



Update

Deliberate Communication

by Laura Schildkraut

When you begin preparing any substantial type of communication whether verbal (i.e., presentation) or written (i.e., detailed email,) you likely start by thinking about content: what you want to say. While content is critically important, here in this *Executive Update*, I propose you think *deeply* about content, not first, not second, not third, not even fourth — but fifth in your line of steps to get to that content.

KNOW YOUR OBJECTIVE

The best place to start when thinking about any communication is the objective. What is your objective in conducting this communication? What is your desired outcome? When the other person either finishes reading your email or leaves your presentation, what do you want him or her to do, think, feel, and so forth? That's where to start. How can you make good decisions regarding content and tone if you don't know your desired outcome?

Take this example: you are going to an executive meeting to provide status on a multimillion-dollar project. Consider these two scenarios:

1. If you want the executives to leave you alone to complete the project, you'll focus on how things are moving along smoothly and frame any challenges as "under control."
2. If you want additional support — while you'll still discuss what's going well (you certainly don't want the project cancelled) — you'll focus more on the problem areas. You want to ensure your project gets the support it requires.

Neither scenario requires being untruthful. You will just frame and focus your content differently, depending on your desired outcome. When using this approach, it is

critically important for you to be crystal clear on your desired outcome. That's *deliberate communication!*

KNOW YOURSELF AS THE COMMUNICATOR

The next thing you want to think about is yourself as the communicator. What is your credibility with respect to topic and audience? Does your intended audience see you as a subject matter expert with high credibility, or will you have to convince them that you know what you're talking about? The last time you interacted with this particular set of people, were you a star or did you let them down? Maybe they don't know you at all. What's your reputation?

While some aspects of credibility travel with you, such as being inherently honest and truthful, most credibility is situational. Imagine you and your staff have been working on two projects. Progress on Project 1 is going wonderfully well. It seems your team can "do no wrong": the system will be installed on time, on budget, and the users are thrilled. But Project 2 just isn't going well. This team can't seem to catch a break, and it appears it can "do no right": the schedule slipped, the project went overbudget, and the resulting usability did not meet expectations.

When you talk to the Project 1 user team, you have exceptionally high credibility, and those team members will be inclined to approve whatever (reasonable) projects you propose. Conversely, when you walk into a room with the Project 2 user team, you'll have to be more apologetic and deferential. You'll need to carefully build up to whatever requests you make, and you may struggle for every approval.

Knowing your credibility will have a huge impact on the content you elect to include, how you organize that content, and the tone with which you write or speak. If your credibility is low or unknown, you may need to start by introducing yourself with respect to the topic, establishing how and why you come to be addressing this area.

On the contrary, if your credibility is high, then the introduction can be very brief and you may have the

luxury of providing less background. In terms of organization, you'll be more direct, rather than needing an indirect approach to build up to your request. Your tone can be lighter and more casual. Regardless of the scenario, you can't make good choices about how to approach your content if you don't first think about your situational credibility.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Now it's time to think about your audience. Certainly, you will need to determine basic knowledge like who, besides the decision maker, should be included on an email and who should be around the table for a presentation. But thinking about the audience must go deeper than whom to cc: and whom to invite. Before you can think about content, you must think about what your audience already knows. If these people are familiar with your subject matter, there's little need for deep background. If they aren't, extensive background will be necessary for them to understand the scope of your content.

How do you expect they will feel about your request? Do they have any biases toward these types of projects? Of all the benefits of your proposed idea, which will most likely resonate with this audience? You'll want to focus more on those benefits. Is your desired action difficult (or expensive) for them? If so, a richer, more compelling proposal will be necessary. Ultimately, before deciding on your content, you must think about how your audience views the world.

I remember a conversation I had with a business school dean many years ago. I needed to request approval for additional credits for a project I had underway. I was particularly nervous about this conversation because if the dean was to decline my request, I would need to look for another job. So I sought help from a professor who taught negotiations. I remember her words exactly, "He's a numbers guy; give him numbers." I left her office frustrated. What kind of numbers made any sense for my request?

As I continued to plan my difficult conversation, I thought about all the things I could quantify. But

the quantifications seemed silly and forced. Then I realized that I had reviewed more than 100 résumés per quarter, on my own. It was not an official part of my job. I added that to my list.

I began the meeting by reminding the dean that recent administrative decisions had impacted me negatively, but that I've been a good sport. I rambled through my list of accomplishments. His immediate response was, "Uh huh ... Uh huh."

So, I continued, "And, on my own time, I reviewed over 100 résumés per quarter."

"How many?" he perked up.

"Over 100. More during spring quarter."

"That's a lot," he responded.

The whole feel of the meeting warmed up after that. Wow, she was right: "He's a numbers guy; give him numbers." What kind of "guy" are you talking to or writing to? What does your recipient care about?

As an aside, the other thing I realized through this exercise is that nobody spends more time thinking about your accomplishments than you. I went into this meeting reluctant to remind the dean of my accomplishments over that past year. I had assumed they would be top of mind for him. They weren't. His accomplishments are top of mind for him. I needed to remind him of mine.

Anyway, before you start to write or prepare a presentation, *really* know your audience.

KNOW YOUR MEDIUM

These days, communication channels have become so much more varied and complicated. Do you text or email, do you call or stop by, do you present in person or over video chat? So many choices. In most cases, the medium you use will be obvious. For example, if someone sends you an email, you're most likely to respond in the same manner. But before you respond, I propose you spend a few moments thinking about whether that is the best channel for your message. Is it the channel that will most likely achieve your objective?

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For example, some email conversations are likely to go back and forth several times, or may be at risk of being forwarded along in a way that is not advantageous for you. It's best to make these types of interactions verbal, so a phone call may be more effective. Don't let yourself be locked into a medium that isn't most likely to achieve your desired outcome.

KNOW YOUR CONTENT

With your objective, self-assessment, audience, and medium in place, it's finally time to think deeply about your content. Based on what you hope to achieve, your level of credibility, and what the audience already knows and has biases toward, you probably have a good sense of what content to include. Here are a few more thoughts to make your content work most effectively.

Less Is More

Everyone is busy. The longer your email or document, the less likely your recipient(s) will read it *now*. Longer content tends to go in the "later" pile. You never want your work in that pile! The same holds true for longer meetings/presentations. Conversations of any kind that will take more than 30 minutes are much harder to schedule and often move out on the calendar. Think very carefully about what content will have the most impact and bring you closer to your desired outcome. Share that; skip the rest.

Use Format to Your Advantage

When you open an email and see a big chunk of text, are you excited to dig right in and read it? Probably not. (Yet, do you ever find yourself sending those types of emails? Probably.) The reason why you lack excitement in reading such an email is obvious. Large chunks of text generally don't get the extra thought required to pare them down and helpfully section them off with subheads. Such content is basically a first draft, with possibly a once-over edit pass. It takes less time to construct.

So, remember, your objective is not to hit send as quickly as possible; rather, it's to achieve your desired outcome. Which is more likely to do that: a big chunk of text that nobody wants to read, or something carefully constructed? If you don't meet your objective with the first communication, you have to go back and communicate again. That takes more time than being highly thoughtful and deliberate the first time.

The same holds true for presentations and meetings. As you plan your content, instead of just thinking about what you want to convey, consider how to get your audience engaged and involved. Yes, it will take more time and effort in planning. But you're so much more likely to achieve your desired outcome — and isn't that the whole point of the conversation?

Do the Hard Work, Rather than Expecting Your Audience to Do It

This follows from the previous point. If you do the hard work of editing down your content so that you present the most relevant and compelling information, your audience will more likely stay engaged and respond as you'd wish. But you need to go a step further into the analysis behind what you hope to achieve.

For example, if you are proposing a new project and there are three alternative approaches, you can either merely explain the alternatives or provide a "strengths and weaknesses" analysis that will help your audience decide. Chances are you have a preferred approach and you can support your preference well. Take the extra time to provide thoughtful and well-formatted background analysis, so that your audience doesn't have to. This will not only lead to the response you want, but you'll also get your response more quickly.

As you lock your content, ask yourself whether you've done everything you can to make your desired outcome as logical and easy for your audience as possible.

NO SUCH THING

There's no such thing as business communication that is purely to inform. Let me say that again — because it's not obvious and is crucially important. *There's no such thing as business communication that is purely to inform.* Think about it. If you share information with someone, and that person says, "That's interesting," but doesn't do, think, or feel anything with that information, what was the point?

Any time you enter into professional communication, you have a desired outcome. Being clear in your own mind about what that outcome is will help your communication be more deliberate and more effective. Thinking through your objective, credibility, audience, medium, and content may appear to take a great amount of time, but imagine how many more conversations will go your way when you do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Schildkraut is the founder of Onboarding Gen Y whose mission is to help organizations attract, retain, and see excellence from their Gen Y employees. This is accomplished through consulting and workshops and establishing internal, reciprocal mentorship programs. Ms. Schildkraut is a faculty member at the University of Washington, teaching classes focused on innovation, entrepreneurship, professionalism, and communication. Her course entitled "Management Lessons from *The Apprentice*" earned her national recognition from CNN and *Dateline*. Ms. Schildkraut was the host and co-executive producer of *Information Technology Leaders, On the Career Path*, and *Information Matters*, television shows that aired on ResearchChannel and UWTV. Prior to Onboarding Gen Y and the University of Washington, she worked for Microsoft, Ogilvy & Mather, and the US National Association of Securities Dealers (NASD). Ms. Schildkraut holds an MBA from NYU's Stern Business School with concentrations in IS and marketing. She can be reached at laura@OnboardingGenY.com.