

Understanding E-Body Language: *Building Trust Online*

By: Robert Whipple

Online communication is so much a part of everyday life that we normally take it for granted until the power goes out. Many of us view e-mail the same as face-to-face communication; we just type information as if we were chatting with someone in the lunchroom – potentially a big mistake.

When we communicate verbally, the majority of information conveyed is through body language and voice inflection; only a small fraction of information is conveyed by the actual words. In electronic communication, all we have are the words as clues to decode information accurately. Whenever we communicate via e-mail, we have a large challenge to convey information accurately.

Imagine the advantage if we could read a kind of “e-body language.” We could understand the intent of notes. That skill would be increasingly important, as the percentage of e-communications continues to rise. There is ample “body language,” and even voice inflection, available in electronic communications if we know how to read the signals.

Unfortunately, most people have had no training on how to read e-body language. They just rely on the written words to impute meaning, which is the equivalent of trying to paint a full-color picture using only red paint. They cannot blend different colors into subtle shades that reflect the richness of the scene.

The ability to read between the lines of text online is not as difficult as it sounds. We have to pay attention to the signals and integrate them into a pattern that yields more information than the words alone. For example, if we know what to look for, the first few words on an e-mail often give vital clues to the tone of the entire note. The difference between “Hi Mary” and “So Mary” is huge in terms of how the reader will interpret the entire note.

Decoding e-body language well is the mirror image of being sensitive to the messages we write. Let's look at some important, but often overlooked, principles of clear online communication.

- Everyone knows that E-mail is different from conversations, but often people do not consciously change communication patterns based on that knowledge. For example, people cannot modify content of an e-mail based on the real-time visible reaction of the other party as is possible in face-to-face conversations. Instead, all of the information is presented at once without feedback. Misunderstandings or hurt feelings are common. No matter how sensitive you try to be, the reader may interpret your comments as being insensitive.
- E-mails are permanent documents. Look closely at the first finger of your hand. It controls your destiny. Once the “send” button is pushed, you cannot take it back, and you normally lose all control over who views your words. The permanent nature of e-mails is often forgotten in the hubbub of everyday interactions, but the implications are serious. Consider the difference between verbal praise and praise via e-mail. When praise is given vocally, the impact is reduced over time as people tend to forget. When praise is given via e-mail, the recipient is likely to read it many times and even print it out to show others at home. The benefit is amplified. Unfortunately, the same more lasting impact occurs on the negative side. A verbal reprimand is an unhappy event for anyone, but time often mitigates the pain. A reprimand in an e-mail tends to endure and even feel worse with time. It will be read over many times, and may be printed out to pass around in the break room.
- Understand the objective of a note before you write it. What are you trying to accomplish? Make sure when you proofread a note that it will achieve your goal. Most people who annoy or anger others in notes did not have that intention. You can eliminate problems if you clarify your objective.
- Less is more in online communication because short notes are more likely to be read and understood. A note must be opened, read, and internalized by the reader to have any value. People who write long, detailed, and technically perfect notes are frequently ignored by others due to the volume of information. Have they communicated or just annoyed?
- Set the tone for the entire note in the “Subject” line and the first sentence of an e-mail. There is a momentum within notes. A poor start means the reader is likely to reject much of the content or at least become defensive. E-mails that start with the right tone are more effective.
- Avoid sending messages that are written when you are angry or otherwise not yourself. At these times, you are not the person you want to portray to the world.

These points seem obvious when you read them, but they are often ignored causing poor online communication. The good news is that, with the proper mindset and attention to detail, significant improvements can be easily made. Let’s look at how three components of E-Body Language have a significant impact on the meaning of notes.

Three T's – Tone, Timing, and Tension

Tone builds additional meaning into notes in dozens of ways. Emoticons and acronyms are two well-known methods that should be used sparingly and only in casual communications. Qualifying conjunctions, such as the word “but,” often convey the opposite meaning from the literal words of a note: “We loved your class, but it is good to have it completed.” Other kinds of expressions might also convey the opposite meaning. For example, “no offense” usually means the writer is expecting you may take offense. Some words or phrases tend to inflame people if not managed carefully. “Let me make it perfectly clear” is a good example.

Much of the tone of notes is contained in the use of pronouns. “You” is the most commonly misused pronoun. “You never let me finish my work” is an example. The reader interprets this as an accusation or lecture and instinctively becomes defensive. Whenever starting a sentence with “you,” check to see if it might send a wrong signal. Overuse of the personal pronouns “I,” “me,” and “my” make the writer sound parochial or egotistical. Too much emphasis on “we” and “they” will signal a competitive atmosphere.

To maintain credibility, avoid using absolutes. “She has *never* done *anything* to help us” is easily proven incorrect. Try to avoid phrases with double meanings, one of which is sarcastic: “His diatribe at the meeting shows what an emotionally intelligent leader he is.” Sarcasm is often disguised as humor, but it can quickly backfire with uncontrolled distributions. Never write something in an e-mail that you would not be willing to have anyone read, because literally anyone might receive a copy.

Timing issues with online communication often lead to problems. A major issue is the asynchronous nature of e-mail. Since people open notes at different times, one person might respond to a note that has already been superseded, leading to much confusion. The antidote is to be alert for misunderstandings based on when people respond to notes.

Sometimes notes arrive in the inbox when readers are in an overload situation or otherwise unable to react positively. The solution to timing issues with e-mail is to use common sense and try to reach your reader at a time when he or she is most receptive. This advice is more critical when emotions are high.

Tension and interpersonal conflict often leave a bloody trail in online correspondence. Inappropriate outbursts of anger in e-mails usually make both parties look foolish. When individuals escalate conflict in online exchanges, it becomes like a childish food fight. The way to stop an “e-mail grenade” battle is to refrain from taking the bait. Do not respond to the attack in kind. Acknowledge a difference of opinion, but do not escalate the situation. Switching to a different form of communication will help avoid a trail of embarrassing notes.

The three T's explain some of the mechanics of e-body language, but why should organizations be vitally interested in this subject?

E-xcellence: The Corporate Case

Global competition has made it more difficult to find and maintain any advantage over the competition. Many groups are “tapped out” of ideas on how to improve operations. They are on a merry-go-round of complex improvement initiatives in a desperate search for something with lasting impact. E-xcellence offers a pragmatic and inexpensive approach to resolve some of the most frustrating issues in organizations quickly.

All organizations face the realities and problems associated with communicating online efficiently. The solutions to these problems appear elusive in most environments, so those organizations smart enough to include e-xcellence as part of their vision have a huge competitive advantage.

Your organization has a sustainable competitive advantage if:

- You live and work in an environment unhampered by the problems of poor online communication.
- Employees are not consumed with trying to sort out important information from piles of garbage email.
- Your coworkers are not focused on one-upmanship and internal turf wars.
- Leaders know how to use electronic communications to build rather than destroy trust.

The corporate improvements are like a ripe apple on the tree, just waiting to be picked. Training in this skill area does not require months of struggling with hidden gremlins. While employees often push back on productivity improvement training, they welcome this topic enthusiastically because it improves their quality of work life.

Once you learn the essentials of e-body language, a whole new world of communication emerges. You will be more adept at decoding incoming messages and have a better sense of how your messages are interpreted by others. You will understand the secret code that is written “between the lines” of all messages and enhance the quality of online communications in your sphere of influence.

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