

Fuel Leadership Excellence With Effective Writing

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While communication is widely accepted as a critical leadership competency, far too many executives, supervisors and managers are unable to write messages that support—rather than subvert—their ability to lead others. According to the Los Angeles Business Journal, billions of dollars in lost productivity can be traced to inadequate writing, much of it likely from leaders at various levels.

Here's what you should ask leaders at your organization about their writing:

- Are your emails to subordinates supportive rather than harsh or condescending?
- Do your emails motivate others to action and encourage them to give their best efforts?
- Do the messages in your emails, texts and other correspondence align with your organization's mission and culture?

Anyone who leads others needs to master core writing skills and understand how to craft messages with the appropriate content and tone. Train your leaders with these guidelines:

Assign work with a positive, productive tone.

When you're under pressure from a client, management or others to finish a new project yesterday (sound familiar?), don't take your angst out on your staff with a rude or condescending email. Explain the importance of completing the work in a timely and professional manner. It never hurts to give your direct reports some kudos. Compare these two emails:

Demanding/condescending:

I was just assigned the extremely important XYZ project. You'll need to complete budget projections, determine the required manpower and order supplies—all by March 1 at the latest! Failure to meet this deadline will negatively affect the productivity of our division, so please be sure your performance is up to speed. Contact me with questions.

Positive/supportive:

Thanks again for all your hard work this quarter. We were just assigned the important XYZ project, so I'll need your help completing budget projections, determining the required manpower and ordering supplies, all by March 1. By meeting this deadline, we can maximize our division's productivity, so please give it your best effort, as you always do. Feel free to contact me with questions.

Communicate change by focusing on the staff's WIIFM.

If you want employees to embrace change, don't forget about their WIIFM (What's in it for me?). Otherwise, your message will likely be perceived as the standard "company line," further evidence that management doesn't care about the staff. Compare the openings in these two emails:

Neglects employees' perspective:

At times, the organization needs to make changes critical to its long-term success. Effective June 1, this region will be restructuring. That means many of you will need to learn new roles quickly. The company sees this as an essential move to streamline operations. We're confident that you'll all make the required adjustments and become comfortable with the new processes.

Directly addresses employees' WIIFM:

To enhance the long-term success of our company—and to improve your productivity and job satisfaction—we will be restructuring this region to streamline operations, effective June 1. That means many of you will need to quickly learn new roles. We'll be with you every step of the way, so feel free to contact us with your concerns.

Create an environment that values feedback.

Making sure that employees feel comfortable in offering candid feedback—which can improve morale and produce other benefits—takes more than just saying that you want it. You also need to demonstrate that your organization cares about and has a process in place to facilitate their feedback. Compare these two emails:

Doesn't really want employees' opinions:

After researching several new budgeting software programs, we're launching the ABC system, so please start using it by April 6. Your feedback is welcomed.

Embraces employee feedback:

After researching several new budgeting software programs, we believe the ABC system will best meet your requirements. Please start using it by April 6, and let us know of any difficulties you experience in implementation (email HR with "ABC" in the subject line). This way, we can make periodic tweaks if necessary and help ensure that future software purchases suit your needs.

Leaders at all levels can't afford to let substandard writing abilities short-circuit their individual and organizational goals. By following straightforward principles of communication and applying critical thinking skills to each situation, leaders can write messages that will drive better outcomes.

Jack E. Appleman, APR, CBC is a business writing instructor and author of the top-selling "10 Steps to Successful Business Writing" (2008, ATD Press). The principal of [Successful Business Writing](#), Jack has led workshops, webinars and coaching for organizations including HBO, Johnson & Johnson, and the U.S. Olympic Committee, which have consistently earned outstanding evaluations.