



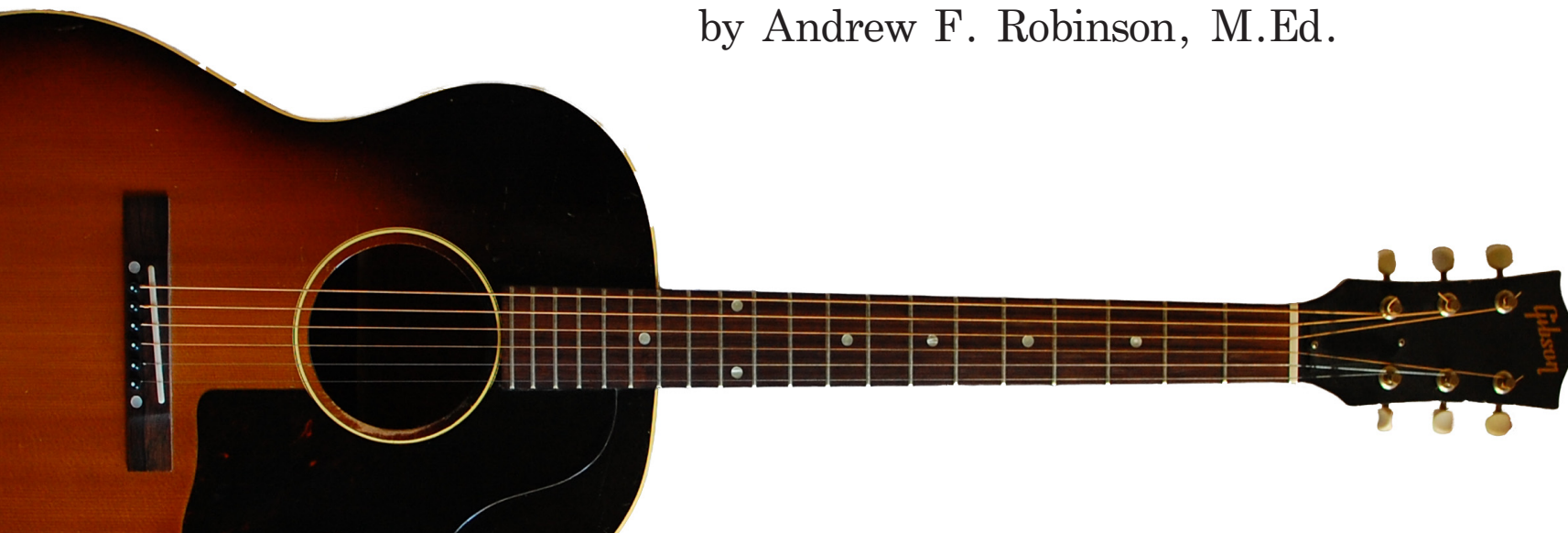
# Own It

How a single sheet can transform the way people engage with your message.

Help others make your message their message, because engaging people in the future is about personalization, not information dissemination.

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by Andrew F. Robinson, M.Ed.



“Whoever plays me, make sure they don’t handle the guitar like it’s a baby. Make them hold it like they own it!”

- Johnny Cash

Johnny Cash made this lone request of the actor who would portray him in *Walk the Line*, the film about his life and career. Johnny Cash did not play his guitar as if it were a baby. He owned it. He wanted the actor who played him to do the same. The role was later given to Joaquin Phoenix.

Cash’s single request encapsulates the hope we have for our message: that others may come to own it as we do.

## THE CHALLENGE

“Do or do not...there is no try,” said Yoda, Jedi Master from the Star Wars films.

Yoda was wrong. There is such a thing as *try*.

Trying is how we learn and grow.

Trying is a life-changing transaction: we exchange comfort for discomfort, the ordinary for the remarkable.

To *try* is to *do*. It is better than the inertia that hamstringing many organizations and people.

*Try* each suggestion in this short book.

*Try* means you may fail initially. But the people and organizations contacting me with their success stories once began by trying. They are the true adventurers who traveled to the outer reaches of their comfort, creativity, and ability. Their failures taught them what didn't work. Their tenacity was rewarded in a newfound joy and accomplishments in their work experience.

I hope you will travel to this place and discover gifts and abilities you did not know you possessed.

We begin the journey now.

## OWNERSHIP

You own your own message. It's personal to you, but how personal is it to the people you serve? Your message is most effective when you transfer ownership. Your message then becomes their message. This transfer process requires real engagement, not just getting people's attention.

Real engagement is when you successfully connect your message with the passions, experiences, ideas, and interests that already exist in the minds and hearts of your targeted audience.

Once you've engaged them, your task is to make your message theirs.

You to have a reason to believe your message makes a difference. It is an important message and therefore the people you serve need to own your message for themselves. I mean *need to* in the sense that one *needs to* be at the airport on time to catch a flight; *needs to* breath in order to live, *needs to* train if you want to finish a marathon.

People often fail to take ownership of important messages because the message does not resonate with them at a level deep enough to influence their own decisions or behavior. They know the message but they don't own it. The purpose of this book is to help you maximize the opportunities and resources you possess, helping you deliver your message in a way that helps others own it.

Instead of wasting your time and resources I will help you maximize them. I will introduce you to uncommon methods you can use immediately. Try them. Keep trying. Watch what happens. You will see an increase in the depth and breadth of the engagement of your message.

Increasing engagement with your message requires determination, creativity, and hard work. This book is not about formulas, tricks, or shortcuts. Through this process you will discover what works best for you in your unique setting. You are the expert on your message, organization, and clientele. You will discover the resources you have within yourself to act on these strategies far more creatively and effectively than I could ever prescribe for you.

## **ABANDON SCRIPT**

Before you can help others own your message, you must first consider the immeasurable value of you owning your own message. Your ability to successfully transfer ownership of your message to others is directly related to how well you own your message.

When you first began to deliver your message you probably depended on a script, or an outline, or perhaps a cache of power point slides. Everyone needs such training wheels, so you memorized the script hoping no one would interrupt you. Perhaps you even feared someone might raise a question you couldn't address. Your goal was simply to get through the script.

But as you became more familiar with the material you didn't need as much assistance.

**This is the natural progression of every messenger.**

## It is also where many messengers stagnate, sometimes for an entire career.

We get to where we know every nook and cranny of our script. We can recite the entirety of our message from memory. We could say it in our sleep, but we need to progress through this stage if we are to better assist others in owning our message.

Consider movie making. A script guides production of most movies. It's the bones for which all else clings to. Actors memorize the script, rehearse, and then perform it in front of the camera. But we all know that the best actors don't just memorize their lines. They deliver them in a way that makes us believe in the character, while still following the script. Without delivery movies are mere lines on a piece of paper. Yet, fidelity to the script is paramount for the efficiency of the production.

The writer and producer, Christopher Guest, of movies such as *Best in Show*, *Waiting for Guffman*, or *A Mighty Wind*, does not use a script in any of his films. He doesn't even have rehearsals. Instead of originating from a script, the lines in Guest's films spring forth from spontaneous interactions between the actors on set. The absence of a script demands actors fathom the depths of their creativity for lines and interactions. This process far exceeds a script in spontaneity and authenticity.

Prior to filming, Guest spent considerable time developing a structure that also permitted spontaneity. First, he created detailed, elaborate back-story for each character. His actors knew in specific terms the person he or she would portray. The second component: a set of 140 note cards

upon which Guest wrote each scene's beginning and ending. Immersed in their character, Guest's actors were free to work toward the end of a scene however they saw fit.

**In this same way you can abandon your script.**

Like an actor in one of Guest's films, this will then require you to access the depths of your abilities. When you own your message in this way it is far more accessible to others than when you are tethered to a script. Design a clear structure for each section that includes the beginning and ending of each section of your message.

**The content of your message will be the product  
of your collaboration with others. This is  
significantly different than reading from a script.**

You will find that your message becomes more personal and meaningful than any script previously provided, for you now have engaged your audience in the process.

## **FROM A TO C**

Your message is concrete to you. There's nothing abstract about it. This is not initially true for your audience. Your message is abstract to them. So long as it remains abstract it will not be

effective. Your message creates a lasting change in the lives of others when it travels along a spectrum from abstract to concrete—from A to C. What may at first seem to them like an amorphous room filled with endless string needs to become as real and solid as an orderly ball of tightly wound string, ready to access at any moment. It can be counted on because it has order; it has meaning; it is concrete and solid.

Traditional methods of communication—those that emphasize information dissemination and knowledge acquisition—don't encourage this reality.

Merely stating your message is not enough to make it concrete. Providing evidence and data, although it helps having such backing, is also not enough. Humor and entertainment, though it grabs others' attention, is also insufficient and impotent for creating lasting change.

**It is personalization—the process through which people internalize and make something their own—that is the missing ingredient.**

We all have a natural inclination and ability to make abstract ideas more concrete by connecting what we don't know to what we do know. Not long ago, while attending a cultural festival with my family, I watched a woman who was learning how to weave wicker baskets. “Oh, it's like macrame’,” she said to the instructor. She was adjoining what she did know to something she did not. We often engage in this personalization process, mostly without any conscious awareness of effort. Your job is to provide this opportunity to the people you serve.

Use the following activity to activate the personalization process to help your message become more concrete. The *Single Sheet* is a simple, yet powerful alternative to traditional curricula and programs.

## THE SINGLE SHEET

First, summarize your message in one sentence, phrase, or word. Then ask the following questions about it in sequence. Allow adequate discussion before moving to the next:

1. Why might some people support or agree with this message?
2. Why might some people not support or disagree with this message?
3. What attracts people to this message?
4. What repels people from this message?
5. In what ways is this message important to people?
6. In what ways is this message irrelevant to people?
7. How has your understanding of the message changed during this activity?
8. How might this change of understanding influence future decisions?

Your role in this process is to ask the questions and facilitate dialogue. Withhold your own responses. Listen intently to each person. Ask additional questions. Look for connections and con-

trusts in how people respond. Acknowledge each one. Synthesize the group's responses before you transition to the next question.

The purpose of this activity is to uncover embedded opinions, ideas, and previous associations others have about your message. It enables your audience to better connect your message with what they already know.

This method has engaged children, youth, and adults with a variety of messages in a variety of settings. In every instance, it helped participants form a more personal connection to the message and initiated the migration from A to C.

**The message became more solid. Less string. More formed ball. Less abstract more concrete. Farther from A. Closer to C.**

I attribute the success of this method to help people engage and own your message to these three components:

1. Divergent Thinking
2. Divergent Questions
3. Dissonance

## DIVERGENT THINKING

The American psychologist, J.P. Guilford, first proposed the term divergent thinking in the 1950s. His research revealed that human creativity stemmed from this aptitude and he associated four characteristics of it:

1. Fluency: the ability to produce great numbers of ideas and solutions to problems in a brief period of time.
2. Flexibility: the ability to apply a variety of approaches to a specific problem.
3. Originality: the ability to devise unique ideas.
4. Elaboration: the ability to arrange, systematize and act upon the details of an idea.

During my workshops I implement a fun divergent thinking game in which I provide each participant with a common household object, such as a paper clip. I challenge them to devise as many real uses of this object as they can in a set period of time. We then compare answers. The abilities we exercise in these activities are precisely those your audience will need to use in order to make your message their own.

Each question in the *Single Sheet* provides participants with an opportunity to view your message from a variety of new and original perspectives.

They orbit your message and come to know it in a way that is more personal and tangible. The message begins to become theirs.

Studies show that we lose our ability to think divergently as we age. George Land and Beth Jarman, in their book *Breakpoint and Beyond* discuss a longitudinal study that surveyed sixteen hundred three-to-five-year-old children in the early days of the national Head Start program. Researchers used eight different tests to gauge their levels of divergent thinking. In the study ninety-eight percent of the children surveyed scored the equivalent of genius level in divergent thinking. Five years later they tested the same children and found the proportion of students considered genius dropped to thirty-two percent. When tested five years later, the proportion dropped to ten percent. Two percent of two hundred thousand adults that have taken this test score genius level. The *Single Sheet* allows participants to rediscover and exercise their ability to think divergently in an effort to acquire message ownership.

## DIVERGENT QUESTIONS

Divergent thinking originates from our ability to ask divergent questions. Every question in the *Single Sheet* is a divergent question. Like divergent thinking, divergent questions help us consider multiple options as we seek deeper understanding.

**Divergent questions are the richest questions.  
They are an invitation to others to own the  
message.**

Few tools can better serve your quest to help others own your message.

But there's a problem: many of us grew up not understanding what constitutes a good question. Build your capacity to ask good questions by revising your definition of a good question. Begin this process by dispelling two pervasive myths about what constitutes good questions:

## Myth #1: Good questions are open-ended questions and bad questions are closed-ended.

According to this myth, good questions are those that begin with *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how*, and bad questions are those that only require a *yes* or *no* response.

The word that begins a question has little to do with the quality of the question. Exceptional questions can be open and closed-ended depending on the context in which we use them.

For instance, one of my children recently asked, "Can dogs see better than humans at night?"

This was an excellent question. It made me curious. It does not matter that I could have answered the question with a simple *yes* or *no*.

We need a new, more accurate standard for good questions:

- 1) Good questions arise from curiosity.
- 2) Good questions invite others to be curious.
- 3) Good questions generate additional good questions.

Questions that meet these three standards are divergent. They open possibilities, engage others, foster conversations. They make personal understanding more meaningful and possible.

Curiosity is contagious. Notice that your good questions prompt others to ask good, divergent questions as well.

## Myth #2: There is no such thing as a bad question.

We've all heard this statement, or one like it. As the Head Start study about divergent thinking suggests, children tend to possess a natural ability to ask rich, curiosity-laden questions. Factors such as insufficient schooling and negative social pressure cripple our curiosity. The result is that the questions we ask are of a lesser quality. They tend to become more convergent in nature. These kinds of questions do not stem from curiosity. They limit possibilities and truncate one's creative abilities.

Therefore, there is such a thing as a bad question. We ought to learn to recognize it and substitute it with good questions.

Just as there are standards for good questions, the following characteristics determine bad or

insufficient questions:

- 1) Insufficient questions are ones asked for motives other than true curiosity.
- 2) Insufficient questions aren't really questions, they're statements pretending to be questions.
- 3) Insufficient questions are those guiding people to predetermined answers.
- 4) Insufficient questions are a control mechanism to get people to say what we want them to say.
- 5) Insufficient questions close dialogue, exploration, and conversation.

**In contrast to good questions, insufficient questions are not born of curiosity. Therefore, they cannot promote it.**

Good questions are an invitation for increased involvement and collaboration; insufficient questions have the opposite effect. They repel instead of engage. Insufficient questions make it more difficult for others to own your message because curiosity is a prerequisite to true ownership. Good questions cultivate such curiosity. Insufficient ones do not.

Make this training a core aspect of your staff development to increase engagement and transfer ownership of your message. Organizations who replace insufficient questions with good ones

experience immediate increases in engagement with their message. People want to engage and be involved. They just need you to furnish the opportunity.

## DISSONANCE

dis-so-nance

- 1 a: lack of agreement
  - b: an instance of such inconsistency or disagreement
- (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Not long ago I pulled into a parking spot at the grocery market and noticed directly in front of my car a pair of women's platform shoes and a can of organic soda atop a garbage receptacle. How did these two objects come to rest next to each other? Why were they on top of the can? When we experience this kind of dissonance—the clashing together of two or more seemingly unrelated elements—it ignites our curiosity and mobilizes important learning tools. Using our ability to think divergently we develop plausible options to bring harmony to the dissonance we experience. Until we can resolve the dissonance, it irritates us like an itch in the middle of our back that we cannot reach.

Dr. Eric Mazur, Balkanski Professor of Physics and Applied Physics at Harvard University and Area Dean of Applied Physics, is a self-proclaimed converted lecturer. During his tenure Mazur transitioned from a lecture format to one that is far more engaging and effective. His method is to present a brief introduction to a problem. Next, he presents students with a multiple-choice

question. He asks his students to commit to an answer then find someone who answered the question differently and try to convince that individual of one's error. Mazur is less concerned about getting the right answer and more interested in the process that takes place between two people with conflicting answers. He isolates and amplifies the dissonance among his students to maximize their engagement with the topic. Mazur found that people who implement this method doubled their gain in student performance when compared with traditional methods that are based on information dissemination.

The *Single Sheet* is similar. It introduces dissonance by juxtaposing questions whose answers contraindicate each other. The responses to the question: "What attracts people to a message?" will conflict with responses to the question: "What repels people from this message?" This collision of conflicting ideas activates the ability to think divergently. We want to resolve the dissonance.

We often present messages in a straightforward and harmonious manner. Such messages lack engagement because it is void of dissonance. It requires nothing from the audience in the way of interaction. It's like asking a child to solve a puzzle and then doing it for them.

**Pre-assembled messages lack dissonance.  
Therefore, they lack engagement. Your message is  
too important to pre-assemble.**

"Drugs can ruin your life and relationships," is an important, accurate message. You pre-assem-

ble this message by supplying the myriad reasons for not using drugs, but then there's nothing left for your audience to do, so they disengage. Just like the objects sitting on the garbage can did, create dissonance by setting two or more contrasting elements next to one another. Collaboration with others resolves the dissonance. It's through this process that others can make your message theirs.

You can do this in a variety of ways. The questions in the *Single Sheet* activity are one way. But you may also want to select themes from your particular message with which you create dissonance. Utilize the same concept that the filmmaker Guest used: note-cards. As you transition from one theme of your message to the next, ask your audience how they connect the two. If, for example, you are discussing the potential consequences of tobacco use and plan to transition to discuss the role of media in tobacco use, ask the question, "How are the risks of smoking and media related?" This question infuses your message with dissonance because it's not clear how the two are related. Another simple way to infuse your message with dissonance is to stop everything and ask, "Why are we talking about this?" You can almost hear people laboring to assemble all the disparate pieces into a harmonic whole. It is good to do this throughout the *Single Sheet* activity.

**By introducing dissonance, these questions increase engagement, curiosity, and the likelihood that others may come to own your message.**

The result of this process is a new, deeper understanding of the message. What was dissonant

becomes harmonic, the impersonal becomes personal. Dissonance organically leads to discovery.

## WHAT NOW?

A knife in the hand of a chef like Jamie Oliver is more like an appendage than a tool. Yo Yo Ma's bow is an extension of his body when he plays the cello. Picasso's paintbrush was a channel for his mind's intent. In each case, the person and the tool are one. You need people to know your message in the same way. You need your message to be an extension of their will and mind then, like a toothbrush, it becomes something tangible they will use in their lives.

At the beginning of this book I issued a challenge: *Try every suggestion in here to help people own your message.* I'll close by adding to this challenge a word of caution. Know that when you try these things you will experience what Steven Pressfield called *The Resistance* in his books *The War of Art* and *Do the Work*.

*The Resistance is a choir of voices within yourself  
whose goal is to make you return to what is safe,  
predictable, and common.*

If you have ever started a venture—a business, a piece of art, a relationship, or an organization—you've heard these voices. Resistance has many expressions: procrastination, self-doubt, self-pity, and lame excuses, to name just a few. Its top five phrases include: "You'll get in trouble," "It's too risky," "Don't stand out," "You'll make a fool of yourself," and, my personal favorite, "No

one else does it this way.”

The goal is not to rid your self of these messages. They’re speaking only because you’ve mustered the courage to risk more of your self to serve others. Don’t gag the messengers. Let them speak. Hear them out. When you hear their messages you’ll know you are on a course worth pursuing. But what you must not do, what you owe to your self and the people you serve, is to not let these voices sabotage you.

These voices have one source: fear. They speak of the fear of change and the fear of what others may say or think; fear that you will not be in control.

Fear will show up when you put this short book into practice.

## The antidote to fear is to *do*.

Thinking, planning, and talking about these ideas is part of *The Resistance*. You have to *do* that which takes you to the outer reaches of your comfort, creativity, and ability. It is there that you will most be able to help people own your message in a way that will forever change their lives.

*Do it.*

## HOW TO *DO* IT:

Here are a few ways you can spread the ideas in this e-book throughout your organization and beyond:

1) Host a discussion group for your team. Ask people to read the book and show up to the discussion with their own ideas. Amazing things happen when everyone in a group reads the same thing. Here are a couple questions to guide the discussion:

How can we better own our message as individuals and as an organization?

How can we help the people we serve better own our message?

What things keep us from risking more?

If we did, how might our organization be different one year from now?

2) Email the link to your funders, headquarters, boards, and other governing bodies. Send it to your colleagues and challenge them to host their own discussions.

3) Invite me to come work with your organization. Every group is unique. I'd welcome the opportunity to work with your group to make your message something people can more readily own. [Click here to send me an email.](#)

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

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## ABOUT THE PICTURE ON THE COVER

This is a photo of my 1955 Gibson LG-1 guitar. I purchased it from a widow whose late husband had purchased it new. One of my children will own it someday.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Andrew Robinson is the President of People Change People and a Principal in the design group, BEND. He is also the author of, *The Teen Age: 40 reflections on relating with teens*.

He is a speaker, writer, raconteur, and consultant.

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