Communication Etiquette: Adapting to the times of COVID-19

Our workplaces are experiencing a range of changes and transitions during this age of COVID-19, including adapting to changing needs around communication.

During these trying times many of us are working remotely for the first time, juggling unexpected work-life demands, and working in a climate of ambiguity and uncertainty. Now, more than ever, clear, concise and empathic communication is needed to further a sense of belonging, foster respect, and provide direction. However, with our increased reliance on technology for communication comes the increased likelihood of misunderstanding and misinterpretation in our messages.

Written communication doesn't capture intonation, facial expressions, and other important sources of information we use during face-to-face interactions. We often fail to appreciate how these sources of information are lost in email, group chats, virtual calls or texts. We tend to fill in the gaps by jumping to negative conclusions—for instance, assuming others are upset or frustrated with us.

To help ensure mutual understanding and intended interpretation, follow these communication etiquette guidelines as we all learn to better navigate our changing work practices amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recognize that people are juggling work-life priorities.
Our work and personal lives have suddenly been disrupted. Individuals now are juggling family, health, school, and financial demands that they didn't have before the pandemic. Juggling multiple priorities also involves adjusting daily schedules. Therefore, be clear in your communication about expectations for replies to messages.

- "I don't expect an immediate response to this…"
- "While I am sending this in the late hours of the day, I don't expect you to reply until tomorrow's regular work day hours."

Keep most communications concise, not as extreme brevity.
Extreme brevity is usually not helpful—it can be cold and confusing. In general, though, keeping your communications clear and succinct will help maintain efficiency and professionalism, especially when a chat or email thread involves many coworkers. If you have more thoughts and information to share, then suggest a one-on-one voice or video call.

Proofread.
Like it or not, how you communicate shapes how people think of you; and by extension, whatever it is you're trying to accomplish. Spend a couple of extra seconds to proofread your message – check grammar, spelling, tone and clarity – which will help avoid any unnecessary time to re-clarify in the future.

Clarify the subject matter and the recipients.
Quick and easy are our preferences for communicating virtually. Double check if you are replying to an email/chat thread to write about the same or different topic. For example, if you're replying to an email/chat but changing the topic or starting a new conversation, change the subject line to briefly summarize the new conversation topic. If you're replying to a message and keeping the subject matter mostly the same, leave the subject line alone. Additionally, make sure when you hit reply or reply-all that you are indeed selecting your intended recipients. Take a second to double check why and who you have selected as the recipients of your message -- Is it really necessary to hit Reply All to all 50 people in a previous email to just say 'thank you' to the original sender?

Sign on and off with respect for the current climate.
We all are going through the same thing, so express empathy in a few words which will go a long way.

- "I hope you and your family are doing well."
- "Hoping all is well in spite of these unsettling times."
- "Be well"
- "Take care and be safe"

Take sensitive conversations offline.
Choose clarity over convenience. Virtual communication (email, messaging, texts) is often our default for quick and convenient communication; especially as we become more reliant on virtual chats and email. But if a topic requires back-and-forth dialogue or touches on a potentially sensitive topic, turn to a conversation via phone/video chat instead.

Provide clear communication expectations.
As a team member you can suggest to your manager to develop clear team guidelines for communication if they don't already exist. As a manager, lead with good communication practices by providing clear communication expectations to your team during this time of change and transition.

Resources for general professional email etiquette and effectiveness:

[WLD Self-Guided Learning module](#)