

Paaige K. Turner, PhD

A Step Beyond

When seventeen-year-old Paaige Turner told her parents she had gotten into college, they were shocked—not because they didn't think she could do it, but because they didn't even know she had applied. Neither her mother nor her father had attended college, and growing up in a blue-collar family, higher education was not a focus.

But what had always been a focus, from the time Paaige was a little girl signing herself up for extracurricular activities, was the nurturing of her own agency. "Anytime I initiated things, my parents would support me," she recounts today. "They had me when they were eighteen, so in many ways, we grew up together. They didn't always think to guide me, so I had the freedom and joy of guiding myself. And whenever I wanted to do something, they found a way to make it happen."

As a high school student, Paaige had traveled to various college campuses for debate and forensics team tournaments, and she had seen her classmates apply to college. She filled out the application and financial aid forms herself, gaining admittance to both the University of Oregon and Lewis & Clark College. "While the whole process was entirely self-motivated, it did require me to take a step beyond my comfort zone," she says. "Though it's not always easy to do that, I've found I'm at my best when I'm taking a step beyond."

Now a co-founder and Principal Associate at Communication Resource Associates (CRA), as well as an adjunct professor at Webster University, Paaige has dedicated her life to helping others take a step beyond, too. Whether it's helping students tackle a research project, empowering women in higher education and organizational leadership, helping someone overcome their fears to speak in front of 500 people, or working with corporations and universities to forge a path forward, she teaches others how to master that critical life skill

of overcoming. "I like to see people believe they can't achieve something, and then realize they can," she says. "Helping people step beyond disbelief or flat-out terror, to courage and confidence, to achieving what once seemed impossible, is the most rewarding work I can imagine."

Along with a partner, Paaige first launched CRA in 2000 as an LLC dedicated to creating the organizational structures that allow higher education entities to connect with organizations. Essentially an umbrella organization that allows Paaige to convene the best possible team to tackle a given problem, CRA focuses on organizational change management, executive buddy matching, leadership development, external and internal communications, and mentorship certification programs, while also assisting universities with internationalization to help their students better meet the needs of a globally-connected society.

Often, Paaige's work is about helping various parties better understand the different systems of meaning at work in a given situation. "As a leader, you can frame meaning, which means everyone ascribes to the same belief," she explains. "Or you can align, which means looking for common threads amidst different understandings that can be merged together. A leader's job is to find those threads and make sure they connect. Or, it might be more appropriate for a leader to orchestrate—to allow various groups to work in isolation, with the leaders acting as the connecting force that ultimately integrates everything. In a university setting, you're always working to frame, align, or orchestrate meanings, so everyone can move forward together for the good of the whole."

The types of problems that can be addressed by an organizational communication expert are vast and varied, but almost always



involve bringing people together in the pursuit of an optimal solution to a problem. For instance, Paaige worked with St. Louis University (SLU) to integrate video-capturing lectures into its classrooms. They succeeded in putting the technology in the hands of faculty faster and more effectively than the software company had ever seen, bringing together countless people from across the university to overcome tremendous doubt. Their approach was so groundbreaking that the software company created a Rapid Response Award to honor SLU's work.

Through her various roles in academia and industry, Paaige's leadership style has been characterized by a unique commitment to lifting up others, keying into the goals of each individual team member and working to create opportunities to achieve those goals in much the same way her parents did for her—and each other. Born in Medford, Oregon, Paaige and her younger sister grew up with a front-row seat as their parents pursued an expansive range of entrepreneurial ventures. Her father, a sharp mind who could figure anything out, made gun parts and greenhouses, and eventually became a general contractor. Her mother, who easily connected with others to get a sense of how she could help, owned a flower shop and sold embalming supplies to mortuaries. Together, they managed apartments and ran an earthworm farm. "They did whatever seemed relevant, interesting, or exciting at the time," Paaige remarks. "It was often feast or famine, and things didn't always work out, but I got to see their courage and resiliency as they tried out different things and always bounced back."

As a kid, Paaige loved school. She was a voracious reader, and even had to be cut off in a reading challenge put on by her local library because she burned through too many books. When she and her sister were 12 and 10 years old, and their parents were too busy with work to spend much time at home, the family hired a nanny to help out, but quickly realized that the girls were far too self-sufficient and capable to warrant the extra help. "When I was in sixth grade, my parents planned to go out for Thanksgiving dinner because they were too tired from flower deliveries to cook, so I called up the local market and had them deliver all the ingredients," Paaige recounts. "My sister and I made the whole turkey dinner and set the table with the china to surprise them when they got home that evening. We loved

doing things like that."

When Paaige entered her freshman year of high school, she decided to join her school's debate and forensics squad, among the best in the state. It was an extremely demanding commitment that included several hours of class each week, followed by peer coaching sessions and weekend travel to tournaments. Through observation and imitation, she began learning how to organize her thoughts on the fly and structure a meaningful argument.

That first year, Paaige never won a single trophy, and she felt discouraged as classmates began to tease her. But as she kept working at it, mastering the logic and structure of debate and articulating her views, she developed the linear thinking that characterizes her potency and wit today. Then, at one tournament early in her sophomore year, she felt particularly good about her performance. "For the first time, I made it into the final round of my oratory event," she remembers. "And for my other event, called the Lincoln Douglas, there was no final round because one person had won by such a landslide. At the awards ceremony, they announced that I had won first place in both events!"

On the bus ride home, as Paaige hugged her first two trophies, Jeff Davidson, a senior on the team, approached her. "He told me I didn't need to say anything to anybody else, because I just did it," she recounts. "It reminded me that it's not about the things you say, or about the things other people say about you. It's about what you do. I still carry that moment with me, and how Jeff was a role model for how to do excellent work while lifting others up."

All through high school, Paaige's parents put complete trust in her—something she never abused or took lightly. She was a hardworking, enthusiastic, engaged teenager who joined the speech club, ran for student government, choreographed dances, designed costumes, and acted in plays. With a modest monthly allowance of \$50, she covered all her own expenses, from clothing to food to activities with friends. She worked in her mother's flower shop, processing invoices and sometimes waking up at 2:00 AM to help with the deliveries. She'd also visit her aunt in Michigan, who ran a grocery store and gas station. There, Paaige would stock shelves and coolers, pump gas, change oil, and make sandwiches. When she turned sixteen, she got a job at

Wienerschnitzel, where she lobbied to change the rules so women were allowed to work the extra half-hour at the end of the night to close the stores. Her parents taught her that adults are just kids with responsibilities—a freeing concept that comforted Paaige with the realization that people rarely know for sure what the outcome of their decisions will be. “They taught me that, as long as I was willing to accept responsibility for my decisions, I was making an adult choice,” she says. “It’s one of the reasons I had the courage to take that leap and become the first in my family to go to college.”

As it turns out, college was a big challenge for Paaige at that time in her life because she didn’t have a support system to guide her through the process of transitioning beyond a high school mentality. “College was such a foreign environment to me, and I didn’t really understand how to study or how to write a paper,” she recalls. “I didn’t know why I was there, and I didn’t know the right questions to ask to find my way.” When Paaige started her sophomore year, her financial aid wasn’t covering enough, so she began selling Fuller Brush products door-to-door. When she realized she didn’t feel prepared to take her psychology statistics midterm that semester, she decided to drive to the registrar’s office instead of the test and dropped out of school.

Assuming responsibility for her outcome and her life as her parents had always taught her, Paaige enrolled in secretarial school with the goal of moving to New York, but her aunt and uncle in Los Angeles convinced her to try a big West Coast city instead. She lived with them for six months and then moved into her own apartment, working for several years as a secretary at a small accounting firm and then at a real estate firm. She got married and moved back to Oregon, where she enrolled at the University of Oregon to finish her undergraduate degree. “I took a Sociology class in LA and finally understood what college is supposed to be like,” she laughs. “I finally knew what I wanted to learn and how to do it.”

Over the next several years, Paaige did student advising and counseling while running the orientation programs, helping to ease the way for students struggling as she had struggled. She also particularly remembers David Frank, the intelligent and caring History of Rhetoric professor who invited her to be a TA for his class. “At the end of the semester, he urged me to consider

graduate school,” she says. “I dismissed it until another faculty member said the same thing. That taught me the importance of articulating to people when you recognize possibility in them. If they hadn’t said that to me, I wouldn’t have seen it in myself, and I’d never be where I am today.”

In 1990, Paaige completed her dual-degree in Marketing and Rhetoric—balancing her appreciation for numbers and logic with her passion for questioning truth and meaning—and a minor in Real Estate Finance. And, though she hadn’t imagined she would go on to graduate school, she heeded the urging of her professors and went to Purdue University to pursue her PhD in Organizational Communication, the perfect blend of rhetoric and marketing. When she completed her doctorate, she was slated to go to a Research I institution. “To most people in my field, that was the dream, but not to me,” she recalls. “I wanted to do both research and teaching, and I wanted to work with consulting and organizational partners to make sure the things I was teaching in the classroom actually held up in industry.”

With that, Paaige made the unconventional choice to turn down the Research I slot and instead take a position as an Assistant Professor at St. Louis University, where she spent the next several decades serving in a number of roles that included Interim Director of Women’s Studies, Graduate Director, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, and Associate Vice President for International and Academic Affairs. She leapt at opportunities to serve on various committees, which taught her to see how all the parts fit together. Then, in 2014, she accepted a position as Associate Dean and Professor at Webster University—a position in the middle of the organizational structure that would allow her to fill a gap in her own knowledge base, while furthering her interest in global work through the university’s eight international campuses.

Then, in 2017, Paaige took another leap and accepted the position of Executive Director at the National Communication Association—a completely new challenge that allowed her to apply her knowledge to help the discipline as a whole. But once there, she found she deeply missed academia, where she had spent her whole career. “I found that I wasn’t happy when I couldn’t help individual students and faculty,” she remarks. “Now, as I finish up a book project and

think about my next move, I use the same compass that has always guided my very nonlinear career path. It's always been about, what is it that I want to do in this moment, and where can I have a positive impact?"

While the answer to those questions has changed over time, it has always included teaching in one way or another. Even as an administrator, Paaige taught at least one class, and as a professor, one of the most important lessons she teaches her students is the definition of a geek. "Unlike dweebs or nerds, geeks can still have social skills and dress well," she points out. "Being a geek just means you're passionate about what you do, and we need more of that. Our society lacks commitment and passion, and almost denigrates people who are passionate about things, which is really wrong. I want to be a geek who inspires others to be geeks, and to have the passion and inner fortitude to make an impact and stay committed." Her passion, in fact, motivated her students to create a fake dictionary page with her definition of geek and a photo of Paaige.

Today, as a high-achieving professional with a 22-year-old daughter and a 20-year-old son, Paaige is living proof that there's more than one way to be a great mother. Her work may have prevented her from making her kids' PTA meetings, but it afforded them opportunities to travel the globe and to better understand the world of academia. When Paaige spent two summers teaching in Spain, the kids came too, and the family took side trips to Paris and Morocco. Other work trips sent them to China and Japan. "Too often, the narrative around working mothers focuses on what the kids don't get," she points out. "But it's important to also think about what they do get because of their mother's career."

Paaige is now remarried to Bob Krizek, a fellow organizational communication academic who adds the narrative and emotional balance to

her methodical momentum. She is a proud supporter of *She Should Run*, a nonprofit dedicated to encouraging and supporting women in running for elected office. She also serves as the President Elect for the Organization for the Study of Communication in Language and Gender, and was recently named a Phillip Tomkins Distinguished Lecturer by Purdue.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Paaige urges patience and prudence, keeping in mind that success doesn't happen all at once. "Don't get yourself in a financial situation that locks you down before you're ready, like buying a car that's too expensive or a condo that ties you to a job you don't like," she says. "Also, remember that once you learn skills that make you successful, you'll always have those skills. Even if something doesn't work out, remember that you still have those things in you, and they don't go away. Cherish them and let them carry you forward as you step beyond to the next success."

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