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Communicating from the Heart

O'Neal finds compassion and perspective

by Kathy Stamps

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An actor, a counselor, author and communications consultant. No, we're not talking about a quartet, but one person. Mary Claire O'Neal, a 2007 finalist for Commerce Lexington's Independent Professional of the Year, conducts seminars and works with companies and executives across the country, all in the name of effective and compassionate communication. She even went on a scouting trip to Europe last fall to add international clients to her roster.



In the early '80s, O'Neal took an acting class in college to get over her shyness. "I looked at the floor when people talked to me," she said. She received a bachelor of science degree at Indiana University with a double major in English and educational psychology. With the help of a terrific acting teacher, she soon overcame her shyness — to the point that she left grad school at Notre Dame to act with a company opera house in Pennsylvania. Within a few years, she was performing at the Royal National Theatre in London, England, with Anthony Hopkins. Talk about achieving a goal. "I wanted to work at the best theater in the world, and I got to do it."

Acting was a vehicle for O'Neal to learn more about herself and become a better communicator. By 1995, she was sharing with others what she had learned, by offering Acting for Non-actors workshops through UK's community education program. She added a Successful Communication for Business seminar at SBDC. "Over time it grew to the consulting business I have today," she said.

Mary Claire O'Neal Communication Consulting, LLC meets with HR managers and CEOs to address issues with employees.

"Whenever people work together, there will be communication challenges," she said. "It's part of the human condition."

After sending a brief e-mail survey to employees to get a picture of the different perspectives going on, she conducts a one-day or two half-day training sessions with the staff. Many times, trouble spots boil down to communication blind spots people don't even realize they have.

"I give them tools to correct these spots and strengthen communication," she said.

Turf issues are common. "They usually happen by accident and are perceived, not calculated," she said. O'Neal teaches people how to talk clearly and compassionately, even when they'd rather not, so resentments don't build up. Her corporate workshops are all about creating unity and a sense of family within a business. "It's everything in my book," she said.

And she did write the book. *Becoming What You Want to See in the World* was published in 2006 by River Birch Publishing, her own company. Her agent has sold foreign rights for the book, and it will soon be printed in seven different countries. O'Neal recorded an audio version of the book, which won the 2007 National Indie Excellence award for non-fiction and a National Best Books award in the category of spirituality.

"It's not a spirituality book, but a communication book," explained O'Neal, although she certainly sees a connection between spirituality and communication. "What do you hold dear, and are you living in accordance with what's important to you?" she asked. "This should be a part of everything, including business." Her book helps people find out what's important to them so they can make sure their communication reflects that.

Prior to starting her own consulting business (and in between acting jobs), O'Neal was a mental health educator for the state for a couple of years. She said her time as a teacher/counselor at Eastern State Hospital was a nice background for the work she does now. "I learned to be a good listener and observer," she said.

In addition to corporation communication training, she offers personal coaching ("a co-creative process") and executive consulting ("professional information based on a specific situation"). The companies that hire O'Neal are already pretty healthy.

"I don't come in and fix broken things," she said. "I help organizations and companies deal with the inevitable bumps in the road before they become potholes."

Communication is key, of course. O'Neal describes internal communication as "what we are saying to ourselves," and it is the subtext of everything. "It's vital to get in line with the mission of an organization, or your own intent, to communicate rightly and well," she said.

To learn more about compassionate communication, visit www.MaryClaireOneal.com .

Kathie Stamps is the co-founder of www.ISBO.biz, an online directory of independent/small business owners.