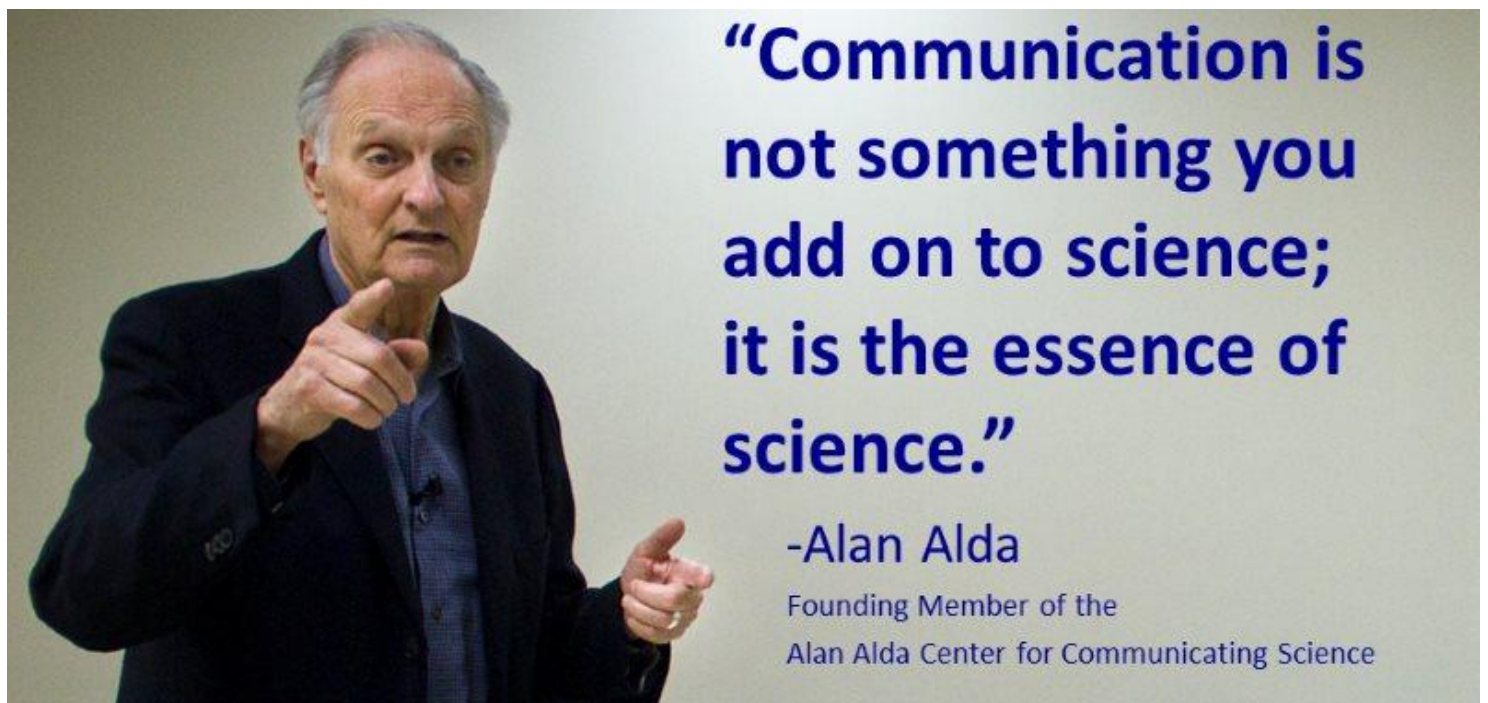


# Alan Alda Takes A Leading Role, Inspires Scientists To Be Effective Communicators

By RHESA LEDBETTER • 20 HOURS AGO



**“Communication is not something you add on to science; it is the essence of science.”**

**-Alan Alda**

Founding Member of the  
Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science

*The Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science uses improvisation to help scientists communicate more effectively.*

CREDIT UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT

Scientists, a small group of them, sit in a circle—it's reminiscent of a campfire gathering despite the fact they're in a drab classroom. Everyone is listening intently to the scientist holding up what looks like a 5x7 photograph, but in reality, is just a blank piece of paper. You wouldn't know it was an imageless page by the number of eyes staring at it. A scientist is sharing a special memory, distinctly describing the details of the “photograph” that means so much. People laugh, cry, feel, and relate in some way to every story told through the simple piece of paper that makes its way to each person around the circle.

Scientists have “wonderful stories” to tell and Alan Alda, an actor who became famous for his work on the television series *M\*A\*S\*H* and host of the PBS program *Scientific American Frontiers*, recognized that.

Scientists tend to love their scientific language, and some struggle making their work accessible to those outside the field. This rings true for Beth Ogata, a scientist at Utah State University.

“Public speaking is not my favorite activity. I get very nervous, but I also recognize it’s an important skill to practice,” Ogata said.

Alda believed he could use his training as an actor to help scientists convey their work in a clear, vivid, and engaging manner whether they’re speaking with another scientist, the legislature, a curious person on an airplane, or their 6-year-old son.

Alda once said, “Communication is not something you add on to science; it is the essence of science.”

Alda is a founding member of the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science (<http://www.centerforcommunicatingscience.org/>). The center conducts workshops and employs improvisational techniques to inspire better communication. Although the games have similarities to those on the television show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, the objective of the center is not to make scientists comedians, but rather help them connect with the person on the other end.

“A big goal of the program is to get scientists out of their comfort zone. We want them to get in touch with their natural communication abilities and what it takes to make a personal connection with someone. This is right down to looking them in the eye and reading the messages they’re getting from them,” said David Calvitto, an actor and improvisation workshop leader for the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science.

---

**Alan Alda believed he could use his training as an actor to help researchers share their scientific stories with various audiences.**

---

The center was invited by iUTAH, Utah State University's Office of Research and Graduate Studies, and the University of Utah's Vice President for Research Office, to lead workshops in Logan and Salt Lake City. Their visit generated significant interest among faculty, staff, and graduate students.

---

**"Talking about your research doesn't have to just be boring facts, you can make it interesting. It's an opportunity to talk about why you do what you love, and why it matters to the person you are speaking with." -Beth Ogata, Scientist**

---

The scientists learned how to adapt their individual message for various audiences and engaged in improvisational exercises like vivid storytelling with a blank sheet of paper. They also participated in an activity called time traveler.

"The point of the game was to give scientists experience talking with someone outside their field. Two individuals sat face-to-face. One person was from 300 years ago, the other person was from today. The person from today had to explain a smartphone, so that the time traveler wouldn't think he was talking with a witch," Calvitto said.

This type of exercise forces the scientist to connect their knowledge with the person they're speaking with. They learn the importance of analogies, eliminating jargon, and making the time traveler feel comfortable. Calvitto recalled a scientist explaining to the time traveler that the cell phone sends a message similar to how they would send a letter to a family member via horse. The major difference being you talk into the phone.

Ogata, the scientist who is a bit shy when it comes to public speaking, found the workshop incredibly helpful and insightful.

"Talking about your research doesn't have to just be boring facts, you can make it interesting," Ogata said. "It's an opportunity to talk about why you do what you love, and why it matters to the person you are speaking with. It's more of a conversation."

Calvitto shared that it's not only the scientists taking something away from the workshop—even this actor is learning.

“If I can help scientists communicate better, then I am very happy. So much of what we do is help the scientists speak to a lay audience about their work. Well, that layperson IS me,” said Calvitto. “Every time I do this, I am getting to spend time with all these fascinating, intelligent people. I learn something every minute.”

People from all walks of life—the actor, the politician, the man on the airplane, and the young boy—will be joining the campfire circle from time to time, and the hope is that they will not only hear, but feel a connection to the “wonderful stories” scientists have to share.