

# The Worst and Best of Electronic Communication

Electronic communication enables individuals and groups to work together in and across boundaries of time and place to achieve corporate results. Email and voice mail are two forms of electronic communication that offer unique opportunities for efficient, effective use of people, time and corporate resources – when used properly – which some people find difficult to do. Here are ten worst and ten best practices for you to consider when communicating electronically using email and voice mail.

## Ten Worst Practices for Communicating in Email and Voice Mail

1. Always assume the worst. There are no innocent questions or statements. If you get an email and question the sender's intent, assume that she/he is being deliberately tactless and intentionally offensive. The same with voice mail; if the caller did not put a friendly smile in his/her voice, then assume that the caller had an unfriendly intent.
2. Be bold. Since you don't have to face other people (at least not immediately), say those things that you have always wanted to say but could never bring yourself to utter in person.
3. Work at your own pace. You have the right to respond to email messages when you get ready, and not before. You know your priorities better than anyone else. So what if a teammate is sending you multiple messages – she or he is just contributing to information overload.
4. Use email to replace face-to-face communication as often as possible. Even if the person you're writing to sits a few yards away and all you want to do is ask the time of the next project team meeting, even if typing the email takes longer than a phone call. Do not walk, do not call – send email. So what if some think email is cold and impersonal? Rapport and team spirit are highly overrated and who has the time?
5. Blame the technology. When you've received an email request that you don't have time to answer, or work that you don't have the knowledge, skill, desire, or resources to complete, then say, "I never received the email." Or "It must be lost in the network." Or "The server is down." Use humor; tell them it was "lost in space."
6. Keep upper management and executives informed of the shortcomings of your peers. If an issue has not been handled properly (by someone else) and customers complain, email copies of these complaints to senior managers.
7. Use sarcasm and biting humor. True, it is difficult to convey rapier wit and subtle cynicism professionally to colleagues one has never met, especially when it's directed at them. Still, you owe it to yourself to try. How else will they appreciate your keen intellect? When in doubt, use emoticons to clarify your meaning ; >)

8. Make email your first choice for provocative and confidential information. Email is particularly suited to ensure that many people receive confidential and/or provocative correspondence, quickly. Your influence will be felt far and wide and, there is almost no way to recall the message or undo the damage you cause. You will be forever remembered – a legend – notorious. Remember, what you send to a few, others will forward to many.
9. When leaving voice mail messages, always call from your car – while backing out of a parking space in an underground parking garage or driving through a tunnel. It forces the listener to pay close attention to your message when he or she has to strain to hear it. Caveat: The static on the phone may prevent the called party from hearing unless you yell. If they are not self-motivated, they may delete your message.
10. Don't answer incoming calls; let them go to voice mail, regularly and consistently. You or your company paid for voice mail. Use it! You have "Caller ID." You know who is calling. Let them leave a message. Then retrieve the message and return the call at your convenience – or not. So what if "some people" say that you are "hiding behind" voice mail when *really* you are making the "most efficient" use of your time and resources.

## **Ten Best Practices for Communicating in Email and Voice Mail**

1. Communicate clearly. Say exactly what you mean. Ask for responses to messages you send, when needed. Make voice mail greetings simple, clear, and concise.
2. Pay attention. Listen to voice mail greetings, completely, before you respond. Try to understand the other person. Listen to or read the complete message carefully to understand their perspective.
3. Use sensory language and attachments. If they say or write, "I *see* what you mean," then you say or write, "I am glad you get the *picture*. Both words use a visual sensory preference. Paint word pictures that include all five senses to get your meaning across. Attach graphs, tables, and pictures to improve understanding.
4. Give feedback. Feedback provides important information about the relationship between behavior and its effect. Feedback is a special concern within the electronic workplace because people who work apart may not have as many opportunities to give and get feedback, to understand how their behavior affects the work and the work group.
5. Follow-up. Close the loop; follow-up on messages you send.
6. Think before you respond. Consider the receiver when composing a message. Place yourself in the other person's shoes. How will that individual interpret your message?

7. Provide timely acknowledgement and responses to all messages that require a response.
8. Learn the technology and use it efficiently and correctly.
9. Use multiple media. Provide parallel channels of communication that reinforce each other. For example, follow-up a telephone request with e-mail.
10. Plan your communication. For every meeting, contacts, and call, have a clear agenda.

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