

## Fiducient Advisors, Nonprofit Investment Stewards Podcast Episode 75, August 27, 2024

### Navigating Communication in a Noisy World With Dean Brenner

**Bob DiMeo** (00:00)

Hello and welcome back to the Nonprofit Investment Stewards podcast. I'm Bob DiMeo, always great to be joined by co-host Devon Francis. Today we're going to deviate from typical investment related topics and instead dive into a topic that is relevant to everyone and that's personal communication. We'll discuss how clear communication in today's world can be challenging, what mistakes you might be making without even knowing it and how you can improve upon your own communication skills.

Devon, I hope you're doing well. May I ask you to introduce our guest?

**Devon Francis** (00:33)

Hi Bob, always happy to be here and I'm very happy to be joined by Dean Brenner who is president and CEO of the Latimer Group. I actually met Dean more than 25 years ago when he was a wealth advisor for a large brokerage firm and I was an intern at that firm. Dean left the securities industry shortly thereafter to found the Latimer Group which is an executive coaching and training firm.

He has written three books on communication skills. He is a frequent keynote speaker and podcast guest. So today's appearance on our show should be no sweat for him. And Fiducient actually has a long-standing relationship with the Latimer Group. We've used their coaching and training services. I myself went through presentation training.

maybe 10, possibly even 15 years ago, and I still use many of the skills and methods that Dean and his team taught me to this very day. So Dean, we are thrilled to have you. Welcome to the show.

**Dean M Brenner** (01:29)

That is great. Thank you. It's good to see you both and I'm really excited to be here. Thanks for having me.

**Devon Francis** (01:34)

So Dean, why don't we start off with you telling us a little bit about your story and your journey to founding the Latimer Group.

**Dean M Brenner** (01:42)

Sure. Interesting story, at least from my perspective, but I was in wealth management, as you mentioned, long ago, and that was right around the time my wife, Emily, and I got to know each other and were married. And long story, very short, for a variety of reasons, we decided that wealth management wasn't where I really should be, wanted to be. So we made a huge decision for a big pivot. My wife, Emily, is a teacher.

and she wanted to stay in teaching, but we spent a lot of time thinking about what the pivot would look like. And we actually took six months off, dropped out of life, put everything we owned in storage, which at the time wasn't very much, and got in the car and drove across country, out the Northern route, down the California coast, home the Southern route, and spent those months camping and hiking in about 15 different national parks.

and we'd only been married for about a year at this point and it was just a really formative time for us. We didn't have kids yet, we didn't own a house and we just talked about the life we wanted to live together and took advantage of the time and we talked about a bunch of crazy ideas but I had just finished another part of my life as a competitor for the US Olympic Sailing Team and I was one...

member of the coaching staff for the U.S. Olympic program, and Emily finally said, we were hiking out of Grand Canyon on the Bright Angel Trail early one morning before the sunrise. And Emily said, you know, we're overthinking this. And you love to coach and you've always been very comfortable as a public speaker. You should build a business around that. And that was in September of 2000. And we launched the Latimer Group based on that simple idea.

about a year later. And here we are 22, 23 years later and it's still going strong. So, didn't realize at that moment on the Bright Angel Trail that Emily had basically in one sentence mapped out the future of not only my professional life, but really our life together because it's something that we have done together as a couple that we're really proud of. So.

#### **Bob DiMeo** (03:58)

Dean, that's a wonderful story and an unusual one in terms of a launch into a business. Appreciate you sharing that. Let's talk a little bit now about communication in today's world. I just had this conversation with a young adult the other day. There are just so many challenges to communication in today's world, whether you're younger or older. Can you talk a little bit about that and share your perspective?

#### **Dean M Brenner** (04:23)

Yeah, I absolutely can because my colleagues and I think about this constantly. And you are correct, we are living in an incredibly challenging environment for communication. And the phrase that we use a lot here at the Latimer Group is it is a really noisy world and it's hard to be heard. And if you think about what the typical person's daily life looks like with their phone joined at their hip, news blasts, social media.

you know, the amount of email and instant message chats and news blasts. There's just distractions everywhere. And that's not news, everybody knows that. But what we have really been fascinated by is the impact that that is having on a number of elements of the way we interact as human beings. We're all massively distracted all the time.

We all factor in that we're all distracted. It's almost like we've become very tolerant of it But still annoyed by it. It's it's weird people complain about it all the time but they repeat the bad behaviors themselves all day every day and You know this noisy distracted world Makes it really hard to be heard in a professional or a personal setting but our work at Latimer is almost exclusively professional

You know, I ask participants in our workshops a few questions all the time just to get a sense of what their experience is like. And one of the questions I ask them is, what percentage of your typical week do you think is wasted because of really bad communication behaviors from other people? The average answer we hear to that question is 40%. Two out of every five days. And we track this data religiously. Like,

The average answer we hear is 40 % of people's time is poorly used because of just terrible communication behaviors. And then I flip that around and I say, okay, what percentage of time, what percentage of the meetings that you're in are you multitasking? And they all laugh and say 80, 90%. And I say, okay, we're gonna spend some time connecting those two things because we all hate having our time wasted. We all hate talking to people who aren't paying attention to us.

and then we turn around and repeat the exact same behaviors to others. So, you know, we use the phrase, you have to earn the right to be heard in this noisy world, and that's not easy.

**Devon Francis** (06:56)

That's a lot to take in 40 % of a week wasted.

**Dean M Brenner** (06:57)

Yeah, I just I started started right at like 90 miles an hour there but But if you monetize that like take 40 percent of everybody at fiducian's time and monetize that number You know and I a lot of our clients are publicly traded companies. I say, how do you think your shareholders feel about that number?

**Devon Francis** (07:04)

boy. Alright, well let's...

Yeah, that's huge. It's hard to believe. All right, so let's pivot. Let's get a little more granular. And I know that you work both with for -profit companies as well as with not -for -profit companies. Are there different communication challenges that you see between those two groups?

**Dean M Brenner** (07:19)

Yeah.

Yeah, that's a great question. The short answer is yes. And let me explain to you a little bit about what that looks like. First of all, there's a lot of commonalities too. If we were doing a Venn diagram here between for -profit communication requirements and nonprofit, there'd be a lot of overlap in that Venn diagram. It doesn't look like this. It doesn't look like this either. It's probably something like this. There is some overlap there. But I think...

In the for -profit world, great communication starts with results -oriented communication around key information. Information flow is probably the best way to evaluate effective communication in the for -profit world because there's so much information that goes into decision -making and depending upon what altitude of the organization you're communicating to.

That's the first thing that you have to think about in that for-profit world is efficiency. In the nonprofit world, fighting through that noise, sure, efficiency matters. But in the nonprofit world, if you want to be heard, I think your primary goal is a little bit less about efficient communication and more about connection and finding a way to get people to want to hear more.

about your nonprofit, whether it's an academic institution or some sort of charitable organization, you're fighting for relevancy. You're fighting for air time. I think eventually in the nonprofit world, efficiency of communication matters too. But to get heard, that's a phrase we're gonna probably come back to a bunch of times. To get heard in the nonprofit world, I think you first have to establish relevancy and connection. Like here's why what I'm talking about matters. In the for-profit world,

I think there's an element where you can pretty quickly prioritize efficient communication and transfer of key information because the connection matters there too, but it's probably secondary to the efficiency need. Does that make sense?

**Devon Francis** (09:46)

It does make sense. And I actually think it might be helpful if we take a step back and think about, we've been just banding this term about communication, but communication encompasses so many different things. So can you talk a little bit about the various forms that you think about?

**Dean M Brenner** (09:56)

Yeah, it does.

Sure. I mean, that's a great clarification. When we think about communication, we're lumping together meetings, presentations, emails, instant messaging and texting. Part of the noisy world is there are so many channels that we can get to each other on. And it's funny, we took a step here at the Latimer Group because our companies, we're small by most company standards, we're 16 people.

But three years ago, we were five people. And that growth, that 3X growth, even though it's only 16, it's still a pretty high growth rate. We started to have a problem with what we call channel management. And we would start some conversations on email and then they'd get picked up in a meeting and then somebody would comment on them in the chat. And it was really hard to track the flow of a conversation.

So one of our ways of battling a noisy world is we set some guidelines around what kinds of conversations should be limited to email, what merits an in-person meeting or a phone call, what can be limited to chat. And then by creating some guidelines and some normative behavior, we actually found an immediate impact on efficiency because we didn't lose track of conversations. Does that make sense?

**Devon Francis** (11:29)

It absolutely does. And I actually think that that's helpful in leading to the next question, which is thinking about internal communication versus external communication. So you just gave a great example of how to improve the efficiency of communication internally. But with regard to nonprofits and making that connection with stakeholders, how should organizations be thinking about their external communication?

**Dean M Brenner** (11:55)

Yeah, you know, it's funny. When I first started Latimer 20 plus years ago, my assumption was going to be that I was building a business that was going to the primary use case for people who might hire us. My assumption in the early days was that people would hire us for their external comms, presentations, sales pitches. And we still do a lot of that work. There's no question about it. But what has surprised me,

especially over the last 10 years, is how much effort people are feeling they have to put into their internal comms. And that makes sense once you think about it, but it wasn't intuitively where I thought this business was gonna go. So internal comms, and I'm gonna pick up that stat that I gave you a few minutes ago, internal comms is less about it being perfectly polished and can be more just about,

not wasting your colleagues time. If you think of a meeting with eight of your colleagues as like a blood cell and you're all coming together, a healthy meeting or a healthy blood cell takes in things like oxygen and then distributes it in a very healthy way. That's what a healthy blood cell does. An unhealthy blood cell constricts things and there isn't a good flow of oxygen out of the blood cell. Meetings are the same way. A good internal meeting,

Information comes in in a healthy way and it's distributed in a healthy way, which speeds things up for the organization. An unhealthy meeting just constricts. Stuff gets in the way. It doesn't get distributed. Decisions don't get made. Your external comms, I think the efficiency matters a lot, but at that point, when we talk to our colleagues about external comms, you now have to add that extra element of branding and polish and presence.

because now you're the literal embodiment of your brand, where you're gonna get a little bit more latitude on that internally, like your colleagues kinda know, I'm not saying presence doesn't matter internally, of course it does. I'm not saying polish doesn't matter internally, of course it does. But it matters a lot more, because the stakes are higher when you're in front of a client than when you're in front of a room full of your colleagues. So if I had to pick a priority, internal versus external,

The internal priority is make sure that there is a healthy flow of information and that you're not slowing it down, even if it's not perfectly polished. Externally, that still matters, but now you gotta remember that you're representing your brand and you wanna show them who the firm is. And then things like body language and voice and vocabulary and verbal language come in at that point. Those things matter internally, they just matter a lot more externally.

Does that make sense?

**Bob DiMeo** (14:56)

Absolutely. And Dean, I'm going to ask you about blunders that you often see and that you have seen just repeatedly. Before I do, it's funny, as we think about communication and we think about, you're almost describing a communication crisis, I think back to, I think it's the Japanese symbol or word that means both crisis and opportunity, right? So for as much noise as there is, my hope is...

**Dean M Brenner** (15:04)

Yeah.

Yeah. Yes.

**Bob DiMeo** (15:24)

that folks who communicate well really can have the edge. And so maybe you can talk a little bit about blunders that you repeatedly see just so we create some awareness.

**Dean M Brenner** (15:32)

Yeah, yeah, for sure. And I'll give you a story here that'll set up probably the most frequent blunder that we see. And this is a few years old, and I'll talk about it cryptically to protect the innocent. But we got a call a few years ago to, and it was from somebody at a firm, a Hartford area company that we know well, and there was an emergency executive coaching need. And...

The call came in and said this person had been rising up throughout the company, had been identified a while ago as a high potential, knew the business, had come up through the ranks more from the technical side of the business, and had been tapped to succeed a very senior, very popular leader who was retiring. And this new leader had gotten off to a really bad start with their first all-hands town hall.

and I was asked to come in and try and help save the situation because this person was basically facing a mutiny early on in their new role and nobody saw it coming. So as I got to know the situation and I understood who the departing leader was, that person was really personable, not a detail guy, but really a people guy, knew everybody's kids names, like really personable, had been one of those kind of leaders that had grown with the company. That person was retiring.

The board had decided that the company had lost its way a little bit and needed to get back to basics and specifically look for a leader who really understand, understood the business more from a technical side and search that out. That was an intentional choice and it made sense from a business perspective. And this person that they tapped really understood the business from a technical side, but they weren't hiring for personality or presence or anything like that. They felt they needed this other skillset. And this...

guy in his first town hall meeting gives the speech and it bombs. It absolutely bombs like there's literally people freaking out. And I said, before I meet with them, can you show me the speech? And they sent me the speech. I hadn't even spoken to the guy yet. And the speech was all about shareholder value, getting back to basics, streamlining, becoming more efficient, all things that the board had given this new leader as a mandate, all things that were really, really important. And I'm getting to the classic mistake that we see.

What this leader forgot is that everybody processes information through their own lens. So if you're in all hands and you're listening to your new leader and all your new leader talks about is streamlining efficiency, shareholder value, what are you hearing?

**Devon Francis** (18:10)

playoffs.

**Dean M Brenner (18:10)**

You're hearing, like, that's exactly right. You're hearing layoffs. That's literally the only thing anybody heard. And everybody panicked and everybody was literally running for a lifeboat. And this leader hadn't seen it and nobody that had edited the speech ahead of time had thought that that was going to be the perception. The bottom line is the most classic mistake that we see is communicating primarily from our own perspective and leaving out.

**Bob DiMeo (18:11)**

Thank you.

**Dean M Brenner (18:39)**

the other half of the communication equation. Who am I talking to and how are they going to process what they're hearing from me? And by the way, performance oriented people who tend to be pretty successful tend to think about like, I got to do this, I got to do this, I got to do this. They're very efficient. They love their lists. They love to crank out stuff, which means they're not always likely to take a pause and say, well, hold on. Before I crank through my list and get all this stuff done, how might the other person feel? That's not a natural place.

the performance oriented people go. And if I had to pick one thing that we see mistakes made all the time, it's communicating from an egocentric point of view and forgetting to factor in the other person or people and how they might receive the information. That problem manifests itself in like a whole bunch of ways, but it's probably the biggest thing that we see day in and day out.

**Bob DiMeo (19:33)**

Super helpful. Dean, I'm curious. So 22 years ago, you and Emily sort of conceptualized this and launched it. I want to know if that evolved sort of how you anticipated it would evolve. And then as importantly, are there any other tips or recommendations that you'd add or underscore for our listeners?

**Dean M Brenner (19:53)**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So let me take the second one first. And when I think about most common advice that we give, I come back to that noisy world concept. And I say to people all the time, think about yourself as a translator and a simplifier. And if you think about the world that you're probably living in, and then if you assume that everyone else is living kind of in the same kind of world,

and everybody is on some level suffering from too many meetings, too many distractions, too much this, too much that, how could you be of value in that kind of a world? And what I come back to all the time, a very common piece of advice is think about how you can simplify and translate things for the people around you. You know, 20 years ago when Emily came up with the idea and I first started this thing, the most valuable person in the room,

was often the person with the most information. You know, 20 years ago, I didn't know anybody that had a home wireless network. Netflix was still in the business of mailing DVDs. You know, your basic cable didn't have a thousand channels. Nobody had a smartphone, there was no social media. The world, from



an information flow, was a very different place two decades ago. So if you showed up at a meeting with really good information, you were pretty damn valuable. Today, the most important person in the room is not...

the person that shows up with the most data. Most important person in the room today is the person who can take a lot of information and simplify it for those around them. So I tell people, and I did not see this coming 20 years ago, because the world was so different. One of the greatest things that you can do as a communicator is present information in an absorbable way and to be the simplifier, to be the translator for the people around you. Like,

be the easiest part of their day. The person who can walk in and say, let me organize all this for you. Let me make this simpler for you, Bob. I know you're dealing with a lot of stuff. Let me simplify the information you have in front of you so you can make a good decision. If somebody consistently walked into your office and did that, Bob, you would probably look forward to that person coming back to your office every day, as opposed to the person who walks into your office and just crushes your soul.

with like overwhelming amounts of stuff that's disorganized and you're like, whoa, slow down, too much, too much. We all are drawn to those who make life easier for us. And I think, regardless of for-profit, non-profit, I think that's a universal truth. I'll give you a second one if I may. When I talk to people about, so let me connect these two.

I'm talking a lot about knowing your audience and anticipating what people are going to care about. So let me go a step further and talk about how we can accomplish that. Everybody will nod yes if I say, are listening skills important? Everyone's going to say, sure, yeah, of course. Everyone's going to nod enthusiastically. But it has actually become one of the lost arts of communication. And it's the part that people don't think of first. But I would actually argue is the foundation of being really good at this.

because when you are really good at listening to people.

Two things happen. Number one, you just gather better information. It's hard for me to know what matters to Devin if I refuse to listen to Devin. And if I don't know what matters to her, it's gonna be hard for me to connect with her. So listening starts that chain. But the other thing that happens when you're a really good listener, we can tell when we're being listened to. Most human beings sniff that out right away.

Devin will be able to tell if I'm listening to her or not. And when I demonstrate that respect, that's a credibility build, that's a connection, that's a form of empathy that will make her feel good and make her want more connection. Like in a social setting, who do we want to talk to in the social engagement? The person who's constantly looking over our shoulder for their next conversation or the person who takes a genuine interest in what we're saying?

So, you know, knowing your audience is great advice, but like the foundation of figuring out who your audience is, is to really lean into being a better listener, which people will not at, but most people are terrible at it because of all these distractions.



**Devon Francis** (24:32)

Yeah, that's an important bit of advice that should be simple to follow, but seems really difficult in today's day and age.

**Dean M Brenner** (24:38)

It should be. It should be. I've got a story for that if you're interested in hearing it. So I had another...

**Devon Francis** (24:47)

Sure.

**Dean M Brenner** (24:52)

senior executive interaction several years ago. This is probably more like 10 years ago now. And it's actually a really interesting story because it was an oil, I got a call from an HR friend of mine who I knew from a prior business. She'd moved over to an oil and gas company. And this is a know your audience story. It's also a listening story. And she said, hey, we have a new young CEO.

wants some executive coaching, knows he needs some, asked me to find three candidates, he wants to interview all three, and then he'll choose the one. I know you, I'd love for you to be one of the candidates. I said, sure, no problem. And I said, tell me a little bit about him. New in his role, up and comer, real performance oriented guy. And I asked a few questions and I said, hey, before I interview with him,

Can I come back to you one more time and have one more conversation with you before I interview with him? I need to learn a lot here. So she said, no problem. So I did all the usual stuff. I started looking them up on LinkedIn and I noticed right away on LinkedIn that we had somebody in common, somebody I knew well enough to call. So I called this guy I went to business school with and he went to college with this executive. And he said, yeah, I remember him. I don't remember a ton.

But I do remember a class we took, long story short, my friend is looking at his website and notices on the website that there's a lot of industry experience on his board. And they talk about it a lot about the board. And he said, Dean, you should poke at that because I remember him being a big believer in experience. So I looked a little bit more deeply at the board construction. There was a ton of industry experience. They're bragging about it all over the website. I called the HR woman back.

ask her a bunch of questions and she validates it for me. She said, that's going to be his most important thing in choosing a coach. The problem for me was I had no experience in oil and gas, zero, zero. So what I had to think about was how do I take this important nugget, which I've now uncovered and figure out how I can connect with this guy. And, you know, I thought about like, Hey, do I kind of fabricate some experience? Do I minima like, where do I go with this?

And the only way this would have happened is if I really did a deep dive and trying to understand what mattered to this guy. And the way I ended up deciding to play it, which in this case worked really well, it might not work in every situation, I went to him and I said, you know, before he could bring up industry experience in the interview, I brought it up. And I said, you've got a lot, you should be really, really proud.

Like you've built a deep bench of experience, that's gotta be really helpful to you. And I complimented him on it explicitly.

And then I said, but now let's talk about what you need from your executive coach. I said, because when I look at your lineup, what I see is a guy who's already surrounded by industry experience, so much so that if you're not careful, that's going to turn into a risk. And he said, what do you mean? And I said, you don't have the other thing that you're really going to need, which is non-industry fresh perspective. And I said, the way I would frame the decision, the choice, if I were you is I'd want my executive coach to be the one person.

in my life, my professional life, who was going to give me the totally outside perspective. And we ended up working together for a while and he talked about that interview and the way I framed that to him for a long time. And the point here is the only way that you develop that sort of an intimate knowledge of people that you're working with is by really trying to pay attention and listen to and research what might matter to them.

And in a busy world, that's hard to do sometimes. But I think it's an essential skill.

**Bob DiMeo** (28:45)

Well, you invested, right? You clearly invested. You could have taken the short path and you invested in that. And it seems like it benefited both of you.

**Dean M Brenner** (28:52)

Yeah. Yeah, and it doesn't work perfectly every time. Sure, I just gave you the success story. You know, it doesn't work perfectly every time. And I've seen this with my own eyes many, many times. If you want to be closer to somebody, which may mean wanting to do business with them,

There is no replacement for figuring out who they are, who their organization is, and what matters to them. Tying back to that noisy world, that's the only way you're gonna be consistently heard in a noisy world, is to show up prepared and to demonstrate to people that you've shown them the courtesy of preparation.

**Devon Francis** (29:43)

Yeah, that's so crucial and so often folks are just focused on the next step and the step after that and they don't think about the research and the lead up to the step one. So thank you for reminding us of that. Well, we are...

**Dean M Brenner** (29:52)

Yeah.

Totally.

Yeah, yeah, sure.

**Devon Francis** (30:00)

closing in on our time with you. So we are so appreciative of what you've offered us today. We always like to learn a little bit, a little personal nugget from our guests. So why don't you share with us if you have any great TV recommendations.

**Dean M Brenner** (30:10)

Sure.

Yeah, because there's no shortage of choice in today's world. Or noise, exactly right. So Emily and I are at the stage, Emily and I are coming up on our 25th anniversary and we're at the stage now where our TV choices tend to be something that captures both of our eyes so that we can watch it together as a little shared experience, which raises the bar because we don't like the same things.

**Devon Francis** (30:22)

That's for sure.

**Bob DiMeo** (30:23)

or noise.

**Dean M Brenner** (30:44)

But one thing that we loved when it was coming out, and this is an old show now, but you can find it streaming quite easily, we are massive West Wing fans, even to this day. And West Wing went off the air in 2006. And it's funny, when either of us or both of us is having sort of a bad day or a bad stretch, we...

almost inevitably end up dialing up an old West Wing episode. And for both of us, it's kind of like hanging out with old friends. But what I also love about it is, because now it's pretty dated. I mean, they had pagers in the West Wing. But it also harkens back, and we don't have to go down this rabbit hole, but it harkens back to a simpler time where communication skills, for example, mattered a lot in government. And we watch that maybe a little wistfully as well. But...

That is probably the show that has had the most formative impact on me from just a writing perspective and a dialogue perspective. Yeah.

**Devon Francis** (31:50)

I have to put that in the queue.

**Dean M Brenner** (31:53)

Wait, you're not a West Winger? You've never seen any West Wing?

**Devon Francis** (31:55)

I have not seen any West Wing, so I'll add it to my growing list of TV shows to watch, which is very lengthy. Great. Well, we are so appreciative of your time and your expertise, and thank you for all the tips that you've shared with us, and we really appreciate you coming on the show.

**Dean M Brenner** (32:02)

You're in for a treat. You're in for a treat. So.

Thanks for having me, it's been an honor. Thanks, good to see you both.

**Bob DiMeo** (32:17)

Great, Dean. Great to have you on the show. And communication is an important topic that impacts all of us, right from personal relationships to our professional lives. And we're so appreciative to Dean for sharing his expertise today. I hope all of us walk away with some methods or ideas or approaches that can help us be better communicators. So to all you good stewards, thanks for investing time to help your nonprofits prosper. We'll connect with you soon on the next episode.