Successful Supervisor Part 36

Improving Virtual Communication

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

For the past couple decades, I have been fascinated by the topic of virtual communications. This topic was the subject matter for my second book, **Understanding E-body Language: Building Trust Online**.

For many supervisors, the need to communicate clearly in virtual situations is becoming more important. Unfortunately, very few supervisors have been trained on how to communicate well virtually. This article will provide some tips to help fill the void.

In most cases supervisors are local managers, and these people are not charged with managing teams in different parts of the world. For those supervisors who do deal with subordinates in remote locations, I recommend the work of my friend Nancy Settle Murphy and her wonderful searchable blog [Guided Insights.](#) She has a wealth of information on how to be an effective manager of remote teams.

This article is for supervisors who work with people locally, but do a lot of communicating with subordinates via some form of computer. I will use email as the example, because that is a common form of virtual communication, but the principles will apply to texting or any other non-verbal communication method.

1. 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 topics.

2. E-mail is not a conversation

We often think of email as a type of conversation where one person makes a point and the other person responds. Thinking of e-mail communication like it is a conversation is very dangerous because the two modes are completely different. When we converse with someone face to face, we modify the pace, tone, cadence, and even the content based on the visible reaction we are seeing in the other person. If we detect

misunderstanding based on a quizzical facial expression, we know to back off and try a different approach.

In electronic communication, there is no ability to modify the message as you are giving it, and you get no feedback as the person is absorbing your points. Therefore, if you start to diverge in terms of understanding, there is no way to correct the problem in real time. The disconnection simply grows as the reader plows on to the next point.

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 email messages, this is a critical element.

4. 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 email, less is often more, because people do not take the time to wade through mountains of text to get the meat.

5. 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 has an accusatory tone that sets up a negative vibe in the mind of the reader who will try to prove the writer is incorrect.

6. Don't play one upmanship

Escalating emails 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.

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 take 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! We all learned that lesson in the last election. Email can become an Achilles Heel, because it can always be recovered somehow.

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.

This is a part in a series of articles on "Successful Supervision." The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision *or on this blog.*

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