Chapter XXXV
Virtual Writing as Actual Leadership

James R. Zimmerman
James Madison University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter applies the evolving principles of electronic communication rhetoric and recent leadership theory to the daily practice of e-mail composition by leaders in large organizations. It articulates principles and techniques for new and midlevel leaders who most need to use e-mail. This analysis specifies opportunities and pitfalls and recommends that e-mail be a planned, significant part of an overall strategy to communicate the leader’s vision while offering support and information to peers and superiors. The discussion addresses rhetorical principles and practices as they apply to the advantages and disadvantages of leadership via e-mail, and it advocates a composition process to increase effectiveness and reduce inefficiency for all levels of leadership in large organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Our use of e-mail, like that of automobiles and firearms, can be hazardous to our own health. Great leaders tend to avoid driving their own cars and carrying their own guns—they have people who do those things for them—and they tend not to send e-mail because of its inherent, highly-publicized risk factors. The obvious alternative to the challenge of using e-mail for leadership purposes is to delegate the task, but this safer path means missed opportunities, and it insulates leaders from key information and rich relationships even as it removes them from the many distractions, complications, and hazards that e-mail entails. Nevertheless, for leaders not absolutely at the very top of the organizational food chain, e-mail is the proverbial necessary evil, and it is instructive to explore its typical uses and how it can be leveraged most effectively for leadership purposes.

Contemporary leadership theory articulates a set of fairly standard general principles, but these are often inapplicable to e-mail—at least at first glance. Everything in 21st Century leadership literature indicates that each person in an organization is expected to assume some kind of leadership role, and that role presumably includes
the judicious use of carefully calibrated electronic messages that are distinct from purely informational content. Given the gray areas and the high stakes involved, leadership through e-mail is a risky but required art form with ill-defined rules and rewards that stand in need of clarification, and it is crucial for the most vulnerable leaders, the newly-promoted or recently-hired, those identified as “high potential,” and middle managers throughout large organizations who are expected to build and lead teams during periods of rapid change.

Leadership, when it succeeds, makes everyone better; in the presence of good leadership, the organization, the associates, and the leaders themselves thrive. E-mail, when it is at its best, is an essential component in the lifeblood of fast-paced organizations that allows them to collaborate creatively in the identification and exploitation of competitive advantages. But leadership theory and e-mail practice both include gray areas of ambiguity, uncertainty, and unreliability. Communication is the means by which leaders work their magic in person and otherwise, but, despite books and seminars devoted to the secrets of leadership, there are still mysteries about the way successful leaders communicate. Although these mysteries apply to all forms of communication, they particularly apply to electronic communication, with its odd shelf-life nature that combines the usually ephemeral with the possibly permanent. Two questions present themselves: “What can we say for sure about how leaders use e-mail effectively?” and “What aspects of e-mail composition can be learned, practiced, and improved upon?”

Often, we do not notice the little things that make leaders stand out. We are well aware of the big things, like the way the leader’s image is projected, what his or her reputation is, and how a charismatic CEO can change the atmosphere in a room or an entire company. Yet it is usually the little things that set us up for noticing the larger ones. Great leaders are masters of the fine points of audience-and-purpose consciousness and, especially, message delivery (or performance). In other words, leaders consciously “model” productive attitudes and behaviors in the details of their daily professional life. Subordinates presumably watch and learn. But one of the “little” things in leadership communication today is the use of e-mail, and top leaders avoid using it, except for formal, carefully-crafted, and usually lengthy announcements. Instead, it is the leadership levels below the very top rung of the executive world where we find the most useful modeling of creative and productive e-mail, but these midlevel and emerging leaders lack the usual master models to guide them. They must find their own way—and they are. A careful look at the quality of the electronic communication of a successful midlevel leader reveals a judicious use of electronic mail, with careful attention to tone, content, consistency, clarity, brevity, and audience-and-purpose precision.

MATURATION OF A FORM

Now that the novelty and freshness of e-mail is a thing of the past century, the mode is established as a routine form of business communication, and its consequent ubiquity is now decried much more than celebrated. Magazine articles, Web sites, and even books are now devoted to tips on e-mail, most of them obvious to everyone who has learned the hard way since the form began rearing its timid little subject lines over three decades ago. Norms of etiquette and appropriateness have converged with opportunities to transcend the traditional hard copy memo to leave us with something both more and less. For new and midlevel professionals aspiring to leadership roles, e-mail is an essential and continuous form of communication, but it can be particularly problematic and even downright dangerous. Immediacy and interactivity are obvious characteristics of the new form that give it distinct advantages, while casualness (even to the point of reckless impulsiveness), frequency, and length are obvious hazards. One thing to consider carefully and often before the unfor-
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