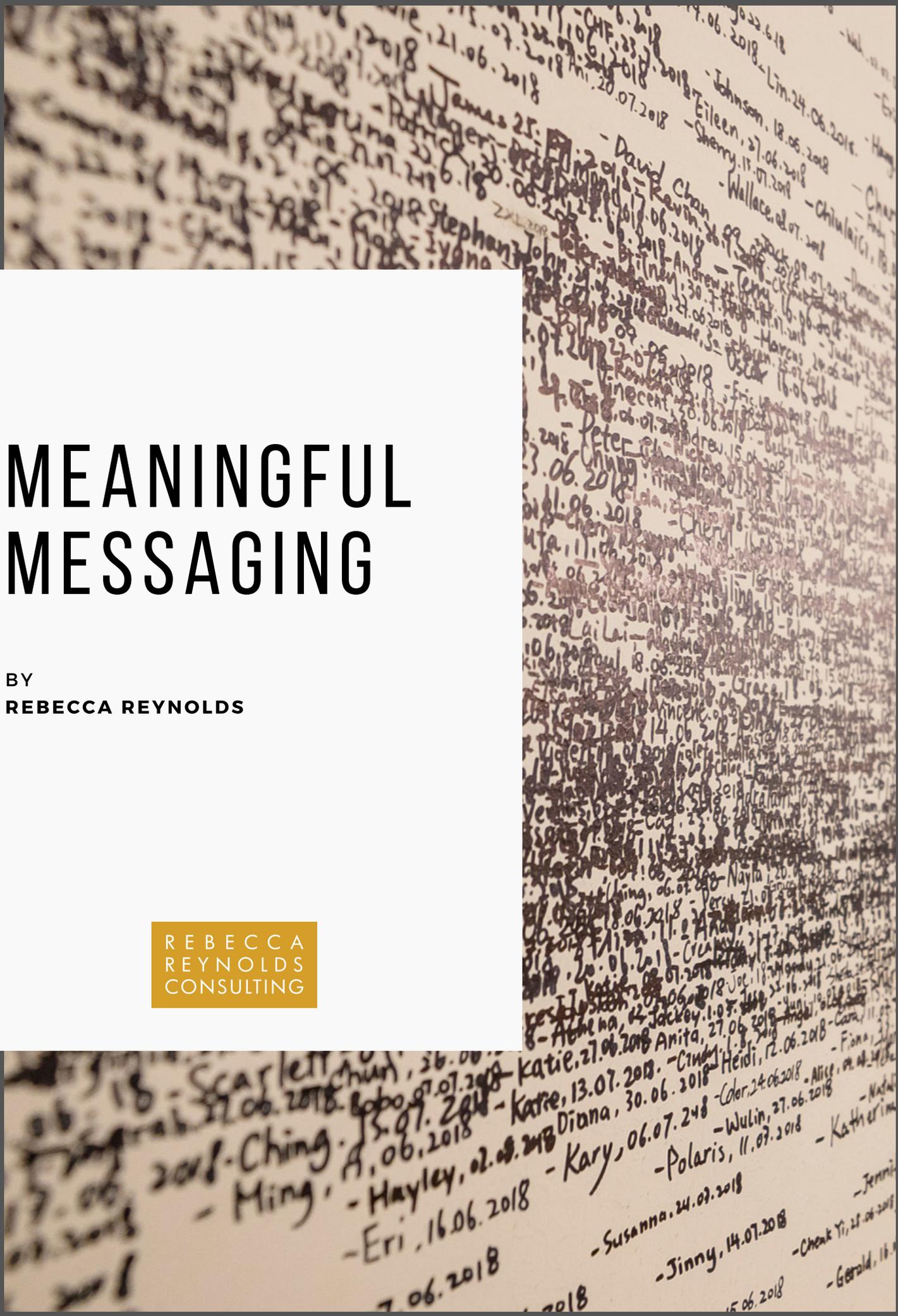


# MEANINGFUL MESSAGING

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### ***The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.***

~ Ludwig Wittgenstein

Remember the phrase "the medium is the message"? Marshall McLuhan was pointing us to look at the medium, to be aware of its power and influence in shaping the content of our messages.

### **Medium as Message**

This notion of considering the medium and how (as well as how much) it affects the message isn't new. Each new technology, at least since the Industrial Age, has undergone scrutiny as an actor on how people communicate.

But McLuhan, in the time of TV's rise, gave the idea a particular vocabulary with a passion that was persuasive. And, since we're again in the face of, not so much an emerging technology as the thorough infiltration of it, McLuhan's ideas are on people's lips - whether they credit him or not.

A case in point is James Gleick's story about African talking drums (in his 2011 book *The Information*), which is a perfect illustration of McLuhan's medium-as-message point. As Gleick explains, the drum captures the tone of the language and does so precisely because the language itself is rich in tone (drums don't work with English because it's largely monotone). But because the drum replicates the tone and not the sound, each set of tones can represent a number of different words, so drumming must supply context in order to make meaning clear.

The drum is the actor shaping the message, but at the same time, honing the message sender, who must develop this descriptive ability in order to effectively convey ideas. Gleick reminds us that the telegraph did the exact same thing in another time and place, but where drummers were poets, telegraphers were our first texters.

### **Language**

It's interesting and in some way quaint to examine cases like drums and telegraph, both of which are mostly lost media today. But apply "the medium is the message" to something extant and intrinsic like, say, language, and the whole exercise takes on new meaning.

It's a bit of a mind bender, but language really is the first technology, right? What is original is human experience, which resides inside me and inside you. We developed language to express what is individual and inside, to the other and the outside.

Even when we're in our own heads, language runs like a river, at times spraying buoyantly over an idea and at others eddying around an emerging thought. Writers toy and struggle and cajole and muse over just which words - the units of language - to string together to make ourselves known. We humans rely on language in the same way we rely on the air we breathe: effortlessly, continuously, unconsciously, completely.

But if there's one thing large-scale change work has taught me over



the years, it's that language is really a terrible analog for human experience. Get 20 people together to discuss anything of consequence, and you quickly find that language is so imprecise, it's a wonder we ever connect at all. I spend much of my time, especially early on, asking "what do you mean?" to untangle the layered meaning inside one head so as to relate it to others. Wars are fought not so much because we **disagree** but because we **misunderstand** each other.

Those who use language well know it's imprecise, and just because you say a word, doesn't mean the other person got your intent. Great communicators tell stories, describe ideas or concepts with metaphors and examples, using different perspectives, wording, and sometimes even language. And in the context of change, the bigger it is, the more critical our use of language becomes.

The early talk about global warming is a good case in point. Bill McKibben, in his book *Eaarth*, describes how 100 years ago a Swedish scientist proposed that

**LANGUAGE IS REALLY A TERRIBLE ANALOG FOR HUMAN EXPERIENCE.**



coal “evaporating into the air” could cause increased temperatures.

Obviously, he was way out in front, and no one paid him any mind. Yet, it strikes me that his language was a big part of the problem: there were not yet words to express his message and no one had the foggiest idea what could be meant by coal evaporating into the air; it must’ve sounded almost mystical.

### **A Powerful Tool for Change**

But imagine if that scientist had been more skilled in messaging... imagine if he'd been able to get beyond the limits of his own language, as Wittgenstein says.

Where might we be today?

Despite its imprecision, language is our most indispensable and powerful tool for change. Using it well, we can inspire, galvanize, and focus. Use it badly and we’re ignored, or worse, taken for hucksters, gadflies, even traitors.

What’s involved with using it well? Honing ourselves as messengers, who care deeply about what we are trying to convey, who notice and make use of the medium as we craft our messages, and most importantly, who approach each person with humility and curiosity.

And the more agile we are, the more effective we will be in sharing the meaning of our human experience with others.

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# ABOUT

## ADVANCING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY TO BRING ABOUT LARGE-SCALE CHANGE

Author, Rebecca Reynolds is CEO and Principal of RRC, a firm specializing in supporting large-scale change endeavors.



Reynolds is a pioneer in building individual and group capability to achieve visionary leadership and strategy, collaboratively developed alignment on innovative solutions, and institutional rigor in their implementation.

Reynolds acts as strategic adviser to executive leaders on complex business and leadership challenges across industries as diverse as natural resources, the arts, public policy, and IT, on issues involving diverse stakeholders and long-term effects.

RRC advances visionary strategy development and then builds the requisite capacity to achieve it. Core capacity areas include executive leadership advancement, governance redesign, IT solutions, human capital development, and collaborative process—all to enable success in dynamic and complex environments with long-term impact.

Founded in 1991, RRC has served hundreds of clients in the government and non-governmental sectors on a broad range of issues. Government clients include the USDA Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the US Environmental Protection Agency, as well as collaborations involving the spectrum of stakeholder interests on land management and business enterprise issues.

APPROACHING  
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