The Challenge of Electronic Text Communication

Like most of us, I begin my day checking my e-mail. What's in? What's up? Who has a question I can answer, an invitation I can't refuse, or a meeting to reschedule? There is no question about it, e-mail works. And now I can send a text message on my cell phone, making communication even quicker and easier. In the workplace, these communication tools can be great time-savers, but they require particular communication skills.

Here is a short list of things you can accomplish via electronic means:

➤ You can announce a meeting time and place so that everyone knows where to be and when.

➤ You can circulate the agenda so that everyone knows what to expect generally when they get there.

➤ You can distribute the minutes of the meeting so that everyone knows what was considered and decided.

- ➤ You can track the budget and increase the transparency of transactions.

- ➤ You can transfer data with less opportunity for human error transposing numbers or omitting lines.

- ➤ You can communicate with everyone on the staff, either singularly or as a group, at any time of the day or night, wherever they are, or you are, whether you are in your office or on the beach or three time zones away.

- ➤ When there is a policy change or a schedule change, you can communicate the same message to everyone at the same time.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Some people just love their electronic communications. They use e-mail and texting for just about everything. There are times when this works well, but there are other times when it does not.

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For Steve, it was far easier to send e-mails from his office than to try to track people down at their desks. Whenever he had a new job requirement, it went directly from his keyboard into someone else's e-mail, to be added to his or her to-do list. There were a few people on the team who Steve was not all that comfortable working with. He found texting and e-mailing were especially helpful communicating with them.

There was Anita, who was always complaining at length about this project or that assignment. If he sent her an e-mail with new tasks, he didn't have to listen to Anita's complaints. And there was Ben, who never seemed to understand exactly what was expected of him. An e-mail with a clear deadline took care of that problem. What a relief to have this e-mail capability!

The longer Steve used the electronic communication, the more comfortable with it he became. Truth be told, he was much more at ease with the computer than he was with human interaction. Steve had a long list of responsibilities to juggle. He sent texts requesting status updates. If his direct reports didn't answer

him quickly, that was okay. He'd just send a text to someone further down the chain of command. Sometimes, when he didn't get a response as quickly as he expected, he would send another text a few minutes later. Maybe he thought the first one didn't go through. Maybe he thought the person would understand how important the question was. After a while, maybe he really didn't think about it at all.

Staff meetings were such a bore for Steve. There was no need anymore to waste people's time in meetings. He could just tell them what they needed to know through the daily e-mail. He discovered that he didn't have to have those uncomfortable conversations face to face. Performance evaluations got a lot easier when he could e-mail them as attachments. If anyone had a problem with them, they could let him know. Preferably by e-mail.

Antoine was a bit of a pain. The two of them went round and round on a job requirement. After several e-mail exchanges, Antoine's tone got nasty. But Steve hung in there. If you keep at it, he figured, eventually employees will get the message. Then, there was that really dreadful week a couple of months ago. Facing a downturn in the business cycle, the higher-ups decided that a layoff was the only way to make the numbers look positive for the quarter. Fortunately for Steve, he had his trusty e-mail system. After he got the list and confirmation from his boss, on Thursday afternoon he e-mailed notices to three of his employees, giving them the bad news and directing them to clean out their desks. As far as Steve was concerned, it was the easiest way to handle a dirty job. He could attach the paperwork, give them necessary instructions, and he didn't have to endure any messy, uncomfortable scenes or tearful goodbyes. He thought about it from their perspective, too. He was sure they would appreciate avoiding an awkward moment.

What Steve didn't see was the negative effect all of his e-mailing had on the staff. His relationships with them became more awkward. Without staff meetings and with limited face-to-face conversations, his staff was reluctant to take on new assignments; they did not have a clear understanding of the office's priorities. Opportunities for people to assist each other on projects

dwindled. When Steve reacted by pelting them with more e-mails to demand answers, they became increasingly resistant. Morale dropped as employees felt less connected to the boss, to the mission of the office, or to each other.

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Maybe you have worked with Steve. Maybe you recognize some of your own tendencies in his story. Maybe you find some of the details hard to believe. They are not fabrications, as much as we might want them to be. Like other basic elements of life—fire, water, wind—electronic text communications can be a boon to human existence, and if they get out of control, they can become destructive.

Since these communication tools are so easy to use, abusing them is easy as well. The challenge is to use electronic communication tools wisely. On the one hand, when writing an e-mail, you are not interrupted as you are getting your thoughts together. Having time to think through your response, organize your information, and reread your message, amending and revising before sending it, can help you deliver the message more accurately. This can give you added confidence, help you manage your emotions, and overcome a strong desire to avoid the situation altogether.

On the other hand, when people do not trust one another, there is too much room for interpretation—or misinterpretation—of the text. As discussed in an earlier chapter, the words themselves account for a mere 7 percent of the communication. Through e-mail and texting, people lose about 93 percent of the intended communication.

Empathy is triggered by seeing a face. This works in both directions. A manager connects with a worker and a worker thinks of a manager in more human ways when they are able to see each other. So much important information can be expressed with a smile or a shrug or in eye-to-eye contact that cannot be relayed on a bare page of letters and numbers. Emoticons can only go so far in expressing your intent. There is no opportunity to observe how the recipient is reacting to your message or to demonstrate through your tone of voice that you meant your exchange as a friendly inquiry.

If you send an e-mail and others don't trust you, immediately their

negative filters shade the computer screen. In other words, they often will automatically and unconsciously read your words with a negative tone of voice. Their thought process is quite likely to be, "Who is she to be asking me *this*?" or "Where does he get off telling me *that*?"

Recently a colleague approached me as we were heading into a meeting. Waving a paper in the air, her face flaming red, she demanded, "Can you *believe* he wrote this to me?" I held the sheet steady and read the message. I shrugged. Having no history with the sender, it sounded pretty straightforward to me. She, on the other hand, had had several disagreements with him and distrusted any of his actions. She automatically read his words through her own filter of distrust.

With e-mail, you can quickly dispatch a response and have one less item waiting for action on your to-do list. On many a morning, I begin my workday by sending several e-mails. There is a sense of satisfaction that the task is done, at least until I get responses from them. However, one of the challenges of the computer system is that the send button is located so conveniently on the screen. It is easy to read a message, react to it, and immediately write a sharp reply. By the time you reflect on what you have said, and how the recipient might read it, the message is off your screen and onto the receiver's screen.

If you need to communicate something to someone you don't trust, electronic communication seems like the way to go: it's not necessary to interact with the person *and* you have proof that you sent the message. You can demonstrate later that, yes, you did send the message—and it is even automatically time-stamped. Often, you can also prove that the person opened the message, which is also time-stamped.

In contrast, if your intention is to reduce conflict and resolve differences, this approach may only drive people further away. When you do finally have to have that face-to-face conversation, you can come armed with reams of e-mails, a printout of all of the messages exchanged over the past fourteen months. You will have proof of the rightness of your cause: "See, right here. July 13, 11:15 A.M. I *told* you I could not extend the deadline." You will likely alienate the very person whose cooperation you need. Where the trust is low, using electronic communications to establish a paper trail often only creates more distrust.

The possibility of having a permanent record of those e-mail com-

munications can be helpful, of course. If you need to retrace how the ideas have developed, being able to read through the record can be helpful. "Did I quote a cost for that project? Let me check back in my 'sent" folder to be sure that I gave them that number already." On the other hand, those messages, because they exist inside the system and never really go away, can be forwarded to others without your knowledge. In addition, once your views—or someone else's opinions—have been expressed in black and white, the flexibility to change your mind, or for them to change theirs, begins to disappear.

E-mail can be useful for communicating with many people at one time. That way, everyone gets the same information. Everyone knows that everyone else knows what is happening. However, that same capability can be used to include others in what would best be kept as a one-on-one conversation. Copying your own manager or others on the staff in an e-mail or text message ratchets up any disagreement to another level. And there are the hazards of "reply all." Without realizing who is copied on this e-mail, you can easily send a response to people you never intended to read what you have written. Suddenly, the conflict or disagreement takes on a life of its own, with rumors and misunderstandings buzzing through the office.

When Not to Use Electronic Communication

Here are some tips for when to avoid using electronic communication.

➤ Build positive relationships in person, so that when difficulties arise they will be easier to resolve.

➤ If there is any question about the strength of your relationship, or if trust is a concern, deal with differences and disagreements face to face. Communicate about complaints or dissatisfaction directly to the individual.

➤ If you can't meet face to face, pick up the phone and talk. Your voice tone will convey far more information about your intent than your words may express.

➤ If the subject matter is highly complex, direct communication can reduce misunderstandings.

➤ Do not use e-mail to communicate about confidential matters.

➤ If you have bad news to deliver, do not use e-mail or text messaging to deliver it. Talk with the person directly.

➤ Follow the rule of three: if you have responded three times through e-mail on the same topic, it is time to pick up the phone or visit the other person's office.

➤ Resist the temptation to fire off a response. Reread the original message to be clear that you are not misinterpreting it. Draft a reply and let it cool before sending it.

➤ No "flaming." Do not send messages that are hostile, aggressive, or insulting. Do not use profanity, all capital letters, or numerous punctuation marks at the end of a sentence.

How to Write an E-Mail

Face-to-face or phone communication can make exchanging views and resolving differences easier, but this may not always be possible, given the challenges of time and schedules in the workplace. There are ways to write e-mails that are effective and that avoid some of the pitfalls listed above.

Consider this e-mail message: "Not available next week." It is short and sweet—and open to negative interpretations if there is mistrust in the relationship. Revising it can make a difference in how the sender receives the communication: "Holly, next week is really busy for me. I know we need time to talk this through. What does your calendar look like the following week? Thanks."

What a difference a cordial response can make. Here are some other suggestions for phrasing your e-mails in a positive way.

➤ Use the subject line to indicate what the message is about.

➤ Begin with a salutation, using the person's name, saying "Hi" or "Hello."

➤ Express positive intention (e.g., "I want to be sure that I understand your concerns").

➤   Put your most important statements in the first paragraph. Follow up with details.

➤   Keep paragraphs short for easy reading.

➤   Make recommendations clear and easy to identify.

➤   Ask for a specific action. Tell the recipient what you need in order to complete the task.

➤   Re-read your message at least once more before you send it.

➤   Say "Thank you."

A Word About Social Networking (Facebook and Twitter)

These are marvelous communication tools, broadcasting messages to a wide band of readers at once. The public forum is not a healthy place to discuss or resolve conflicts, however. Far too many people are otherwise privy to what is best kept as a private conversation. The potential for trust to be broken, the opportunity to be misinterpreted by others, and the possibility of the conversation landing in the hands of the wrong people are multiplied. Don't even go there.

Electronic communication is a powerful tool to make life in the workplace more efficient. When it comes to developing and maintaining positive working relationships that are essential in resolving differences and disagreements, however, technology can sometimes be more of a hindrance than a help. Proceed with caution.