Communication skills for effective management.

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Chapter 9 – Writing Matters: *How To Create The Write Impression*

Introduction

The ability to communicate in writing has been one of the earliest and most significant achievements of human civilisation. Indeed, the Egyptians first used postal systems in 2000 BC. Since the invention of printing in the 15th century, written communication enables us to disseminate ideas and information widely, cheaply, clearly and (with the advent of e-mail) instantaneously. Formal written communication within businesses include audit reports, shareholder statements, marketing and promotional materials, annual reports, technical briefs, white papers and other forms of writing that interface with services and products[1]. In consequence, it absorbs a great deal of any manager's time. One study of 60 front line supervisors at a Midwest US steel manufacturing plant[2] found that 70% of them spent between 8 and 14 hours per week in writing related activities. These involved producing disciplinary action reports, clarifying job procedures, dealing with formal grievances, writing memos, producing instructional documents to subordinates, drafting incident reports and writing external letters or reports to customers. In addition, managers spend significant amount of time responding to the written communications of others. It is scarcely surprising that a survey of business departments in US universities found that departmental leaders regarded written communication as the single most important component in business communication courses for students[3].

Perhaps because it takes so much time, and is viewed as being so important, written communication causes many people a great deal of stress. The survey of frontline

supervisors discussed above disclosed a number of key stress factors in managerial writing (Table 9.1).

[INSERT TABLE 9:1 ABOUT HERE]

It is, therefore, imperative that managers reduce such stress factors, while monitoring and improving the written communications in which they engage. This chapter seeks to facilitate this process by examining the strategic role which written communication plays in dealing with a business's internal and external customers. In particular, we look at how it should be evaluated, to ascertain whether it is doing its main job - enabling a receiver to understand, internalise and act upon the sender's message. Flowing from this, steps are discussed which managers can take to improve the major aspects of their written communication - producing reports, memos, letters and dealing with complaints. We also increasingly live in an era of e-mail communication. Therefore, a special section of this chapter is devoted to the main trends in e-mail use, and how it can support rather than undermine fundamental business goals.

The strategic role of written communication

Written communication activates customer recognition, purchases and loyalty. The reasons for this are clear. In one study, 70% of businesses claimed to look forward to receiving their post[4]. Clearly, there is a pleasure factor in anticipating the plop of a letter hitting the mat. Most people rush to get their mail in the morning. This reflects our profound sense of curiosity about the unknown, to the extent that we are generally

curious about the contents of mail intended for others. The Royal Mail in Britain surveyed two thousand people on this point. One third admitted to reading mail addressed to their partner, relatives or other people, while one in six even claimed to steam such letters open[5].

This sense of curiosity can be used to attract and retain customers. The Henley Centre for Forecasting found that 68% of customers actively wanted information from the companies they dealt with and 60% were more likely to buy from suppliers who kept in touch[6]. This may be an illustration of what has been dubbed 'the availability factor'[7]: information about something which is readily known to us is more likely to inspire action than information which requires considerable effort to access. Maintaining contact ensures that knowledge about products and services is more available to customers than what is on offer from competitors. Thus, sending newsletters, cards, calendars, circular letters and directly addressed letters activates the availability factor, cements customer loyalty and improves profits.

This effect is also achieved since written communication can engage what has been termed the norm of reciprocity (see Chapter 2). Once we feel that a positive attitude has been displayed towards us we are motivated to respond by expressing similar feelings to the other person. We might, for example, feel obliged to return a favour, even to a much greater extent than the one we originally received. Ninety-four per cent of respondents in one major survey agreed that when they received a letter from someone they felt that the sender had put time and thought into its contents[8]. Clearly, this predisposed them to feel favourably towards the sender, and respond in like fashion to what was perceived as a positive act. Thus, simply staying in touch

influences people - and attracts their business. The one exception is what is perceived to be junk mail. Many recipients detest this precisely because its impersonal character conveys the impression that the receiver's individual needs were not considered when it was produced.

Retaining customer loyalty by writing to them is cost efficient. The Office of Consumer Affairs has calculated that it costs six times more to get a new customer than to keep an existing one[9]. Such findings put the costs of sustained communication in a proper perspective. It has also been found that small changes in presentation enable your written communications to stand out from the crowd. For example, the Henley Centre estimates that 80% of people are more likely to open a personally addressed white envelope than a manila one[10]. As an illustration, the owner of a small family company which won an export award, Tanice Slater, reported that when she uses direct mail the envelope is hand written to give it a personal touch. Regular customers receive a birthday card[11].

Such findings suggest that the impact of direct marketing mail can be intensified if you:

- Hand write the envelope.
- Use a white envelope rather than a manila one.
- Use the receiver's name, in your opening line.
- Include as many personal details about the recipient as possible.

Written communication is also a powerful means of rewarding people, publicly disseminating praise and encouraging an atmosphere of celebration inside an organisation's own ranks. It forms a crucial part of communication strategies aimed at building and sustaining positive relationships between managers and their staff. Some of the main options available include[12]

- Newsletters (monthly/ weekly/ quarterly)

- Internal memos (particularly in response to crises, rumours or to instantly spread the news of a great success)

- E-mail postings, to everyone in the organisation

- Postings on corporate intranet sites

- Notice boards (although these tend to become cluttered, and often go 'unnoticed')

- Letters to individual staff members

Tom Peters[13] gives an example of a manager of Marriott's in New Mexico, who made a firm policy of sending out 100 'Thank You' notes a month to members of his staff for jobs well done. However, caution is in order. Many staff have confessed, during communication audits conducted by us, that they automatically deleted e-mail postings from various people (including some senior managers), irrespective of the subject line. The message senders had acquired a reputation for verbal incontinence, one that is not easily shed. Thus, personal notes, or other efforts at promoting written communication, do not in themselves yield results. Personal competence matters, and will be addressed later in this chapter. But a systematic approach to evaluation matters

more, and should form an integral part of a planned and systematic approach to written communications.

Evaluating written communication

What is effective communication? It is useful to explore some of the most pertinent myths we have about written communication, and which prevent us from accurately estimating its impact.

1.   *More communication is better communication.* This assumption often leads to the circulation of multiple photocopies or indiscriminately circulated memos and e-mails, about everything. In reality, these are usually produced to protect the sender rather than inform the receiver. There is some evidence that communication between senior managers may be particularly prone to this fault[14]. In organisations where the dominant urge is to 'cover your back', paper is used to camouflage the lack of real communication. People drown in ink while gasping for facts. The result is information anxiety. One respondent in a communication audit conducted by us, a senior manager, complained bitterly of 'death by memo.' Typically, those working in such organisations are uncertain about what messages to attend to, and deal with this uncertainty by filtering out most communication emanating from senior managers. A blizzard of paper causes snow blindness, ensuring that the business's key aims and objectives continually drift in and out of focus. The result is inertia, internal feuding and missed business opportunities.

2.   *Written communication equals a fulfilled obligation*. The assumption here is that if a message is received, it is read, understood and acted upon. The sender can then always claim: 'But I told you about this, in paragraph 23 of my 14-page memo of last January!' In reality, *repetition* of key points (albeit in as *concise* a manner as possible) is as important as their initial *transmission* in determining impact.

3.   *Informing someone is the same thing as persuading them*. Most of us assume that more people agree with us than actually do, and that our opinions are more correct than is really the case[15]. We also assume that our arguments are more attractive to other people and hence more persuasive than they actually are. An additional difficulty is that people often view the needs of the reader as less important than their own credibility, possible financial rewards and scope for promotion[16]. In short, the writer's own agenda and ego needs over-ride the requirements of the audience. A golden rule is that the information needs of the receiver should be clearly established before messages are transmitted.

In one study, investigators[17] found that roughly half of keyboard and secretarial staff who regularly used erasing fluid did not know the content of the warning label on the bottle. A communication audit conducted by us in a hotel found that none of the receptionist staff knew the organisation's mission statement – although it was posted in large letters beside the reception desk. Thus, even if information is presented it is not necessarily attended to, understood, retained or acted upon. Real communication involves mutual feedback. It is vital to build opportunities for this into our written communications.

4.   *Using one channel of communication is efficient - i.e. it saves money*. The consequence here is that important issues are often only mentioned once, perhaps in a company brochure, newsletter or an internal memorandum. In reality, effective communication requires us to:

- Employ multiple channels for important information.
- Use written channels several times.
- Engage in the systematic, planned repetition of key themes and messages.

In one survey[18], a selection of women undergoing a hysterectomy and who received a booklet providing information about how to cope with anxiety and what to expect in hospital, experienced less post-operative pain and stress than those who did not. They also left hospital more quickly. In short, people can obtain added benefit when they receive written communication, even if the information it offers has already been made available to them by other channels.

5.   *Channel proliferation = increased informativeness.* This is the opposite but equally destructive mistake to that identified above. Particularly with e-mail technology an abundance of communication creates the illusion that real information exchange has occurred, and that messages have been understood, agreed with and acted upon.

Many surveys have shown that employees have a strong preference for face-to-face communication, above all else. The more vital the issue at stake, the more important face-to-face communication from immediate and senior managers becomes[19]. Written

communication should reinforce contact between people, rather than paper over its absence.

Box 9.1 contains a number of evaluation criteria, which you are encouraged to apply to the written communications in which you engage[20].

[INSERT BOX 9.1 ABOUT HERE]

The rules of high impact writing

Effective writing does three main things[21]:

1. *It attracts the recipient's attention*. Ignored messages fail to persuade. Worse, messages submerged in the small print lose any sense of urgency, purpose or conviction.

2. *The arguments in the message must be understood*. This means that key arguments should be simple, repeated, short and to the point. Waffle muffles your voice in cotton wool, and sends your audience into a trance.

3. *The recipient must learn the arguments contained in the message and come to accept them as true*. This means that the argument should promise the reader a benefit. We scan written messages with one question foremost in our minds - what is in this for me? The sender should keep the needs of the reader clearly in view, answer this cardinal question at once and repeat this answer several times.

In general, a 'high impact' style includes stating your main objective in an opening paragraph, using bold type headings, and constructing simple but dynamic sentences. A more traditional bureaucratic style is characterised by abstract language, no personal pronouns and the general lack of an explicit purpose[22].

In the quest to develop a high impact style there is no substitute for quality writing, and vivid presentation. A number of steps will enhance this effort. Here, we look at issues of writing style, and then of presentation.

Writing style

- *Use concrete words rather than abstract words and sentences*[23]. Aim to write the way that you speak. Do not say 'collateral damage was inflicted on his upper personage by an object.' Do say 'a brick hit him on the head.'

- *State presuppositions explicitly rather than refer to them implicitly*. For the most part, people can only understand evidence when they know what it is aiming to prove. The general rule is that you should put your conclusions first, and your evidence second.[24] Thus, lawyers tend to begin summing up by saying what they intend their evidence to mean ('My client is innocent'). Open with your big sell, and then reiterate and refine it throughout.

- *Use antithesis*[25]. This takes the form of 'not this, but this.' An excellent example comes from the oratory of President Kennedy, when he said: 'Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.'

- *Fine the right tone.* If you are trying to fire people up, to energise them, engage their enthusiasm or win their support for change then your prose must be hot as opposed to cool[26]. This means that it should freely employ colloquial expressions that people can relate to and boldly outline lively scenarios that they can visualise. Passion is critical. Except when conveying bald factual information, your prose should aim to woo and wow an audience. We offer an example of a 'cold' written communication in Box 9.2, and what it looks like when livened up. Which version makes most impact on you?

INSERT BOX 9.2 ABOUT HERE

- *New information should be related to what people already know*. This will make it more easily understood. Thus, put new information at the end of a sentence and old information at the beginning[17].

- *Never use a metaphor or other figure of speech that you are used to seeing written down or spoken aloud*[27]. Metaphors should create a visual image for the reader, and so assist them to sharpen their thinking on the topic at hand. Clichés begin as an arresting image ('We need a level playing field'), but lose all colour, subtlety and shade through over-use. Why turn up at a dinner party in some one else's cast-offs, when you can wear a designer outfit of your own? Dress to impress. George Orwell, widely regarded as one of the finest ever prose writers in the English language, added the following recommendations to the above suggestion, and argued that they formed the foundation of effective writing skills:

    1. Never use a long word where a short word will do.

2. If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out.

3. Never use the passive where you can use the active.

4. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word, if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

5. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

- *Avoid vague modifiers*. These are imprecise expressions that leave an audience puzzled about what you expect them to do.[28]. Padding illuminates an argument in the same way that a burnt out candle illuminates a darkened room. Instead, use specific, concrete language. For example, 'bottom line' means *final result*. 'Interface' means *meet*. Box 9.3 contains two examples of writing that contain many vague modifiers, and then how they might appear if translated into a more vigorous style. Be ruthless while pruning your prose, and clear messages will bloom in the imagination of your readers.

[INSERT BOX 9.3 HERE]

- Make your writing *vigorous, direct* and *personal*.

- *Identify your central idea.* Write down the main purpose, theme or thesis that you are trying to convey. Then consider your expectations, what you intend to accomplish, the contents areas that need to be addressed, the order of importance that they should come in, and the amount of detail or information that will be required by the particular audiences that you need to address[29].

- Use the active rather than the passive style of writing[30]. The active is more direct, more forceful, tends to use fewer words and is more likely to conjure up a clear picture of what you are talking about. Consider the following sentence:

'The building was destroyed by the storm.'

Here, the subject in the sentence (building) receives the action, and is hence described as passive. However, this could be amended to read:

'The storm destroyed the building.'

In this case, the subject (storm) does the destroying, and is therefore described as active. The overall impact is more vigorous, and the reader will be more likely to assume that such energy is a normal characteristic of the writer.

- *Build your writing around verbs*, like a theme park constructed around a spectacular central attraction. These are essential for active writing. Verbs 'show action, convey sense, and engage the reader[31].' They are a visual image of something happening. Before you write something, think of what action it will convey, write it down as a verb and build the rest of the sentence around it. Do not say: 'We will do all that we can to achieve our goals.' Do say: 'We will storm heaven and earth and we will be victorious.'

- Consider at all times the importance of *accuracy, brevity and clarity*.

Presentation matters

- *Use headlines.* According to advertising guru, David Olgilvy, five times as many people read headlines as read the body copy. Headlines in quotes increase recall by around 28%[32]. Headlines on memos, notices, e-mails or most other forms of written communication grab attention, without which no real information exchange occurs. As Sam Goldwyn reputedly once remarked: 'A good movie should start with an earthquake, and then work up to a climax.' Get the promise, claim you are making, or the main point of the issue to hand into your headline, reaffirm it in the opening paragraph and repeat it at intervals throughout.

- *Insert frequent crossheads*: that is, short headings to break up your text, and summarise the key issue of the next section. An army engaged in a long march needs regular stopovers for rest and refreshment. Crossheads create curiosity, but should also convey the gist of what is to follow in order to prepare the reader for your message to come. They improve both comprehension and recall[33].

- *Insert illustrations.* Pictures and cartoons convey a human dimension to your message and attract attention, particularly if you are conveying information about particular individuals[34]. People love stories, however brief, about other people. As discussed in Chapter 2, case studies are more effective than statistics in persuading an audience of your case.

- *Use bullets, asterisks and marginal marks*[35]. This is particularly important when you are listing a number of disparate points on a range of issues, as we are doing here.

- *Indent the first line of a paragraph*. This increases speed of reading[36].

- *Consider carefully the size of type that you use.* Type should be at least 10 point in size - this type is 14 point, while this is much smaller at 9 point, and 12 point looks immediately much better[37].

- *Printing in italics also reduces the speed of comprehension*, although it is effective for short passages of emphasis[38].

- NEVER WRITE AT LENGTH IN CAPITAL LETTERS, *or prolong your use of italics, PARTICULARLY IN CAPITALS* - IT IS MUCH HARDER TO READ, ESPECIALLY IN A LONG MESSAGE. THAT IS WHY NEWSPAPERS ARE NEVER PRODUCED IN THIS STYLE![39]

- *Use the HATS acronym* to check the style of your document when finished[40]. This means looking at

  HEADINGS – Do you have enough of them? Do they reflect your subject matter?

  ACCESS – Is important information easy to locate? Does the method of presentation enhance the clarity of the message?

  TYPOGRAPHY – Do you use the appropriate typefaces and sizes, styles, and alignment options for both headings and body text?

  SPACE – Do you use sufficient white space, to avoid an impression of denseness and clutter?

- *Avoid errors in typing, spellings, in numbers and dates, and misplaced apostrophes*. Presentational blunders suggest the presence of a sloppy thinker. Readers will reason that your careless attitude towards small issues betokens a careless attitude towards bigger issues: first impressions do count.

In Praise Of Plain English

The 'Plain English Campaign' has made a major contribution to the campaign for clear writing. It has identified many examples of bureaucratic or otherwise mystifying jargon in company and Government documents, and urged the use of plainer English as a means of conveying meaning rather than confusion. For example, European Union documents at one point redesignated a 'cow' as 'a grain-consuming animal unit'. Another described a plane crash as an 'involuntary conversion'. A British local authority replaced the evocative term 'bottlenecks' with 'localised capacity deficiencies', while another added the following erratum to its district plan: 'For the justification statement read the implementation note and vice versa[41].' We rest our case! In addition to many of the points listed above, the Campaign urges the following in written English:

- a good average sentence length (about 15-20 words)
- everyday English (e.g. words such as 'we' and 'you' rather than 'the insured', 'the applicant')
- conciseness
- an average line length of between 7 and 23 words
- plenty of answer space and a logical flow (on forms).

In 1990 the Campaign introduced its seal of approval - the Crystal Mark. This is now a much sought after symbol among major corporations who wish to use it on their documents.

Letters and Memos

Effective written memos and letters follow the guidelines listed above. They have a definite purpose, a specific target audience, and convey clear information in as succinct a fashion as possible. When they are required to do more than simply impart information, they should use an appropriate blend of the levers of persuasion discussed in Chapter 2 to argue a case. One of their most important characteristics is length. Paperwork is an organisation's cholesterol. The arteries of even the healthiest organisation are generally clogged with far too much. Readers therefore respond with gratitude towards short communications, in which the primary point is nevertheless made absolutely clear. Elegant formula and exotic excursions have their place, but their primary role is to make the ultimate sacrifice in the interests of brevity.

[INSERT REFLECTIVE EXERCISE 9:1 ABOUT HERE]

Writing Reports

Most managers are called upon to produce reports during their careers. The ability to do so frequently determines whether your career has lift off, or whether it stalls on the launch pad. Reports can be viewed as 'primarily factual accounts that communicate

objectively about some aspect of the business'.[42] One of the problems with writing them is that they typically have multiple audiences. For example, an account of financial audit reports estimates that they will typically have at least eight different audiences, including management, boards of directors and outside auditors[43]. Nevertheless, most reports come with certain expectations and standard formats.

In general, they are expected to be:

- *Timely:* This refers to both the production of the report, and its contents. Ideally, it should arrive before it is due (but certainly no later), and contain the most up-to-date information available on the problem at hand.

- *Well written*: The report should be clear, concise, and interesting; it should grab the reader's attention and hold it throughout; it should avoid errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation and its factual content. One factual error damages the credibility of your whole case, much as a single episode of adultery shatters a reputation for fidelity. Above all, it should be driven by a bias towards action, which solves a problem, identifies the next steps your key audience can and must take, and relates to the underlying business objectives of the organisation.

- *Well organised:* A good report is designed to be read selectively, so that the reader can pay attention only to its most necessary parts. Most reports have multiple audiences, and will have few readers interested in its entire content. For this reason, with long reports, an executive summary is obligatory.

- *Attractive:* It should be clearly labelled, arrive in good condition, and be presented with an attractive typeface and lay out. First impressions count. They shape expectations about the overall impact and import of the report. Thus, many of the issues concerning the power of attractiveness in communication between people which we discuss in Chapter 2 also apply here. A well-presented report projects a favourable impression of you, and creates an aura of attractiveness around your central propositions.

- *Cost effective:* The report's recommendations should be designed to solve real problems facing its readership, and should be clearly explained, possible to implement, and cost effective. Although there are no guidelines on the maximum number of recommendations it should contain, it is important to remember that an organisation with forty priorities in reality has none. On the other hand, a small number of key proposals is known as an action plan.

- *A report begins before the beginning*, with the terms of reference set for its production. These identify the problem(s) it will be expected to solve, set explicit limits on the range of issues to be addressed, and identify specific outcomes towards which the report should aspire. Box 9.4 provides examples of terms of reference which aim to produce reports and recommendations which achieve these aims.

[INSERT BOX 9.4 ABOUT HERE]

You are also asked to consider the terms of reference outlined in Reflective Exercise 9:2, and contrast them with the options discussed above.

[INSERT REFLECTIVE EXERCISE 9:2 ABOUT HERE]

Standard formats exist for the structure of a report, which will normally contain the following[44]:

- Title page

- Contents

- Acknowledgements

- Executive Summary

- Introduction

- Methodology

- Findings/ Conclusions

- Recommendations

- Appendices

- References

❑ *The Acknowledgements* are an opportunity to identify important change agents within the organisation who have helped you with the most important aspects of the report's production. By sharing the credit you gain a valuable reputation as a team player. You also spread the responsibility for awkward issues raised and difficult decisions proposed: it is harder for people to reject your conclusions outright, if you can identify the Chief Executive as a key figure in drawing up your terms of reference

and gathering your data. But avoid 'Oscar night syndrome': the urge to thank everyone, down to your remotest ancestors, who has made the slightest contribution to your night of glittering triumph. This tempts readers to fast forward before your peroration reaches its climax.

❑   *The Summary* should outline both the main findings and recommendations. Busy senior staff will read only this section. However, the rest of the report lends authority to the summary. Readers who query a particular finding or recommendation can delve into the appropriate section in more depth, to reassure themselves that you have done your homework, and that your conclusions rest on solid evidence rather than an unstable mixture of hype and hope. Such supporting testimony is excised from the summary, which needs to combine brevity with a comprehensive account of the most salient issues.

❑   *The Introduction* should explain who commissioned the report, who was responsible for the project or issue it is discussing, the purpose of the report, the method of inquiry which has been adopted and the terms of reference which have been set. It should also explain how the data have been assembled and arranged, how the report is structured, and whatever general background factors you consider to be most crucial. In general, this means identifying the importance of the issue to the organisation at this stage. The temptation here is to assume that, since the issue is by now over-familiar to you, it will be equally familiar to everyone else.

❑   *The Methodology* outlines, in detail, the steps which you took to assemble your data - for example, who you interviewed, what questionnaires you used (and

why), what other reports you relied upon, what tests you carried out, and what other organisations you studied. Each measure taken should be explicitly related to your starting terms of reference. This helps you to build a convincing series of steps towards your grand design - the recommendations which you want the organisation to implement. They should appear logical, rest on irrefutable facts and be supported by a wealth of impressive detail. Would you buy a house if the builder had neglected to erect it on solid foundations?

❑ *The Findings/ Conclusions* section details precisely what you have discovered. It should also present your analysis of their significance. If 70% of your customers express a hostile attitude towards your new product, and a favourable attitude towards that of your main competitor, what precisely does this mean for your marketing strategy? Add interpretation to the facts. Draw clear conclusions.

❑ *The Recommendations* are the heartland of any report, and should emerge clearly from the findings, rather than appear unintroduced in the middle of your conclusions. Your principal finding (judged by its importance to your organisation, and as identified in your terms of reference) should attract the most emphasis in the recommendations. It is vital to frame recommendations so that they tell people the following[45]:

- Why were we doing the wrong thing before?
- How does this change fit with the previous changes?
- What will remain constant?
- How is this change grounded in our values and commitments?

- What will the organisation look like in six months? In a year?

- What will we gain or lose personally?

- What support will we get to make the change?

- What will executives do to make sure the change works?

Remember also that too many recommendations produce paralysis rather than action. In addition, anything that irritates your readers or does not support your case distracts from it. You should resist the urge to drag your own darling hobbyhorses centre stage: other people never find your children as fascinating as you do. Above all, answer this cardinal question: what can the organisation do differently to what it already does, and how will this make a difference to the main problem which it currently faces?

❑ *The Appendices* should contain supporting material which is important to your case, but which does not belong logically in the main body of the report. These include examples of data collection instruments (e.g. questionnaires), tables which are of interest to some readers but are marginal to the main issues being explored, or more lengthy extracts from interviews with people who have been surveyed.

❑ *The References* is a list of main sources cited in your text - books, reports, newspaper articles, journal articles or official statements. This reassures readers that your methods, findings and recommendations rest on a solid body of research and experience. It also enables anyone who wishes to explore in more detail a particular issue you have raised to do so by following up some of the sources you have cited. If they do, this is also likely to reinforce their interest and hence commitment to the issues raised in your report.

Breaking bad news

Reports must also sometimes tell people bad news. For example, they might have to explain that a crisis is looming, at a time when neither senior managers nor anybody else wants to hear about it. Only hypochondriacs visit a doctor praying for bad news. In fact, organisations frequently ignore warning signals that tell them something is dreadfully wrong[46]. How can reports alert them to warning signs in such a manner that they take corrective action, rather than guillotine the messenger?

Research suggests that when positive and negative feedback has to be communicated about a person, object, process or organisation the message recipient is more likely to believe the message when it begins with the positive comment[47]. This may be because a variety of self-serving biases cause most of us to routinely exaggerate our proficiency as communicators[48]. In consequence, a message that begins by confirming what we think we already know (i.e. *what I am doing well*) has a greater intuitive validity for most people, and leaves them more favourably disposed to accept what follows. A report should begin by accentuating the positive, in the form of stating whatever good news it honestly can.

It is also important to indicate how the findings compare with surveys of this kind in other organisations, or how much further improvement could be realistically expected at this juncture of its history. Context is vital to promote understanding and facilitate action.

Above all, the report should be written in non-inflammatory and neutral language, offering solutions rather than a grievance list. It should be sensitive to the internal politics, language and values of the organisation concerned. Rather than identify scapegoats, responsibility for problems should be shared as widely as is honestly possible, thereby encouraging a collective determination to do something about them. Naming and shaming leads to aggravation, conflagration and retaliation.

Reinforcing the previous point, it is vital that critical feedback be constructed as non-judgementally as possible[49]. This means that it should avoid negatively labelling the people involved (e.g. 'the marketing department in this organisation is causing blockages for every other department, and therefore creating nothing but trouble'). Such an approach attacks people's face needs, and is thus likely to provoke their immediate opposition rather than attract their support. On the other hand, a constructive focus on detailed behaviours which can be changed is likely to be perceived as helpful feedback, and spur further change. Thus, a report *could* usefully say: 'Employees require more information about the impact of the reorganisation plan on job security. We recommend that a short statement be prepared by human resources on this issue, in conjunction with communications staff.' Non-judgmental feedback is generally perceived as one of the foundation stones of supportive communication.

E-mail, snail mail, more mail

The Internet has transformed business communication. At one point during the 1990s, there were 20 million US e-mail addresses, and more than half of these had gone on

line during one calendar year: a phenomenal rate of expansion[50]. The advent of the new millennium witnessed e-mail becoming the dominant force in written communications, both in the office and at home.

The central advantage of e-mail is that it enables the 'instant transfer of messages and documents worldwide between people on the same private network, or with access to the same public network' [51]. For example, in one calendar month the Royal Mail handled 258 million letters for domestic customers in the UK, while over twice as many e-mails (550 million) were sent and received from family homes[52]. This has done more than change the way in which we transmit information: it has also increased the volume we send. Most people now regard it as a vital link in the information chain, and a measure of the importance that managers attach to communication, both internally and externally. One respondent in a communication audit conducted by us, in an organisation where e-mail had not yet been introduced, commented: 'We need e-mail around here. Without it I feel like the Flintstones.'

Here, we focus on the challenges that this poses for effective writing. The informal nature of the medium can lead to problems such as misunderstanding and conflict. Crystal[53] has pointed out that 'Netspeak' is neither written nor spoken language, instead it relies on characteristics of both, forming a 'third medium' for communication. Employees should understand that the way in which they communicate through e-mail is unique and as such they have to respect the boundaries of this new language. This has been recognised in many corporations. For instance, the New Jersey Hospital Association adopted a proactive approach, by providing training for all new recruits, encompassing the basics of communicating

quickly but courteously, being careful not to write e-mails which could come back to haunt the sender, and the importance of proof-reading[54].

However, the time devoted to writing e-mails is usually lower than that allocated to letters or memos, and therefore the content is often less precise. Spelling and grammatical errors that would be frowned upon in memos or letters are more readily accepted in e-mails. Indeed, with the epidemic of texting from mobile phones, e-messages are becoming even less formal. But confirming by e-mail a formal appointment with the CEO with 'OKCU4T&Jaw@3' is clearly not appropriate! In business contexts, words and phrases need to be chosen carefully. Box 9.5 presents guidelines for e-mail composition, which should be incorporated into employee training.

Box 9.5 hear here

But all opportunities also bring dangers. Here, we focus on two issues. The first is that most of us assume – wrongly – that our office e-mails are private. In fact, at least two in three British employers monitor website access and incoming e-mail messages, while roughly 80% of US employers have software capable of monitoring employee internet usage[55]. It is likely that these figures will grow. An obvious target is pornography. However, the software can also scan for such words as 'CV' or 'application', each of which might suggest that the employee is looking for a job elsewhere. The conclusion is simple. You should consider very carefully what you include in e-mail messages, and whether it could imperil your career or cost you your

job. One in four British firms say they would fire employees who violate their internet policies[56], and many have already done so. Caution is vital.

Secondly, a related problem is what has been dubbed 'flame mail' – angry emails that escalate conflict out of control. Part of the problem is that 'writing e-mail is a solitary activity. The reader is not there to nod approval or frown misunderstanding. Not surprisingly, then, e-mail writers, may state their messages bluntly, treating readers insensitively, or fail to explain fully, ignoring readers' needs[57].' Accordingly, more than half of the 1000 users who responded to one major survey had received abusive e-mails (so-called 'flame mails'), which irreparably damaged working relationships[58]. Fifty-four per cent of antisocial e-mails were from managers to their staff and one in six of all respondents reported being officially disciplined via e-mail. Interestingly, flame mails were five times more likely to be written by men than by women. Forty six per cent of respondents also said that e-mail had reduced face-to-face communication in their workplace, and that this had led to less co-operation, greater internal conflict among colleagues, bullying and a more unpleasant working atmosphere. In short, e-mail lacks the non-verbal and tonal cues of face-to-face communication, on which we rely to interpret meaning. The rapid nature of e-mail also means that it provides for instant communication, at a time when tempers are running high and both parties require a cooling off period.

It has been suggested[59] that these problems can be reduced if we follow the simple guidelines contained in Box 9.6. These could form the basis of what is sometimes described as a 'netiquette statement.'

[INSERT BOX 9.5 ABOUT HERE]

A clear danger with e-mail is the assumption that more communication is better communication. This can transform computer screens into slag heaps of discarded information, through which people forage in a futile quest to find something useful. The outcome is more likely to be isolation and despondency, rather than cohesion and enlightenment. The scale of the problem is illustrated by a survey of Information Technology directors and senior and middle ranking managers in the UK[60]. On average, managers reported receiving 52 e-mails a day, with seven per cent receiving 100 or more. But only 30% of them were deemed essential, with a further 37% regarded as important and the remainder being irrelevant or unnecessary.

All this can also mean that face-to-face communication becomes neglected. Precisely such a difficulty was reported with Apple Computers, which developed a culture of people having a computer on their desks[61]. In a dilemma that anyone who has become addicted to Macs will readily recognise, people loved the technology and came to rely on it so much that face-to-face communication was neglected. Apple's response was to hold a series of conferences for different levels of management, specifically to promote face-to-face communication. This led to systems for face-to-face briefings, the development of national publications and the convening of cross-functional communication meetings. The lesson is that the role and impact of e-mail should be carefully monitored, to ensure that it supplements rather than supplants the old 'technology' of people talking to people.

An area where written communication is particularly pertinent is in dealing with complaints. A study by the Henley Centre for Forecasting[62] found that 95% of complaining customers preferred their grievances to be dealt with in writing. Evidently, this reassures them that the issue is being treated seriously, and in most cases has the effect of discouraging further action, including litigation. Various writers on this question have suggested guidelines, and these are summarised in Box 9.7. In general, complaints are viewed as a litmus test of an organisation's commitment to genuine customer care. This holds true for 'internal' customers, as well as those outside its own ranks. Adherence to these guidelines is a vital means of nurturing those relationships most critical to overall success.

[INSERT BOX 9.6 ABOUT HERE]

Overview

Communication must add value to information, rather than simply distribute it. Written communication, as this chapter has shown, has the potential to accomplish this in multiple ways. It can become a permanent form of recognition, and thus has high reward potential for staff. E-mail binds an organisation tighter together, speeds up the flow of information, increases its quantity and facilitates more rapid contact between an organisation and its customers. Well-crafted reports create a bias towards action, and help promote their authors' careers. Long ago, *Confucius* said it well: 'If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant; if what is said is not what is meant, then what ought to be done remains undone.'

Even if we lack his eloquence, most of us can improve our written communication skills. The guidelines outlined throughout this chapter will help. Practice may not make perfect, but it does make better. Remember - *Writing Matters*. Defective written communication leads to congestion on the information superhighway, causing traffic jams, multiple pile-ups and outbursts of road rage. Effective written communication keeps the traffic flowing freely, nurtures relationships and ensures a smoother journey towards business success. Used wisely, it will serve you and your organisation well.

[INSERT BOX 9.8 HERE]

Table 9:1: Major stress factors in management communication

Major problems in the writing of	% of managers documents identifying difficulty
Meeting deadlines	76
Identifying appropriate information for document	68
Organising information in document	65
Writing instructions that workers understand	58
Summarising information from other sources	46
Understanding grammatical and stylistic conventions	33
Creating effective tables, graphs and charts	18

Box 9.1: Evaluating channels of communication

1.   Feedback potential: How quickly can the receiver respond to the message?

2.   Complexity capacity: Can this channel effectively process complex messages?

3.   Breadth potential: How many different messages can be disseminated through this channel?

4.   Confidentiality: Can the communicators be reasonably sure their messages are received only by those intended?

5.   Encoding ease: Can the sender easily and quickly use this channel?

6.   Decoding ease: Can the receiver easily and quickly decode messages in this channel?

7.   Time-space constraint: Do senders and receivers need to occupy the same time space?

8.   Cost: How much does it cost to use this channel?

9.   Interpersonal warmth: Does the channel have the potential to communicate interpersonal warmth?

10.   Formality: Does the channel imbue a sense of formality?

11.   'Scanability': Does the channel permit the message(s) to be easily browsed or scanned to find relevant passages?

12.   Time of consumption: Does the sender or receiver exercise the most control over when the message is consumed?

Box 9.2: From cold to hot in writing style

Cold (and traditional)

You will have realised recently that our market share in Gizmos has fallen dramatically. This threatens our previously front-rank position in the Fortune 500, and puts a very large question mark over our competitiveness. I need hardly delineate the consequences. It seems that we will have to pay our shareholders a reduced dividend, while bonus payments may also be suspended and job cuts may even have to be contemplated. The senior management team will be devoting all its efforts in the next month to the development of a new strategy, and will communicate this to you as soon as it is finalised. As a first step, we have cut production of Gizmo A and invested more resources in a marketing strategy to support Gizmo B. Your support would be appreciated.

Hot (and lively)

The world has recently become a far tougher place. We used to dominate the market for Gizmos, and every one of us was damn proud of it. But a new bunch of competitors is out there. They're, lean, hungry and after our business. They want my job, and they want yours. We have to act fast and we have to act now. Otherwise, they'll have us for lunch and we'll all be standing in the unemployment line. First off, we will be cutting production of Gizmo A. We might love it, but not enough of anybody else shares our enthusiasm. We will be making more of Gizmo B, and investing every ounce of our sweat to make it the best Gizmo in the world. Nothing will stop us. Let's work together, and make sure that by the next quarterly report we're back where we should be - on top.

Box 9.3: The anaemic impact of vague modifiers

Sample 1:

'Although an appropriate budget had originally been established, a slight financial over-run has been caused in the short to medium term, due to the consequences of unanticipated industrial action in our main supplier industry.'

Total words: 34

Translation:

'The project is now overspent. This is because of strikes in the machine tool industry.'

Total words: 15

Sample 2:

'He has a talent for self aggrandisement, obfuscation, and indolence, leavened only by the transparent nature of his intentions which renders it distinctly questionable whether his obvious ambitions will be realised.'

Total words: 31

Translation:

'He tells lies and is lazy. His main aim is self advancement, but since everyone knows this he will never be promoted.'

Total words: 22

Box 9.4: Examples of effective terms of reference

1. Complaints from customers. To investigate why the rate of complaints from customers about the new payment system has increased by 20% in the last three months and to recommend changes in procedure which will solve this problem.

2. The current computerised personnel management information system (PIMS). To explore alternative systems currently available, conduct a cost benefit analysis of the various options, and recommend whether to upgrade the present system or to keep it for a specified period.

3. Absenteeism. To establish our current level of absenteeism, compare it to industry wide norms, investigate its causes and recommend measures which will significantly reduce it.

Box 9.5: Guidelines For Writing Business E-Mails

1. Decide that e-mail is definitely the most effective medium. Would face-to-face, telephone or 'paper' communication be better?

2. Be aware of your audience. Tailor the style to the person to whom it is being sent.

3. Always use a signature as this gives vital contact details for follow-up.

4. Use a 'talking' subject line that tells the readers *what the message is about* and *how it concerns them*.

5. Only prioritise or mark 'urgent' when it really is.

6. Keep the message brief and to the point. Put the most important words and part of the message first, since this is what readers will see in their in-box display.

7. Keep emphasis to a minimum.

8. Check for spelling and grammar – this is often overlooked in casual e-mails.

9. Re-read messages to check for clear understanding.

10. Select the final distribution list before you write. If you do it later, you will not have composed the message with the audience's interests in mind. The odds are that most of it will pass most readers by.

11. Do not get involved in 'flaming'. There is a natural temptation to respond to rude e-mails in kind. But remember, if you lose your temper you lose the argument.

Box 9.6: Composing fire proof e-mails

1. Resist the temptation to respond to the e-mail of another person when you are still angry.

2. Wait until you calm down before replying.

3. Consider whether you would say what you want to say to someone's face.

4. Do not use abusive language: a message cannot be rescinded once it has been transmitted, and the more discourteous your tone the more likely it is that this will become the issue, rather than whatever it is you should really be discussing with the other person.

5. Temper your overall enthusiasm for e-mail with an awareness of its defects and hazards.

6. Consider whether a face-to-face meeting might be more appropriate, or at least a useful follow up to your e-mail message.

7. Invest the same care in composing your message that you would do in writing a formal letter or memorandum.

8. Set the e-mail aside for an hour and then review it, before finally sending it.

Box 9.7: Dealing with complaints

1. Don't delay - reply today. It is human nature to post pone tasks we find unpleasant; it is equally human nature to seek a fast response when we feel aggrieved. Rapid action short circuits customer disillusionment.

2. Remember that it is easier to fire missiles in missives than it is face-to-face. Resist the temptation to declare war on the enemy.

3. Personalise your reply. Use the complainant's name. Otherwise, they are liable to feel they have received a standard form letter and that their complaint is not being taken seriously.

4. Thank the person for bringing the problem to your attention, however annoyed you feel by the complaint or however irrational you assume it is. This might calm troubled waters: you must also reckon with the possibility that whatever you write will be read by many people other than the addressee. If people see you in full Blitzkrieg mode they will assume that this is your natural state, and take their business elsewhere.

5. Inform the complainant that you understand his or her point of view. Do this even if you think they are wrong - you can then explain the other point of view. However, most people want to be treated seriously and feel that they are understood. Acknowledging that you hear their grievance deflates aggression.

6. If an apology is on order, then express it whole-heartedly. Communicate your genuine desire to make amends.

7. Ensure that the letter is signed by the most senior person possible.

8. Resist the temptation to be curt. If a detailed reply is necessary to deal adequately with the issue - write it.

9. If the problem lies with some other department in your company avoid catching the virus of 'blameititis'. Customers detest organisations which treat complaints like an unexploded bomb, to be lobbed from Department to Department.

10. Err on the side of accepting responsibility, offering restitution and making placatory noises.

Box 9.8: Model answer for Reflective Exercise 9:1

To: All employees of Rite Manufacturing Corporation

From: Managing Director

Date: 28th June, year

Come and find out how you can plan for a more comfortable retirement by taking out additional voluntary contributions to our existing pension scheme.

Date: Friday 5th July

Place: Boardroom

Time of meeting: 11.30a.m.   Total words: 48

Reflective Exercise 9.1: Dynamic Writing

Read the following memo carefully. Then rewrite it, in line with the guidelines for dynamic writing outlined above. An alternative is contained at the end of this chapter, but you should first of all craft your own version before reading it. Cheating is not allowed!

To: All employees of Rite Manufacturing Corporation

From: Managing Director

Date: 28th June, year

I am happy to advise you that representatives of the Board will be available next Friday 5th July to acquaint you with information about additional voluntary contributions to our existing occupational pension scheme. This will help all of you to plan for a comfortable retirement, and should take no more than a few minutes of your time. Feel free to contact my office for further details. The meeting with the Board representatives will be at 11.30a.m. in the Boardroom. In addition, experts from our finance department will be on hand to deal with any detailed queries you may have on this issue. I hope to see you there.

Total words: 122

Reflective Exercise 9.2: Writing for Objectives

Study carefully the terms of reference shown here, and then answer the questions listed below:

'To produce ideas which will enable the Board to refine a strategy for innovation in certain key resource areas, thereby increasing market penetration in our most important markets, enhancing quality, improving the efficient use of resources and increasing profits in the next financial year.'

Issues for consideration:

- List as many of the objectives contained in the above terms of reference as you can.

- Consider whether the objectives identified are compatible or in conflict with each other.

- Pick what you think are the top two objectives. Consider the criteria that influenced your decision. Would other people in your organisation employ other criteria, and reach different conclusions?

- Translate your main two objectives into terms of reference that match the style and specificity of those on offer in Box 9:4.

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