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Boost Productivity – select the right communication tool

For many readers there is only one answer to the question how to best communicate. It's sending an e-mail, and, on the surface, you'd expect e-mail to be one of the biggest productivity-boosters to ever be invented. After all, with e-mail you don't have to wait for the phone to connect, a timeslot in a person's schedule to open for a quick exchange or to coordinate multiple people to attend a meeting. As more and more people use e-mail for all their communication we have, however, not seen the productivity boost we expected.

Why is this the case? Our research has shown that many people choose e-mail as their main communication method, even when another method would be more suitable to the situation. And that wastes time and money. The other fallacy is that e-mail writers think that one writing style is good for all recipients, being completely ignorant to the fact that, like in One-on-One conversations, one has to present the information in a way that makes it easy for the recipient to understand and act upon. In our workshops (Interpersonal Communication and Behavior based Selling) we explore the different needs of people depending on their main behavioral styles: task or people orientation and their assertiveness level. Each trait results in drastically different e-mails and conversations.

Besides the need to customize our message, let's take a look at how we convey and receive information. Principally we use three means:

- Verbal
- Vocal (pitch and tone of our voice, pronunciation and emphasizing of words etc.)
- Visual (mostly eye contact, verbal expression, body language etc.)

When asked, most people will answer that most of a message is conveyed verbally. Some put the verbal component as high as 60% of a conversation. However, this could not be further from the truth. Scientists have determined that we communicate only 7% verbally, 35% through our vocals and 58% through visual signs! If we communicate by phone we lose the visual part and the importance of the verbal component goes up to 20%.

So, the least important component of a conversation is how we say something, not what we say. Misunderstandings can be easily detected by the parties and unclear content can be clarified.

By writing an e-mail we lose all of that and rely 100% on the verbal component. Depending on the mood one is in, the background he/she has on a subject, cultural differences and one's desire for a certain outcome, the same e-mail can easily be read and interpreted in several different ways. Does this mean we should only use verbal, or even better, in person communication? Absolutely not. E-mails have strong advantages in a variety of situations. Let's look at the use of e-mails first.

When to use E-mails

E-mails are composed of text. Text is a fine medium for expressing very precise meanings; it's also a medium that you can absorb at your own pace. But text has its limitations - it can't convey the subtleties of tone of voice or body language, it's not particularly memorable and it doesn't grab your attention very well.

In short, e-mails are a great tool to convey information. So to send to a group of people the production quota or output, an efficiency chart or hours worked -to name just a few- e-mail is the perfect tool. The same is true for organizing a meeting or setting the agenda for a meeting and other administrative efficiencies. The biggest benefit of using e-mails is that you can compose your message whenever you have a couple of minutes and you have a written record for follow-up. However, I see far too many e-mails sloppily composed with little information or actionable ideas. These are the time wasters clogging up all of our inboxes and reducing drastically the value of this great tool. How can we avoid this?

Keys are to:

- Use clear subject lines –this will help people to decide if they want to read the e-mail
- Keep it short – if it is more than two paragraphs, e-mail might not be the best medium
- Keep to the facts – let the reader interpret the results
- Never send an e-mail written when you are agitated. Wait 24 hours and consider carefully if your intent or mood is reflected in the message
- Address the e-mail only to the person you expect to act on the content. If you list multiple people in the TO line don't be surprised if nobody acts
- Only copy people when necessary – CC is seen as sending spam, and if pressed for time, people will just delete it
- Read and re-read your e-mail prior to sending to ensure that your message is clear and precise and easy to understand. If the stakes are high, utilize a second person to proofread your message prior to sending it.

You should never use e-mails:

- For One-on-One leader conversations, to provide feedback, evaluate or coach an employee - there is too much that is lost

- To communicate sensitive information
- To delegate – it leaves little room for dialogue and a lot of room for misunderstanding
- To deliver negative messages or reminders – they can sound angry and demanding; even when delivered face to face these are difficult conversations
- When you need the input from multiple people – long e-mail exchanges will bore the readers quickly and the outcomes are, in most cases, less than effective
- When you need immediate answers
- To wrong somebody – e-mails can be printed and saved and can haunt you long after you sent them
- If it is not essential that all of your audience get the message
- To use sarcasm – you might think you're clever, but the recipient(s) will be put off

Experience has taught most of us that e-mail isn't meant for certain kinds of humor, sarcasm, ironic asides or critical assessments. The medium is way too literal and fast moving for nuances. Some feel that there are exceptions to this rule for the recipients who know you well and can "hear" your tone via e-mail. Don't! A friend of mine just had several of those e-mails read to him by a lawyer in court. What sounded funny at the time could be painful at best and most often is career-ending. Certain topics should be entirely avoided in business. Don't ever use e-mail to send off-color jokes or to comment on anyone's sexual, racial, religious or ethnic characteristics or someone's age or disability. Do not ever trash a colleague's professional capabilities or performance or job history. Some of this can be legally actionable. Any of it could severely damage your reputation and business.

E-mail etiquette

Like with all requests, you should always acknowledge that you received an e-mail. Don't just let e-mails linger in your in-box unanswered. If you don't have the answers and it will take some time to gather the requested information or to resolve a problem, let the sender know so that he can plan for it.

If you reply to a long e-mail exchange, do everybody a favor by deleting the e-mail threads which are no longer relevant. It will make it so much faster to find –if necessary- the relevant information.

The biggest e-mail blunders are always a result of sending the e-mail to the wrong recipient or to have damaging conversations included in previous e-mails when you forward your response. So be careful. It is easy to write an email complaining about Mr. Doe and then quickly send it to the name you have in your head, which is, in most cases, Mr. Doe!

And finally, don't just hit the "Reply to All" button. Carefully check the "TO" line to ensure that only the person who needs to act on the content of the e-mail are listed. If you always have large distribution lists people will discount the content and stop reading them and surely stop acting on them.

When to use in-person communication

The easiest way to answer this question is to look at the “never use e-mail” list above. All communication which has sensitive content needs to be conducted in person. As you can tell, I am a strong proponent of in-person communication. By watching the visual clues and listening to the vocal clues, one can avoid misunderstandings and confusion and move the conversation along at a speed suitable to the person or group.

Catering to the person’s communication needs is, however, the key to getting one’s message through. And this makes a lot of people uncomfortable. It is so much easier to blame a person for not reading an e-mail and making faulty assumptions, than blaming oneself for not clearly communicating. Communication needs are based on one’s behavioral preferences, ethnic background and yes, the gender of the person. Female communication strength includes the ability to read body language and pick up on non-verbal clues, combined with good listening skills and effective display of empathy. Male communication strength are in the direct to-the-point interaction and their physical presence. Thus they can come across as overly blunt and direct and too confident in their own opinion.

The good news is that good communication is a skill which can be learned. So everybody can increase his or her efficiency by reading and attending training classes.

The more one becomes a leader in the organization the more he or she should use and rely on personal communication. Nobody can create ownership or motivate people to enthusiastically follow directions or align and support an idea by sending out e-mails. The same is true for sharing business updates. There are too many factors recipients might not understand and consequently misinterpret and their imaginations tend to run wild. By communicating in person, actively listening and responding, a lot of this stress can be avoided and people can buy into the context.

In many cases a significant amount of time can be saved by doing project or progress reviews in person. It saves the “reporter” the time to compose a lengthy report and the “receiver” is not forced to read the report and rather can act on the visual and vocal clues given to hone in on the key points and evaluate them deeper.

Personal communication etiquette

Basis for assertive communication is that you can make your time and energy available to listen and participate. Every successful person I know has a time management method by which he prioritizes tasks and schedules their days. Thus rather than ignoring or tuning out a conversation (for example, by reading e-mails while listening) setting time limits (I can give you five minutes) or telling a person that one does not have the proper time to engage and to schedule a time for the conversation to take place is good practice.

The biggest disadvantage in personal communication is the lack of a paper trail. We encourage our clients to follow up a conversation with a brief e-mail, summarizing the decision(s) and commitment(s) made.

Summary

Effective communication is the glue that holds a company together and keeps members focused and moving in the right direction. The other component that sets successful companies apart are high performing teams. Both are built on trust and close relationships of the people involved and sensitive communication. E-mails or personal communication -when properly used- will both boost productivity. People's effectiveness depends on the use of either. Overly relying on e-mails and abusing one's time by sending unnecessary or cover-up e-mails will be discounted as spam and the person's efficiency and contribution will be greatly diminished.

Customer communication with the exception of transmitting facts (500 pieces shipped on 5/10/2010. Tracking number is x6574) should always be made in person.

Always remember: Trust and relationships cannot be built through e-mails!