

A stylized illustration of a woman's profile in shades of orange and peach, facing left. Her eyes are closed. The background is a deep blue with a large, light blue circular shape on the left. Several dark blue, wavy shapes represent clouds, and several bright orange lightning bolts are scattered across the scene. The overall mood is one of calm amidst a storm.

**IN PURSUIT OF HIDDEN CHALLENGES:**  
**PRO MOVES FOR COURAGEOUS COMMUNICATION**  
**Michelle D. Gladieux**

# Jazz great Miles Davis instructed us, “When you hit a wrong note, it’s the next note that makes it good or bad.”

Identifying what to change and trying new behaviors is the crux of growing as a communicator. What Miles conveyed is essential in music and in communication: you will at times forget even your most sincere resolutions or your words won’t come out right. They may not come out at all. You’ll make some faux pas. It’s what you do after the stumble that will set you apart from many other people: you get back up. You clarify, apologize, reword, revise, restate, recharge, retry, and inch ever closer to your communication potential because you are resilient. And you have *Pro Moves* in your pocket.

Albert Einstein’s colleague John Archibald Wheeler, a physicist who communicated with him over the course of 21 years, published an essay about Einstein in *Newsweek* magazine in 1979. He noted that Einstein employed three rules of work. 1. Out of clutter, find simplicity. 2. From discord, find harmony. 3. In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity. Number three relates well to our pursuit of hidden challenges, and how we can view them. Rather than “ugh, I have to work on myself,” let’s find some opportunity in the difficulty of hidden challenges, shall we?

First up, **HIDING FROM RISK.**

You likely know it if you do it. It's a feeling of low confidence—a hanging back, shrinking violet vibe. If I may be blunt (one of my strengths and, of course, also a weakness), Hiding can result in failing to meet life's communication challenges. One might say it results in failing to meet life itself.

Many otherwise logical people suspect they might be a "bad person," when, really, they are not different from the rest of us: a blend of good and bad. So, they don't offer as much in the way of getting to know them below surface level. I would much rather chat about their greatest regrets or most "out-there" goals than discuss what the weather's supposed to do tomorrow, but they direct communication to more mundane places, their real selves under the radar. Being seen can be scary.

Hiding causes the rest of the world to miss out on what makes them uniquely interesting and beneficial in the way they could interact. They tend to resist sincere compliments. They might allow tough previous circumstances to lead to fatalistic thinking. The mud they've trudged through thus far in life invites negative self-talk to boggle their self-view. They stop daring to stand and be counted, or perhaps have never really tried it. And this fog extends to eclipse how they perceive others' ideas. I've noticed when we're handicapped by past failures, we tend to also be quick to point to the likelihood of failure ("that's been tried, it didn't work," "it's not worth the drama to have that discussion") as a defense to avoid risk.

Just like there are no bad dogs (just bad owners), there are no completely incapable communicators. You've got some good juice. You've got a foundation to stand on, even if it's built on seeing others do or say things you never want to repeat. If we work from where we are, we can engage more bravely, authentically, and professionally with every passing day.

Hiding may come about because we're missing an important ingredient to self-esteem development: someone to say "you can do anything you set your mind to." Or, perhaps we did hear this important "you have potential" message but didn't believe the person saying it.

It is in fact quite likely you can do anything you set your mind to, from hiring and training a team, to speaking up about what makes you uncomfortable or delivering the best presentation your boss or customer has ever heard. Persistent baby steps are the way. Regardless of whether or not you had a role model to affirm your basic goodness and strengths, you can do this for yourself today. Reflect on times you've survived, times when you've thrived, and qualities you possess that allow you to keep on keeping on.

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Writing about the trials of Shaker life in Pennsylvania in the late 1800s (like the conditions of public roads, the struggle to keep warm burning coal in the winter), Brother Daniel Orcutt captured a valuable, never-give-up mentality through the power of his pen:

***Do not despair at slow progress; little by little great things have come to pass. Life, and great things are made up of little things, and little things often lead to great results.***

Hiding points to a fear of being exposed. If we ask for feedback (for example, about how we came across in a meeting) and something critical is said, it can trigger worries that we're not and have never been good enough. Good enough for what? Good enough for whom? How about we just aim for good enough to want to get better?

Carrying around fear of embarrassment cuts into your wherewithal. It means you'll need more reassurance than others who can tolerate the feeling, and worse yet, you may fall victim to victim thinking. What a cross victim thinking is to bear! We all go there sometimes. It can feel darkly good to congratulate ourselves on our burdens and to rehash the times we've been dealt bad cards. Victim thinkers can be very strong-willed as they adopt a hiding perspective. It would be to their advantage to apply their impressive will to embrace risk rather than to avoid it completely.

Another word about victim thinking. It reinforces itself. It's exhausting but often possible to find something or someone "out to get you" in every interaction. We unlock this cage when we decide to find some modicum of power to assert, no matter how crappy the situation.

A good reason to come out of Hiding is that we can't encourage others if we haven't dusted off and exercised our own courage. Folks in Hiding are not a good choice for supervisory roles despite tenure or depth of knowledge until they overcome their "fly low" reflex. They just can't credibly motivate others to take development risks. "Do as I say, not as I do" never convinced anyone.

There's another tell of Hiding: the preference for predictable scenarios is an overused strength of steadiness and preference for routine. As we avoid attention, we deny the world our fresh perspective. That's a shame, because every person's light as a communicator is singular and will never shine forth from another. Your light is irreplaceable.

## **IF YOU SUSPECT YOU'RE HIDING FROM RISK**

Think about what you lose: a chance to make your mark in a positive way. Think about how those around you lose the benefit of seeing you more deeply and learning from your experience. Get past fear of judgment by choosing what matters most to you. Instead of seeking to blend in, make a choice to get in the game as a communicator. Not everyone will applaud your effort to stick your neck out, but you can survive negative feedback by comparing it to your values. Collect data as you interact with others and adjust your sails as needed using sources you trust as guideposts.

The second hidden challenge is **DEFINING TO BE RIGHT**.

Defining is claiming absolute assurance and overlooking gray areas because we don't want them to exist. Defining can be a defense mechanism. It's something that keeps us feeling safe.

It's an illusion because growth is a better bet, and it can keep us stagnant. It limits conversations and our ability to bravely include competing points of view as we consider options and navigate life.

In Defining mode, we often don't believe we could be biased, so bias seeps into our communication undetected by us, detected by others. This damages credibility. We often show impressive persistence when we believe we're right, but overuse that strength, becoming unbending in the way we impose our beliefs on situations, self, and others.

I often feel Defining to Be Right fear when I tune in to clients' frequencies in coaching sessions. Many are understandably afraid to see how their belief structure, words, or actions may limit others' opportunities, because if that's true they think, oh my gosh, am I a bad person, and how long has this been true?

In Defining mode, we are quick to judge good or bad, right or wrong, because it gives us a sense of control in this crazy world. And again, we meet our old friend fear in the second hidden challenge.

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Defining downplays the importance of optimism, inclusiveness, and empathy when those three qualities can actually expand a person's communication power exponentially. Definers can come across as rigid, overusing their skill of setting boundaries, which may make them seem unapproachable. They miss out on feedback. By forgetting to include competing viewpoints, they may not be included by others seeking input in return.

Defining behaviors are hard to admit (what hidden challenge isn't?). Testing what we've been taught can make us question our upbringing. It can cast a shadow on the behaviors of our past or on our current mentors or role models. As one example, it's uncomfortable to question the fairness of a society or structure when we have perhaps succeeded within an environment that's less advantageous to others.

## **IF YOU SUSPECT YOU'RE DEFINING TO BE RIGHT**

Know that on the twisty road of communication you're right where you're supposed to be, perfectly imperfect. Nobody wants to hang out with someone who has no weak points to work on. Be a seeker. Investigate conscious and unconscious bias so you challenge your own thinking and others' thinking when necessary. Test your assumptions instead of relying on them. Inform your mind (which controls you if you don't control it) that you will remain open to diverse views. Celebrate when you have the courage to accept your opinion, data, or hunch is wrong. Keep learning, lest you limit your growth by your rules. Not only will your communication prowess expand, but so will your understanding of the world. Change won't hit you as hard going forward.



**RATIONALIZING THE NEGATIVE** is the third hidden challenge.

Rationalizing is an attempt to explain or justify behavior or attitude with plausible reasons, even if they are not completely true, useful, or appropriate. Rationalizing is related to an excellent tool: logic. It's wise to turn on cognitive processing when emotions run high. But Rationalizing can lead to risk aversion and conflict avoidance.

Highly cognitive folks fall prey to a pessimistic mindset as they seek and talk about what's going wrong or could go wrong more often than what's going well or might go well. This becomes a detriment when important tough conversations get skipped because expending the effort just doesn't seem worth it.

Rationalizing can prohibit us from "going there," from going deeper than surface talk, where trust is built, problems are aired, and sometimes problems are solved. Sticking to the facts and avoiding talk of feelings comes at an unfortunate cost. Analytical, detail-driven communication isn't the only type of communication called for in many scenarios, especially those that unlock human potential, repair a damaged relationship, or address workplace performance problems. You know change is important and that there's no escaping it.

Know that on the twisty road of communication you're right where you're supposed to be, perfectly imperfect.

When we're Rationalizing, the negative side of change seems larger than life, and we may downplay the emotional elements of communication, missing opportunities to really engage with our partner or colleague.

Because a Rationalizer's self-talk warns them of pitfalls rather than emphasizing opportunities, they may not invest fully in relationship communication. They may shy away from disagreement and have difficulty putting their cards on the table. This means those around them are stuck guessing about how they feel, so Rationalizers are assigned negative viewpoints or a lack of caring that just isn't accurate. In Rationalizing mode, we think things we may not verbalize. We might shut down, cut off communication, or project a negative tone. Rationalizing that most debate isn't worth the energy limits our own and others' success before we even begin. When we put no faith in positive outcomes as interactions get challenging, positive outcomes become less probable.

Many folks (maybe you, too?) believe the risk of something going wrong in conversation outweighs the benefits, so they "avoid the drama" by shutting down, losing their temper, paying lip service (going along in word but not deed), or by forfeiting and losing unnecessarily to escape the conversation. The result is often a stagnant relationship. It does not feel good, and nobody grows.

## **IF YOU SUSPECT YOU'RE RATIONALIZING THE NEGATIVE**

Ask yourself: In recent conversations, what type of presence did you bring to the interaction? How did you leave others feeling? In your next conversation, choose a quality you want to bring to the interaction. Do your best to project that energy. You may need to

stop cutting yourself or others off at the knees. You may be in a pattern of limiting success before you communicate by forgetting to monitor your energy.

Set aside disbelief. Success is possible even when it's not probable. Your self-talk will be the first type of communication you revise. Then, you'll notice your outward communication becomes more creative, productive, and attractive to others.

**SETTLING FOR "GOOD ENOUGH"** is the fourth hidden challenge.

When we settle as communicators, we do just enough in a way that's good enough to get by. "C+" effort is what we expect from ourselves and it becomes all others can expect from us. Sometimes, we employ or accumulate "yes-people" to nod their heads and agree with us, making it convenient to avoid learning what people really think. At other times, we may be feeling burned out and need to rest and recharge our batteries so we can be more fully present as communicators. Folks I've seen kick this habit need some way to be made aware of it (nice to meet you, thanks for picking up this book).

Your self-talk will be the first type of communication you revise. Then, you'll notice your outward communication becomes more creative, productive, and attractive to others.

They may be low on intrinsic motivation—the fire in our bellies that helps us strive—or they may need to reorder their priorities to allow themselves to show up more fully, but for fewer engagements.

## **IF YOU SUSPECT YOU'RE SETTling FOR "GOOD ENOUGH"**

Sometimes what we stop is just as important as what we start. You can decide to stop being content with just getting by in situations that resonate with you. You're destined for greater things in those scenarios. No one's saying you have to constantly be striving (at least, I'm not). But pushing yourself to excel sometimes is good for your mind, heart, soul, work, and relationships. So, play a little game. What if, in your next interaction, you figured out a way to give a little more effort? Here's what will likely happen. You'll put pep in someone's step and add a nice glow to how you feel about you at the same time. On the flip side, you might rile someone up but bring a problem to light diplomatically, so it can be addressed—maybe even solved. Some positive self-talk will ensue.

Be careful, it can be addictive, in a good way. You might start to ask yourself, "What if I give just 1% more?" in interactions (sounds like a *Pro Move* to me, don't you agree?), then find yourself doing so. You often end up receiving much more than you give.

### **PRO MOVE**

Identify one hidden challenge to try to rise above this year. It's not a straight line of progress, so plan on moving at a reasonable pace of two steps forward and one step back. Baby steps are perfectly fine as you develop courage to take risks to grow as a communicator.

Celebrate in a way that's meaningful to you when you act despite fear. Don't wait for someone else to celebrate you—reward yourself.

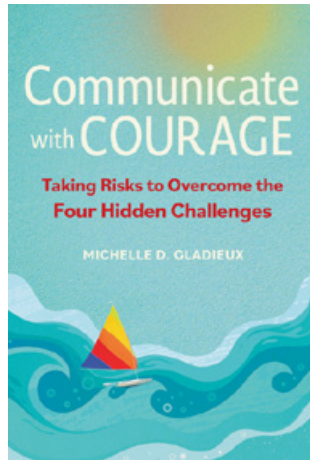
## EXERCISE

To make sure your courage isn't crowded out by what's going on in your head, release one worry about your interactions every time it comes up for the next month. Choose something you're doing your best to improve, or perhaps that you recognize is outside of your control. For one of my clients, this was worrying about her accent (not easily changeable). For another, it was putting aside worry that her face would flush when she's presenting.

Write out your worry, then for one full month starting today, notice and release it when it comes to mind. Use a mantra if you like: "I have this worry, and it does not define me or rule my behavior. I'm releasing it now." You can have the worry you're breaking up with back after one month if you want, which you won't. **What a *Pro Move* to build increased tolerance for risk, as you use your limited energy more wisely.** 📖



# Info



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Michelle Gladieux is President of Gladieux Consulting, a Midwest-based team known for the design and presentation of seminars in communication and leadership topics around the U.S. She facilitates strategic planning and executive coaching for clients in diverse industries, in governments, at non-profits, and in academia. She has 18 years of collegiate teaching experience at three universities in her home state of Indiana, accepting her first faculty position at age 23. She's worked as a Human Resources and Training Director in the cold storage, robotics, and construction industries and enjoys visiting conferences as a keynote speaker and workshop presenter. She's dedicated her professional life to helping employees at all levels GROW.

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