

Communicate Strategically to Get What You Want

The best of Business Management Daily's advice

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Few skills separate you from the pack faster than effectively wielding the power of words.

In this special report, we've collected the best of Business Management Daily's advice on how to communicate in the workplace—not just to get along and convey information, but to become a shaper of minds and reach your career goals.

Onward and upward!

If your email fails this test, don't bother sending it

Somewhere out there lurks a group called the Plain English Campaign, an organization so peeved by bad business communication that it hands out annual Golden Bull awards for the worst of the worst. Here's a recent "winner," a snippet from an email sent by a business to a prospective client:

(Company X) is engaged with the largest knowledge driven companies helping them transform the way their employees collaborate, breaking down silos and creating a flatter more dynamic organization that better leverages the thousands of staff that they have.

37 words, almost no information.

Heather Baker, speaker and creator of the BakerWrite Speedwriting system, points out that words themselves make up only 7% of the full message that's internalized when we speak or write. The rest comes from factors like intonation, style, body language—even timing and the restrictions of the medium in which we choose to communicate.

Email remains the primary place where that other 93% regularly goes haywire. How many do you receive each day that grate on you with their sloppiness, incompleteness or unintentionally brusque tone? "The *meaning* of your communication is the *response* you get back, regardless of your intention," Baker says. So if you're taken aback by the *Re:* reply to what you put out there, go over your original message again. Chances are it failed this critical 7-point test that Baker offers:

1. Is your email going First Class? Whenever you compose one, imagine yourself writing it on paper by hand, putting it into an envelope, stamping it and walking it all the way down to the mailbox. The preparation of electronic mail should be treated no less seriously than this, because it's certainly taken that way.

2. Are you maxing out the info in the subject line? Baker recalls an infamous chain of emails that began with the subject line "Merry Christmas!" She and her

co-worker re:'d each other with that line intact for months as the calendar and their ever-changing topics made it seem more and more absurd. Save your recipients' time and patience by giving them something to spot, sort and understand easily.

3. Are you making it clear why they should give a hoot? You should always be hyperaware of what's important to your reader's workday. If you know a person well, you can probably gauge their level of interest in what you have to say pretty accurately, and you may have to massage the message to make it hit their world a little harder. If they don't usually care about the goings-on in your department, why will this email make them pay attention? What's in it for them?

4. Do you sound like they do? Know your audience and speak at their level, using terms they themselves have used before. This creates an affinity between you. Imagine how your email would go down if it were delivered verbally; is it something you'd be likely to actually say to that particular person, or would they find it jarring because it's simply not the way they would ever speak?

5. Are you coming off as a pipsqueak? See if you can identify all the weak-kneed words in this offering: *"I'm sorry to bother you. Could I just ask a couple of questions? I'm not an expert but I think it's important. Sorry again."* Don't demean or lessen yourself by filling your email with apologies for intruding or presuming. You're not "just" anything—put yourself on equal terms with your reader from the outset or you'll find yourself getting blown off.

6. Are you turning bad news into good news? It doesn't take a whole lot of skill to stress or depress someone with a negative tidbit. Keep in mind that it's tough not to blame the messenger just a little in these cases, so look for a way to put a positive spin on a message you don't particularly want to send. You may be cutting the office coffee budget by 50%, but why not highlight the fact that glorious warm weather is just around the corner and iced drinks will be in vogue?

7. Are you offering solutions, or just more problems? Your message should be a tool for fixing things, not pointing out that the toolbox is empty and life is hard. Email is a tiny thief of time, so if you're going to take more of it away from the reader, make those words valuable ... and if you can't make them valuable, at least don't raise troublesome issues that can't be worked through on a screen. Bringing problems to people requires a different delivery method: picking up a phone or walking down the hallway for a pop-in. Remember what that was like...?



Sarcasm's a slow killer

Laughter and good humor are terrific for morale, but there are ways to make people laugh at work that aren't helpful. Cynicism never gives others any kind of boost; instead it gradually dampens spirits and makes people less likely to confide in you. The next time you make a cutting remark—even a pretty darn funny one—make sure it doesn't come out sounding like you simply don't understand something fully, so you've just decided to be bitter about it.



How to write a good letter of complaint

Q: In my job I often have to write some unpleasant correspondence to people and firms that have let us down or not given us what they promised. Do you have any tips for writing a complaint letter so it gets acted on, without resorting to becoming a bully?

A: What I do is remove every adjective I possibly can from the letter, because somewhere in there I've often worked in something that could be considered insulting, and that's counterproductive. Stick to the facts and leave personal observations and character assassinations out of it. State clearly what was promised (and make sure it really was), what actually happened and the damaging end result. Then I always attach a deadline for action, which lets them know I expect them to make the next move and respect my time frames, not theirs.



8 phrases that instantly convince people to follow you

Not everyone is a brilliant orator, but it only takes a few words—precisely timed and honestly delivered—to truly command attention and respect. Here are eight phrases totaling less than 40 words. Use them and you'll stick in people's minds long after you've left the room.

“I guarantee it.” When you're absolutely certain of a result, push all your chips to the center of the table. A guarantee says you know what you're talking about and you have a very clear vision of what's ahead.

“I was wrong.” Note that the period cuts this statement off at exactly three words. The temptation to turn that into a semi-colon and provide an explanation is what turns a leader into something weaker. Admitting a mistake without a hint of protest generates admiration.

“That was then, this is now.” Apply this to past success rather than a failure and people think of you as someone who's never going to stop trying to get better.

“I won't accept that.” A sentence that affirms your power and status as someone not only with high standards, but with the gravitas to whip into shape those who won't live up to them.

“We'll make it happen somehow.” The odds seem against you on that lofty deadline, that bold proposal—even that train wreck of a project that desperately needs fixing. But you speak as someone who trusts in the team and yourself to push through all barriers with confidence.

“They were absolutely right.” Your competitors or your detractors, that is. Ears perk up when you give credit where credit is due and admit others are sometimes more clever than you are.

“That was the biggest mistake of my life.” People respect those who have learned big, hard lessons and speak of regret openly. We've all got a total wipeout in our past; few have the guts to admit it in public.

“Let’s just do it!” When things have gotten complicated, followers want someone to simplify things—or at least someone brave enough to pick up a sword and shield and charge ahead of the pack into the thick of battle. With this one sentence, that person is you.



Too persuadable? Stick to email

If you’re always punishing yourself for saying “yes” too often, look at the situations where it happens. Meetings and phone calls are more likely to cause you to commit to something—you naturally lose some control of the conversation and are forced to think on your feet, causing hasty answers. Email, on the other hand, gives you far more power. You can answer at your own pace and think far more deliberately about the topic or request at hand.



6 phrases to say during your next review

Whether your next performance review goes swimmingly or becomes a half hour of frustration, here are six phrases that will likely paint a more flattering picture of you:

1. “I can see myself ...” Mentioning the long-term future assures the boss that you imagine yourself here for the long haul, and attaching an ambition to the phrase sets you up as someone who is always pushing toward the next level.

2. “I need to stop ...” Bosses (and everyone else) respect those who recognize their own shortcomings ... and then address them head-on. Being a little hard on yourself puts you in a positive light. Just don’t try the old “humblebragging” trick, in which you say something like, “I need to stop being such a hardworking perfectionist!”

3. “_____ has been a lot of help to me.” Compliment your team members, and be very specific in pointing out exactly what they’ve done to assist. This demonstrates humility and appreciation for others.

4. “What I definitely want is ...” Not what you *think* you want, or what you’d *like*. Tell your boss something that you’re dead set on having, and prepare both a rationale for it and a means to get it that will help the company as well. Set yourself up as a person with strong desires and specific targets—that’s how a CEO thinks.

5. “One problem I’m coming across is ...” No one believes that every workday hums along smoothly, and that every department is perfect. Managers need and like for others to spot issues. The key here is that you must have a potential solution in mind, otherwise it’s a fine line between talking about problems and whining.

6. “My plan is to ...” This is a phrase that puts a concrete vision in the boss’s mind that you’re actively pursuing a specific goal. You don’t have to create self-imposed due dates; those can make you feel confined unless you’re already close to the goal line. The word “plan” alone suggests you’re a person of action.

What do people want from your apology?

When the inevitable screwup happens on your watch, don’t craft your apology without knowing which words will do the trick and which won’t. A lot depends on the harmed party’s own motivations for seeking your apology—and sometime those motivations don’t have a whole lot to do with any actual harm they may have suffered. Essentially, as human beings we want:

1. **A bit of power.** We like to feel briefly elevated over someone with more influence than we have—it imbues in us a sense of control. The perception of CEOs, big companies, and even just the big cheese in the office as Goliaths that can be occasionally brought down by a tiny David makes us feel strong. When you

stand before a group in contrition, you are seen, for one moment, to be someone who can in fact be bested.

Give them what they want: Be humble, and acknowledge that you don't know quite as much as you think you once did.

2. A connection to a tribe. Especially in these days of the overwhelming force of social media, we crave the sense of a vast sea of anonymous supporters standing behind us, and that after being attacked, "our side" has won against the "other side." This is especially true in cases where someone inadvertently offends people of a certain race, gender or class.

Give them what they want: Apologize not to just one individual or group, but others like them who may also have felt betrayed by your actions.

3. Schadenfreude, or "shameful joy." There is often an element of "I told you so" to a blunder by someone in a leadership capacity. We like to think that we knew all along that a mistake like this was coming, had anyone only listened to our judgments of the person or company who made that mistake.

Give them what they want: Tell them you should have seen it coming, but be very specific about where exactly the breakdown occurred. Don't issue a blanket statement that you're ineffective—that will weaken you further.



Sell a meeting any way you can

Few people get excited when they see yet another meeting invitation float into their inbox. To intrigue and entice them a little, give the meeting a title. A title suggests that a real narrative may emerge and reminds people in a subtle way to stay focused on the topic. Make it funny, make it dramatic ... just make it seem like you care enough about the meeting to brand it.



The perfect thank-you script?

The time has come to express appreciation to a group for a job well done. We all know it's a moment that's not so easy to pull off well; you can overlook some people and create resentment. So try this one sentence out: "I know it really took a lot of people to make this happen, so I want to thank everyone who had a hand in this, big and small—sincerely." Avoid the trap of listing names and adding, "Did I miss anyone?" That creates an awkward moment that puts people on the spot and makes you look ill-informed.



Phrases that make you look weak

One thing that will quickly make you a doormat boss is using phrases that suggest you have a brittle spine. Employees pick up on the wimpiness and take over the show. Avoid these lines, and stay in charge:

"Hey, I didn't write the rules!" Of course you didn't, but someone at your company did at one time. And they had a reason for it that you need to defend, whether you agree with it or not. When you use this line on an employee, you are essentially stepping away from the management tier, thumbing your nose at the rule, and buddying up with the disgruntled ranks. Never cross that line. Tell the worker, "This is the rule, and this is why we need to follow it." Keep your opinion of the rule to yourself.

"There isn't anything I can do about that." Never slam the door on a worker who came to you for help. If there really is nothing you can do to fix his problem, you can certainly help him change his attitude about his concern. Say something like, "Take the high road on this. It will pan out better for you in the long run."

"Can I say something?" Do you really need to ask permission to talk? People use this when they are about to give their opinion on something. As a leader, you don't need to telegraph when you are about to render your two cents. Just come out and say it. You need not be rude about it. Just say it.

“I hate to bother you, but ...” This one gets the top award in timidity. As a manager, you are never “bothering” your employees when you are coaching, mentoring, explaining, delegating, praising, teaching, or correcting them. They may come to you with this line, but never use it on them.

“Someone told me that ...” You know who that someone is. So don’t hide it. When you are cornering an employee with some secondhand information with the intent of getting to the bottom of a problem, come right out and say where the information came from. The anonymous-source routine makes you look frightened about handling this whole thing. Plus, it will leave your worker wondering who the rat is.

“Would it be possible ...?” It’s nothing but a lightweight phrase that gives the employee a way to wiggle out of your request by saying, “I don’t think it’s possible.” Avoid this line if you want your directive carried out. By all means you can discuss what tools, resources, and time the employee needs, but don’t open the conversation with this weak question.



The power of the pen

Each year that the digital lifestyle engulfs us all, the power of a simple handwritten note grows. Just as getting a real greeting card in the mail dwarfs even the snazziest animated e-card, handing off a note of thanks, encouragement or motivation written in your own hand is a gesture that gets noticed and remembered. If your staff doesn’t know your lettering by sight, it might mean your communications with them could use a personal touch.



Communication skills at the heart of successful management

Management is primarily about communication: spelling out expectations, sharing information, asking questions, collaborating, and so forth.

Enhance your skills by focusing on these areas:

Personalize your communication style. Get to know your employees (and colleagues, customers, etc.) so you can communicate with each one effectively. You'll need to deal with quiet, introverted people differently from outgoing, assertive types.

Express yourself clearly. Don't make employees guess what's on your mind. Think about what you want to say before opening your mouth, and choose your words with care so you say what you mean and avoid mixed signals. Don't waste time with irrelevant chitchat, and don't repeat yourself once you've made your point.

Tell people what you want. Speak up when expectations aren't being met. Employees can't read your mind, and even if they've read their job descriptions and the employee manual, they can easily forget things no matter how obvious their importance is to you. Don't be afraid to ask for what you and the organization need.

Ask for feedback—and give it. No matter how good you are at management and communication, you can always stand to improve, but you need honest feedback from the people you supervise to do that. Ask employees to tell you what you do right, and what you could do better (and don't get mad at them for telling the truth). And return the favor. Constructive feedback in both directions helps build a firm, professional working relationship.

Don't run from conflicts. No one likes dealing with conflict, but ignoring it only makes a bad situation worse. Confront disagreements head on. Talking openly about problems, without getting emotional, will generally lead to better understanding between workers and a quicker, more satisfying resolution for everyone.

Collaborate. Don't try to do everything yourself. You'll burn out fast, and chances are you won't be as successful at juggling your responsibilities as you think you can be. Enlist your employees and colleagues to take on appropriate tasks. They'll learn and grow and will realize you trust them. Plus, you'll have more time for your own tasks.



Sell the win hard to sound like a leader

When you absolutely know that the positive outcome of a certain project or initiative is certain, you have the opportunity to appear very strong indeed when you speak of it. Don't pass it up. Instead of saying, "We're definitely going to meet our customer response target this month," try "That customer response target is a lock—I guarantee it." Instead of "We'll have the report finished by Friday," try "Put that report right out of your mind—it'll be on your desk Friday come hell or high water." The facts haven't changed, but your attitude has become a lot more inspiring.



Craft an effective warning letter

Except in extremely rare circumstances, managers shouldn't fire employees without going through a disciplinary process that documents the problem and affords the employee a chance to improve. A warning letter to the employee is usually a key element of that process. Here's how to write one:

Examine the situation. Does the problem really call for a written warning? Don't trivialize the impact of a warning letter by writing one for every minor offense you become aware of. Reserve letters for serious performance/behavior issues.

Don't delegate your authority. Consulting with your lawyer or HR department is a good idea; they may even be able to supply you with a draft that protects you

and your organization. But sign it yourself, and make sure the employee understands that it comes from you to avoid any confusion over who's in charge.

Document the facts. The letter is just one part of your documentation surrounding the incident. Keep a written record of your observations and conversations as they relate to the situation, as well as any discussions you have with the employee in question. Ask the employee to sign a statement indicating that you've talked the matter over so he or she can't claim ignorance of the problem later on.

Spell out the problem in detail. In your letter, outline the employee's conduct, explain why it's unacceptable (with reference to written procedures and prior verbal warnings), and discuss consequences if the problem continues or the unacceptable behavior recurs.

Exercise some discretion. Deliver the letter and discuss the contents in private to avoid embarrassing the employee and making a potentially volatile situation worse.

Follow up. Let the employee know what kind of improvement you expect, and by when. Then keep track of his or her performance. Praise any positive developments, but be ready to take action if the situation worsens.



A better way to ask questions

When you ask employees questions, the way you ask influences not only the answers they give, but also your relationship with the employees afterward. It's easy for a simple question to appear like an aggressive one to employees. Here are some examples:

Learning. "Do you understand what you're supposed to do?" calls for only a "yes" or "no" answer. "Would you like to go over what we agreed on?" shares the responsibility for the uncertainty and lets the employee help direct the discussion.

Errors. "Are you responsible for this error?" almost accuses the employee. "What can you tell me about this problem?" takes the initial burden off the employee and

focuses instead on gathering information. You and the employee can work together to solve the problem.

Deadlines. “Are you going to meet that deadline?” challenges the employee by expressing doubt. “Do you need anything to meet the deadline?” is solution-oriented. It puts the employee in charge of the situation, but opens the possibility of assistance if necessary.

Make your call more like a movie trailer

Prompt return calls (and create a little mystique) by adding a teaser to your voice mail message whenever you can. *Examples:* “By the way, I may have found the solution to your distribution problem” or “I’ve come across some very interesting information which should save you serious money.” This shifts the power of the dialogue subtly in your direction.

An attention-getting email ploy

When we see the letters Re: in front of a subject line, our first instinct is often to think that someone is replying to our message, and so we’re liable to take a quick look. Marketers will often insert those letters to increase their email open rates, so you might want to consider this sly technique once in a while for your own messages.



The power of persuasion and how to counteract critics

It used to be commonplace to ignore haters and critics entirely when you are trying to use the power of persuasion. But times have changed. In today's social media and its always-on environment, we can't ignore haters.

And we now know we can win them over if we engage them in the right way.

It's important you know that when we say, "Don't be afraid to communicate with haters," that doesn't mean the critics won't be vocal.

You've got to prepare yourself for the extreme response. What happens if you get trolled? What happens if people come at you and verbally attack you? Or call for a boycott of your products?

When Keurig pulled their advertising from Sean Hannity's show, people were breaking their Keurigs, but guess what? Keurig weathered it without caving, and their market share is as strong as ever.

Recently we developed a social strategy for a telecom company that was working to rebuild their reputation after becoming known mostly for dropped calls and spotty service.

They wanted to take a stand on cyberbullying because so much of it happens on devices using their broadband. It was holistic and made sense. But they also knew that they were going to get crucified by trolls at the same time, because that's the world we live in now.

So we were prepared. When trolls came at them with tweets like, "You know who's a bully? Your billing department!" we had a hundred prepared fun tweets in response, with links sending them to cyberbully counseling, and the trolls settled down pretty quickly.

The right way is to know what the criticisms are going to be and handle them without being defensive.

Get someone to play devil's advocate and try to think of the worst thing someone might come at you with. List all the potential criticisms you could receive. Is it just you, because you're an individual?

Or are you a company that needs to make sure that all your employees are prepared? Do you have a social media presence? Do you have a strategy for how to answer trolls who are going to come at you? Are you doing media interviews? You know you're going to get questions. How are you going to answer them?

Most important, remind yourself of your goal, what you said you were going to do, what you've accomplished, and how much progress you've made so far.

Say, "We expected turbulent times, and we understand that we're receiving a lot of criticism, but we're also moving things forward." Then take the high road, not the combative road.

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The dubious wisdom of email signatures

A pre-made email signature would seem to add a nice personal touch to the end of your emails, but often they create the opposite effect, ending your communications with an impersonal "form letter" feel. Internal emails especially could do without the odd formality of contact and job title info that people see again and again. Before you add it, think to yourself: Am I trying to keep some sort of professional distance between myself and the recipient, or do I want to establish a true back-and-forth? If the latter, drop the signature.



Can you stifle your verbal placeholders?

Once in a while, try to become hyper-aware of the times you sprinkle your speech with *so*, *um*, *like*, *I mean*, *well* and other placeholders. It's going to be impossible to get rid of them all—who's ever accomplished that?—but a good place to focus on is the very beginning of your sentences. You sound stronger and more confident when the first word out of your mouth is the actual start of your thought, rather than one of those meaningless “run-ups” we all fall back on when we're not quite sure of ourselves. Make your effort a tag-team affair by having a co-worker playfully monitor you, and vice versa, for one full day to see who succeeds more in this rather difficult task.



Play the 2-second game

Just for one day, try this very subtle communication tweak to see how it changes the way you respond to people: Wait exactly two seconds before saying anything after someone finishes speaking. Those two seconds may be enough to keep you from making a snap criticism, agreeing to something you don't feel great about or going off-topic. It will also keep you from interrupting or falling prey to the “I have something to share too!” fallacy that generates ever more words that don't actually advance a conversation.



Write Emails That Don't Enrage

Are your emails committing some subtle faux pas that cause co-workers to roll their eyes? See if you're guilty of any of these:

1. Excessive curtness. The message conveyed by simple Yes or No answers to complex questions, or even worse, "I don't know," is simple: "Don't bother me." Taking the time to offer up a complete sentence is a common courtesy that lets a co-worker know you've thought about the issue at hand and tried your best to respond to it.

2. Lack of proper punctuation. You don't want a messy stream-of-consciousness sentence without capital letters, commas, or periods make people think you're a bit flighty and unfamiliar with the basic rules of communication.

3. Walls of text. Don't lose the good ideas you have to share in an unreadable mess. Hit that carriage return early and often in a long passage that will be presented on a glowing screen, and remember that bullet points have been hanging around for so long for one reason: they work.

4. Excessive epilogues. Do we really need your life history attached to the end of every email in the form of an email signature that includes way too much information about who you are and what you do? Remember that your email signature is getting blasted over and over again, and your co-workers may tire of the show quickly. You might want to think about making it modest and keeping its design on the minimalist side.

5. Failure to read what you need to. Think how irritating it is when you ask someone multiple questions in an email (a faux pas in itself sometimes!) and get only one answer back, or they just didn't get the point of it. People have a tendency to stop truly reading a message as soon as their mind is caught up by what they perceive to be its most important item. Remember to always absorb and respond to *every* point raised in an email, if only to note that you need to consider a matter further, or can't get around to addressing it fully right now.

6. Subject line laziness. Make the extra effort to tag your email with a subject line that's informative and easy to spot in a sea of others, since people refer back to emails all the time after a too-casual first glance.

Important message? Deliver it yourself

Deciding what messages you can delegate to an employee to communicate is an important choice for any manager. You certainly don't need to communicate everything yourself, but there are also some messages you shouldn't entrust to others. The question is, how should you decide which is which? Here are four criteria:

1. Confidential information? If you're passing on or seeking proprietary business information from a co-worker, customer, vendor, consultant, or anyone else, delegate the task only if your messenger is qualified or approved to be in the know.

2. Personal information? If the communication concerns someone's personal life, communicate yourself or ask the person if he or she minds dealing with a delegate. You might even give him or her a chance to choose or approve the messenger.

3. Negative information? If you have to deliver criticism to someone or inquire into his or her failures or mistakes, make contact yourself to avoid embarrassing the person or putting the messenger on the spot.

4. Complex information? If you're asking about or delivering materials that will probably call for follow-up questions or explanations, it may be more practical to communicate yourself. For example, with material that your messenger isn't familiar or expert with, he or she won't be able to ask or answer the questions necessary to deal with the nuances of the subject. The same problem occurs with questions or exchanges that focus on your opinions or those of the other person; only you know what you need to dig for. In all these cases, you'll probably save time and trouble by doing the communicating yourself.