Email Because It's Right for the Situation, Not Because It's Convenient!

Would you use a wrench to pound a nail? Many of you who have done home improvement projects, worked in your garage or even hung a picture have probably been in this situation before. You need to pound in a nail, but you don't have a hammer nearby. I personally have turned a crescent wrench around and given a galvanized 2-inch 8d a few whacks instead of going to the basement to get a hammer. I've also used a shoe, a rock, and my wife's favorite figurine to sink nails on various occasions when I just couldn't muster up the energy to get the right tool. At the time, I really thought I was being efficient by using what was convenient.

> **THEMES**
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> - *Use the proper communication tool based on the situation and objectives.*
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> - *Sending an email may be convenient at times, but if it is not the right tool it can reduce your productivity and that of others.*

What were the results? In most cases, I was able to eventually get the nail in without the hammer but often was only marginally successful. I achieved the goal, but not efficiently or effectively. In every case, I had to hit the nail more times than if I had used a hammer. When I used the wrench, I bent the nail. When I used the shoe, I left a dent in the wall when the heel slipped off the nail head (which I had to patch later). When I used the rock, I smashed my finger. And after reading this article, my wife will finally know how her figurine got chipped!

What most people don't realize is that they make the same mistake almost every day in the business world. They use the wrong communication tool because it is convenient for them at the time. But really, they are reducing productivity in the process.

What are the typical results of using the wrong communication tool? In most cases, the message does eventually get through. But the sender's and other people's time may be wasted in the process, the message may not get through correctly the first time, it may not generate the right results, or it may even cause damage to relationships along the way that need to be later repaired (like the dent in the wall). When these things happen frequently in an organization, the results can really hurt productivity.

The most common example of this today is the overuse of email. You're sitting in a meeting, and you receive an email with a list of questions for you and others. The meeting discussion isn't directly focused on you, so you decide that you can read it on your PDA without missing out on anything important (a likely mistake we'll address in a future article!). The email is from someone you'll see tomorrow in another meeting, and it has a 12-person distribution list. The question asked of you is a bit unclear, but you're pretty

confident that you understand what is being requested. It is also a somewhat sensitive issue that people feel strongly about. The sender needs a response with in 48 hours. Only two people on the list other than the sender need to know your response, and they'll be in the same meeting as the sender tomorrow.

What do you do?

What you should do is go in the basement and get the hammer! In this case, this means you should not respond immediately. Instead, you should bring a copy of the message to your meeting tomorrow and request clarification from the sender to be sure you understand the question. Then, you should respond while paying attention to the others in the meeting to make sure the negative emotional reaction you are concerned about doesn't happen.

But unfortunately, if you were like many people today, you would instead respond to the message right away. You would peck in an answer on your PDA or pound one in on your laptop. With so many emails coming in, you just don't want to leave this one sitting there. Since it's too hard to reduce the distribution list (especially on the PDA) you just hit the Reply All button, figuring the others will just disregard the message. You're also confident that if you misinterpreted the request, the sender will get back to you and clarify (likely also with a Reply All). Finally, you figure that if there's an emotional reaction, you can deal with it in the meeting tomorrow.

What's the worst-case scenario with this approach? First, you missed out on an important part of the meeting you were in since you weren't paying attention. You'll end up redoing some work as a result of this. Second, you did misinterpret the request, and it took two more emails with the entire distribution list to achieve clarification. Third, your response triggered a strong emotional reaction with one of the people. This person will be in the meeting tomorrow, but by that time they'll have repressed their feelings. Since you didn't get the visual or verbal clues from their initial response, you'll never know that you upset them. This will hinder your relationship with them moving forward.

In summary, 45 irrelevant messages were sent to people, an informal network got damaged, you wasted two hours redoing work, and you spent 20 minutes on all of the emails that were generated on the subject. Had you just brought it to the meeting tomorrow, your initial response and the required clarification would have taken one minute. Also, you would have observed the emotional response from one person and clarified your position to resolve their concern. Or maybe you would have even integrated their feedback into your response to make it better!

Because PDA's and email systems make it so convenient to use email, mistakes like this are often made. What's worse is that there's a multiplying effect in an organization since emails beget emails beget emails. The basic rule to remember in this specific situation is to *email because you should, not because you can.* In a more general case, you should select the right communication tool based on the situation. If you are in doubt of which one to use, use direct verbal communication.

Future articles will investigate specific scenarios in more detail, but below are some general rules regarding proper communication tool selection.

Email because you <u>should</u>, not because you can.

- *Think about what is most efficient and effective for all parties involved, even if it means slightly more work for you. A voicemail, phone call or a live conversation may be a better way to communicate.*

- *One inefficient email from you can create a lot of work for others, especially if a large distribution list is used.*

- *If a response isn't needed in the immediate future, consider other ways and opportunities to communicate the information such as in an upcoming meeting.*

- *This approach will likely save you time because you'll select the most effective way to communicate instead of the most convenient at the time.*

Don't send messages just because it is easy or convenient.

- *Avoid the urge to send an email on an issue that should be handled with discussion or other means just because email is most convenient at the time.*

- *Don't send an email just because you are in a meeting and that is the only way you can communicate.*

- *While it may seem convenient for you at the time, it can often slow down the overall process and may actually make more overall work for you and others involved if the issue is not resolved effectively. It can also be distracting and counterproductive for the meeting you are in.*

- *Give yourself a task or action item to follow-up in person if that is the appropriate response instead of sending an immediate email.*

- *Often emails sent on PDAs in meetings are not well written due to the difficulty of typing on the small devices and the partial focus of the person composing the email. This can lead to misinterpretation of the message being sent.*

Go to http://www.emailless.com/ for more articles and information on communicating consistently and effectively as an organization.