

E-Body Language: Decoded

Attention to detail is key to a well-written message.

By Robert Whipple

ONLINE COMMUNICATION is so engrained in our everyday lives that we normally take it for granted (until the power goes out). Many of us view email and face-to-face communication as the same thing: We just type information as if we are chatting with someone in person. However, that behavior can be a big mistake, especially in the workplace.

When people communicate verbally, the majority of information conveyed is through body language and voice inflection. Only a small fraction of information actually is communicated by words. But when we use electronic communication, the words are our clues for decoding information accurately.

Email is different from live conversation in two important ways. First, you cannot modify content of a message based on the visible reaction of the other party. Second, emails are permanent documents. Once you send it, you cannot take it back, and you lose all control over who views your words. Unfortunately, the permanent nature of email often is forgotten in the hubbub of everyday interactions.

Most people have no training on how to read e-body language. They just rely on the written words to impute meaning, which is the equivalent of trying to create a full-color painting using only red paint. Fortunately, the ability to read between the lines of online text isn't as difficult as it sounds. You have to pay attention to the signals and integrate them into a pattern that yields more information than the words alone.

The basics

The ability to decode e-body language well is the mirror image of being sensitive to the messages you write. Here are

some important—but often forgotten—principles of clear online communication from the writer's point of view.

Understand the objective of your message. What are you trying to accomplish? When you proofread a note, make sure that it will achieve your goal. Keep in mind that most people who annoy or anger others in their correspondences didn't have that intention.

Write less. Less is more because short messages are more likely to be read and understood. To have any value, a note must be opened, read, and internalized by the recipient.

Set the tone. There is a momentum within notes. A poor start means the reader is likely to reject much of the content or at least become defensive. So, set the mood of the entire message in the subject line and first sentence. Emails that start with the right tone are more effective.

Watch your emotions. Avoid sending messages that were written when you were angry or otherwise not yourself. At these times, you are not the person you want to portray to the world.

Three keys

The e-body language of email is primarily conveyed in three main areas. If you learn to control them, your online communications will be well received.

Tone. How you structure and phrase your emails can play a large part in how they are interpreted. Emoticons and acronyms are two well-known methods for setting tone, but they should be used sparingly and only in casual communications. Qualifying conjunctions, such as *but*, often convey the opposite meaning from the literal words of a note. Consider the meaning of this statement: "We loved your class, but it is good to have it completed."

Other kinds of expressions may communicate the opposite meaning, too. For example, "no offense" usually means the writer is expecting that you will take offense to her remark. Be aware of words or phrases that tend to irritate people if

not managed carefully. "Let me make it perfectly clear" is a good example.

Pronoun usage can speak volumes in terms of tone. Think about the word *you*, a commonly abused pronoun, and how it is expressed in this participant's comment: "You never let me finish my work." Most likely, you interpreted it as an accusation or lecture and instinctively became defensive, and so would the recipient of such an email. Similarly, overusing the personal pronouns *I*, *me*, and *my* make a writer sound parochial or egotistical, and too much emphasis on "we" and "they" signals a competitive atmosphere.

To maintain credibility, never say *never*—or any other absolutes. Most of the time, a statement such as, "She has never done anything to help us," can be proven incorrect easily.

Try to avoid phrases with double meanings, like this one: "His diatribe at the meeting shows what an emotionally intelligent leader he is." Sarcasm is often disguised as humor, but it can quickly backfire during uncontrolled distributions. Never write something in an email that you would not be willing to have anyone read because literally anyone might receive a copy.

Timing. The asynchronous nature of email often leads to problems for both parties. Because people open notes at different times, one person might respond to a message that has already been superseded, leading to confusion. The antidote is to be alert for misunderstandings based on when people respond to messages.

Sometimes notes arrive when the recipient is in an overload situation or otherwise unable to react positively. So, use common sense and try to reach your reader at a time when he is most receptive.

Tension. Interpersonal conflict often leaves a bloody trail in online correspondence. Inappropriate outbursts of anger via emails usually make both parties look foolish, especially when individu-

als escalate the conflict into heated exchanges. The way to stop an online battle is to refrain from taking the bait. Don't respond to the attack in kind. Acknowledge a difference of opinion, but don't escalate the situation. Switching to a different form of communication will help avoid a trail of embarrassing notes.

Once you learn the essentials of e-body language, a whole new world of communication emerges. You will be more adept at decoding incoming messages and have a better sense of how your messages are interpreted by others. You will understand the secret code that is written between the lines of all messages and enhance the quality of online communications in your sphere of influence.

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