

PEOPLE IN YOUR COMPANY ARE CONFUSING “COMMUNICATION” WITH “CONVERSATION:” Corporate Media Policies for Your Consideration.



Our CEO client was furious. He was seeking to consummate a deal. Five hours ago, the CEO asked a critical stakeholder if the deal was “on.” If it is not on, he wanted to understand what needs to be done to get the deal over the “finish line.”

He had sent an email asking for a status report. No response.

He had sent a text message. No response.

Embedded in this executive’s anger are five assumptions:

My electronic communications go to the right address.
My electronic communications are always received.
My electronic communications are read within two hours
after my having sent it.
My electronic communications are never accidentally
deleted.
Electronic communication is the appropriate media for
something that may require a conversation.

Are We Managing Our Mobile Devices or Are Mobile Devices Managing Us?

Sherry Turkle is the Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology in the Program in Science, Technology, and Society at MIT. She received a joint doctorate in sociology and psychology from Harvard University and is a licensed clinical psychologist. Her book *Reclaiming Conversation* is a well written, lucid, and research-oriented exploration about people's relationship with their mobile devices.

Leaders need to be sensitive that those who are starting careers at your company today have never been without mobile devices.

Dr. Turkle makes the case that constant interaction with mobile devices changes thinking patterns.

Communication is not Conversation:

It is easier to send an electronic message than to arrange a face-to-face meeting or a telephone call. Most employees automatically go with the easier form of communication.

Consider your mobile device today: how many voice messages did you receive relative to the number of emails?

Emails are an efficient way of communicating information.

But they are a terrible way to have a conversation.

And many of your employees do not understand the distinction between “communication” and “conversation.”

That is a problem at your company!

Communication is sending information one way.

Confirming a date for a meeting is a good use for emails.

Conversation, on the other hand, requires both parties to be “fully present to one another.” Conversation is where we exercise empathy. Conversation is where we experience the delight of being understood by those who may not agree with us.

Conversation enhances self-reflection. Communication reinforces one's existing beliefs.

Like the political arena, transactions in business suffers from an excess of communication and a dearth of conversation.

Texting is not conversation.

Using digital media, your employees can hide from peers yet remain connected to them.

How to Symbolize You are Open to Conversation.

Below is a site you can easily see in any playground:

Mother takes her daughter to the playground. As the daughter is ready to go down the slide she glances towards her mother for approval. But mother is looking at her mobile device and is lost in responding to emails.

The daughter realizes that her mother is physically in the playground yet not "with" her.

Dr. Turkle states that the very sight of a silent mobile devices on a table sends a signal to others around the table that you are less connected to the real people around you. If we think you might be interrupted, others tend to keep the conversations light.

In our work with clients, we teach them how to conduct meetings using mobile devices: physically take out the

device and turn it off in front of the other people in the room. This is a nonverbal way of communicating, “I am truly with you.”

At the same time the mobile technology insures that no phone call or electronic message will be missed.

One of our clients proudly spoke about his new Apple Watch. It has a blue tooth connection to his mobile device. Instead of picking up his mobile device and examining the screen there would be a buzz on his wrist. He could discretely gaze at his watch to see if the call was important enough to interrupt the conversation.

Really?

Who can't figure out the symbolism of a raised elbow plus a simultaneous glance at one's wrist?

Crisis of Empathy.

Communication is not conversation. Using a team meeting as an opportunity to empty your email inbox is not conversation.

Limiting media information to news feeds that happen to provide the information that interests you empowers intellectual isolation and ignorance. It reduces your peripheral vision.

As we isolate ourselves we begin to lose empathy.

Mobile devices may re-wire our brains to make us less empathic.

Dr. Turkle calls this the “Goldilocks effect.” Face-to-face communication increases the chances of getting too close, too personal, or disrupting one’s deeply held beliefs. Online communication avoids such disappointments from happening.

Digital relationships are not too close and not too far.

Technology moves us away from meaningful conversation into efficient communication. We can emotionally hide while being “connected” at work.

Bring People “Home” to Work:

Dr. Turkle describes the experience of Radnor Partners, a high-tech consulting firm. Since the 1990’s it had encouraged telecommuting as a method of reducing costs while improving employee morale. This is the “common sense” of the management today.

The CEO, on the other hand, saw the extensive use of virtual meetings as people talking without really communicating. Real communication takes place in over dining room tables, in parking lots, in hallways, in bathrooms, and by copy machines.

Radnor Partners did away with virtual commuting and required office presence. Physical proximity sparked new

conversations. When analysts, sales people, and consultants began working in the same space, Radnor began to grow at five times its former rate.

Corporate Decision Making in a Binary World.

The digital world is based on a technology involving splitting data into binary forms. Information is often presented in the digital world as a succession of binary decisions called Menus. Over time, this way of looking at the digital world influences the way we look at the real world. The middle ground disappears. We cannot see the gray spaces. There is polarization of options.

It is your job as leader to ensure that a binary perspective does not infect business.

As the speed of an automobile increases, driver peripheral vision decreases. As the speed of business increases, decision makers tend to suffer a loss of peripheral vision. The gray spaces are no longer visible.

The use of mobile devices as a media tool increases the chances of failing to see the gray spaces or the peripheral opportunities.

“Tools Down:”

One option is to encourage physical team conversation versus digital communication.

We all have had the experience of being at team meetings where participants are monitoring their mobile devices.

If challenged, they might state that they are competent to multi-task despite the research evidence that the cerebral cortex is poor at multi-taking.

In virtual or physical team meetings, ask participants to power down their mobile devices. Setting the devices to vibrate is not good enough. Power it down!

Consider people who open their lap tops at team meetings and take notes.

According to Dr. Turkle, these people have moved from participants to transcribers. If called upon to make a comment about the ideas in the room, they often get angry because they have been “interrupted” in their task of writing notes.

Appoint one person to be transcriber. The others should power down their lap tops. Only turn them on to obtain specific information required for the meeting.

If you do this, be sensitive to the fact that many people cannot tolerate being out of connection with their mobile devices.

Break the physical 60-minute time frame into 50 minutes for a meeting and 10 minutes to power up your mobile device, check mail, use the rest room, etc.

The issue we recommend to clients is you cannot and should not eliminate mobile devices. But companies need to manage it more effectively.

About John Montgomery

John Montgomery used to be CEO and owner of Stybel Peabody client, Environmental Interiors, Inc. It is a fabulous company that manufactures/installs artistic metal finishes for "monumental" buildings like airports, museums, and stadiums.

As CEO, John Montgomery would always repeat: "Face to Face First; Telephone Second; Voice Mail Third; Email Only to Confirm Meetings or to Write 'I have been trying to get in touch with you....'"

Consider Using the Montgomery Method as a Media Structure at Your Company.

Notice John's disdain for e-mail as a media tool?

How can this be?

Email is almost too easy, too pervasive, and too inexpensive for you NOT to use it as a primary tool.

One problem with e-mail is that it is pure text based, thus removing social cues. Such cues include voice tone or facial expression. When nuance is drained from communication, there can be unintended consequences.

An example might be an interpretation that the sender is angry when that was not the case.

A second problem with e-mail is that it is too easy to be spontaneous. Spontaneity can create unintended institutional risk.

In 2015, a group hacked Sony Corporation's email system. The group made public the emails of movie producer Scott Rudin. In one e-mail, he described a fellow-producer a "bi-polar lunatic." He also described a well-known actress with a contract at SONY as a "minimally talented spoiled brat."

In another example, BLOOMBERG BUSINESS reported that Deutsche Bank sold \$1.1 billion in collateralized debt obligations to DB's clients in 1987. It later became public that Deutsche Bank's co-head Michael Lamont wrote this in e-mail: "I think we will sell this (to our clients) just before market falls off a cliff."

What is the Evidence?

C.E. Naquin and his colleagues examined the impact of electronic communications on individual cooperation within groups. (2008). The research team took 120 undergraduate business students and randomly assigned them to groups consisting of four members each. There were 14 groups who would be interacting primarily via e-mail and 16 groups interacting in a face-to-face manner. Each group was given tasks that put individuals in a

situation of deciding whether to cooperate with fellow team members for potentially greater financial gain versus a path that would only benefit them individually.

A group was cooperative if at least three of the four members sacrificed individual opportunity for gain for the benefit of the group. It was considered uncooperative if fewer than three group members made an individual benefit sacrifice.

Groups that communicated primary online were less cooperative at the .001 level of significance using Chi Square statistical technique. That is a very significant level for a social science experiment.

A replication of the study was done with 64 executive level business students attending MBA programs in the evening. The average age was 40.8 years.

Once again, participants were assigned to groups of four members. Eight groups communicated via e-mail and eight groups interacted face-to-face. They were given a different situation that involved a maximization of personal gain versus contributing to the benefit of the group. Once again, online communications resulted in less cooperation. The results were at the .01 level of significance.

Conversation vs. Communication:

If the issue is pure communication, e-mail may be the most efficient technique. That is the John Montgomery method. For example:

You read on linkedin.com that Jane Smith has a new job as partner at a law firm. If your objective is only to communicate that you read the notice. You also wish to congratulate her. Sending an email or texting her through LinkedIn is better than a phone call.

If you would like to gain Jane's cooperation to introduce you to her fellow-partners, then a LinkedIn or e-mail response is the last thing you want to do.

You want to leave a voice mail message inviting her for a congratulatory lunch. If that is not practical, you may wish to call her and speak with her on the phone.

Conversations with Job Candidates:

One of our services is retained search. We subscribe to a LinkedIn service designed for recruiters. This service allows us to easily be in email touch with millions of people. We can search the database and find people to communicate with by title, industry, geography, and size of company. It is a great tool for communications.

But LinkedIn is not a tool for conversations.

To move from communication to cooperation, we have to use the LinkedIn technology only as a first step.

CEO-Board Communications.

The distinction between communication and cooperation can be confusing for busy senior executives. As the speed of business increases, peripheral vision decreases:

Given the demands on personal time, we find that many of our CEO clients like to send out emails with attachments to Board members to keep them in the communications loop.

If the only objective is one-way communications, then e-mail is the technique of choice. But do CEOs communicate with Board members for the sake of communication or for conversation?

Our CEOs tend to use communications for the purposes of influencing Board members. Using the Montgomery Method, one would argue that e-mail is that last technique they should employ.

Telephone vs Facebook.

As a communication platform, Facebook is an excellent communication tool. But it is not designed for conversation.

You might wish to spend more time on the phone and less time on your mobile device.

Summary and Conclusions.

We have just given you unwelcomed news:

Effective communication is more time consuming than you thought.

Looking at issues from a communication vs conversation framework, Is it more time consuming?

Perhaps you are using the wrong framework.

George Bernard Shaw once said, "The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place."

Assume that Shaw is correct. Can you even begin to calculate the amount of time you spend trying to clear up communications that get botched?

How much time, for example, will Deutsche Bank spend in trying to repair its reputation with clients? If you add that amount of spent time to the equation, perhaps the old-fashioned techniques might not be such time wasters after all.

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