

Are We Really Becoming Better Communicators?

Kerry Patterson

For years, managers and employees alike have gone to amazing ends to avoid certain controversial, touchy or possibly frightening conversations. For example, how do you tell a co-worker that he has persistent and noxious body odor? That's simple, don't say anything—just make fun of him behind his back. Or what would you say to your boss if you thought she was micro-managing? If you're normal, you say nothing at all. After all, this is your boss we're talking about, right? And here's a good one, how do you give a subordinate a bad performance review? I know of one fellow who actually slid the written review under a stall in the restroom.

When it comes to the advent and use of new technology, the point here is a simple one. Many of us are already far too creative at finding ways to avoid face-to-face conversations—at least high-stakes ones. Throw voice mail, e-mail and instant messaging into the mix, and we have even more tools to help us avoid real, interpersonal communication—even when the situation calls for it. And guess what? With the creation of each new high-tech tool, people hale convenience while complaining endlessly that face-to-face conversations are becoming increasingly rare.

For example, a guy who sits no more than 10 feet away sends a whining, edgy e-mail when he should have simply turned around in his chair and said something. "Have we forgotten how to have a simple conversation?" employees lament. Worse still, people who lack the courage to give negative feedback in person find it quite easy to do so in an e-mail—using all caps to highlight the fact that they think you're a FOUR-STAR JERK!

Most people agree we shouldn't be so insulting (in print, no less), but we all know it's so much faster and emotionally less taxing to send an e-mail. Plus, with e-mail, you have a record of the conversation. You can't argue with these points, but we're still left with the question: When does ease and security trump the need to talk face-to-face? What are the guidelines for choosing your method of talking with others and if you're a CLO or HR executive, how do you communicate these standards to the rest of the organization?

Guidelines for Choosing Conversational Media

E-mail: This is a perfect tool for sending information—words, pictures, etc. Rather than hauling files down the hallway, you send them with the click of the button. It's also terrific for asking questions that have simple answers. And if you do want to have a face-to-face conversation, e-mail works fine for sending an invitation. Obviously, like all electronic communication, e-mail is fast and obviates the need to get up and move. This is also the medium's greatest vulnerability. People use it in place of real conversations when conversations are required.

Voice-mail: This tool has one use: The person you want to chat with isn't available to talk on the phone, so you leave a message. Generally, your message should cover little more than the fact that you called and would like to talk. You can leave modest amounts of information such as where you can be contacted. You can even

ask a simple question so the person can call you back with an answer. But don't leave lengthy complicated messages, give new and difficult assignments, or relay one-half of a conversation. If you do have a more complicated question that can't be answered in a few words, hang up and send an e-mail.

Instant Messaging: This medium is currently hot with younger people, leaving older folks either pointing and complaining or wondering if somehow the technological world has passed them by. At first glance, instant messaging seems more like the starved version of talking on the phone. And to be frank, if you really are talking back and forth in quasi real-time, you probably should be on the phone. At its worst, it's used as a covert tool during meetings.

However, there are good uses for instant messaging. If you want to fire off a quick question, such as "What time are we leaving today?" and you don't want to have to go through dialing, making small talk and then asking—you instant message. Gone is the startup time, plus the person can respond at their leisure—usually within a few seconds or a few minutes.

If you want to use instant messaging to carry on an actual conversation because somehow you like typing on tiny little keys, just don't do it around other people—it drives them nuts. It seems that most humans figure that if you're in a meeting, at a party or on a date, you should be paying heed to the folks 10 feet away—not your cousin back at his apartment.

Phone: We've had the phone around long enough to know most of the dos and don'ts of this medium. It allows for long-distant rapid communication, but starves participants by eliminating nonverbal feedback. In addition, you don't get a written record of your transaction, and it does require some startup time. The phone's primary strength is that it allows for talking, listening and otherwise quasi-conversing. But don't use it when you need to talk in person.

Face-to-face: So, what situations call for you to get off your duff, walk down the hall and talk to the other person in the flesh? Any time you need to read the other person's nonverbal cues. Any time the news is particularly bad or sensitive. Any time you're giving negative feedback. Any time the other person will want to immediately share his or her differing opinion.

For example, don't fire people over the phone. Don't tell your boyfriend you're leaving him with a voice mail. Don't give complicated assignments using e-mail (people need to be able to push back, shift priorities, seek resources, etc.). Don't give delicate feedback through an instant message. Don't announce a controversial decision in a memo. All communication that requires conversing, that is so emotional or devastating that the other person expects a face-to-face interaction, or that is so controversial you need to read the other person's nonverbal reactions requires a genuine tête-à-tête.

How to Know When You're Doing the Wrong Thing

Since people are so good at coming up with reasons why they shouldn't chat in person, take note: If you're letting your fingers do the talking because you're

purposefully trying to avoid a live interaction, you're probably doing the wrong thing. You fear that if you allow the other person to say anything the conversation won't go well, so you cut off any chance of a blowup by sending an e-mail. Bad form.

If you're worried about talking face to face because your past high-stakes and emotional conversations haven't gone well—enough so that you think it's better to send a letter—don't. Instead, improve your crucial conversation skills. Actively work on increasing your ability to step up, speak up and work through your differences. As your skills increase, your desire to rely on electronic methods will be replaced with a genuine willingness to talk in person.

Finally, if you think you're too busy to actually talk face to face—even though your heart says the topic deserves a genuine conversation—you need to find the time. Better still, you need to be honest with yourself. Quit short-changing yourself by saying you're in a leadership position and consequently too busy to meet with your direct reports. Leaders who are too busy to actually talk to their employees aren't really leaders—they're individual contributors who are shirking one of their core leadership responsibilities. So, when your heart tells you it's time to talk to one of your employees, take your hands off the keyboard, get up, walk down the hall and do what every other human being did for tens of thousands of years—have a genuine chat. Your direct reports will appreciate it.

How Do We Disseminate This Message?

If you're a CLO or HR specialist who is entrusted with the responsibility of managing employee communication, you may be wondering how to create a soft landing for each new wave of technology. What will it take to establish new norms, clarify standards and resolve some of the existing problems?

This topic deserves real time, face-to-face communication and is best handled in work teams. Gather workgroups together during a routine in-service discussion or meeting and talk about the pros and cons of each type of media. Then, meet and create a "bug-list." What bugs you about e-mail? What bugs you about instant messaging? This game provides a nice warm-up conversation and helps to quickly establish social borders.

Once you've aired your gripes (and there will be plenty), discuss the benefits of the new tools and agree on what you'll do to make the best use of each. Make sure you create a forum for discussing ongoing problems. Clarify what to do when someone continues to use technology in a way that creates problems rather than solves them. For example, you may want to create a follow-up discussion where people can talk about what they've improved and what still needs work.

Finally, with the advent of each new means of communication (which possibly will further isolate people from one another), discuss the best use of each. Always keep in mind one fact: Left unguarded, high-tech inventions can impair the use of high-touch solutions. Don't let it happen.

Kerry Patterson is author of New York Times bestsellers "Crucial Conversations" and "Crucial Confrontations," an acclaimed keynote speaker, consultant and chief

development officer of VitalSmarts. Kerry can be reached at kpatterson@clomedia.com.

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