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Mailbox

Snapshot



Suzette Haden Elgin

This month's profile features Suzette Haden Elgin, the founder and director of the Ozark Center for Language Studies, Box 1137, Huntsville, AR 72740-1137; 501/559-2273. She is the author of 10 books on communications—including *The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense* and the new *BusinessSpeak* (McGraw-Hill)—and of 12 science-fiction novels.

What's the cause of most communication problems in the workplace? "When someone says something that strikes you badly, it's easy to leap to the conclusion that it has to do with the other person's character and values. But it usually doesn't. The other person may come from a different ethnic group or background. He or she may define the words differently. The most important thing is to understand that communication problems are in the language, not in the people."

What's the first step to understanding? "There is a principle called Miller's Law: If you want to understand what other people are saying, you have to assume that what they're saying is true. So then you have to figure out what's going on with their world view that makes it true."

"If someone says to you, 'My toaster is talking to me,' the best response is not 'Are you out of your mind?' It's 'What is your toaster saying to you?'"

How can communications trainers help? "Trainers need to tell people to stop concerning themselves with other people's flaws and really

investigate what people are saying and what it means."

"For example, most males in the United States operate in the workplace by the traditional metaphor of the football field, and most females operate by the metaphor of the schoolroom. To the male, it's OK to pretend you have the ball when you don't; that's the way the game is played. In the schoolroom, it's not OK; it's lying. The man might assume the woman is flighty or doesn't know anything about business. In reality, it's just that they're using language differently."

Do you see a link between your science fiction and your nonfiction? "What I really am about is trying to do something about violence in this country. Once violence gets physical, there's nothing the average person can do about it. But before it gets to that point—while it is still just angry words—ordinary people can stop it. I try to teach people to use language to defuse it."

"My second goal is to get information out about linguistics and language. Most people in this country are ignorant about its importance, because

they've never been told.

"In my 'Native Tongue' science-fiction series, I'm supposing a future in which the public will continue to be ignorant about linguistics. That future includes the need to communicate not only with people of other cultures, but with extraterrestrials. Only people who know linguistics will be able to communicate. And that gives those people a tremendous power."

What's your favorite book? "*I Heard the Owl Call My Name*, by Margaret Craven. I think it's a perfect book. There's no violence, no sex, and no jargon. It's concise. And it absolutely takes hold of your heart and tears it to pieces. I wish I had written a book like that."

This Snapshot interview was conducted by T&D Managing Editor Catherine Petrini.

(To nominate a "Snapshot" subject, call 703/683-9590 or fax your suggestion to Haidee Allerton at 703/683-9203. Include your name and phone number, as well as the name and number of the nominee, and say why he or she is a good candidate.)