

Directions

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Written Communication: Survival Techniques for Businesses

by Nancy Drown McWhorter

As the economy continues to tighten, you may find that the mood of your office is tightening as well. Employees are noticeably nervous about job security, affecting their performance at a time when you need them to be functioning at their best. The advantage of written communication – especially in an emotionally charged environment – is that you have time to get it right. If you've ever said something to an employee that you later regretted, you can prevent that by using the written word and crafting it carefully. Here are a few tips to improve your chances of surviving this trek through a bewildering economy with a healthy, functioning workforce on the other side.

- **Embrace Employee Email.** Regular communication to all employees – such as a brief weekly newsletter or daily update – can go far in preventing misunderstandings that occur when the employee grapevine is activated, usually by a lack of direct communication. Likewise, if your habit has been to send these emails already, don't stop during this tough time. Remember that *not* communicating with employees leaves an information vacuum inviting troublemakers to fill it with speculation. Consider your audience and what they want to know, as well as what they need to know. One office, for example, publishes a daily email that includes which employees are out on leave for the day and which ones are actually traveling on business. In addition to avoiding speculation about whether one of these people has been laid off or is terminally ill, it allows employees to know in advance who they'll be able to contact that day. Nothing is more annoying than emailing a colleague with a quick question and getting no response, so you should also encourage your employees to use the Out-of-Office function provided by most email programs, alerting the sender to the employees' absence.
- **Tweak the Tone.** In all written communication, either email or letter, carefully consider the tone. One wrong word can undo all the goodwill intended by the writer; therefore, it's best to compose an email first with no names in the recipient box or compose it in word processing, which can then be simply cut and pasted directly into email. It always helps to have an editor. Since people can't proofread their own work, a second reader can save hours of explaining. Did you really mean to use "I refrained from" when "I didn't" would be clearer and softer? Never hit "send" when you're feeling angry. *Never.* And for inter-office correspondence, feel free to use contractions such as "I didn't" rather than the more formal "I did not." All email experts agree that capital letters are always a bad idea and equate with shouting at the reader, so get rid of those. You can use italics instead if you need that emphasis. Your staff's morale can be dependent on the quality of your communication with them, and that morale can translate into profits.
- **Commit to Correctness.** In a competitive environment, your company can stand out with a commitment to correct Standard Business English. If your written communication is sloppy, error-filled, and unclear, you have sent a message to its readers that you aren't concerned with details and may not be competent. Sloppy communication from management trickles down to other employees. You'll find that your employees appreciate learning, so use the down time in your market to boost their language skills, either by offering an in-house training or encouraging their use of interactive grammar and usage websites. A quick and simple daily email contest to

punctuate a difficult sentence or find misspelled words can serve two purposes: it increases employees' proofreading ability and builds morale among staffers.

As you navigate choppy waters in this economy, think of how written communication can make your sailing smoother.

Nancy McWhorter is a consultant in the business communications area, with more than 30 years of experience in headquarters offices, coordinating and facilitating communication with regional field staff. Nancy has been a writer, editor, trainer, and manager, 20 of those with the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), from which she retired in 2008. She can be reached at nmcwhorter@sc.rr.com.