

## Talent Development 6 – Electronic Communication

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The very first area of personal capability in the ATD Certification Institute Content Outline is “Communication.” Within that category, the second skill area reads: “Skill in applying verbal, written, and/or nonverbal communication techniques.”

Personally, I would add the concept of electronic communication to that bullet,

because we continue to communicate more through electronic means than other ways.

Years ago, I saw many professionals make critical errors when trying to communicate online. That observation caused me to write a book on the topic way back in 2006. The book was titled [“Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online.”](#) Most of the content is still valid today.

Here are a few of the key points I made in the book.

### **Use the right mode of communication**

Every time we attempt to transfer information through communication, we have a choice of how to do it. For some topics, a “Town Hall Meeting” format will be best. Other times a phone call is the most appropriate, while for other situations an email would be the best choice.

The first rule in communication is to consider what mode to use for a particular situation. For example, if you are having an “e-grenade” battle with another person going back and forth with escalating rancor and distribution, it is a wise strategy to pick up the phone or walk down the hall to change to a less inflammatory method of communicating.

### **Email is not conversation**

Because of the pattern of entering data and then getting a response before adding more information, we often think of email messages as if they are a conversation. But email communication is far different from conversation.

When we are face to face with another person, we have the opportunity to flex our tone, cadence, content, and message based on the real-time body language we observe on the part of the recipient. In email, we have no ability to modify the message based on how it is being interpreted by the receiver.

We just take our whole unmodified message and put it in a box and plop in into the lap of the receiver. Never think of email as conversation. It is so much easier to get into trouble in email versus face to face communication.

### **Less is more in emails**

To communicate at all, it is necessary for the recipient to not only open the note but to actually read the whole thing and absorb the meanings you put into it. If you have a reputation for sending long, rambling, poorly-formatted emails, you may think you are communicating, but if people just don't bother to open your notes, then you are in error.

You probably know someone who when you see their name pop up in your inbox, you say something like, "Oh no, not him again. I don't even want to open this note because it will be upsetting to me and take me 15 minutes to unscramble." You know other people who you welcome in your inbox because you anticipate their note will be well formatted BRIEF and easy to digest. Make sure you are perceived more like the second person than the first.

I have two rules of thumb to keep out of trouble.

**Rule 1** – Your email should be able to be read and interpreted in 15-30 seconds. If there is more detail necessary, consider a different form of communication or use optional attachments.

**Rule 2** – Make sure that when the reader opens up your note, he or she can see the signature at the bottom of the FIRST page. The reason is that if the text of a note goes "over the horizon" to more pages to come, it puts the reader off because the person does not know how long this note is going to be.

### **Subject and first sentence set the tone for a note**

Before a person opens your note, the only bits of information are your name and the subject. Make sure the subject is clear and unambiguous. Then, when the person opens up the note, the very first few words will actually set the tone for the entire note. Make sure you start off on the right foot with the reader.

It is best to avoid having the first word be "You." Reason: regardless of the content to follow, the tone of the first word puts the reader on the defensive. This is especially true if you would follow the pronoun with an absolute (eg "You always," or "You never").

Be cheerful but not banal. For example, “Hi George” is a good start, but if it is followed by “I trust this note finds you and your loved ones feeling well” you have lost credibility. Also, while I am on the topic of banal, please do not write at the end of your note, “and remember we will all get through this together.” It was old several months ago.

### **Emails are permanent documents**

Once you hit the send button, you have lost control of the information. It can go to anyone else at any time in the future. When we speak to others, the half life of the information is a few days to a week, but when it is online, the information is available forever. Try to mostly praise people online but coach them verbally.

If you use electronic means to criticize other people, there will likely be significant damage control necessary, as we witness by the tweets of some famous people.

### **Accomplish your objective**

When you communicate online, you have an objective in mind. You want to obtain a positive reaction to your note. When you proofread your note before sending it (which is always a best practice) ask yourself if this content and format is going to get the reaction you wanted.

### **Write when you are yourself**

We have all made the mistake of flashing out to others in email when we are upset. It is sometimes difficult to hold back, but it is always wise to send out notes only when you are in good control of all your faculties.

These are just a few of the points I make in the book. They seem obvious, but in the hub bub of organizational life we sometimes forget these basic ideas. That habit works to our disadvantage.

*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](http://www.leadergrow.com).*

*Robert Whipple is also the author of **The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals, Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind, and Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change**. Bob consults and speaks on these and other leadership topics. He is CEO of Leadergrow Inc., a company dedicated to growing leaders.*

