



# **Managing Your Email and Electronic Body Language**

When you speak to someone in person, your conversation partner not only listens to your message, he or she also notices your body language, the tone of your voice, the words you choose, and the speed and fluency of your communication.

What is this conversation partner trying to understand?

- 1) "What is this other person trying to communicate?"
- 2) "Is there a second hidden message that I should be looking for?"
- 3) "What is the perceived relationship between this person and myself?"
- 4) "How does he/she feel about me right now?"
- 5) "In general, what is he/she feeling emotionally?"
- 6) "Where is this person's attention focused?"
- 7) "How do I feel about this person?"
- 8) "How should I react to the information that is being communicated?"

Many of these questions we never ask aloud. We might not even consciously think them. Yet, our brain tries to answer these questions using whatever data is available.

With emails, texts, and phone calls, your conversation partners are looking for the same information with far fewer clues. Making this communication harder, our conversations often take place in an environment full of distractions and conflicting signals.

With reduced attention and limited unspoken signals, you need to be far more intentional in your electronic communications. Here are 8 steps to ensure you send the right message.

## **Build rapport**

First, build rapport. Take a moment to reinforce a positive relationship.

Whenever possible, include the person's name. In an initial email, this should be in the greeting: *Dear Tracy* or a less formal *Hi Tracy*. In later emails, this could include something like, *Thanks, Tracy* — mentioned at any point in the body of the message.

Since we can't foster emotions with our body language, we need to foster these emotions with our words. Mention a shared experience. This could be as simple as, "I hope it finally stopped raining in Chicago," if you'd discussed the rain in a previous conversation. Or it could be, "Thanks for taking the time to speak with me yesterday." Or, it could be, "That's a great point. I really appreciate you mentioning it."

Where you can, say thank you or otherwise express gratitude.

## **Keep the message simple**

Second, keep your message simple. If you try to do too much, you can create confusion and overwhelm, and decrease your ability to have a specific intended impact.

In a face-to-face conversation, you communicate back and forth. You share some information, check for understanding, then receive a response. Only then do you advance the conversation.

Electronic communication should function in a similar way.

If you have several goals you want to achieve, consider writing more than one email. Save the later goals as drafts and come back to them later. If you have to include multiple



goals in one email, assume that at least one of these goals will be overlooked. So be ready to follow up later.

### **Ask questions**

Show that your attention is focused on the other person by asking questions. Asking questions also shows that you value the other person's abilities, goals, and feelings.

You can ask questions that check for understanding. For instance, "Was this along the lines of what you were thinking about?"

You can ask questions that create buy-in. "Would you be available to help me with this?"

And you can ask questions to establish rapport. "How's your day going?"

### **Share your message in bite-sized chunks.**

Reading text on a small phone screen or a bright computer monitor takes effort. If you make reading your message too much work, you can distract your audience from your message, or worse, induce frustration.

Long paragraphs don't work. Instead, a paragraph should be no longer than a couple of sentences.

Long lists can be distracting. Instead, use short bullet points.

Try to use shorter sentences. If a sentence becomes too long, split it up.

In longer messages, use bolded subheads. Each subhead can separate one idea or group of ideas from the next.

## **If your intention is not 100% clear, explain it**

“Please call me to discuss,” can be a very scary phrase. Is this person angry? Confused? Have limited access to email?

This is just one of many common business phrases that can have a very different emotional impact than intended. And this ambiguity and emotional weight can harm relationships. Yet it's easy to fix.

If the purpose of a message isn't clear, explain it.

For the previous example, this would look like, “Sorry, I'm a bit confused. Can we talk in person to discuss it?” or “This would be much quicker to explain over the phone. Call me when you have a minute.”

## **Be careful of your emotional impact**

In face-to-face communication, when body language or voice cues are hidden, we become suspicious. Our mind begins to wonder why this information is being concealed from us. Is their intent malicious or less than honorable? These concealed cues activate our danger detection systems.

In electronic communication, many nonverbal cues are always hidden from us. As a result, our danger detection systems are on alert, at least with people we don't know well.

In other words, people can be a bit paranoid when reading emails.

To alleviate these concerns, you need to be very careful of your emotional impact. Building rapport helps to deactivate this person's defenses. But there is more that you can do.

First, avoid sarcasm. Say what you mean as clearly as you can. When reading an email, your recipient can't see your smile or hear your playful tone. Keep humor to people you know well, mostly friends and family.

If you're emotional intentions could come across as slightly ambiguous, you can use emoticons like the sidewise smiley face :) to signal your good intent. These emoticons come across as a bit informal, so they should be used later in conversations with people whom you already know (and then, sparingly).

Be careful of exclamation points. Exclamation points are great to express enthusiasm in slightly informal communication. And they work well in combination with positive words such as, "Great!" or "Thank You!" Yet when used too often, they suggest that your communications aren't completely sincere. For particularly enthusiastic messages, you can use up to two exclamation points.

Avoid all caps. ALL CAPS INDICATES YELLING. You want to avoid creating such an impression.

Avoid emotionally loaded words, negative words, or phrases that can be taken the wrong way. If you aren't sure of a message's potential negative impact, read the message in an angry voice to see what could happen. Or have someone read it to you in an angry voice.

Along these same lines, don't expect that everyone who emails you will follow these rules. If you're ever reading an email from a coworker and find yourself taking offense, pause and try to re-read in a completely neutral tone. It's natural for us to read in a way in which we imagine a person speaking, so there may be times when you assume tension or inconsideration is present when in fact, it wasn't implied.

### **Communicate your availability**

Some people expect their texts, chat messages, and emails to be answered immediately. Others don't. And for some of these rapid responders, slow replies are experienced as a cold shoulder.

To avoid these problems, provide your typical response timetable.

When you start communicating with someone new, let them know your expected response time. For example, "When I am meeting with clients, I always give them my full attention, including switching off email. So it can take up to a few hours before I can follow up with your emails. Even my spouse has to wait."

If your availability changes from your normal pattern, consider setting up an auto-reply message. For example, if you usually reply within an hour, but at one point during the week are attending a conference, create an automatic reply message to share this information and when you expect to be available.

### **You don't have to use electronic communication**

Email is great. Yet, when you are struggling to communicate your message over email, consider picking up the phone or meeting in person. Sometimes the "old-fashioned" ways work best. And there's no need to spend hours crafting an email when something can be resolved over the phone in less than fifteen minutes.