



Twelve Steps to Becoming a Better Communicator

Lauren Vargas
[The Root Report](#)
<http://twitter.com/vargasl>



Introduction

When networking do you cringe at introducing yourself as a communications professional? Do people joke about a career in communications as not being "professional?" Are you called a "Master of Spin"? Stop being in denial.

The first step is admitting we have a problem. That problem is the degeneration of transparency in communication. Enough finger pointing. Let's clean up our side of the street and one-by-one, change the direction of our profession and be proud of our contribution to society for ourselves and on behalf of the organizations we represent.



Twelve Steps

If twelve step programs work for those facing life inhibiting issues, the approach can surely be adapted to the rebuilding of public trust in the communications industry. The following steps are clear cut directions for you to practice *continuously* to foster healthy online relationships and place community first.

Step 1: We admitted our organization was powerless over the social web – that our conversations had become unmanageable.

Step 2: Came to believe that a power greater than our organization could restore us to sanity.

Step 3: Made a decision to turn our organization's will and our social outposts over to the care of the community as we understood our community.

Step 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves, our organization and brand.



Twelve Steps cont.

Step 5: Admitted to the community, and to our entire organization the exact nature of our organization's past behavior.

Step 6: Were entirely ready to have the community remove all these defects of character.

Step 7: Humbly asked the community to remove our shortcomings.

Step 8: Made a list of all communities our organization displeased, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Step 9: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would further irritate them or others.



Twelve Steps cont.

Step 10: Continued to take personal inventory and when our organization was wrong promptly admitted it.

Step 11: Sought through social media engagement to improve our conscious contact with the community as we understood our community, asking only for knowledge of the community's will for us and the power to carry that out.

Step 12: Having had an intellectual awakening as the result of these steps, our organization tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

*This version of the 12 steps is an adaptation from the [original 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous](#) and the program inspired by **Communicators Anonymous** (my former blog) to reposition the communications industry.



Step One

We admitted our organization was powerless over the social web – that our conversations had become unmanageable.

This admission is your first step to *thinking* sobriety. Stop being a passive victim and resting at the mercy of those who are stirring up conversations on the social web. Conversations are happening with or without your organization or brand's permission, but your organization is not helpless. The first step seems odd in business because many of us have been taught we have control of the message...or at least given this illusion. Control belongs to the community engaging in two-way dialog. The social web is messy. Conversations are happening everywhere and connecting the dots can become a very tedious process.

Surrender.

This step is the foundation for you and your organization, to be capable of self-direction and self-responsibility. The overall power of these steps begins with you and how your actions ultimately impact the organization and later, your industry. You must be the first to carry out these steps. Identify other like minds in your organization to assist in taking on the challenges these steps require to achieve success within the social web.



Step Two

Came to believe that a power greater than our organization could restore us to sanity.

The power this step refers to is the energy of your communities – those built by your organization, by your employees and your consumers. The organization is built of and exists because of these communities. Do not let any prejudice you may have against these communities deter you from asking yourself what these communities mean to the organization. Allow there to be hope that the community can restore the organization to an existence free of egotistical behavior and monologue.

Begin by cleaning your organization's side of the street. The organization must prove willing to be open and brutally honest – to ask themselves the tough questions. True humility and an open mind has the ability to foster healthy two-way dialogue with communities that once sought to avoid your organization or peppered your organization with challenges. One thing most organizations lack in the social media space is a working relationship with their communities.

If you wish your organization to grow online relationships, you have to begin somewhere. This somewhere lies in asking a simple question of your organization – *Do you now believe or are willing to believe the community is a power greater than your organization?*



Step Three

Made a decision to turn our organization's will and our social outposts over to the care of the community as we understood our community.

What is the community's will for your organization? Think well before taking this step to ensure your organization is ready to commit to the community. This is an affirmative action step by which your organization has the choice to cut away the self-will that has generally governed and blocked the entry of the community voice and will.

Breaking out of this bondage of self does not mean an organization must deny its own needs. Quite the opposite. If we can discover healthy, community-directed ways to meet the needs of our organization, our organizations become less needy, less selfish and less self-preoccupied. This is a recovery paradox. Discovering what our organization needs are and asking to have those needs met by the community may be one of the most *unselfish* things we do. Avoid tackling organizational issues and challenges like a bull in a china shop. Turn it over to the community. All you need to do is try.



Step Three cont.

Made a decision to turn our organization's will and our social outposts over to the care of the community as we understood our community.

For some organizations, social media is a big playground and moving the conversations and relationships into that space is a natural move. For others, social media is explored because executive management sees an article in a business magazine or hears about Twitter and other online channels through CNN or other mainstream sources.

Knowing what you want out of social media and preparing the foundation for growth is just the beginning of what several organizations require before engaging. Locating an organization's driving force for entering social media does not have to be an enigma if you know the general areas where you may find your source of inspiration that will spur your company into action.



Step Four

Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of our organization and brand.

Just as your organization must take honest stock of its inventory on a regular basis to identify flaws, damaged or unsalable goods and services, an organization must also take inventory of its values. Get real about who and what your organization represents by compiling a list of traits and behaviors that have transgressed your highest values. What aspects of your organization's character do you need to retain and emphasize, and what should be modified or discarded?

Begin to see things as they truly are through the eyes of the community instead of a limited view obstructed by the cubicle walls of your organization. By discovering the exact nature of your organization's past behavior, the organization may strive towards corrective, proactive and positive actions. Your organization is starting a new way of life and dialog in social media and needs to be rid of the burdens and traps which have controlled and prevented the organization's growth.



Step Four cont.

Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of our organization and brand.

Begin by:

1. **Monitoring real-time chatter** – Listen at the point of need. Determine how and why the community is talking about your organization or brand.
2. **Reviewing current community relationships** – Explore how your organization is handling customer service and human resource dialogue. Conduct a communications audit. Do the existing processes reflect the same type of relationship your organization desires to foster online?
3. **Finding your influencers** – Monitor the chatter about your organization/brand to uncover key information about who your influencers are, where they spend their time online and how they prefer to share and spread information.



Step Five

Admitted to the community, and to our entire organization the exact nature of our organization's past behavior.

The fifth step is the key to social media freedom and keeping an organization's side of the street clean. Being transparent and admitting our past behaviors to another outside the organization makes the behavior real and the organization accountable to the community it serves. Only in admitting to another the exact nature of our past actions, do we humble the organization and begin to lose fear and egoism as a big brother organization.

After conducting step four and getting a pulse of the organization's current online and offline engagement or lack thereof, counterbalance negative insights with positive opportunity by spreading lessons learned throughout your organization. Insights kept in a vacuum do not provoke change throughout an organization. What changes can or should be made to prevent future situations and build community trust?



Step Six

Were entirely ready to have the community remove all these defects of character.

Is your organization willing to share the changes discovered in step five and turn it over to the community to get their feedback? Only your organization can determine if it is entirely ready to participate in the online conversation. The decision cannot be forced. The words "entirely ready" underline the fact that an organization is aiming for their very best and is open and ready to learn through new experiences. The goal here is release, not self-punishment. For most organizations, this process is ongoing.

This step requires only willingness to engage and is a time of preparation and reflection for your organization. The fear surrounding social media begins to dissipate when the organization is properly [educated](#) about social media risks and engagement. Use this time to educate the need for and establish your organization's [social media policy](#) and [rules of engagement](#).



Step Seven

Humbly asked the community to remove our organization's shortcomings.

Now that your organization has determined social media readiness and is equipped to engage, it is time to jump into social media and begin participating. This step is a change in attitude which permits the organization, with humility as its guide, to move out of itself and toward the community and engage in two-way dialogue. Humility is necessary so the organization can recognize its defects, acknowledge the limits of power and appreciate the community's power to transform the organization's existence.

This step is not about stripping an organization of its confidence and existence in the community. It is possible for an organization to participate in social media conversations [without surrendering confidence](#). An organization requires humility to stand out in social media. The realization of powerlessness admitted in step one and the truths outlined in the step four inventory will help spur the organization through this step. Have the courage to laugh at your organization, learn from mistakes and know when to ask for assistance from your community.



Step Eight

Made a list of all communities our organization displeased, and became willing to make amends to them all.

When beginning this program, your organization committed itself to go to any lengths for recovery of its relationships with its communities. This step demands a new kind of honesty about your organization's relationships within the community and starts the procedure of forgiving others and possibly being forgiven by them, forgiving itself, and learning how to live and communicate openly with its communities. By the time your organization reaches this step, it has become ready to understand rather than to be understood.

It is time to ready the organization for a social housecleaning. During the fourth step, your organization uncovered valuable information about who your influencers were and how the organization/brand was perceived. Now it is time to ready your organization to [engage the influencers](#) directly by opening a dialogue with those who have negative perceptions about your organization and empowering positively passionate influencers.



Step Nine

Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would further irritate them or others.

After your organization has made a list of influencers and reflected carefully upon each, it is time to engage the influencer and make amends for past behavior or ignorance where necessary. There will be those who ought to be dealt with just as soon as your organization becomes reasonably confident in engaging in social media dialogue. There will be those to whom your organization can make only partial restitution, other cases where action ought to be deferred, and still others in which by the very nature of the situation your organization shall never be able to make direct personal contact at all. Pick your engagements wisely and remember there is no giant eraser for online conversations.

Timing is an essential part of this step. Amends are sincere efforts to offer apology for past harm and are bridge-builders for positive future relationships. When your organization makes amends or reaches out to an influencer, you are simply telling the person the truth about your organization's actions as you now see it and how your organization seeks to improve future relations with their participation, if they so choose, and feedback. It takes insight, courage and dedication to make such amends and to earnestly seek the right way to go about this process from your community.



Step Ten

Continued to take personal inventory and when our organization was wrong promptly admitted it.

Your organization should continue to take inventory and set right any new mistakes as you embark along your social media journey. Cleaning up your organization's past behavior is behind you, but the principles of this program should continue for a lifetime. Continue to watch for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear. Pledge your organization to continually monitor your social media engagement with honesty and humility.

These steps requires the organization to be vigilant against the triggers for old behavior. The more you actively listen and follow up on the community's feedback, the less your organization will need the corrective part of this step. This is really a great tool. It gives you a way of avoiding a crisis situation before your organization brings it upon itself. Conducting a daily inventory should assess the status of your relationship with your communities. Are you still yielding your will to them?



Step Eleven

Sought through social media engagement to improve our conscious contact with the community as we understood our community, asking only for knowledge of the community's will for us and the power to carry that out.

This program works and will result in successful social media engagement if your organization maintains a positive attitude and continues to work the steps. Use this step as a continual reality check and compass. By [demonstrating your organization's transparency and accountability for actions](#), the community is more willing to give honest feedback, especially if they see this feedback being received and used. This step depicts the growth of your organization with the acceptance and participation of two-way dialogue and its willingness to let other people be what they are without having to pass judgment on them.

Over time, as your organization becomes more comfortable participating with the community, you may begin to engage with these communities as you would with a trusted friend. The community will be the source with whom your organization can conduct your daily inventories and you will begin to make sense of how their feedback strengthens your organization.



Step Twelve

Having had an intellectual awakening as the result of these steps, our organization tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Helping others is a significant part of this program, and there are many ways your organization can pass along lessons learned. When your organization practices this program and shares it with others, you are carrying the message that transparent and honest, two-way dialog trumps narrow minded thinking and monologue. In practicing the Twelfth Step you will find:

- By demonstrating these principles to others, your organization's appreciation of the program and the program's longevity increases.
- By hearing the stories of social media newcomers, your organization is reminded of where you were when you started and how far you have progressed.
- By modeling to others, your organization becomes aware of the need to practice what is preached.
- By giving to others, your organization develop bonds with new organizations and communities.
- By helping others, your organizations gives what it has received.
- By supporting new beginnings, you revitalize your own efforts.



Closing Thoughts

The first step is admitting we have a problem. That problem is the degeneration of transparency in communication. You, too, can clean up your side of the street and one-by-one, change the direction of our profession and be proud of our contribution to society for ourselves and on behalf of the organizations we represent.

For more information about this program, please visit Lauren's blog, [The Root Report](#). Please [contact](#) Lauren if you have any questions or would like to invite her to [speak](#) on this topic.