



PATRICK CAMPBELL PHOTO AT THE CU HERITAGE CENTER

We're all in this together By Haley Sinn-Penfold

Phil Tompkins and organizational communication

There's nothing like the living, breathing organism that forms when groups of humans work together. Sometimes, however, the communication within an organization is flawed. Bureaucracy's ailments have long needed a communication doctor — and Phillip Tompkins, CU professor emeritus of communication, has been making house calls for more than 45 years.

Tompkins received a doctorate in 1962 in what was then a brand new field — organizational communication. He worked for several years as a consultant to Wernher von Braun, director of NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Ala. Tompkins was charged with analyzing the communication system and reporting his findings to the elite management of the space center.

"It was a bit unnerving to speak to an audience of the top rocket scientists in the world," says Tompkins, who is now a nationally recognized lecturer.

What followed was the model of von Braun's "Monday Notes" — what Tompkins calls the most powerful communication practice he has ever uncovered. Every week, the head of the 24 departments at MSFC wrote an informal note to von Braun reporting technical problems and progress made during the previous week. After reading and commenting on each note, von Braun made copies of them all and sent a packet to each department head. The Monday Notes were composed after the department heads received a Friday Note from all division chiefs, who received a Thursday Note from their bureau chiefs.

"Realize that once a week, nearly everyone of the 7,200 employees at MSFC stopped to think about what the boss needed to know," says Tompkins. The practice left very little room for errors and encouraged lateral and vertical communication.

"Speaking the truth to power" became a mantra for Tompkins. Practices like Monday Notes had a built-in immunity for lower management — meaning no jobs would be lost because the truth wasn't something the boss wanted to hear.

What he learned at NASA provided the basis for Tompkins' lifelong research and writings about successful organizational communication, including his most recent book, *Apollo, Challenger, Columbia: The Decline of the Space Program* (Oxford

University Press). It discusses the breakdown of communication in NASA and its effect on important aspects of the space program.

In 1986 Tompkins left a professorship at Purdue to save CU's drowning communication department. Administrators had closed the department's graduate admissions, removed its assistantships and were considering eliminating the department. With the industrious Tompkins as a driving force, the communication department soon ranked among the nation's top 10.


Tompkins continued as a professor until 1998. While at CU, he further developed a theoretical and empirical research program called "concertive control," which uses concepts much like von Braun's Monday Notes.

A post-bureaucratic form of organizational control, the concept involves people working as a team to make decisions — "in concert," says Tompkins, whose wife and colleague Elaine Tompkins, formerly of CU communication, coined the term.

Former CU graduate student James Barker (PhDComm'87) used the concept in studying an Aurora manufacturing plant as it transitioned from a traditional form of bureaucratic control to concertive control. As a result, the organization flourished.

Although he continues to teach in many capacities, Tompkins moved to Denver after retirement and has spent eight years as an advocate for the homeless.

"His approach to life is simple yet leaves such a profound impact," says graduate student Carey Candrian (Comm'04), who is currently working with Tompkins on a research project. "He embraces difference, which thereby brings motivation and identification to building better practices of working and living together."

Tompkins has the ability to recognize the importance of each person in every level of an organization or a society. He understands the universal need to be a part of something larger — and to be valued as a part of the whole. This line of thought will ultimately affect each of us working together to build a better society. 

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