

EMPATHIC CONNECTIONS IN WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS



FOR EXECUTIVES, MANAGERS, SUPERVISORS AND OTHER LEADERS:

TIPS FOR WRITTEN ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION AROUND DIFFICULT ISSUES

Email, text or IM is rarely the best format to discuss sensitive or difficult issues or difficulties in relationships, as we lose facial expression, body language and tone. Sometimes we have no choice though, when we need to communicate with large groups of people. The following are tips for emails to all employees or other large groups:

⊘ **AVOID** written electronic communication to individuals when addressing: disagreements, misunderstandings or any difficult emotional content.



DISCLOSE SOMETHING PERSONAL OURSELVES

We all have different levels of comfort with self- disclosure, so it is important to stick to what we are comfortable with. If we disclose more than what we are comfortable with, it will make the recipient feel uncomfortable too. The goal is to disclose something that 1) is true 2) demonstrates our humanness and 3) connects us to the recipients as fellow travelers (mitigating power differentials).

Examples:

- » "I haven't slept well for the past week, because I am worrying so much about what I need to share with you all today."
- » "I have an elderly father in a care home and I haven't been able to see him in 3 weeks. I'm guessing some of you are having similar experiences"
- » Narrate your thinking process: "I am torn about sharing this information, but made the decision to go forward because..."



USE 'WE', 'US' AND 'OUR'

Instead of 'I' and 'you', when possible. 'We', 'us', and 'our' are pronouns that join us with others, shoulder to shoulder. These words indicate equality and are the bias for most inspirational orations.

Examples:

- » **'We** are all in unknown territory right now' **VS** 'I know **you** all are in unknown territory right now'.
- » 'All of **us** are experiencing loss, in some sense' **VS**. 'Many of **you** are experiencing loss...'



PERSPECTIVE TAKING

When communicating to groups of people in person or by email, we rarely know what others are feeling, and of course, not everybody has the same feelings, even when they are in the same situation. Despite this, we can still think deeply about the group we are communicating with, consider their experience, and guess what they may be feeling. This is called "perspective taking" and is the basis of cognitive empathy. We can also word the message, to account for the fact that we cannot be sure about others' feelings.

Examples:

- » "I imagine many of you are feeling..."
- » "In this moment, many of us may be feeling...."
- » "Feeling [X] is so common right now...."



ACKNOWLEDGE DIFFICULTY FIRST

Sometimes when there have been difficulties, we might want to send a 'peppy' email, to cheer the team, motivate our department, or encourage an optimistic outlook. This will usually be more effective if we acknowledge the difficulty first. Humans have a difficult time healing, getting current, and moving on when something has not been sufficiently acknowledged. This can be frustrating if we were raised in a "don't wallow/I'll give you something to cry about" family. We tend to want ourselves and others to move on, fast! Sometimes we fear that acknowledging hardship, loss, wrongs, mistakes and emotional wounds will make people think about them more. However, the opposite is usually true. Once acknowledgment has occurred, people are more able to let go and hear positives.

Example:

- » “This is a time of loss for all of us, in some sense. Here at work, we have had to furlough our fellow team members and close a clinic. We’ve stopped meeting together and some of us have even lost seeing each other in person. Our children’s and our own emotional health may be challenged right now, and we don’t know when it will all end. There are also some rays of sun...”

**MAKE MEANING**

This is also referred to as “sense-making”. We have a human need to make sense of the world around us, to make meaning out of our lives. For some, meaning-making might be structured in a set of spiritual or religious beliefs. For most of us though, even with a faith of some kind, we effort anew to make meaning of each difficulty or challenge we experience. Sometimes the meaning one makes out of something is not particularly helpful (believing that something is punishment from God or believing that stress is always bad for our health). While we can’t control how other people appraise or evaluate situations, we can share a positive interpretation of events.

Examples:

- » “Challenges can bring us closer together and make us stronger.”
- » “In times like these, we recalibrate to what is most deeply important in our lives...”

**RESPOND TO FEELINGS FIRST**

If our staff share feelings with us (collectively or individually) and also share the reason for their feelings, it is important to respond to the feelings first.

Example:

- » “It sounds like there is a lot of frustration about this new process, and many people are confused” **VS.** “we are instituting a new training for this process...”

**USE THE OBSERVER EXPECTANCY EFFECT**

We can communicate to staff that we are sure they will be able to meet the challenge. We can do this by sharing past examples of this, by calling out particular characteristics or strengths that they have, or by asking them to engage in the solution with us.

- » “For those of you who were here then, we were able to weather the deep financial difficulties of 2006-2009 and the [X and X]. You all have been committed, steadfast and incredibly focused on helping patients through this all. I have no doubt we will get through this too, weathered and wiser... I’m going to be developing a steering committee/developing recommendations/ holding a town hall to address this, and would like volunteers to [X, X, and X].”

- ⊘ **AVOID Using “I know how you feel”.** Most of us have already been stung when saying this in our personal lives! It is one of those sentiments that is motivated by compassion, but rarely lands that way. We can replace it by saying, “I can’t imagine how you might feel”, and get the same effect of conveying care and concern.
- ⊘ **AVOID Putting a positive spin on things before acknowledging hardships.** If many people have shared that they are worried about furloughs, or frustrated about getting out of clinic on time, we don’t want to send an written communication telling people ‘not to worry’ or the solution for getting out on time, before we acknowledge and normalize the feeling.
- ⊘ **AVOID Responding to feelings with facts.** If we have a lot of staff sharing feelings of fear or anger or sadness, and we respond by sharing (in person or by email) that the data doesn’t support those feelings...that will not go over well. We have a long history of this in healthcare. For example, “Doctor, I am scared about the surgery” is met with “Don’t worry, it is one of the most common surgeries” or “Your surgeon is the best...”. These responses are rarely reassuring despite the good intention behind it. A good guideline is to acknowledge feelings first, before sharing information.
- ⊘ **AVOID Engaging in an anger, defensiveness or criticism cascade:** When we receive a written communication that feels harsh, pointed, critical or otherwise unpleasant, it is often our first response to fire something back to correct, defend, question or react. No matter how many times an email has been batted back and forth, we can always take a deep breath and.... pause. There is nothing that can make a situation worse like responding quick, in kind.