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The 12 Commandments Of Effective Communication

In an era of increasing speed in communications and processes, of ever increasing integration of technology into our lives, not to mention, an era of increasingly global projects, clear communication of intent and goals has become more challenging. Remember that childhood game where you whispered something into your friend's ear and that sentence was passed from person to person? What started as "Jonathan, would you like a diet Pepsi?" can end up as "Harmony, it likes fleas" . The end result was different and quite funny. And it was due to many factors - anxious or impatient assumptions, erroneous corrections, or deliberate alterations for confusion and humor sake. There weren't any consequences then, but a lesson is clear - messages can be twisted and misunderstandings can happen, so we want to build up trust and otherwise try to avoid miscommunications. Say the wrong thing, or in the wrong way and you can get a smoldering bridge, or worse; miss a typo or write a complex message to an international colleague and "we've got to put out fires" could be construed as firing everyone…and you end up needing a new team, and even more stress relief.

Human signaling and facial expressions developed far before language, and buried in our ancient instincts part of the brain, we still respond to approach, as well as substance, so all communication involves building some level of trust and conveying the core message.

So, given all of that, here are 12 core commandments of effective communication -- there are many more that could be added, but these aim at the underlying principles, and interject a couple tools. Good luck communicating!!

1. Keep your voice, or personality, consistent across all communication channels and all communications; yes, more informal in social media but your core values and style are the same, whether you're at a party or a meeting, right?

2. When in doubt, check it out. Always have someone read over your important messages, before you send them out, to make sure they're clear and professional.

3. Identify all your stakeholders and their preferred method and style of communication.
   - Personally, you might have family, friends, faith community, youth sports activities, etc;
   - Professionally, you'll have employees, investors, suppliers and buyers, strategic partners, or within a company, teams your department works with closely (have you heard of the RACI matrix?) .[1]
   - You have in-person meetings or conference calls, one-on-one scheduled and informal "water-cooler conversations" , and a wide array of written channels of varying levels of formality.
   - In the pandemic era, with communication going virtual, it's a good idea to go over zoom/GoToMeeting/Citrix, etc etiquette – how to un/mute, where the chat box is, how to share screen, share the air-time, etc.

4. Level of detail and appropriate style depends on the communication channel
   - twitter at 140 characters is obviously brief and only the essence or headline;
   - e-mails should be one topic (aim for max 5 sentences) if you want it read; and clearly invite action;
   - policy, contract or essay should have all the details, but attach a short executive summary.
   - Write in the style of your communication channel - newsletter, e-mail, twitter, website, policy updates have a style - check your official style manuals (or Strunk &White, or Chicago Manual), not to mention a few, in-house samples. If something is unfamiliar, "observe then act " is your mantra.

[1] Ask us for copies of "Trends and Why Communication and Critical Thinking are More Important Than Ever"

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5. Similarly, know your audience and *write your stories in their words*, highlighting *their* interests. An investor will be interested in one or two anecdotes, but more of your process, expectations and financials; a friend community on Facebook will be interested in a chatty product or activity update and a series of anecdotes - don't mix 'em up or you'll have some disengaged investors & friends.

6. If managing a project or team, keep the updates frequent, simple and action focused, looking to praise people publicly, and correct people privately.

7. We innately trust people more, and communicate with them more thoughtfully, when we can see their face and hear their voice; AND with mutual trust, comes more clarity (and resilience) in communication. So, if you are managing a remote team, make sure to schedule periodic (twice-monthly?) conference calls with all online, and, if possible a yearly (or more frequent) visit.

8. People remember negative things in a much stronger way than positive things, so communicate all your negative things together, and separate out the positive things (so they get their due notice, celebration and energizing effect).

9. People listen and think better when they feel respected and confident, so manage the time lines, have clear deadlines, be quick when you need to be, but not harried - you'll stress everyone else out. Take deep breaths when needed, e.g. before rushing into a meeting, and do what you need to do to keep a clear head (regular exercise, nutrition, sleep, socializing, meditation, laughing, ideating, etc).

10. Try to start your e-mail messages with a brief something positive, e.g. "Hope all is well." There's no tone or body language in e-mail - make sure your message is easy to read, and it'll be "heard".

11. If a change is coming, tell people about it for god's sake. Do your homework, figure out their IFEI ™ ("iffy" - their incentives, fears, excitements, ideas). Make the change appear manageable, with a couple details on how you plan to minimize the difficulty to them. Remember, you're a guide, not a dictator; and they may or not get a bit lost on the way, but will get there in the end. Ask them for ideas on how to better design or manage the process or product, and otherwise work together to make the inevitable transition as smooth as possible (see 7).

12. If things get tense or complicated, talk it out, don't write long explanatory e-mails (they'll confuse or just be ignored), or messages with 14 people cc'd. Walk over to the office, or pick up the phone and talk through to clarify. e.g. "Hey Brad, just got your e-mail; I think we might have had a miscommunication. I think you indicated you need the deal approval by next Friday. Policy states a 25 day turn-around, but given this is a new client, I can rush our analysis, etc for you. If you can get me the projected sales for the plasma-constructor, the list of their major clients, and fill out the forms Legal requires, by end of the day, I'll do my analysis and do all I can to get the approval for you by Friday." Or a "Hey Brad – I understand this is a new client. Our normal process is xyz, and these are *my* have-to-dos, let's figure out where we can push or re-prioritize, and how to manage this quickly."

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