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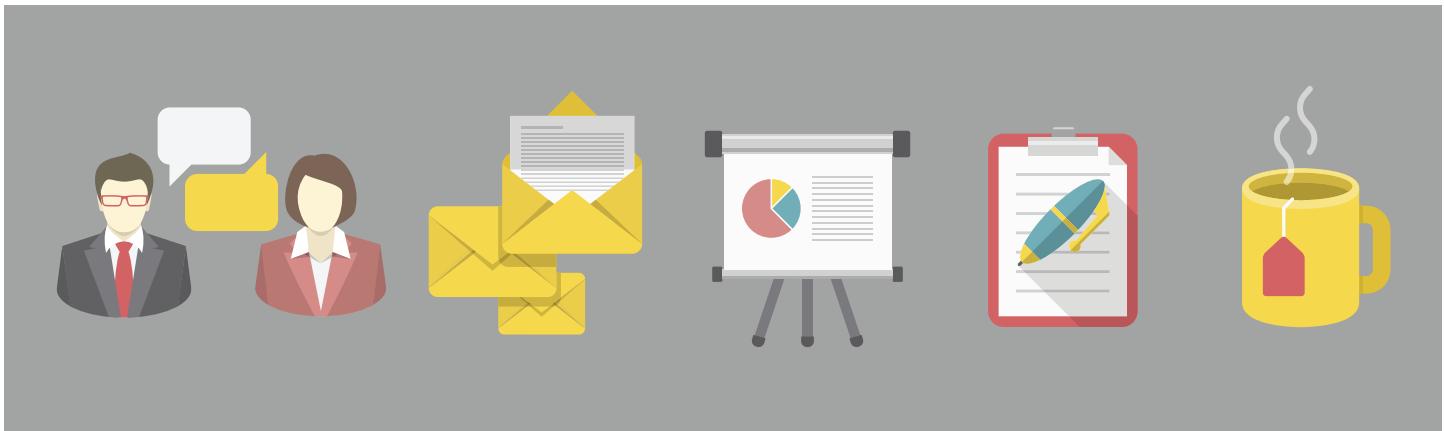
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Preparing for  
the Future of  
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"Someone's sitting in the shade  
today because someone planted  
a tree a long time ago."

-WARREN BUFFETT



# Say What? How to Make Sure Your Message is Really Understood

BY NATALIE ROONEY

*Communicating with others is hard enough without taking into consideration all the ways we have to communicate these days. Face-to-face, letter, voicemail, e-mail, texting, IM – you've got lots of choices. But what's the best method to make sure you're really heard and understood? It depends on the message.*

Once upon a time, when you had a question for or problem with someone at work, you walked to the person's office/cube and discussed it – together, face to face. Or if you were in a different location, you would pick up the phone and call to discuss it.

How often does that happen these days? Very, very rarely according to a study of 508 workers at the manager level (64 percent), director level (19 percent), and vice president level or higher (17 percent). A whopping 95 percent of those surveyed say they plan to use business communication tools instead of in-person meetings, including email (48 percent), mobile (20 percent), desk phones (ten percent), text messaging (eight percent), and web meetings (eight percent).

This shift to less face-to-face communication comes for a variety of reasons. In an international world of business, the people you're trying to communicate with may not

be in the same building – or even on the same continent. There's another reason, of course, and it's right at your fingertips for most of your waking moments: your mobile device. While mobile phones are handy, the convenience of communicating with a quick text or email may be the very thing that causes more mixed messages than ever.

Tara Powers, chief engagement builder at Power Resource Center, says digital communication can be tricky, and depending on what your message is, you may want to steer clear of it, especially with client communication.

"I always try to set client and employee expectations about their preferred method of communication," Powers explains. "It's an important conversation to have. If you don't understand someone's preference, you're not setting up the relationship for success. And if you're in a leadership position, you need to be clear about how the team should communicate. While texting may be the norm, a lot can get misinterpreted in a text."

Human beings communicate with words, tone of voice, and body language. According to research, meaning and intention are relayed in the following ways: seven percent through words, 38 percent through

tone, and 55 percent through body language. Powers says when she teaches classes on communication, she will use the same tone to deliver the same message twice, but use really negative body language in one scenario. "People don't hear the words," she says. "They tune into my body language. When you start to rely only on email and texting, you lose ninety-three percent of your ability to ensure that your intention is heard and understood in the correct way." When you're face-to-face and can see you're losing someone, you can redirect – an option not available when you're texting or emailing.

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–Tara Powers

With instant, impersonal communication, it's easy to dash off a text or email

without thinking about the consequences. "We've gotten into bad habits, and technology has allowed us to do it," Powers says. Humans' natural tendency is to avoid conflict, and technology offers the perfect, easy solution: Send a text or email instead of going to see someone face-to-face or calling.

Lorrie Blanchard Tietze, founder and manager of Interface Consulting and facilitator of COCPA's LeadFit program, says she doesn't mind when clients text her about informal matters, but she has seen firsthand how text conversations are used inappropriately and spiral out of control. "People are sitting three cubes from each other and having a fight over instant messaging," she says. "That is inappropriate. Get up, go into the conference room, and have a conversation. It's amazing the things people will put into an email or text that they wouldn't say to someone's face," she adds.

Powers says that choosing the wrong communication method ultimately requires far more time, energy, and emotional effort regrouping and fixing what went wrong. "Now you need an in-person meeting because something blew up via email or text," she says. "If you'd only picked up the phone in the first place, you wouldn't be in this situation because you'd know what someone's body language was saying or if they were frustrated or angry."

Tietze reinforces that when you can't see someone's face or hear the tone of voice, things are frequently misinterpreted and taken more personally. "For example, if someone has a dry sense of humor and makes a joke, but the receiver gets angry because it's not possible to read the communication signals through text or email," the mode of communication wasn't the right choice. She reminds people to think about the conversation that needs to be had. "If there's anything you think might be perceived as contentious or controversial, at least pick up the phone to hear the other person's tone of voice."

Powers advises, "Choose your method based on what you're communicating and how people are going to feel about it."

## TAKING THE TIME TO DO IT RIGHT

Choosing the right communication process is a habit. Powers offers four key elements of communication to determine the best method for each situation.

### 1. Consider Purpose and Intent

Be thoughtful before you communicate. This builds trust.

- Why am I sending this? What do I want the receiver to do with it?
- What is the receiver's style, pace, and knowledge level?
- What content do others need?
- How much information do they need?
- What is the chance of a misunderstanding?
- What is our relationship like?

### 2. Consider Assumptions

Ask yourself as the Sender:

- What do I know and believe about this person?
- What assumptions might the other person make that could impact how my communication is interpreted?
- How can I provide more clarity?

Ask yourself as the Receiver:

- What do I know and believe about this person?
- What assumptions could impact how I filter this communication?
- How can I get more clarity?

### 3. Make Use of Body Language

- Meeting in person and being a clear speaker and a great listener has the chance of being 100 percent effective.
- Speaking by phone only includes the words you choose (seven percent) and the tone and inflection of your voice (35 percent) for a total of 42 percent effectiveness.
- Using email and IM rests solely on your words carrying your message

- effectively, with only a seven percent chance of complete clarity.

### 4. Incorporate a Feedback Loop

Nine times out of ten, we think we know what to do next, causing mistakes and reworking, Powers says. A feedback loop puts everyone on the same page.

- A message gets encoded by the sender.
- It then gets sent through a communication medium.
- The receiver then decodes this information.
- Some type of feedback loop must take place.

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"This is especially important with a conflict. People are not skilled in how to have a confrontation," Tietze says. "And most people, without additional training, will be conflict averse. So, without those skills, the technology gives you another way to avoid the conflict. You can delude yourself that you're not avoiding things because you are communicating, but you're not doing the right thing at the right time."

Tietze adds that the moment you sense a conversation is becoming contentious, go talk to the person. "Don't argue over text, IM, or email. Confrontations first and foremost belong in person or over the telephone if you can't do face-to-face" she says. "There's too much room for misinterpretation with text, IM, or email." If there's just no way around it though, Tietze says to really think about it ahead of time. Add more words. Clarify what you're saying, as well as what you're not saying, so people don't over-interpret your words.

"These concepts aren't rocket science, but we don't do them," Powers says. "Bad habits are so much quicker and easier. But good communication is what builds trust and transforms relationships." ▲