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(IN)EFFECTIVE (MIS)COMMUNICATION

"When you have a difficult message to communicate, choose your communication medium carefully..."



BY TIM EMPRINGHAM

The age of electronic communication has brought with it some incredible advances. Email, text messaging, BBM, instant messaging, Tweets, Likes, and +1's are firmly embedded as mechanisms we use to communicate with each other both one-on-one and socially to an audience. With each of these advances though we see a progression toward disintermediation of the message and the communication as the "bits" of information we communicate become shorter and shorter.

We all have a tendency to read personal or social written communication with an "internal voice" overlaid on the message. Because we can't actually hear the person we are "talking" to, we apply our own interpretation of tone and inflection to the message to personalize it. The problem is that most often that "internal voice" carries with it the inflection of how we are currently feeling which can give the message a more negative (or positive) meaning than it was intended to have.

Consider the following. Read each message below emphasizing the word in bold when you do:

- I am very disappointed in this outcome.
- I am **very** disappointed in this outcome.
- I am very **disappointed** in this outcome.
- I am very disappointed in **this** outcome.
- I am very disappointed in this **outcome**.

Which of those meanings and perceived intentions was the "correct" one? Your guess is as good as mine.

The problem compounds itself when we assume we understand the intention and quickly hit the Reply button (or worse—Reply All). We blast out our own reaction to the message as we perceived it which in turn can be equally misunderstood. Too often a spiral of ineffective communication, hard feelings, and wasted time ensues.

So what should we do when we feel the hair on the back of our neck rising when we read a message like this?

1. Stop, breathe, and re-read the message.

Take a deep breath, be conscious of your own emotional state, and re-read the message. Be objective and don't "read between the lines." That which is unwritten is in your own head; don't attribute those words or feelings to the author.

2. Pick up the phone or get up and walk over to the author to talk in person.

Get up and go to see the author or get them on the phone to talk so you can hear their voice (and they can hear yours). Even if the message is the same as you perceived it, you'll be amazed at how much less upset it makes you when you hear the message and are able to have a one-on-one conversation about it.

When you have a difficult message to communicate, choose your communication medium carefully and whenever possible revert back to that ancient medium we call "face-to-face." You might save a couple minutes by crafting a quick email, but the time you'll spend cleaning it up later far outweighs any investment upfront to deliver the message directly and in person. **TL**

Tim Empringham is the Principal at Key Consulting who provide innovation consulting and leadership coaching throughout the GTA. www.keyconsulting.ca

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