12 Do's and Don'ts for Effective E-mail Communication

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Overarching consideration: Use the right mode of communication – often e-mail is not the right way to communicate a particular message.

1. **Do not treat an e-mail like a conversation.** In normal conversation we use the feedback of body language to modify our message, pace, tone, and emphasis in order to stay out of trouble. In e-mail we do not have this real-time feedback.

2. **Keep messages short.** A good e-mail should take only 15-30 seconds to read and absorb. Less is more in online communication. Try to have the entire message fit onto the first screen. When a messages goes "over the horizon," the reader does not know how long it is, which creates a psychological block.

3. **Establish the right tone upfront**. E-mail messages have a momentum. If you start on the wrong foot, you will have a difficult time connecting. The "Subject" line and the first three words of a note establish the tone.

4. **Remember the permanent nature of e-mails.** Using e-mail to praise helps people remember the kind words. Using e-mail to be critical is usually a bad idea because people will re-read the note many times.

5. **Keep your objective in mind.** Establish a clear objective of how you want the reader to react to your note. For sensitive notes, write the objective down. When proofreading your note, check to see if your intended reaction is likely to happen. If not, reword the note.

6. **Do not write notes when you are not yourself.** This sounds simple, but it is really much more difficult than meets the eye. Learn the techniques to avoid this problem.

7. **Avoid "e-mail grenade" battles.** Do not take the bait. Simply do not respond to edgy e-mails in kind. Change the venue to be more effective.

8. **Be careful with use of pronouns in e-mail.** Pronouns establish the tone. The most dangerous pronoun in an e-mail is "you."

9. **Avoid using "absolutes."** Avoid words such as: never, always, impossible, or cannot. Soften the absolutes if you want to be more credible in e-mails.

10. **Avoid sarcasm.** Humor at the expense of another person in an e-mail will come back to haunt you.

11. **Learn techniques to keep your inbox clean** (down to zero notes each day) so you are highly responsive when needed. Adopting proper distribution rules in your organization will cut e-mail traffic by more than 30% instantly.

12. **Understand the rules for writing challenging notes** so you always get the result you want rather than create a need for damage control.

Your organization has a <u>sustainable competitive advantage</u> if:

- You live and work in an environment unhampered by the problems of poor online communication. This takes some education and a customized set of rules for your unique environment, but the effort is well worth it.

- Employees are not consumed with trying to sort out important information from piles of garbage email.

- Your coworkers are not focused on one-upmanship and internal turf wars.

- Leaders know how to use electronic communications to build rather than destroy trust.

For leaders and managers, once you learn the essentials of e-body language, a whole new world of communication emerges. You will be more adept at decoding incoming messages and have a better sense of how your messages are interpreted by others. You will understand the secret code that is written "between the lines" of all messages and enhance the quality of online communications in your sphere of influence.

Training in this skill area does not require months of struggling with hidden gremlins. While employees often push back on productivity improvement or OD training, they <u>welcome</u> this topic enthusiastically because it improves their quality of work life instantly. Four hours of training and a set of rules can change a lifetime of bad habits.

The preceding information was adapted from the book ***Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*** by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.

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