9 Ways to Improve Online Communication

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Are you becoming a digital junkie? Between e-mail, texting, or social networking, the nature of communication is becoming ever more digital and less verbal. With the brevity and acronyms used in Twitter messages, we may be heading back toward some form of cave drawings to communicate. At least if we are going to be communicating online all the time, we should all do it as skillfully at it as possible.

The rules for communicating efficiently and effectively online are not complex; unfortunately many people do not remember to use the rules on a daily basis. Here are nine specific points that can improve your communication online:

1. **Understand online text is different from conversation** - When we use the old fashioned method of communicating (with the mouth and ears) we have the opportunity to modify everything we say, the pace, the tone, the content, the inflection, everything, based on the visual feedback we are getting real time from the other person. Instantaneous feedback is not in play with digital communication, so the potential to make corrections and stay out of trouble is just not there.

2. **Use the right mode of communication** - For many applications, a digital note may be the expedient way to communicate, but it may well not be the best way. Consider whether having a face-to-face discussion or a phone call might be the more efficient route in the long run. Having your cell phone or ipad in your hand is not a reason to use the wrong mode of communication for important notes.

3. **Get the right tone at the start** - In any message, even a tweet, you need to set the tone at the very start so the other person understands your frame of reference. If not, the message can be read in a way that is totally opposite to your intention. With longer e-mail messages, this is a critical element.

4. **Don't play one upmanship** - Escalating e-mails in an organizational context are familiar long strings of increasing rancor and expanding distribution. I call these diatribes "e-grenade battles." The antidote here is to refrain from taking the bait.

Simply do not reply in kind to a message that gets under your skin. Instead, pick up the phone or walk down the hall to clear up any misunderstanding.

5. **Keep the content brief** - Twitter helps us in that regard, but the side effect is that sometimes the true intent can be lost in the extreme brevity. With social networking and e-mail, less is more, because people do not take the time to wade through mountains of text to get the meat.

6. **Avoid Absolutes** - If I write that you are "always late for meetings," it is not likely an accurate statement. "You never call me," is usually proven to be incorrect. Even if an absolute word is technically correct, it is an accusatory term that sets up a negative vibe in the mind of the reader who will try to prove the writer is incorrect.

7. **Read before sending** - Depending on the gravity of the message, you should reread it at least twice before sending. With social networking this is also true. Make sure you attempt to put yourself in the place of the reader. Think how the information might be misinterpreted, and make sure you spell things correctly, at least most of the time.

8. **Recognize you cannot get them back** - Most digital messages are permanent data. They do not atrophy with time like verbal communication does. You can apologize all you want, but the other person can demonstrate that you said this or that. Make sure you write what you mean to communicate. Emails never go away.

9. **Understand you lose control of the distribution** - Once you push the send button, it is all over. You cannot get the message back or delete it. It is out there for the intended recipient and potentially any other person in the world to view. That includes your harshest critics or worst enemies!

There are numerous other ways to improve digital communication, but if you keep these nine concepts firmly in your mind, you will have a much more fruitful interface with other people online in the long run.

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