simply on different paths of existence, though, and one has only to ask two simple questions before one sees the difference between faculty and staff. Question One: Can a university exist without staff? Question Two: Can a university exist without faculty? The answer to Question One is a qualified "Yes." The answer to Question Two is an unqualified "No." USM exists for the purposes of Teaching, Research, and Service. Faculty can perform these duties without staff; however, staff members allow faculty more time to teach, research, and perform service by completing clerical and organizational duties that are necessitated by governance and administrative systems put into place by faculty, administrators, and government oversight bodies. Staff members don't teach, staff members don't research, and staff members don't do the kinds of service that constitute USM's mission. In short, staff members are ancillary to USM's mission, which is not to say that they are unnecessary or a lower level of human being.

Of course, all of this ignores the personal animus Gaines-Littles apparently holds for most faculty and (reportedly) has demonstrated toward her fellow staff members.

Gaines-Littles has run afoul of departmental secretary after departmental secretary in her short CoB stay. She was eager to climb the Dean's Office ladder when Melia Hartsfield "departed" the CoB for a position in an administrative office across campus back in 2007, although she was far less qualified than Hartsfield was for the same position. Since that time, Gaines-Littles has earned a reputation as the "Dean's Watchdog" under Doty, Williams, and, now, Nail. A watchdog is a nice pet to have, but what reasonable person allows a pet dog to bite a friendly visitor with impunity?

There's an old saying that "sergeants run the Army." This may be true from an administrative standpoint, but would it be good policy for Commander-in-Chief Barack Obama to allow a supply sergeant to publicly reprimand General Ray Odierno, commander of the U.S. Force in Iraq? If Obama wants to reprimand Odierno, then he should do the job himself or use the proper protocol to deliver the message.

Likewise, Nail used the wrong agent – the wrong "minister" – to deliver his message to CoB faculty. If you're going to do this, you've got to do it yourself, Lance.

#### How can Nail fix this quagmire and what should he have done in the first place?

First and foremost, a personal, face to face apology should be issued. If Nail sanctioned the email, then the apology should come directly from his mouth to CoB faculty ears. If not, then Gaines-Littles should deliver it. Regardless of the voice, the apology should recognize that faculty are individuals and that the vast majority are not "popping in" unannounced.

Whether as part of an apology or not, Nail should tell CoB faculty that he recognizes his role as sheriff and arbiter and that he does not plan to shirk that duty any longer. Nail should then outline one of three possible policies:

1. Nail will announce that the open door policy is reinstated, but anybody who stops by should ask, "You got a minute?" If Nail responds in the negative, the visitor can expect to then be given a suggested time in the very near future,
2. Nail will hold consistent office hours every Friday afternoon. CoB faculty should be able to count on talking to Nail face to face without an appointment but on a first come, first served basis, or
3. Nail will make Associate Dean Peyrefitte responsible for all internal CoB matters, including conflict resolution. Nail will schedule regular social functions (i.e., coffee breaks and luncheons) to allow him to interact with faculty regularly and informally.

Unfortunately, none of these things will happen. Nail will continue to shield himself from his duties as the conciliator of the CoB in order to maximize the time he has to spend on the part of the job he likes: fundraising and schmoozing. Gaines-Littles will continue to play the part of the petulant subordinate who (thinks she) isn't.

CoB faculty who currently work to make Nail a success will abandon his cause, spending their time doing what they like to do (Research? Family? Golf?) instead of doing what Nail needs them to do. If all of this comes to pass, Lance Nail might find his name on the Marquee right next to Bill Gunther and Harold Doty as failed Deans who can't get another dean job and who don't have the vitae to escape as a faculty member. Maybe then Nail will see who is willing to make time for him.