

Reducing Conflict 78 Didn't You Read My Email?

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When someone says, “Didn’t you read my email?” There can be many reasons for it. Many times it is the fault of the sender. In this article, I will describe the typical reasons why conflict arises from poor email communication.

Poor communication is the #1 complaint in most employee satisfaction surveys. Habitually, communication has been a major source of conflict in organizations. Even though communication tools have morphed into all kinds of wonderful remote technologies, the problem is still there. It is even worse today. Many people tend to rely too much on electronic means to communicate information.

The sad truth is that many people put information in an e-mail and honestly believe they have communicated to others. Let’s examine some of the reasons this opinion is incorrect.

People rarely read long and complex e-mails

Managers who put out long emails believe that the employees read every word and absorb all the points. Hogwash! If it takes more than about 30 seconds to read a note, most people will only skim it for the general topic.

If an email is 3 pages long, I suspect not 1 in 10 people are going to internalize the meaning. In fact, when most people open a note, they quickly scan to the bottom to see how long it is. If the text goes “over the horizon” beyond the first page, they close the note. They will either delete the note without reading it or leave it in the inbox for a more convenient time.

Naturally, a more convenient time does not surface, so the note is allowed to mold in the inbox. Eventually, it is thrown out in some kind of purge when the stench becomes too much to bear.

You must augment email messages with verbal enhancements

The written email should contain simply an outline of the salient points. Reinforce the key points in other forms of communication. Use other remote or face-to-face methods. This would also include the opportunity for personal involvement or at least dialog, so people can ponder the meaning and impact. Questions for clarification will enhance understanding.

Give people the opportunity to absorb your meaning fully.

Formatting is really important if you want people to read your email

E-mail notes should be as short and easy to digest as possible. Aim to have the message internalized at a glance and with only 15-30 seconds of attention. Contrast the two notes below to see which one you would understand.

Example of a poorly formatted and wordy email:

“I wanted to inform you all that the financial trend for this quarter is not looking good. In order to meet our goals, I believe we must enhance our sales push, especially in the South East Region and in the West. Those two regions are lagging behind at the moment, but I am sure we can catch up before the end of the quarter. Let’s increase the advertising in the local paper so that we get more buzz about the new product. The increased exposure will help now and also in the next quarter. Advertising has a way of building up sales equity. Also, I am canceling our monthly meeting at headquarters. This decision will keep the sales force in the field as much as possible. You can give your full attention to making customer calls. I am available to travel to the regions next week if you would like to have me meet face to face with your customers. I look forward to celebrating a great success when we have our Fall Sales Meeting. Thank you very much for your extra effort at this critical time for our company... Jake Alsop”

An improved format that people will read

“Let’s look forward to celebrating success at the Fall Sales Meeting. We are currently behind the pace (particularly in the South East and Western regions). I am asking for the following:

- Increase newspaper advertising to improve exposure
- Stay in the field this month; we will skip the monthly meeting
- Request my help with customer presentations if you want it

Thanks...Jake”

People will be more likely to read and understand the second note. When the sales force opens up the first note, they would see an unformatted block of text that is a burden to wade through. There are no paragraph breaks to give the eyes a rest between concepts. It contains several instructions amid redundant platitudes and drivel.

People can internalize the second note in a glance. It would be far more likely to produce results. Note the use of bullets eliminates wordy construction.

Summary

Use the “Golden Rule” for writing e-mails: “Write notes that you would enjoy receiving.” Utilize many different forms of communication rather than relying on just email.

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