Choose the Medium for the Message

May 23, 2014 Joseph Greenblatt

Here’s a basic truth: Leadership is about communication. Here’s another: As casually as we use our communication abilities, no talent needs more directed concentration.

Never before have we had so many channels of communication, including Twitter, video conferencing, face-to-face dialog, text, Facebook. The list is not only endless, it is growing. And never before have we had so many opportunities to be reinterpreted or misunderstood.

It is essential, in all of our interactions, not only to choose the proper platform but also to choose carefully the words it will carry. If you have ever received a scolding email, you know the importance of picking the appropriate medium and message.

Communication (in fact, leadership as a whole) is largely about engaging your team, and it is about listening. People want to know they are respected and heard. The form of conversation you use has to promote dialog, and it’s up to you to weigh each platform for its ability to promote that dialog. Do you need the team assembled face-to-face? Is the dialog you seek appropriate for Facebook or LinkedIn? What is the level of urgency or sensitivity?

From an analytical perspective, it’s a daunting task to undertake optimal communication with all of the alternatives we have at our disposal. At the risk of sounding like a reverse ageist, I have seen younger people move seamlessly between various types of social media but not often it seems with a lot of thought about what should be where. As they move closer to their professional careers, they will have to be a lot more thoughtful about what platform they use and how
they choose to use it. But so do we all.

But there’s also a directive aspect to leadership that can inform the platform you choose. Do you need to be on the record? Maybe a mass email is appropriate. Is there a corrective action you must impose? Then it is time for a closed-door meeting.

Once you have selected the platform, it is time to address content. As we rely increasingly on smaller devices to stay in touch, there is a growing need for thoughtful clarity even to something as apparently mundane as the creation of a subject line. What you put there can be critical to engagement and efficient response.

I recently came across some tips for writing to-the-point subject lines. It included such suggestions as using: * FYI: “For Your Information,” implying that no reply is needed; * URGENT, intended as an eye-catcher and not to be used lightly; * EOM: “End of Message,” used when the entire email is in the subject line.

*Forbes* magazine last year ran a list of rules for emailing, and it’s important to keep them in mind when you’re dashing them off at machine-gun speed. Here are just a few:

1. “Make questions as specific as possible. ‘What do you think about the proposal?’ is not a good question. ‘Can we go ahead with the vendor’s proposal of $20,000 by Friday?’ is better.
2. “If you want to send an angry email, wait on it. If it is urgent, get on the phone instead.”
3. “Don’t hijack a thread on one topic to discuss another topic. Start a new email thread instead, with the relevant subject line and recipients.
4. “Don’t pile on. No one needs a 20th ‘This looked great to me’ email.”

All of this may sound basic, and that’s the point. In the rush of our daily business lives we often take the basics for granted and dilute the impact of our message. These are important steps not only to improving the nature of your
communication but also to improving the efficiency of your team.

Don’t forget that people judge you by the nature of your communication—as much as you judge them. People will not always remember what you say, but they will remember how you made them feel. Any communicator has to keep that in mind.

The concept of servant leadership has been (or at least I hope it has been) a transformative notion in my life, both within and outside the business community. A prime point in this context is the true challenge we as leaders face whenever we attempt to reach out to our colleagues. Good communication is subject not only to our ability to choose words and platforms well, but on the listeners’ ability or willingness to receive the message in those words or on that platform.

Given that rather unnerving truth, you have to ask yourself, can I be truly an effective communicator in 140 characters? Am I mixing my message when I mix social media and business media?

Our ability to impact our constituents and our colleagues, I would say our very growth as leaders, depends fully on how we answer such questions.

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