

Communication

Bulletin TM for Managers & Supervisors

A fast-read source of information to help managers communicate better within and between departments, twice a month.

May 1, 2020



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Digital communication do's and don'ts in today's 'at-home' reality

9 guidelines for these unprecedented times

Nearly everyone is navigating a new kind of work these days.

Some remotely. Some with social distancing. Some alone. It all calls for more digital communication – Zoom meetings, Slack projects, mounds of email, text decisions.

While there were always some guidelines for digital communication at work, you'll want to tighten those due to the sheer volume now.

Here's help – best practices from experts at Harvard Business School:

Understand emotions

Emotions are difficult to relay and detect in digital messages. An intended tone – sarcasm, anger, relief, excitement – is seldom recognized

by others. Digital communication often relays and elicits too much or too little emotion.

Three fixes (the third might surprise you):

- **Spell it out.** If you're excited, angry, worried, etc., say so.
- **Do an emotional proofread.** Seemingly innocuous messages have unintended tones. A "Let's talk" in Slack is passive aggressive even when you mean, "I like the idea. Let's pound it out later today." You don't have to get into too much detail, but you want to avoid vagueness that can be read wrong.
- **Use emojis.** They're not taboo in business communication anymore. For instance,

Please see *Digital ...* on Page 2.

Sharpen Your Judgment

Did age bias lead to firing? It's up to the courts

"You asked the question, so I'll answer," Manager Carol said. "If you want to keep your job here, try to act more like Fred Gomez."

"Fred?" Marvin said. "He just got hired, and I practically have to show him how to do everything around here. What's he got that I don't have?"

"It's hard to explain," Carol said. "But Fred's a go-getter. He's enthusiastic, and he's ..."

"And he's young, right?" Marvin interrupted. "And I'm 58 years old."

"If you want to put things that way – that Fred has a more youthful approach to the job – I won't disagree," Carol confirmed.

"So you admit it's about age?" Marvin said.

"I didn't say that," Carol replied. "You did. I said it was more about his youthful approach to the job and his openness to new ideas."

A few weeks later ...

After another meeting, Marvin stormed out of Carol's office, shouting, "You think you can just fire me and give Fred my job? We'll see about that."

Marvin sued for age discrimination, based on Carol's comments and her replacing Marvin with a younger employee. The company asked a judge to dismiss the case because Marvin was fired for poor performance and only coincidentally replaced by a younger employee.

Did the company win?

This regular feature sharpens your thinking and helps keep both you and your firm out of trouble. It describes a real legal conflict and lets you judge the outcome.

Make your decision, then please turn to Page 4 for the court's ruling.

The Purpose of Communication Bulletin for Managers & Supervisors

Communication Bulletin for Managers & Supervisors provides relevant and actionable business ideas to help managers and supervisors improve communication and increase effectiveness.

The Bulletin helps improve communication within and between departments, a major goal for most businesses seeking better performance.

All in a fast-read format, twice a month.

Digital ...

(continued from Page 1)

🙄 sets an “I’m just kidding” tone because it’s so commonly used.

Keep it clean

Even though we’ve laxed our attitude on emojis, digital communication is still professional communication. Anything littered with typos and overdone with text-style language isn’t professional. In fact, they suggest an angry tone – like you pounded them out in a fit.

Still take a few seconds to double-check for typos (especially because autocorrect can turn good messages bad).

Limit the letters

People tend to misinterpret written, digital communication when it’s used early in relationships. If people only text, email or Slack, they don’t have a full understanding of how funny, serious or sarcastic the other person is.

That’s why it’s important to use richer communication early in distance working relationships such as video conferencing (more on that below).

Defer to video

As much as possible, defer to video conferencing platforms when you need

to work with a colleague or in a group.

Everyone can see the emotional cues that come from facial expressions and body language – and respond appropriately.

Video also ensures everyone feels included, and they’re less likely to miss important information.

Set up effective virtual meetings

As a leader, you’ll likely host most virtual group meetings. Keep these tips in mind – and pass them along to your employees and colleagues who will join:

- **Mute yourself when you aren’t speaking** (especially for the host who will do most of the speaking). It cuts down on background noise caused by our tendency to give verbal cues when we’re listening such as, “yes” and “uh-ha.”
- **Get the right position.** Avoid sitting in front of a window. Use a corner or blank wall behind you. Set your device’s webcam at eye level.
- **Pick your content and pace carefully.** People multitask more and lose interest quicker in video conferences. Make sure you cover the top priorities immediately when you get on screen and go through topics thoroughly but efficiently.

Source: Harvard Business Review, tinyurl.com/newcommunication475

TECH CORNER

Training can be done remotely using Zoom

Many companies are using the Zoom app to hold meetings during the COVID-19 outbreak.

But what if you want to show a PowerPoint presentation or other materials during the meeting?

No projector at home? No problem.

How to dig deeper into the app

You can let meeting attendees see what’s on your screen by following these four steps:

Step 1: Select “Share Screen” from the Zoom Settings menu.

Step 2: Enable “Enter Full Screen When a Participant Shares a Screen.”

Step 3: If you want to still show the speaker along with the shared screen, enable “Side-by-Side Mode.”

Step 4: Select the “Silence System Notifications When Sharing Desktop” so participants don’t hear your alerts.

Good news if you haven’t given it a try: Zoom is offering new users a free 30-day trial.

To subscribe, the cost is \$49 per month (per meeting room).

Source: zoom.us/meetings and blog.zoom.us/wordpress/2019/10/31/10-zoom-tips-tricks/

COMMUNICATION BRIEFS

■ 4 steps to nail critical goals more often

Having goals is the first step to professional success. Having too many goals is the first step to failure.

To help you and employees prioritize goals and strategically achieve them, Dorie Clark, a marketing strategist, gives these four steps:

1. Align goals with the strategy.

Leaders want to look at the company’s multiyear strategy and work backward to identify your short- and long-term goals. Employees want to ask their boss directly, “What is the most important goal I can work on this year?”

2. Create a goal time line. List the things you need to do to achieve the goal. Then place them on a time line so you’re working at an optimal sequence.

3. Identify a keystone goal – the one that, when accomplished, makes everything else easier to achieve. Focus on it initially.

4. Schedule exact times to work on the goal. Avoid distractions and excuses to put off the goal-oriented work.

Source: HBR, tinyurl.com/goals475

■ Here’s how to get more Q in your Q&A

When leaders do Q&A after sharing information, people clam up, and you miss out on sharing more details or creating new ideas. To improve Q&A sessions, Stephanie Scotti, a communication strategist, suggests:

- Maintain eye contact. Losing that contact with the audience suggests a lack of interest.
- Embrace silence. If they don’t speak up immediately, give them some quiet moments to process the information and formulate questions.
- Kick start conversation by bringing up a question you’ve heard before.
- Plant a question. Ask a colleague ahead of time to prepare a question.
- Invite comments, too. They often lead to better exchanges.
- Take a poll. Ask for a show of hands to express an opinion.

Source: tinyurl.com/qtqzktq

Real Problems, Real Solutions

Our subscribers come from a broad range of organizations, large and small. In this regular networking feature, three of them share their successes in improving workplace communication.

1 Employees were our best listeners

Our employees didn't seem to be paying attention to company info.

Since most of them don't use computers, we relied on supervisors to pass on messages.

But some of them didn't take it seriously.

We needed to use another channel as well.

Peer-to-peer plan gets results

We realized employees are most likely to listen to each other.

To capitalize on that fact, we developed a Communication

Ambassador program.

We asked supervisors to nominate a few "ambassadors" to attend a weekly meeting to get information disseminated to everyone.

It's been very effective. The ambassadors take the job seriously, and their peers listen.

As a bonus, the ambassadors also give us useful feedback.

And we know it's coming right from our frontline people.

(Esther Angell, Marketing Manager, FAST, Houston)

2 'Spirit Week' keeps us seriously fun

In business, process often ends up trumping people. We try so hard to succeed that we can lose sight of who does the work and why we do it.

One of the mantras we adopted has helped us focus – or refocus – on what's most important: *Take the work seriously but never ourselves.*

With that, our employees put something together to help us through the busiest time of the year, when we most often get serious.

It's employee driven

They organized a Spirit Week so we can find moments of levity, joy and frivolity even when we're busy.

Employees send uplifting notes to each other, wear pajamas to work and other quirky things.

Themes and ideas change by day and year. Employees lead the charge on how they'll recognize and appreciate co-workers and outstanding work – all the while, not taking ourselves too seriously.

(Amanda Lannert, CEO, Jellyvision, Chicago, shared this success on Forbes.com)

3 See a problem? Say a problem

We start every safety meeting with, "If you see a problem, say a problem."

This reminds our employees we care about their safety, and they need to tell their supervisor about what they could use to make their job more safe.

If they don't say something, we can't do anything about it.

Prioritizes everyone's health

This is also true for anyone injured on the job. Their duty is to report it to their supervisor immediately – not at the end of the day.

I'm pro-workers' comp. I appreciate it when one of our employees, who thinks he might be hurt at work, speaks up right away because that helps me protect his workers' comp rights. Immediate reporting means the workers' comp process can begin.

If more people speak up about a problem when they see one, it can help us prevent small problems from becoming big trouble.

(Ty Stone, Safety Manager, SRM Concrete, Guyton, GA)



YOUR LEGAL COACH

■ Former employee has lots to say: Can we prevent it?

Question: A former employee takes every opportunity she can to post negative comments about our company on social media. How can we prevent this from happening going forward?

Answer: You can't do much to prevent former employees from posting – or just speaking – negative comments, says employment law attorney Tracey Diamond with Pepper Hamilton LLP.

But you can do some things with existing employees, Diamond says.

If you offer a severance package to departing employees, you might consider adding a non-disparagement clause prohibiting them from making negative comments that hurt the company's reputation.

You can also try paying severance over a time period, rather than in a lump sum, so they're more inclined to stick to the clause.

Source: tinyurl.com/review475

LIGHTER SIDE

■ When there are no sports to talk about ...

Baseball may be America's favorite pastime, but *talking about baseball* is a favorite pastime at work.

With COVID-19 and a sports stoppage, there's no ball to talk about. Instead, here are quotes from players:

- Why does everybody sing "Take me Out to the Ball Game" when they're already there? – *Larry Anderson*
- You want proof baseball players are smarter than football players? How often do you see a baseball team penalized for too many men on the field? – *Jim Bouton*
- Baseball statistics are like a girl in a bikini – they show a lot, but not everything. – *Toby Harrah*
- Little League is a very good thing because it keeps parents off the streets. – *Yogi Berra*

COMMUNICATION NEWS

Got problems: Turn to happy people for help

Happy people may be the fix for more of your department or company problems.

Turns out, happy people are good at dealing with problems *effectively* and remaining calm, pleasant and productive, according to research in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*.

3 common practices

Here are three common things happy people do when they hit issues:

Focus on the future. They analyze the situation but don't stay focused on what has gone wrong for long. Instead, they look forward to what can be fixed and how the

future will look better than the past.

Find options. Happy people look for what they can control when there's a problem. They don't dwell on what they can't do. They rally toward what they can do to influence the situation. It moves them quickly to make a plan to solve the problem.

Know when to fold. Happy people have grit. They work hard to solve problems. But they also know when to walk away from what can't be fixed. They weigh the time and resources they've spent on fixing a problem and the potential outcome, and they let it be when they've wasted too much on a lost cause.

Source: tinyurl.com/happypeople475

Stress is rising! 4 ways to help staffers overcome it

When you – or your staffers – become overloaded or stressed at work, it often leads to a cycle of negative thinking.

And that only makes things worse.

In the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak, keeping tabs on folks' stress level is paramount. Here are four tips to break out of the "I'm so stressed!" rut:

Small-sized bites in difficult times

- **Put it in perspective:** Say a good employee made a mistake. Help her put it in

perspective. Share a story of a similar situation, and how it was resolved.

- **Keep goals realistic:** If an employee thinks he can't reach a goal, he may feel defeated before he starts. High – but achievable – standards work best.
- **Focus on what you can control:** Give employees clear, controllable tasks they can focus on.
- **Share info:** Another source of worry is the unknown. If employees are worried about layoffs or the company's future, keep them informed to help stave off their fears.

Sharpen Your Judgment – The Decision

(continued from Page 1)

No, the company lost when a judge refused to dismiss the case.

The company underscored the point that Carol's comment was a single, stray, vague remark that was prompted by the employee.

As such, the company argued, that couldn't be the basis for a charge of age discrimination. But the judge came down in favor of the employee's counter argument that the remark:

- wasn't vague – it applied directly to the difference in age, and
- was made preceding a suspicious action – the firing of the employee followed by his replacement by a younger employee.

When you combine all that, the judge said, the situation smells fishy – and a lot like age bias.

Remarks pointed to bias in firing

An offhand remark – sometimes made in an attempt to help an employee improve – usually isn't enough to get you in hot water. But when the remark can somehow be tied to a disciplinary action, you have what lawyers call "nexus," a connection between the remark and the action.

The lesson: Try to keep your criticism based on measurable performance factors.

(Based on *Barnes v. Foot Locker*. Dramatized for effect.)

Quotes

Life is short really means 'Do something.'

– Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Whoever said revenge is sweet never tasted the yumminess of forget-about-it.

– Karen Salmansohn

It always seems impossible until it's done.

– Nelson Mandela

Your mind is for having ideas, not holding them.

– David Allan

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