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What the heck did that scientist just say? Actor visits BNL to give employees communication tips from a pro

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Actor Alan Alda was on hand Friday to advise scientists and researchers looking to improve their communication skills through an improvisation exercise at the Center for Communicating Science's workshop at Brookhaven National Laboratory.

Sometimes speaking about what you do for a living isn't easy when you're a scientist at Brookhaven National Laboratory. Taking the complex tasks the lab's many occupations require employees to carry out and breaking them down so the lay person can understand them is no easy feat.

Senior radiological instructor Buzz Rundlett knows all about this.

So like many other members of the lab community, the 69-year-old Wading River resident turned to the Stony Brook University School of Journalism for help last Friday, when the school held a workshop for lab scientists to help them communicate with others.

Though the retired U.S. Army veteran has instructed more than 25,000 professionals, ranging from crafts people to scientists, researchers and emergency responders over the years, he noted there is always room for improvement.

"I was pursuing excellence by attending the workshop," Mr. Rundlett said.

Stony Brook's Journalism School established the Center for Communicating Science in 2009 with the goal of helping scientists better communicate their specialized fields not only to the public but also to each other. As part of the workshop, members of the scientific community are coached by media and theater professionals in techniques that help get their creative juices flowing so they can express themselves better.

Part of the workshop curriculum also includes an improvisation exercise designed by Academy Award-nominated actor Alan Alda, who sits on the center's advisory board. Mr. Alda, who has appeared on the television hits "The West Wing" and "M.A.S.H.," said the center has always been a big dream of his.

Mr. Alda said he has always believed it is important for scientists to be able to easily communicate their knowledge to policy makers and members of the public. It's not easy, but Mr. Alda said he is hoping the center will be able to provide some helpful insight.

"Clarity and vividness are what I want to see," Mr. Alda said. "I want to see who [the scientists] are come out, because I think nothing communicates better than an authentic presentation of yourself -- not hidden by jargon in some cases, or by nervousness and that kind of thing. If you can really be there and communicate with the person you are talking to, then you get something happening between you and that person."

And the actor's advice did not fall on deaf ears.

Sound Beach scientist Wlodek Guryn normally spends his day working on the STAR experiment over at the Relativistic Heavy Ion Collider. But on Friday afternoon, Mr. Guryn was also able to lump in myriad activities he normally wouldn't be able to fit into his work schedule -- attending a soccer match, going to the beach and lifting weights. Although the activities were only part of the theater exercises, Mr. Guryn was able to gain something from the experience, he said.

"We have to take time to prepare -- make sure the words we use, the language we use are understood by the people in our community," Mr. Guryn said.

Mr. Rundlett said he picked up some helpful tips, and he learned that he is not alone when has difficulty communicating a point.

"I have emergency responders telling me that the hardest part of their job is explaining to scientists why they should stay home and not come to work in a snowstorm," he joked.

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Want to know more?

Additional workshops will be held at Stony Brook University May 14 and at Cold Spring Laboratory on May 24. For more information on the center's programs, log onto www.stonybrook.edu/journalism/science.