**ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION AND STATUS TIPS/BEST PRACTICES:**

**THE SENDER**



We all struggle with miscommunication or communication breakdowns at some point. As we all embrace the “new normal” of remote work, virtual meetings, instant messaging, and heavy reliance on email communication, it becomes more important than ever that our communications be clear and concise. This is the first in a series of articles intended to provide some useful tips, best practices, and reminders to help make our communications more successful.

Below are some tips for the **sender** of an electronic communication.

Sender’s Responsibilities

* The sender of a message is responsible for making it as easy as possible for the receiver to understand the intended meaning.
* The receiver may lack the knowledge to understand the message (e.g. unfamiliar acronyms, etc.) so it is the sender’s responsibility to accommodate the receiver (e.g. define acronyms).
* Grammar and punctuation are important: Sender errors can lead to the receivers’ confusion and frustration, which gets in the way of understanding the intended meaning.
* If the sender fails to anticipate the needs of the receiver and misses the target of “writing the right thing in the right way,” the sender bears the responsibility for the miscommunication.
* If the sender has any doubt that the receiver understands their message, it is the sender’s responsibility to check in with the receiver.

Communication Mode Matters

* ***Strongly*** consider whether it is a “conversation” better handled on the phone vs. email/IM.
* If an email is appropriate, consider using a follow-up flag to “ping” the receiver of a due date.
* If an email is appropriate, consider the correct audience/distribution based on the content.
* If a phone conversation would be best, schedule time so the receiver can be available and engaged.
* If unsure of the best approach and/or there is a need or desire to have record of the conversation, have a phone conversation followed up by an email to the receiver summarizing the conversation, including any agreed on commitments, and asking if there are any misrepresentations, inaccuracies, or clarifications to ensure everyone is on the same page.

Think

* SLOW DOWN! Re-read your email before sending it to ensure it is how you want to present information.
* Think about the communication from the perspective of the receiver – that is your audience.
* Is there a salutation if that is the preferred style of the receiver? (If you are not familiar with the receiver’s style, you can’t really go wrong with a brief, polite salutation)
* Did you include sufficient relevant background for the Receiver to have context, such as an Executive Summary or Bottom Line Up Front?
* If you know the receiver’s style is direct – were you direct and to the point – could you be more concise?
* Are there any pieces of information or requests that could be misinterpreted?
* Are there any phrases or words that the receiver could interpret as dismissive, flippant, condescending, disrespectful, unkind, or not empathetic to the receiver’s situation, etc.? ***Remember it is the perception of the receiver – put yourself in their shoes.***
* Have you included relevant information about required deadlines, deliverable expectations and any expected follow-up?
* Were you clear that it was a request for action and by whom?
* Were you considerate about the receiver’s schedule and availability when articulating deadlines, deliverable dates and expected follow-up?

In conclusion, a simple way to increase chances of success is to ***be kind, thoughtful, responsive, and respectful at all times.***

**THE RECEIVER**



A times have changed and we are much more reliant on electronic communication in both personal and work environments. Now more than ever, it is critical that our communications be clear and concise in content and tone. This is the second in a series of articles intended to provide some useful tips, best practices and reminders to help make our communications more successful.

Below are some tips for the **receiver**of an electronic communication.

Responsibilities

The responsibility of the receiver of a message is to be able to “*actively read”*not only the message itself, but also to understand the nuances of that message in context and to be cognizant of any bias you have that may be influencing your understanding of the message.

Think

*Messages that Cause You Concern*

* SLOW DOWN! Read the message carefully. Avoid having a knee-jerk reaction.
* If the email or IM caused you concern, re-read it and consider the motivation of the sender.
* Are you possibly misinterpreting intent?
* Is it a sensitive subject or tense relationship that is influencing your reaction?
* Read the message again after some time passes.
* If the communication still causes concern, if possible, schedule time to call the sender to discuss it rather than sending an email or IM response.
* Schedule time as soon as possible so things do not fester or take on a life of their own.
* If you are responding via email, is the response balanced, appropriate in tone and content?
* You do not have to “respond in kind” if you feel the tone of the original email was abrupt or inappropriate.
* Prepare a response, save it as a draft, and re-read the draft later to consider if you still want to send it as written – will it be constructive or inflammatory? Is it responsive or defensive?

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* Is the distribution list/audience appropriate for the response? Should it be directed to just the original sender, reply to all, some subset, etc.?
* Remember, if there is disagreement, there is no need to air dirty laundry for a larger audience.

*General Messages*

* SLOW DOWN! Re-read before responding to emails to ensure you are responding to the request and the response is presented in a positive way.
* Respond to emails with, at a minimum, acknowledgement of receipt within one business day.
* If you will not be able to take action or respond to the request due to competing demands, lack of bandwidth, PTO, etc., let the sender know when you will be able to address the communication.
* Have you included relevant information around your ability to meet required deadlines, deliverable expectations and any expected follow-up?
* Were you thoughtful about the requester’s timelines, schedule, and availability when articulating your ability or inability to meet deadlines, deliverable dates, and expected follow-up?
* If you will not be able to meet the articulated deadlines, deliverable expectations, or follow-up, advise the sender of when you WILL be able to respond so they can reset expectations, re-assign, or seek alternative resources.



* Is there anything that could be misinterpreted or taken the wrong way or out of context in your response?
* Are there any phrases or words that could be interpreted as dismissive, flippant, condescending, disrespectful, unkind, not empathetic to the situation or request, etc.?
* Consider the preferences of the sender in your response.
* Is there a salutation in your response if that is the preferred style? (If you are not familiar with their style, you can’t really go wrong with a brief, polite salutation.)
* Did you include sufficient relevant background in your response to have appropriate context such as including an Executive Summary?
* Were you direct and to the point – could you be more concise?

A simple way to increase chances of success is to ***be kind, thoughtful, responsive, and respectful at all times.***

**ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION TIPS FOR INSTANT MESSAGING, STATUS MESSAGING AND OTHER BEST PRACTICES**



**Instant Messaging Best Practices**As a courtesy, when reaching out to folks via IM, check to see if the person is denoted via Skype as “busy.” If so, consider using the “Tag for Status Change Alerts” to wait for the receiver to show as available. After all, the receiver could be sharing their screen in a meeting, could be a critical contributor in a meeting, etc. Multitasking is not always possible or appropriate.

As the receiver of an IM, you have the option to select to “Ignore” an IM and reach back out to the sender when you are available.

Rather than just leaping into an IM conversation, a good practice of initiating an IM is to start with “IM?” If the person is available or in a situation where they can multitask, this allows them to engage in the chat. If not, they can let you know they are not currently available for a chat. Using this practice also prevents a question or comment from unintentionally appearing on someone’s screen if they are presenting. Worst-case outcome is other people would see “IM?” and no other potentially sensitive information would be displayed.

**Status Best Practices – Setting Expectations**Using the “Do Not Disturb” Skype feature is a great tool when presenting or working a high priority effort. If you use this option, be sure to change your status back to “Available” as soon as possible so you do not remain on “DND” for an unnecessarily long time.

Putting an Out of Office Message on Outlook and Skype when you are out of the office lets people know your status and availability. Be sure to include a delegate or other resource for urgent issues. An Out of Office Message on Outlook and Skype helps to alert others of limited availability or possible delayed response times. It is okay to state in your message, for example, that you are “working on a priority project and responses may be delayed.” However, you should provide emergency contact information (how to reach you or someone covering for you) if you plan to be “off the grid” or otherwise non-responsive.

**Other Best Practices**If something is critical/urgent, and the person you are attempting to contact is not available via IM or other methods for an extended time, try texting their work cell phone number with an indication that it is an urgent issue and you need to speak as soon as possible.

If time permits, pick up the phone and call someone who you do not regularly interact with outside of email or IM. It may move an issue to resolution much more quickly. And, an actual voice is nice to hear sometimes and it can really brighten someone’s day!