



Write Like a Leader



10 Strategies for Success

by Deborah Dumaine

Write Like a Leader

Leaders rely on email 83% of the time to engage employees and foster productivity

—International Association of Business Communicators/Buck Consultants (Xerox) Study (2010)



10 strategies for success

1. Analysing your readers before writing
2. Being direct and sincere
3. Covering one topic per document
4. Making clear action requests
5. Organising your message
6. Using the right tone
7. Writing clearly and concisely
8. Knowing when to write versus talk
9. Writing constructive feedback
10. Respecting cultural differences



10 biggest leadership writing mistakes

1. Failing to target your readers
2. Evasion; falseness
3. Too many topics in one document
4. Hidden or unclear action requests
5. Disorganisation
6. Wrong tone
7. Wordy or overly formal language
8. Writing when you should talk
9. Criticism; shotgun feedback meant for a few
10. Cultural insensitivity



Introduction

If you received this email, would you know what to do?

From: John Q. Director
To: All Department Heads
Subject: Zap Energy System Disaster Recovery Policy

One of our main priorities for the coming year is to have a disaster recovery plan for all critical business functions. A critical business function is defined as a business function, the absence of which may greatly impair the operation of, or jeopardise the existence of, any Zap Energy System company. Disaster recovery plans should define procedures to enable the critical business functions to continue in the event of a disaster until normal business functions can be resumed.

In addition, ongoing testing, maintenance, and backup of the disaster recovery procedures will be necessary. Each department will need an employee awareness program.

Changes to existing critical business functions and the designation of new critical business functions will require updating of all affected disaster recovery plans and procedures in a timely manner.

Plans for each area should be submitted by April 1.

Thank you.

Have you ever written an email like that?

Ask yourself, from the reader's point of view:

- What is the purpose of this email?
- What does John want me to do?

Apparently the purpose of the email is to inform all department heads that they must submit a disaster recovery plan by April.

1. Another purpose may be to develop an employee awareness program—but it's unclear whether each department should develop its own or implement a company-wide program.

Now ask yourself: Is there enough guidance for department heads to begin developing a disaster recovery plan? An employee awareness program? If you were the recipient of this email, what other questions would you have for John?

Was this email written strategically?

John made several of the biggest writing mistakes of leaders in his email.

At the top of the list: Mistake #1

John has obviously not considered all his readers and their varying needs.

If he had, he would have anticipated their expected questions about developing a disaster recovery plan; testing, maintaining, and backing it up; and instituting an employee awareness program. Even if he does not answer all these questions in this email, he should provide guidance and explain how they will be answered.

Another serious error: Mistake #4

Action requests are both hidden and unclear.

The most vital information in his email, to submit a disaster recovery plan by April 1, appears at the bottom of the message instead of the top and is unclearly phrased at that. Since the action request is couched in the passive voice—"plans for each area should be submitted" instead of "submit your plan"—it's unclear who is responsible for the requested action.

The result? Probable misunderstanding on the part of the department heads, followed by a time-consuming string of back-and-forth email messages to clarify the goals for a disaster recovery plan, its purpose, and the actions John is requesting.

Leadership competencies

Can you be a great leader if you're not a great writer?

Many competencies go into leadership; we have selected nine that show up most often in daily writing (see sidebar). If you can't translate your hard-won leadership skills into writing, you're impaired in a major sphere of influence. You may be great in web meetings or the conference room, but do you have the same impact when you write?

If you're not a strategic writer, you don't lack just one of the leadership competencies: your ability to demonstrate all nine is compromised. In other words, writing is not simply part of the competency of clear communication—it's integrally related to the other competencies as well.

Here's your chance to hone the nine leadership competencies that you need to master in writing.

Success Strategy #1:

Analysing your readers before writing

Achieve Strategy #1 by overcoming Mistake #1: Failing to target all your readers and their varying needs

Writing, whether an email or report, is like any project you are leading. You don't just jump right in—you must strategise and plan first. If you take a few minutes to target your readers, you will greatly increase your chances of achieving the response or action you desire.

Clear writing is essential for leading high-performance teams

A senior vice president of Global Financial Services sent the email on the next page to everyone in her organisation about a major new customer loyalty initiative. She was enthusiastic about the project and knew that after the inevitable problems associated with launching a new program, both employees and customers would reap the benefits. She introduced this major initiative with an email to the entire staff.

“Companies that are highly effective at communication are 1.7 times as likely to outperform their peers.”

—2012 Towers Watson Change and Communication ROI study

Leadership competencies most frequently displayed in writing*

- Ability to influence and motivate
- Accountability
- Strategic orientation
- Conceptual/analytical thinking
- Bias for action/being directive
- Fostering collaboration and teamwork
- Developing people
- Interpersonal understanding
- Communication

* Adapted from Bonnie Burrell and Alethia Bess, *The Strategic Leadership Model of Team Leadership Development*, MIT Professional Institute

Chapter summary

Success Strategy #1: Analysing your readers before writing

Writing is like any project you are leading. You don't just jump right in—you must develop a strategy and plan first. If you take a few minutes to target your readers, you will greatly increase your chances of achieving the response or action you desire.

Mistake #1: Failure to target your readers

We learn best from our mistakes. In this chapter we'll discuss the first of the 10 top mistakes leaders make in writing and give you the strategy to prevent that mistake.

Real-world writing samples

This chapter includes examples of messages that fail to address readers' needs and a step-by-step solution for fixing that mistake.

From: Theresa Li, Vice President
To: All Global Financial Services Employees
Subject: Customer Connect

Global Financial Services is asking for your help and participation in a bold new initiative called Customer Connect. The challenge before us is to make customer loyalty everyone's most important job.

That goal suits Global Financial better than any company I know. We believe intensely that our service must be more than good, it must be the best. By our all working together, communicating better, and focusing on our customers' needs above all, we can produce greater value for our customers, a greater challenge to our competitors, and greater satisfaction for ourselves in a job well done.

In its most basic form this is an extremely individual challenge, and we can all begin immediately to find ways to improve how we do our jobs. The payoffs will include a multitude of benefits, including more involvement as you help us pinpoint and solve service problems, greater likelihood of long-range job security, pride in personal accomplishment, teamwork leading to more responsibility and control, and more meaningful work.

We will assemble a team of employees from all levels to examine our customers' needs, develop a plan, establish goals and a schedule, define roles for other teams, and set up training. We will then initiate the effort more gradually, on a program-by-program basis. Please go to globalfinancial.com/customerconnect to learn more. Note any improvement ideas you have for later discussion.

We are also taking steps to provide superior service by responding more quickly and thoroughly to our customers' needs, writing to our customers in ways that make them feel serviced and listened to, increasing customer contact using social media, giving customer-service representatives intensive telephone training, and implementing employee incentive programs.

I look forward to working with you to build an exciting new customer service initiative at Global Financial—one that will keep us the pride of our customers and the envy of our competition. Thanks for your full participation.

Typical reasons for writing

- To persuade
- To solve a problem
- To motivate
- To propose
- To analyse
- To praise
- To inform

Merely to inform is seldom a good reason for writing.

Your purpose in writing should be strategic, not informational. Make sure you have a strong statement of purpose that drives the action you want—even if it's only to obtain buy-in for a new initiative.

What action did the vice president's email produce?

Precisely none, because people were given no clear instructions or action requests. A few did visit the Customer Connect website, but most read the email and promptly forgot about it—it was just one more meaningless new initiative from management.

How to target your readers

Strategise any writing task by creating a reader profile. At Ariel, we call this a Focus Sheet. It helps you clarify what you intend to accomplish with your written communication and keeps your writing on target. There are four issues the vice president should have considered before writing:

- Purpose
- Audience
- Bottom line
- Delivery tactics

Purpose: Why are you writing?

Why is the vice president writing her email? What specific actions does she want people to take besides clicking on a link and writing down some ideas?

Very few documents exist strictly for the purpose of imparting information. As a leader, you usually want to persuade readers to act or at least to buy into your solution, proposal, or initiative. If you think you are writing to inform—like the senior vice president of Global Financial Services did—take a second look. You may not have analysed your purpose carefully enough. It should drive action on the part of the reader. Ask yourself, "So what?" and "What do I want my reader (or readers) to do?"

What should the vice president have done?

She may have thought that her reason for writing was to inform her people that a major new initiative was in the works. But a leader needs to do more. If she was expecting to encounter resistance, for example, her purpose was really to persuade and motivate.

She failed to exhibit two key leadership competencies:

1. Strategic orientation

- Link long-range visions and concepts to daily tasks.
- Understand how the elements of your organisation interact as a whole.
- Create action plans for your team.

If she had thought strategically about her email, she would have linked the long-range customer loyalty initiative to her people's daily tasks: who needs to know what and when, and what they need to do to accomplish the goal. Rather than simply stating that customer loyalty is everyone's most important job, she should have communicated an action plan.

2. Ability to influence and motivate

- Move others to act in a desired way.
- Remain open to other ideas and listen actively before directing people to act.
- Influence others by acting in a desired way.

The vice president's ability to influence and motivate would have increased considerably if she recognised that some readers might be anxious about the proposed, vaguely stated change. She should have allayed fears instead of issuing an "extremely individual challenge" to everyone to "begin immediately to find ways to improve how we do our jobs."





Audience

Who are your readers?

The vice president's proposed initiative would affect everyone in the company, from the executive suite to the shipping room. Did she think about her readers and their roles before writing her email?

Leaders, especially when communicating internally, often write to a diverse, and sometimes international, audience with multiple stakeholders and levels of involvement. Even if you don't know your readers personally, use what you do know about their positions and roles to anticipate the nature of their response. Begin your audience analysis by asking yourself these questions:

Who exactly are my readers, and what are their roles?

Your documents, like the vice president's, often go to more than one reader, which makes your task more complicated. Each reader's role, experience with the subject matter, familiarity with English idioms, and anticipated use of your document may vary. It doesn't take long to create a profile of your readers and consider all their needs before deciding on a strategy.

How much background, detail, and/or context do I need to provide?

Don't overwhelm your audience with too much detail. If the message is too dense, it will be difficult to get through. Use attachments

and links to keep your main point clear. Ask yourself what knowledge and experience your readers are likely to have of the subject, and then adjust your language accordingly. For international readers, consider their level of English proficiency.

How will readers react to my message?

What will be their main concerns? It is critical to remember that different stakeholders in the same audience may have different reactions, from receptive to indifferent to downright resistant. Once you analyse their potential reactions, you will know how persuasive you need to be. What's in it for the readers?

What's the relevance, benefit, and/or impact for them? Don't neglect the all-important "WIIFM"—"What's in it for me?" That's the question you must answer for every one of your readers. Don't get so caught up in your own agenda that you neglect to focus on those you are leading. Think about what your audience, whether internal or external, wants, not about what you want.

How will readers use this document?

Each reader's anticipated use of your document may vary. Especially in a company-wide initiative, be sure to allay fears and clearly explain roles and responsibilities.

What should the vice president have done?

Since her email is addressed to the entire organisation, her audience is obviously diverse, with different levels of capability and involvement. Although the change may affect them all, they will not participate equally in making it happen, and those who do participate will have different roles.

With such a diverse audience, each type of reader would react differently to the message, with varying degrees of concern. Considering everyone's needs and his or her roles in the upcoming initiative would have resulted in a more targeted message, or series of messages, to different departments or employee levels.

A grab-bag "multitude of benefits" resulting from the new customer loyalty program were included in the email: increased involvement, long-range job security, pride in personal accomplishment, teamwork leading to more responsibility, and more meaningful work. However, to increase acceptance and understanding of the initiative, a WIIFM specific to each type of reader was missing.

By not considering all her readers, the vice president compromised her ability to influence and motivate them and probably left a considerable portion of her audience uncertain and confused.

Bottom line

Your key point and “So what?”

If the readers were to forget everything else, what main message should each reader remember? That’s the bottom line. The vice president should have asked herself, “So what? What is the impact of my bottom line on every member of my diverse audience?”

Your writing will be clearer and more effective if you can formulate your main idea concisely. Try to distill it to one or two sentences.

Keep in mind that the bottom line may not always be the most obvious approach. For example, if you’re proposing a new strategy, your bottom line may not be, “Here’s my great new idea,” but, “This strategy will give us a big lead on the competition.” Before you write, determine the key idea that will stick with your readers.

So what? should be an explicit part of your bottom-line statement. Why is it important for readers to take action? And what are the risks of not taking action? The “So what?” will drive home the importance of your bottom line.

What should the vice president have done?

There’s a lack of strategic orientation in her email: both a concise bottom-line statement and “So what?” are missing. She passed up an important opportunity to influence and motivate—and to lead.

Remember that most of your readers are already drowning in information. They usually skim a message to decide if it’s worth their immediate attention.

If readers can’t figure out your bottom line in the subject line, they may postpone a more careful reading—and you’ve lost a valuable opportunity to capture a client’s interest or motivate your people.

Delivery tactics

Is writing the best approach?

Is email the best way for the vice president to deliver her message? And if it is, is now the right time to communicate this initiative to everyone?

The form of your communication is another important strategic consideration. What communication method should you use: email, a paper document, a conference call, a meeting, or an in-person or online presentation? If you decide to write, do you need one document or several? Decide according to your readers.

What should the vice president have done?

We’ve established that the shotgun approach of targeting the entire organisation with a single email would not accomplish her purpose in writing. What could have worked better? First, the vice president should consider whether she should be writing at all. A webinar that the employees of a single department could view together, with an opportunity to ask questions, may have been a better delivery tactic. A series of email messages targeted to department managers with specific action requests and deadlines would be a logical next step.

Crafting this series of communications shows strategic orientation by linking the goal of customer loyalty to people’s daily tasks. The vice president needs to understand how the different parts of her organisation work together to be able to create action plans for her managers and staff. When she uses the right channel at the right time, she will be able to motivate others to work toward a common goal.

Communication methods

- Email
- Paper document
- Conference call
- Meeting
- In-person or online presentation



How do you avoid Leadership Mistake #1?

Contrary to what you may think, your audience analysis won't slow down the writing process or add a time-consuming layer of complexity. Ariel has trained thousands of people who agree that the time spent analysing your audience and defining your purpose in writing simplifies—and speeds up—the writing task. You may find that you need to write far less than anticipated by thinking of readers' real needs.

The vice president of Global Financial Services would have demonstrated better leadership by taking a few minutes to ask herself:

The **purpose** of my communication: What do I want my readers to do?

My **audience**: Who are my readers, what are their roles, and how will they react to my message?

My **bottom line** for writing: So what? What is the impact of my bottom line on every member of my diverse audience?

The best **delivery tactics** to use: Is email the best medium? Is this the right time to communicate this initiative to everyone?

Two leadership competencies are vital to avoiding Leadership Mistake #1

1. Strategic orientation

The vice president would have advanced her agenda and saved everyone time and frustration by linking her long-range vision of quality improvement to her people's daily tasks.

2. Ability to influence and motivate

You cannot move others to act in a desired way unless you understand their needs. The best way to influence your readers is to act the way you want them to, and that begins with modeling clear communication.

Strategy for success #1:

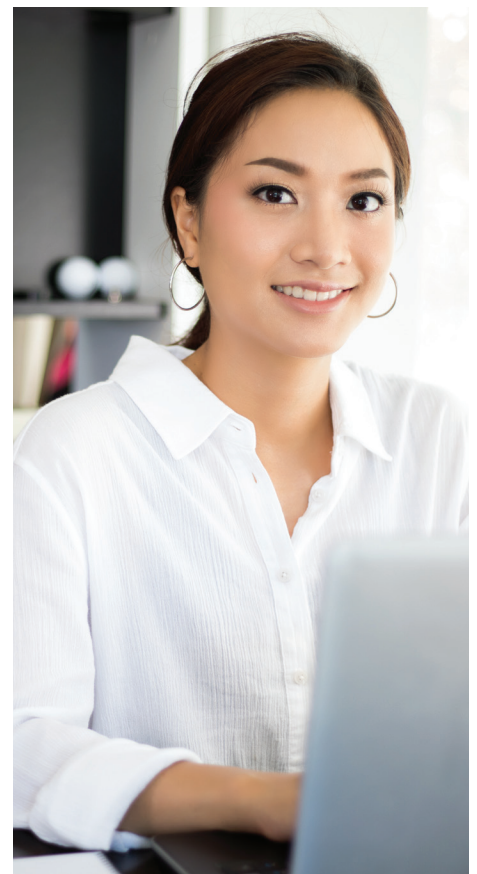
Analysing your readers

When readers see that you have considered their needs, they are more likely to buy into your initiatives and do their utmost to carry out your action requests.

You have achieved Strategy #1 when you have included the right amount of information and zeroed in on your purpose and goals. By taking just a few minutes to analyse your audience, you'll make persuasive decisions about your strategy and content. Through a targeted communication that drives action, you'll gain faster responses, greater influence, and increased respect for clear thinking.

Plan your message to target all your readers and their varying needs.

A focus on your readers will help you achieve the response or action you desire, so take a few minutes to develop a strategy and plan before you begin to write.



Success Strategy #2:

Being direct and sincere

Achieve Strategy #2 by overcoming Mistake #2: Evasion or falseness

If you are seen as evasive when you write, avoiding the hard truths that successful leaders must often communicate, you'll come across as insincere and, ultimately, untrustworthy. You'll also weaken your ability to motivate and inspire your people, especially when your organisation is trying to weather a difficult situation.

Does the email on the next page demonstrate a good leadership strategy?

Last year was pretty grim for the TXMN Corporation. It began with an undetected manufacturing problem in the Toledo plant that required a recall of a major product. The year ended with a precipitous drop in the stock price. To economise, the company was forced to close for two weeks at the end of the year, and employees returned to work to face major layoffs. The pressure is now on the sales reps to meet sales goals that many say are unrealistically high.

Time for a pep talk! On the next page you will see the email that Director of Sales Crystal Richards, worried about her own future with the company, sent to her sales team.

“The only way around is through.”

—Robert Frost

Chapter summary

Success Strategy #2: Being direct and sincere

Sincerity builds trust; insincerity and evasion undermine it. To build a high-performing team, your written communications must feel genuine. When you authentically connect with your readers, you will gain their respect and loyalty.

Mistake #2: Evasion or falseness

We learn best from our mistakes. In this chapter we'll discuss the second of the 10 top mistakes leaders make in writing and give you the strategy to prevent that mistake.

Real-world writing samples

This chapter includes an example of a message that fails to address readers' concerns and an example in which the writer authentically and powerfully connects with his readers.



Writing sample

From: Crystal Richards

To: Sales Team

Subject: Succeeding in the coming year

Team,

First, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you all for getting through a challenging year. I know that we had setbacks; however, I am confident that, with your help meeting our sales goals, we will fare far better this year. TXMN has known fabulous growth in prior years, and I am confident that we will see that growth again soon. You'll make it happen!

I know that all of you care as much as I do about the success of TXMN and will do whatever it takes to meet your goals. Some may think that our sales goals are set too high, but I don't think so. Despite the manufacturing glitches last October, subsequent recall, and dip in our stock price, we know our products and our team are still the best. The layoffs have made us leaner, meaner, and more efficient. With our experience and professionalism, we can make this year at TXMN better than ever!

Remember, you're our stars, and we are counting on you to knock it out of the park! We're here as your resources and are always available to support you and answer any questions. We care about each one of you and see you all as members of the TXMN family.

My door is open—please don't hesitate to drop in. Here's to a great year!

Cheers,

Crystal Richards

What are the main problems in this email?

- It doesn't address readers' likely questions.
- There's not enough information or substance to reassure anxious readers.
- It's filled with empty clichés and hollow cheerleading.
- It fails to motivate or inspire.

What did the readers think?

Let's consider the following passages in the director's email from the reader's perspective:

I know that we had setbacks; however, I am confident that, with your help meeting our sales goals, we will fare far better this year.

What makes you so confident? Give me something to believe in. Information, please!

You'll make it happen!

How do you think we can make it happen in this tough market? Do you have a plan, or is it all up to us?

Some may think that our sales goals are set too high, but I don't think so.

Yes, the goals are way too unrealistic.

Remember, you're our stars, and we are counting on you to knock it out of the park!

There she goes again—putting the burden entirely on our shoulders.

*Remember Mistake #1:
Failing to target your
readers and their
varying needs.*

Begin every
communication by
analysing your
audience and defining
your purpose in writing.

What should the director of sales have done?

In times of challenge or change, employees generally crave information, not pep talks. They want to know that there's a plan to get through the bad patch. While you can't dig fully into a plan in one email, you can at least reference it. Setting expectations that may be unrealistic—which the director herself practically admits—is both demotivating and demoralising.

If the director's true purpose was to rally her team, she could not accomplish it with insincere phrases. And, if she is truly placing the burden of company recovery on the sales team, then she needs to offer more genuine help than “My door is open—drop in.”



Leadership competencies most frequently displayed in writing

- Ability to influence and motivate
- Accountability
- Strategic orientation
- Conceptual/analytical thinking
- Bias for action/being directive
- Fostering collaboration and teamwork
- Developing people
- Interpersonal understanding
- Communication

* Adapted from Bonnie Burrell and Alethia Bess, *The Strategic Leadership Model of Team Leadership Development*, MIT Professional Institute

What competencies do you need to be genuine and sincere as a leader?

The director failed to exhibit the three leadership competencies vital to a sincere and trustworthy leader who knows how to motivate her people:

1. Fostering collaboration and teamwork

- Communicate company expectations.
- Define team roles and responsibilities.
- Set concise and measurable team goals; be willing to re-evaluate goals as needed.
- Build cohesion by including every person on the team.
- Take advantage of individual strengths.
- Regularly reward both individual and team accomplishments.

2. Communicating clearly and effectively

- Face hard truths and tell it like it is.
- Show empathy and understanding of both team and individual needs.
- Translate complex thoughts into language people understand.

3. Ability to influence and motivate

- Move others to act in a desired way.
- Influence others by modeling desired behaviour.
- Remain open to other ideas and listen actively before directing people to act.

Why didn't the email reassure and foster teamwork?

The strategy of successful leaders is to communicate their expectations without resorting to pep talks that their employees will not believe. Team goals should be realistic. The director's goals, apparently, were not, and she doesn't seem to have a plan to re-evaluate them. She certainly is not acting as part of the team by putting the burden of company recovery squarely on her sales reps' shoulders.

She also failed to communicate in a clear and effective way her empathy and understanding of her team's reaction to the new sales goals. Leaders must face the hard truths and tell it like it is without resorting to meaningless phrases like “you'll make it happen” and “you're our stars.”

One goal of a leader in a position like TXMN's director of sales is to reassure and motivate. To provide the necessary motivation to meet tough sales quotas, she should have given her people the information they craved, rather than hollow exhortations. And, if she wants her people to act in a desired way, she should model that behaviour by explaining what steps the management team is taking to stem the tide of manufacturing errors and drop in profitability.

Don't perfume the pig

If you've got something worrisome or negative to say, then say it as straightforwardly as possible. You'll lose respect if you hide bad news in hollow cheerleading.

How to do it right

People of Groupon,

After four and a half intense and wonderful years as CEO of Groupon, I've decided that I'd like to spend more time with my family. Just kidding —I was fired today. If you're wondering why...you haven't been paying attention. From controversial metrics in our S1 to our material weakness to two quarters of missing our own expectations and a stock price that's hovering around one quarter of our listing price, the events of the last year and a half speak for themselves. As CEO, I am accountable.

You are doing amazing things at Groupon, and you deserve the outside world to give you a second chance. I'm getting in the way of that. A fresh CEO earns you that chance. The board is aligned behind the strategy we've shared over the last few months, and I've never seen you working together more effectively as a global company—it's time to give Groupon a relief valve from the public noise.

For those who are concerned about me, please don't be—I love Groupon, and I'm terribly proud of what we've created. I'm OK with having failed at this part of the journey. If Groupon was Battletoads, it would be like I made it all the way to the Terra Tubes without dying on my first ever play through. I am so lucky to have had the opportunity to take the company this far with all of you. I'll now take some time to decompress (FYI I'm looking for a good fat camp to lose my Groupon 40, if anyone has a suggestion), and then maybe I'll figure out how to channel this experience into something productive.

If there's one piece of wisdom that this simple pilgrim would like to impart upon you: have the courage to start with the customer. My biggest regrets are the moments that I let a lack of data override my intuition on what's best for our customers. This leadership change gives you some breathing room to break bad habits and deliver sustainable customer happiness — don't waste the opportunity!

I will miss you terribly.

Love,

Andrew

Note the differences between the TXMN director of sales' message and this one that Andrew Mason, ousted as CEO of the online deal company Groupon in February 2013, posted before gracefully bowing out.

Does he sound evasive or false?

How do you avoid Leadership Mistake #2?

Let's revisit the leadership competencies necessary to keep from sounding evasive or striking a false note:

1. Fostering collaboration and teamwork

TXMN: By placing the burden of company recovery on her sales reps, the director of sales is not encouraging her people to act as a team. Her pep talk sounds superficial and evasive because there is no information or support.

Groupon: Former CEO Andrew Mason, on the other hand, is doing everything he can to foster teamwork among Groupon employees: “getting out of their way,” giving them “a relief valve from the public noise,” and praising them for working together.

2. Communicating clearly and effectively

TXMN: The director of sales' email is composed of warmed-over clichés and a lack of information to help the sales team bear the burden of putting the company back on its feet.

Groupon: Mason's parting message is targeted and specific: *I was fired because of my poor performance. I accept responsibility and am getting out of your way.* A dose of humour helps to ease the jolt of bad news.

3. Ability to influence and motivate

TXMN: Richards issued a pep talk with no information to back it up and failed to model desired behaviour.

Groupon: Mason did not blame his employees or exhort them to do better. Instead, he set a graceful example of how to accept responsibility. He ends with advice and a genuine rallying cry for the future.

While many may justifiably criticise his performance as CEO, few would doubt the sincerity of Andrew Mason's final missive.

Strategy for success #2:

Being direct and sincere

Especially when delivering bad news, begin by analysing your audience before you write. Put yourself in your readers' shoes by asking how you would feel if you received this communication. To sound genuine and sincere, speak as you would to a friend or close acquaintance whose good opinion you value. Try reading your message aloud: those clichés and meaningless phrases will sound even less persuasive.

Clearly communicate the information your people need to accept a new initiative or to deal with bad news. They will be more successful if they function smoothly as a team, so set realistic expectations and define responsibilities. With the right motivational message, they will all pull together through good times and bad—and your chances of emerging from the bad times will increase accordingly.





Success Strategy #3:

Covering one topic per document

Achieve Strategy #3 by overcoming Mistake #3: Too many topics in one document

Number 3 on our list of the 10 biggest leadership writing mistakes is covering too many topics per document. This mistake is especially glaring in email messages as the writer is tempted to include everything that comes to mind and often adds a string of “by the way” afterthoughts.

“Too much information running
through my brain, too much
information driving me insane.”

—The Police

Chapter summary

Success Strategy #3: Covering one topic per document

Long, rambling messages that cover several topics are problems we often see in leadership messages, especially in email. If you include one topic per document, your readers will carry out your action requests quickly and efficiently.

Mistake #3: Too many topics in one document

We learn best from our mistakes. In this chapter we’ll discuss the third of the 10 top mistakes leaders make in writing and give you the strategy to prevent that mistake.

Real-world writing samples

This chapter includes examples of messages that cover too many topics and examples of a data dump and detailed steps for fixing them.

From: Stephen Dobriansky
To: Alia Hamdan
Subject: Following up on your trip to China

Hi Alia,

How was your business trip to china? I hope the jet lag isn't too bad. I'm looking forward to your take on improving our Beijing and Shanghai operations. While you were gone, the office was busy as usual, and I wanted to email you a couple of updates.

Last week, I hired a new assistant to help support our team. She went to State University with a major in English. She begins on June 1 and will sit in the cubicle outside my office. I think she will be a great addition to the group, and I look forward to having everyone meet her. The quarterly performance reviews are coming up, and we need to schedule a time where I can sit down with you and discuss the recent tasks you have taken over as part of your position. We should plan it sometime within the next two weeks. Please remember to bring the latest feasibility report you've drafted so we can look it over together.

Did you notice a big difference in the corporate culture of China compared to here? How do our processes in the Chinese office compare to those in our U.S. offices? BTW, the Vice President is flying in next week and wanted me to ask if you are available for a meeting. He would like to discuss intake procedures with you. Please let me know your availability as soon as possible so we can get an Outlook invitation set up for your both.

Welcome back!

Best,
Steve

What are the main problems in Steve's email?

- The subject line is vague.
- The message covers at least five topics.
- Action requests and next steps are unclear and hard to understand.
- Action requests are buried in long paragraphs and difficult to find.
- Some of the topics—for example, the new assistant—are unnecessary. Right now, Alia just needs the information necessary to hit the ground running after her trip.

What should Steve have done?

He should have divided his rambling and unfocused email into at least three messages:

1. Welcome home! Here's what's hot.
2. Let's schedule a performance review.
3. We've hired a new assistant (in the form of an email to the entire staff).

On a positive note, unlike many email messages we've seen, the tone of Steve's message is genuine and friendly.

How to improve Steve's message

What to leave in

- Subject line: Make it more informative.
Welcome back! Here's what needs to be done first.
- Topic: First things first.
Decide which topic is most important and focus on it. Two of Steve's requests appear to require immediate action: debrief the China trip and meet with the Vice President.
- Action requests: State clearly what you need. Include meeting times and deadlines.

In Steve's case, propose a meeting timetable. Use an action-oriented headline like "Next steps," and number the items so they are easy to reference:

1. *Are you available Tuesday, 3 p.m., to meet with the VP? If not, please propose an alternative time on Tuesday or Wednesday.*
2. *If your jet lag isn't too bad, let's meet tomorrow at 10 to debrief the China trip.*

What to leave out

- Actions that can wait: Steve should schedule the performance review in a separate message—it does not require immediate action.
- Nonspecific information that does not require action: Inform the entire office that a new assistant is starting. Cover that topic in a separate email to all staff.

Two leadership competencies would help Steve stick to the point

1. Conceptual/analytical thinking

- Think of new ways to look at problems.
- Set priorities on a rational basis, identifying time sequences and causal relationships.
- Communicate concepts clearly and accurately.

2. Bias for action

- Think over the problem before taking action.
- Use analysis to implement a solution.
- Appropriately and consistently decide when to act and when to delay.

"Yes, yes," you're probably saying to yourself. "These are skills I already have. I wouldn't be a leader without them." But if you are not translating your hard-won leadership skills into writing, you're impaired in a major sphere of influence.

In Success Strategy #1, we discussed the importance of analysing your readers before starting to write. If Steve had taken a few minutes to define his purpose in writing, he would have come up with a sequence of importance for the items he had on his mind, and Alia would not have lost valuable time untangling the various strands of his message and trying to decide which to focus on first.

Two important questions to ask yourself before starting to write:

- Why am I writing this?
- What do I want the reader to do?

The answers to these questions will help you limit your communication to a single topic. Take just a few minutes to target your readers, and you will greatly increase your chances of generating the action you desire.

Taking a moment to analyse your readers and define your purpose in writing will help you stick to only the information your audience needs to move business forward.

Avoid a data dump by asking yourself:

What is the reader's role: decision maker? influencer? implementer? other?

What does the reader know about the subject?

How will the reader use this document?

Short does not always mean readable

Even a four-line email can weave a tangled web.

From: Kayla Ross
To: Daniel Rhodes
Subject: Next deadline for MIRA report is noon next Wednesday (10/14)

Hello Daniel,

Our next deadline for MIRA is next Friday--please submit your updated report by noon next Wednesday. Earlier would be better. Also, David is out sick today, so I need you to present the deck he made about the REM study (attached) at the 1 p.m. meeting with SleepWell. If you can't, please find another department head who can. I'll expect you are taking care of this unless I hear from you.

Thanks,

Kayla Ross

Director, R&D

A critical and time-sensitive action request is completely unrelated to the subject line. Still worse, it requires immediate action—Daniel has less than two hours to prepare for a presentation! As it turned out, he was in a meeting and was unable to check his messages. Daniel didn't respond to Kayla until 12:30, and he couldn't get back to the office in time for the 1:00 meeting.

Avoid the dreaded "data dump"

Another major problem associated with too many topics per document is the data dump. Whether it's from a fear of leaving something out or a desire to impress with the depth of their knowledge, writers too often include everything they know about a topic. It's hard for writers to resist the urge to include whatever is on their mind.

A senior manager at a financial services company sent an email to everyone in the

organisation about a major change: the company was migrating all its telephone, Internet, data server, and backup storage to the cloud, along with word processing, spreadsheet, and calendar applications. She introduced this initiative with a single email to the entire staff. Her technical email, dense with unnecessary detail, is too long to reproduce here; this is just an excerpt:

When the functionality of an application is critical for the business and the goal is to allow multiclient, multichannel access to the application (browser, laptops, tablets, smartphones), it will be retooled to run in an environment that emulates a server to allow multiclient, multichannel access.

If she had first considered her readers' roles and their level of knowledge, she would have sent a more concise and jargon-free document.

How do you avoid Leadership Mistake #3?

Let's look at the leadership competencies necessary to make your action requests clear and actionable in writing:

1. Conceptual/analytical thinking

- Analyse your reader and define your purpose.
- Set priorities for your reader.
- Communicate clear action requests, timetables, and deadlines.

2. Bias for action

- Think before writing.
- Stick to your subject line.
- Include one topic, or set of related topics, per document.
- Avoid a data dump.

Strategy for success #3:

Covering one topic per document

At Ariel, we train thousands to write strategically every year. Long, rambling email messages that cover several topics are problems we notice in our workshops and coaching again and again. After we teach people to include one topic per document, we receive feedback that their action requests are carried out quickly and efficiently. You will have great results, too.



Success Strategy #4:

Making clear action requests

Achieve Strategy #4 by overcoming Mistake #4: Hidden or unclear action requests

As a leader, one of your primary responsibilities is to assign work and clearly communicate what you expect others to do. Often, you do this by email. Because email is so easy and convenient, you may tend to draft a message and press “send” with insufficient planning or editing. Messages with hidden or unclear action items, deadlines, and next steps pose a problem for your people. They may postpone a careful reading, putting off starting on your request and missing a critical deadline altogether. Take an extra minute to plan a strategic, reader-centred document instead.

“When the meaning is unclear there is no meaning.”

—Marty Rubin, author

Chapter summary

Success Strategy #4: Making clear action requests

When messages are unclear or unfocused, you won’t see readers responding or acting as you’d like. By planning your subject line and content before you hit “send,” you’ll give your people the gift of clear, actionable assignments and requests.

Mistake #4: Hidden or unclear action requests

We learn best from our mistakes. In this chapter we’ll discuss the fourth of the 10 top mistakes leaders make in writing and give you the strategy to prevent that mistake.

Real-world writing samples

This chapter includes examples of messages that fail to make action requests clear and detailed steps for fixing them.



Quick! What does Rhonda want Raj to do?

There are two action requests in this email. How long did it take you to find them?

From: Rhonda Murphy
To: Raj Patel
Subject: Finance

Hi Raj,

Jake finished the quarterly report and distributed it to the executive committee for review. Although sales are down 3% this quarter, projections were considerably higher. The good news is that we have managed to pay off 30% of our debt, 12 months ahead of schedule. And just yesterday Liza, one of our top auditors, gave her notice and will be taking a position with a new company at the end of the week. Obviously, her accounts have been distributed among her team members, and we want to make a smooth transition for our clients. Please review the resumes you have for senior auditors and set up some interviews. It is imperative that we find a replacement for Liza as soon as possible.

As you know, we are in the process of acquiring NJT company. Although the recent audit did not uncover any fraud in the company, it did find some accounting errors, as NJT showed a pattern of aggressive accounting. Therefore, as they become part of our company, their auditors must take a more responsible and conservative accounting approach. To ensure this result, John announced that Bill Edwards will accept the position of Director, Corporate Finance. That means that we also need a new Director of Special Projects. Please begin that search too, both internally and externally.

See me if you have any questions.

Rhonda

What are the main problems in this email?

1. Uninformative subject line
2. Buried action requests, reducing likelihood of follow-through action
3. Unclear structure
4. Multiple points in paragraphs
5. Lack of headlines and formatting, decreasing readability





Once again: What does Rhonda want Raj to do?

There are two action requests in this email. How long did it take you to find them?

From: Rhonda Murphy
To: Raj Patel
Subject: Please begin process for 2 new hires in Finance

Hi Raj,

We need to start the process for two new hires in Finance. But first, some good news!

Sales projections are up

Have you seen the quarterly report? It was just released. Although sales are down 3% this quarter, projections were considerably higher. We also have managed to pay off 30% of our debt, 12 months ahead of schedule!

Liza is leaving: Please begin search for her replacement

Liza has accepted a position at another company and is leaving at the end of this week. Her accounts will be distributed among other team members. We need to hire her replacement as soon as possible. Let's make this a smooth transition for our clients.

2nd search: new Director of Special Projects

Bill Edwards has been appointed Director, Corporate Finance, leaving open his current position as Director of Special Projects. The NJT acquisition has finally gone through, and Bill will be helping to smooth the transition. Although the recent audit found no fraud in NJT, it did identify some errors due to aggressive accounting methods. Bill will assure that, as NJT becomes part of our company, their auditors will take a more responsible and conservative accounting approach.

Action requested for the week of June 22

1. Review the resumes you have for senior auditors, and set up interviews to replace Liza.
2. Begin the search, both internally and externally, for a new Director of Special Projects.

Please see me if you have any questions.

Best regards,
Rhonda

What should Rhonda have done?

Rhonda was guilty of a very common mistake that leaders make when requesting action by email: her requests were buried in undifferentiated paragraphs whose topic sentences gave no clue to what was hidden within. She also provided no deadlines.

When Raj first opened Rhonda's email, he saw "update since I went on vacation" and "Jake finished the quarterly report." Raj thought, *Oh, just an update*, and turned to other email that he could see required action.

In *Mistake #1: Failing to target your readers and their varying needs*, we emphasised the importance of beginning every communication by defining your purpose in writing. Rhonda's purpose includes two action requests: hire an auditor and hire a director of special projects. If she had taken a moment to define her purpose in writing, she would have highlighted these two requests. She should even have put them in the subject line.

"Skill in the art of communication is crucial to a leader's success. He can accomplish nothing unless he can communicate effectively."

—Norman Allen, playwright

Three leadership competencies vital to communications that generate action

1. Ability to influence and motivate

- Move others to act in a desired way.
- Influence others by modeling desired behaviour.

2. Clear and effective communication

- Translate complex thoughts into language people understand.
- Show empathy and understanding of both team and individual needs.

3. Bias for action

- Use analysis to implement a solution.
- Appropriately and consistently decide when to act and when to delay.
- Act or decide to "just do it" and contemplate later.

Four main roles of action-driving email:

1. Informative subject line
2. Descriptive headlines
3. Suggested deadlines
4. Next steps

What kind of writing would motivate Raj to act?

Rhonda should model desired behaviour by writing the kind of message she herself would want to receive: a clearly worded email with a specific subject line, emphasis on action items and deadlines, and headlines that highlight key points and help the reader navigate the document. It would have taken her only a few minutes more to write an email with clear action requests. That's a winning strategy, saving time not only for Raj, but for the entire team.

How to write email that drives action

Here are the questions that Rhonda, and you, should ask as you begin any email:

1. If my readers were to forget everything else, what is the main message I want them to remember? That is my bottom line.
2. Who, exactly, are my readers?
3. What are my readers' attitudes: receptive, indifferent, or resistant?
4. Action requested: what do I want my readers to do?
5. What are the next steps?
6. What are the deadlines?



The all-important subject line

Do your messages get lost in the volumes of email your readers scroll through every day? Make sure yours are opened by including a subject line that is specific and informative. It should:

- state your bottom line
- use action words that capture your reader's attention
- include an action step or deadline if possible.

Here are three possible subject lines for three email messages. Which subject lines would prompt you to read the message right away?

-
- Billing issues
 - Billing: Hot May issues
 - Pls pay attention to these May billing issues

-
- Meeting
 - 5/12 meeting @ 2:00
 - Special guest at 5/12 meeting, 2 p.m.

-
- Finance
 - Finance update and new hiring
 - 2 open positions in Finance: pls begin searches
-

Take the time to write a specific and streamlined statement that sums up your message in action-oriented terms. Don't press "Send" until your bottom line or key point is in your subject line.

Sometimes the subject line is all you need

Use "END," "End of message," or "EOM" to tell your reader that there is no more information in the body of the email.



Subject lines: When shorter is better

During a threatened meteor strike, a property manager sent the following email to building tenants. The critical information was at the end of a long, cluttered subject line that was truncated for many readers.

From: Henry Rodriguez
To: Riverview Plaza Tenants
Subject: Riverview Plaza Commercial Center - Town of Springfield - Building Closure

Please be advised that the Town of Springfield is asking that businesses stay closed if possible due to the threat of a meteor strike in the area. Please check your local news sources for updates.

Please update your company's employees accordingly.

<http://www.ourtown.ma.us/>

Henry Rodriguez
Senior Property Manager
Riverview Plaza Commercial Center

If you had been looking at your email inbox on your phone, you would have seen:

Riverview Plaza Commer...

Please be advised that the Tow...

If ever an email deserved a short and screaming subject line, this was it!

How do you avoid Leadership Mistake #4?

Let's revisit the leadership competencies necessary to keep from sounding evasive or striking a false note:

1. Ability to influence and motivate

- Include an informative subject line.
- Write strategic headlines that guide your reader through the document, highlighting action requests and deadlines.
- Motivate your readers to follow your example by writing action-oriented email.

2. Communicating clearly and effectively

- Don't bury action requests—highlight them with headlines.

3. Bias for action

- Get to the point!
- List specifically what needs to be done.
- Include a summary at the beginning if there are several actions.

A good headline

- is brief and informative
- indicates a change of topic or new category
- emphasises actions or directions
- guides the reader

How to write a strategic headline

Good headlines illustrate the content of the paragraph that follows by converting general categories to more specific and informative phrases. For example, "Problem" as a headline is not as helpful as "Absenteeism is on the rise." Headlines organise your document for your readers and make your writing easier to read.

1. Start with generic categories that can double as headlines

To organise information, group similar ideas into distinct categories or sections. Label each section with a simple headline. Examples:

Purpose	Recommendation	Implementation plan	Background
Specifications	Next steps	Observations	Directions
Conclusion			

2. Use headlines to drive action

Call attention to action requests and due dates with clear headlines. Be as specific as possible. Examples:

- Contract attached—please review by 2/4
- Next step: please poll your team this week
- Four milestones to a successful rollout
- Items to prepare for next week's meeting
- Project deadline: June 27
- Action requested: please submit budget by Oct. 1

3. For maximum impact, expand your headlines from generic to informative

Generic

Recommendation
Problem
Q4 sales
Process
Background
Benefits

Informative

Recommendation: increase benefits for part-time employees
Repeated cost overruns in marketing dept.
Q4 sales projected to rise 14%
Correct procedure for transitioning account numbers
How the merger has affected our operations
How will the new position help our department?

Strategy for success #4:

Making clear action requests

The few minutes you spend planning your communication will save you hours of follow-up and clarification. Start organising your writing under headlines, and you will save writing—and reading—time for both you and your team.

- Reader-centred documents communicate twice as fast*
- They generate 50% time savings on the part of readers
- 80% of Ariel's program graduates cut writing time by one third
- 100% of graduates improve document quality

*As measured by our assessment tools



Success Strategy #5:

Organising your message

Achieve Strategy #5 by overcoming Mistake #5: Disorganisation

Clear writing is a sign of clear thinking. If you can put your thoughts together logically, you will convince your reader to act. But if you are mentally disorganised, your state of mind will be quite obvious once it's spread across the page or screen. This holds true for a one-paragraph email as well as a proposal or report several pages or slides long.

“There is a huge stress with disorganisation, and there is also a cost to being disorganised.”

—Marty Rubin, author

“Organising is what you do before you do something, so that when you do it, it is not all mixed up.”

—A. A. Milne

Chapter summary

Success Strategy #5: Organizing your message

A message can lose its meaning and impact if it's not well organised. When you arrange your ideas in a logical sequence, you'll better meet your readers' needs and get the response you want.

Mistake #5: Disorganisation

We learn best from our mistakes. In this chapter we'll discuss the fifth of the 10 top mistakes leaders make in writing and give you the strategy to prevent that mistake.

Real-world writing samples

This chapter includes examples of messages that fail to make action requests clear and detailed steps for fixing them.

Where's the bottom line?

You may be asking yourself, “How disorganised can one paragraph be?” Just take a look.

From: Richard Rowland
To: IT Project Managers
Subject: IT Issues

With the company growing and two huge new projects on our plate there has been some confusion over division of responsibilities and chain of command. We've had discussions about how many people we need to keep the department running smoothly, and how we should distribute the new responsibilities, but in the end, most of you expressed that you wanted to remain in your current roles. Plus it's not necessarily a good plan to use an insider, for obvious reasons. Some of the issues we want to clear up are how we're going to distribute project management responsibilities and how many new folks (and what kind) we need to hire to make it possible for us to meet our deliverables on time. Up to now it's worked fine to have you all report directly to me, but the time has come for me to hand off this job to someone who can dedicate more time to it and has more of an operations perspective. So I'm pleased to announce that our search for a new operations manager begins today, and we hope to have someone in place within a month.

What should Richard have done?

In *Mistake #1: Failing to target your readers and their varying needs*, we discussed the importance of analysing your audience and defining your purpose in writing. Richard's key point, which he finally gets to in the very last sentence of a long and painful paragraph, is that he is stepping aside to make way for a new operations manager.

What is Richard's strategy in positioning his bottom line there? He couldn't tell you why he organised his message the way he did, since he obviously gave it little thought. If his purpose was to allay fears and uncertainty, he has probably not accomplished what he set out to do.

What competencies do you need to organise your message and drive action?

Richard didn't apply two leadership competencies necessary to organise a message strategically:

1. Conceptual/analytical thinking

- Skillfully apply knowledge.
- Clearly communicate concepts.
- Successfully use logical deductions.

2. Communicating clearly and effectively

- Translate complex thoughts into language people understand.
- Respond to both team and individual needs.

The most common methods of development

1. Order of importance
 - a) B.L.O.T.
 - b) The “bottom-line sandwich”
 - c) Opinion-reasons or reasons-opinion
2. Chronology
3. Process
4. Organisation in space
5. Comparison/contrast
6. Specific to general or general to specific
7. Analysis

For more on methods of development, see Deborah Dumaine's *Write to the Top: Writing for Corporate Success*, pages 43–57, and *Instant-Answer Guide to Business Writing*, pages 215–220.

Choose a method of development

Analytical thinking would help Richard choose an organisational strategy, or method of development, that's best for his audience. He should ask himself:

- Who are my readers?
- What do they already know about my topic?
- What do they need to hear first?
- Are they already on my side, or do I need to convince them?

Once he determined his readers' attitude—receptive, indifferent, or resistant—Richard would be able to organise his message appropriately. Understanding his readers' attitude and challenges would also help him communicate more clearly and effectively by responding to their concerns.

B.L.O.T. or not?

Putting your “Bottom Line on Top” (B.L.O.T.) is often the best way to get your key information to your readers quickly, saving them valuable time. Unless you expect readers to be resistant, come to the point early in your message.

You probably learned to write in an academic setting, where the emphasis is on demonstrating a logical process leading up to your main conclusion. Writing like a leader requires a strategy shift: you must acknowledge that readers are looking for key pieces of information that they can act on. Give them what they need, then back it up with explanations or logically organised supporting data. You’ll be all the more persuasive.

Richard’s message, rewritten for the receptive reader

From: Richard Rowland
To: IT Project Managers
Subject: IT Issues

Enormous thank-you’s to all of you for the long hours you have put in this month. The new upgrades and conversions have meant a lot of extra work for everyone, and you’ve met these responsibilities with dedication and a fantastic attitude.

Company growth means that demands on IT will grow

In the past, demands like this have come and gone; however, the surge in the company’s growth has made it likely that they will continue for some time, as we’ve discussed. You know that the company has agreed to hire more programmers and that we’re interviewing candidates right now.

Resource management challenges

When we had less work, you were able to work out team assignments and resource management among yourselves while reporting directly to me. Now, however, there’s too much going on for this informal arrangement to continue. We need someone to assess needs and direct traffic. The Executive Committee has decided to create a new position of Operations Manager. Even though I won’t be on site on a daily basis, rest assured that I will still be available to all of you for consultation and support.

Next steps

We will start interviewing candidates this week. If you would like to be considered for the new Operations Manager position, please see me after reviewing the job description [here](#).

What are the benefits for you?

With a close view of all the IT projects, an operations manager will be able to allocate resources fairly, making sure you have what you need to meet your deliverables. In addition, having a person on site most of the time should help you troubleshoot quickly when your project hits a snag. The new manager’s first job will be to sit down with each of you to hear your recommendations.

We’re confident that an experienced operations manager will streamline our processes, improving your work/life balance and giving you the tools to do the job that you do best. If you have any concerns or questions, I’d be glad to discuss them with you.

Are your readers resistant? Win them over with the “bottom-line sandwich”

If you know your readers are likely to object to your key point—a controversial recommendation or announcement, for example—B.L.O.T. may not be your best strategy. Lead into your “bad news” message by building your case. Think first about what will persuade or win over your readers. What do they care about? Can you find some benefit in your “bad news” to lessen their concerns?

Consider “sandwiching” your bottom line between two more positive statements. You could begin by demonstrating a challenging need, show how your solution is going to meet that need, and end on a positive note such as an offer to provide support or welcoming feedback.

Acknowledge your readers’ perspective

Recognising readers’ concerns is part of successful communication. If something you’re announcing or proposing is going to require extra work or create an uncomfortable change, acknowledge it. Avoid false optimism or flimsy benefit statements—they weaken your case, and people can see through them easily.

Sample “bottom-line sandwich” sequencing strategy

Build your case (use one or more of these elements):

1. Establish the positive context for your message.
2. Find common ground or points of mutual agreement.
3. Mention organisation-wide mission, values, context, etc.
4. Demonstrate a need.
5. Acknowledge readers’ concerns.
6. Give the “bottom line.”
7. Close on a positive note.

Richard’s message, rewritten for the resistant reader

Richard uses a subject line that introduces the reasoning behind the decision. He begins his message with an acknowledgment of his people’s hard work. Then he gives the news: hiring an operations manager.

From: Richard Rowland
To: IT Project Managers
Subject: Making the IT workload more manageable

With our exciting growth and two huge new projects on our plate, we’ve had many discussions about the best ways to divide responsibilities and keep processes running smoothly. I’m pleased to announce that leadership has approved the hiring of an operations manager for our department. We’ll start interviewing candidates this week and hope to have someone on board within the month.

We will consider internal candidates

During our discussions on this topic, most of you said you’d like to remain in your current roles. However, if you’re interested in the position, please see me. HR can provide you with the job description.

What will the operations manager do?

We understand that, at the least, we need to hire more programmers—interviews are in progress. We expect that the manager’s first job will be to learn about our current projects and make further staffing recommendations.

In addition, our operations manager will be checking in with all of you frequently and will be your “go-to” person to overcome any obstacles with your projects. I know it will be a welcome change for you to have an on-site troubleshooter instead of trying to track me down.

Thanks to everyone for your input on this subject.

Ending on a positive note—include one or more of these elements:

- Present a positive vision.
- State benefits.
- Discuss action steps.
- Provide encouragement, gratitude, positive feedback, etc.
- Welcome feedback or suggestions.

How do you avoid Leadership Mistake #5?

Let's revisit the leadership competencies necessary to make your messages organised.

1. Conceptual/analytical thinking

- Choose a method of development that responds to your readers' attitude.
- Once you've organised your information, write strategic headlines that guide your reader through your document.

2. Communicating clearly and effectively

- Show your people you care by empathising with their needs, especially when delivering bad news.
- Be realistic—don't sugarcoat or provide false assurances.

Strategy for success #5:

Organising your message

Follow these organising guidelines:

- Group similar or related ideas so readers don't have to search for them.
- Put conclusions or decisions first, then give supporting facts and reasons.
- Put your "bottom line," or most important point, on top if your audience is receptive or indifferent.
- Put your "bottom line" in a bad news sandwich if your audience is resistant.
- If your document is long, recap key ideas at the end.

One of the most challenging aspects of the writing process is sequencing: putting your ideas in the best order to drive the action you want. When you've chosen the appropriate method of development, your readers will more readily accept your ideas.



Success Strategy #6:

Using the right tone

Achieve Strategy #6 by overcoming Mistake #6: Wrong tone

A few years ago, the CEO of a software development company sent the following angry message to 400 managers.

From: Nigel Banks
To: All Management
Subject: Accountability

We are getting less than 40 hours of work from a large number of our KC-based EMPLOYEES. The parking lot is sparsely used at 8AM; likewise at 5PM. As managers, you either do NOT know what your EMPLOYEES are doing; or YOU do not care. You have created expectations on the work effort which allowed this to happen inside this company, creating a very unhealthy environment. In either case, you have a problem and you will fix it or I will replace you.

Never in my career have I allowed a team which worked for me to think they had a 40-hour job. I have allowed YOU to create a culture which is permitting this. NO LONGER.

Hell will freeze before I dole out more employee benefits. The parking lot will be the yardstick of success. It should be “substantially full” at 7:30 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. on weekdays and half full on Saturdays.

I will hold you accountable. You have allowed this to get to this state. You have two weeks. Tick tock.

Nigel L. Banks, CEO

Less than a week after this message was posted online, the company’s stock was down 22%. The CEO spent the next three weeks trying to reassure investors concerned about what was going on in his culture. His own suitability for the job was called into question.

“The tone is the message.”

—Kevin T. McCarney,
The Secrets of Successful Communication

Chapter summary

Success Strategy #6: Using the right tone

The best writers know that the tone of their writing is just as important as the tone of their voice. They adjust their language to fit their readers’ roles and expectations. Using the right tone is one more way to make sure your audience accepts your message—and acts upon it.

Mistake #6: Wrong tone

We learn best from our mistakes. In this chapter we’ll discuss the sixth of the 10 top mistakes leaders make in writing and give you the strategy to prevent that mistake.

Real-world writing samples

This chapter includes examples of messages that fail to make action requests clear and detailed steps for fixing them.



Tone is critical in leadership communications

While that email is an extreme example, milder versions can also have serious repercussions. Tone is the attitude writers take toward their subject, purpose, and readers. Your choice of language and sentence structure creates tone. How do you sound on paper or on the screen? Serious, critical, angry—or warm, friendly, and approachable? Like tone of voice, the tone of your writing should be appropriate to your readers and the subject matter.

What should this CEO have done?

In every chapter of *Write Like a Leader*, we have emphasised the importance of strategy and planning before sending any communication, however short.

Reviewing your audience and purpose for writing will help you reach out to your readers and determine the tone to adopt. Choose your words to fit your readers' personality and background. The best communicators adjust the way they write depending on their audience.

Before sending, Nigel Banks should have proofread his message. If he had, he may have softened his tone, thus greatly increasing his chances of achieving the action he desired—and avoiding a 22-percent loss in stock value. A better planned, less angry message would have kept the goodwill of managers and staff, customers, and stockholders. Instead, Banks spent three weeks after his hot-tempered outburst backpedaling, apologising, and issuing reassurances.

Email is not the place to express anger

If you feel the need to vent, go ahead, but don't press "send." Save the message in your draft folder and return to it once you and the situation have cooled down.

What competencies do you need to achieve the appropriate tone?

CEO Nigel failed to apply three leadership competencies necessary to create a tone that motivates and drives action:

1. Accountability

- Establish in team members a commitment to achieving results.
- Regulate the behaviour of team members.
- Manage in a situation-specific manner to make people accountable.
- Use well-thought-out action plans.

Threatening your people is not the best way to achieve a desired result or regulate behaviour. Nigel needed to obtain their buy-in so they would feel genuinely accountable for their actions rather than cowed into submission. And needless to say, Nigel did not have a well-thought-out action plan. "You have two weeks. Tick tock" hardly qualifies.

2. Fostering collaboration and teamwork

- Communicate company expectations.
- Define team roles and responsibilities.
- Set concise and measurable team goals; be willing to re-evaluate goals as needed.
- Take advantage of team-member strengths.
- Regularly reward both individual and team accomplishments.

Nigel certainly communicated his expectations! He did not, however, define roles and responsibilities, set concise goals, or take advantage of team members' strengths. The only team spirit he fostered was universal fear of the boss.

3. Interpersonal understanding

- Understand other team members by assessing their behavioural competencies.
- Communicate accordingly.

No one needs a behavioural competency assessment to understand that people respond more favourably to a constructive tone. A leader should have the ability to guide behaviour and performance without threatening dismissal or a reduction of benefits.

Leadership competencies most frequently displayed in writing

*Adapted from Bonnie Burrell and Alethia Bess, *The Strategic Leadership Model of Team Leadership Development*, MIT Professional Institute

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| • Ability to influence and motivate | • Bias for action/being directive |
| • Accountability | • Fostering collaboration and teamwork |
| • Strategic orientation | • Developing people |
| • Conceptual/analytical thinking | • Interpersonal understanding |
| | • Communication |

Match tone to reader

Just as you may change the way you talk depending on the person you're with, you should do the same when you write. Compare the tone of these two subject lines:

Benefits of acquiring the XLC system

How purchasing the XLC System would save time, money, and energy

In the first example, the tone is remote and abstract. In the second, it is more lively and persuasive, reflecting an awareness that the reader is one of the decision makers on the issue.

When you have a chance, be friendly and informal

Write as you speak—unless, of course, you're speaking in frustration. The friendlier you sound, the better chance you have of motivating your readers. Be formal only when you feel it's the best way to reach them. But don't overdo the friendliness to the point of sounding too casual or insincere.

Stuffy, hard to read	In making a request for reimbursement, the form was not completely filled out. It is required that you complete the incomplete questions and forward the form to our offices.
-----------------------------	---

Friendly, easy to read	You omitted several items when you filled out your reimbursement form. We will be happy to process your request as soon as you provide the missing information and return the completed form.
-------------------------------	---

Too casual	We checked out your reimbursement form and guess what—you omitted some items. Just fix it and send it back.
-------------------	---

For more on formal and informal language, see *Success Strategy #7: Writing clearly and concisely*.

Use the “you” attitude

Consider your readers' needs and interests more than your own. Keep your readers in mind as you write. Use “you” and “your” as often as possible.

Remote and impersonal: It is important that all our customers be satisfied.

“You” attitude: Your satisfaction is important to us.

The business-human formula

Apply this formula even with people you write to every day:

- Open with a friendly observation: the past or coming weekend, the weather, the new home, the kids.
- Conduct your business.
- Close on a note of warmth or support.

The less you know your correspondent, the more you should include personal and friendly touches. Relationship-building language shows that you are genuinely interested in your reader, not just in the business at hand. If, on the other hand, you see people every day and are sending them the fourth message of the morning, a friendly one-liner might suffice.

Abbreviations used in texting are finding their way into everyday correspondence, but keep in mind that email is not text messaging. Unless you communicate often with people, understand their writing style and preferences, and have an informal and easy relationship with them, avoid texting language.

Language to avoid

- It took all summer for your department to get started on this. Why hurry now?
- Why did you do it that way?
- What were you thinking?
- It's obvious you should have mentioned this before.
- It has come to my attention... (*Oh no—now what's wrong?*)



Bad news is bad news, but soften the blow

This is one of those unpleasant management situations where, no matter how appropriate the tone, your reader will not be receptive. In this instance, it is better to meet face-to-face than to write. But if you absolutely must write, don't make it cold and impersonal like this.

From: Colin Whim
To: Joseph Knope
Subject: Your future at E.N.D. Inc.

Dear Joseph:

I am sure you are aware of the poor economic conditions affecting this industry. Because of this fact, we have had to eliminate certain positions. I'm sorry to say that yours is one of those to be eliminated.

Your computer access will be terminated at 5:00 today. Before you leave, please contact Pauline in HR. She will explain your generous severance package and collect your key card.

We wish you every success in finding a new position, and we extend our thanks for the good work you have done for E.N.D. Inc.

Sincerely,

Colin Whim
HR, E.N.D. Inc.

Customer-friendly email

Here's a friendly and personable letter JetBlue Airways sent to its customers after Hurricane Sandy hit the Eastern Seaboard in October 2012.

Subject: Keeping you informed

Dear TrueBlue Family,

As a follow up to my last email, I want to thank you for your patience and support as we get our operation back up and running. We began restoring service in Boston on Wednesday and we expect to begin service on a 50% schedule from JFK on Thursday, 75% schedule on Friday and 100% on Saturday. Our Washington D.C area airports are open as are Hartford and Newark.

While we are pleased to have the storm behind us, our thoughts are still with all of our customers and crew members who have suffered damage or loss. For the most up to date information on our recovery please visit jetblue.com. We will continue to monitor airport and transportation status reports so be sure to check our BlueTales blog or by following JetBlue on Twitter.

Please stay safe, and know that all of us at JetBlue wish you and your loved ones all the best.

Sincerely,

Dave Canty
Director, Loyalty Marketing & Partnerships

How do you avoid Leadership Mistake #6?

Let's revisit the leadership competencies necessary to keep from sounding evasive or striking a false note:

1. Accountability

- Don't threaten or exaggerate for effect—you may want to vent, but it won't foster a commitment to achieving results.
- Manage in a situation-specific manner to make people accountable. Match your tone to the occasion without harsh criticism or hyperbole.
- Use a well-thought-out action plan—and proofread to make sure your tone is appropriate.

2. Fostering collaboration and teamwork

- Communicate expectations in a positive rather than negative manner.
- Use an approachable tone so people consider you one of the team.
- Provide recognition when it is due.

3. Interpersonal understanding

- Understand your team members—they are individuals.
- Communicate accordingly.

“Remember not only to say the right thing in the right place, but far more difficult still, to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment.”

—Benjamin Franklin

Strategy for success #6:

Using the right tone

At Ariel, we train hundreds of writers every year. Our learners have a chance to practice improving tone challenges—one of the most important components of writing that drives action.

To model communication excellence in your organisation:

1. Take a few minutes to analyse your audience and define your purpose—it's an essential first step to choosing the right tone.
2. Consider your emotional reaction to a situation and be civil even when delivering criticism or bad news.
3. If you wouldn't like someone to address you in the tone of the message you just wrote, don't send it.



Success Strategy #7:

Writing clearly and concisely

Achieve Strategy #7 by overcoming Mistake #7: Wordy or overly formal language

You plan to engage an executive search company to help you replace a senior executive who is retiring soon. Several companies have sent you general information about their services. Of the three proposal excerpts that follow, which appeals to you most?

From Proposal #1

In order to conduct a successful search, it is imperative that we first form a complete understanding of the duties and responsibilities of the open position. This goes beyond what is written in pro forma job descriptions to include extensive contemplation of the specific company goals. Per our outstandingly successful and renowned process, we first identify and prioritise the major expectations held by you and your organisation. To achieve this understanding, we arrange for intensive discussions with client management and other key individuals with whom you may wish us to speak. In consultation and collaboration with you, we then develop the qualifications of the individual desired and prepare a written position specification. Only after these are agreed upon by all parties do we begin the search.

We have found that the dedicated investment of this time and effort at the start of our search activity serves to ensure that we target, surface, and recommend only the most highly qualified candidates for the position. In most searches this process also gives us full panorama of the personality and style of the organisation and the individuals with whom the successful candidate will have significant interaction. We are fully aware that matching the personality and stature of the individual to the company is an extremely significant factor in the person's contributions to the continued success of your organisation.

From Proposal #2

A successful search must be preceded by our complete understanding of the position that must be filled. To that end, your expectations will be identified and prioritised in a meeting involving anyone whose input is deemed vital to the search. Then a thorough job description will be developed and presented in written form. Only after this is agreed upon is the search begun.

The best candidates can be identified only when effort is invested at the start of a search. This process also allows the style of the organisation to be recognised and then to be taken into account when targeting candidates.

From Proposal #3

To deliver the best results for you, we must fully grasp what you require in a candidate. The written job description is only a starting point: in addition, we will interview you and other key people to make sure we understand your priorities and company culture.

The next step is to write a detailed description of your requirements, proceeding with the search only when all the stakeholders are in agreement. We have found that thoroughly analysing our clients' needs is the foundation for highly successful placements.

Chapter summary

Success Strategy #7: Writing clearly and concisely

Leaders can drive effective action with writing that assigns clear responsibilities and gets to the point fast.

Mistake #7: Wordy or overly formal language

We learn best from our mistakes. In this chapter we'll discuss the seventh of the 10 top mistakes leaders make in writing and give you the strategy to prevent that mistake.

Real-world writing samples

This chapter compares examples of personable, reader-centred writing with unclear, stuffy messages that hide or omit key information.

“Those who write clearly have readers; those who write obscurely have commentators.”

—Albert Camus

Which proposal has the best style?

Proposal #1 is overly formal, long-winded, and downright stuffy. Its formal tone is exacerbated by an endless string of passive constructions: “what is written in pro forma job descriptions,” “expectations held by you.” The reader must plow through a lot of excess verbiage to get to the point of the proposal: we have a proven process for conducting an executive search.

Proposal #2, with its simpler sentences and shorter words, is much more concise and readable, though still a bit distant and indirect. Once again, its less than desirable tone is due primarily to passive constructions: “a successful search must be preceded,” “your expectations will be identified.” To create a friendly and approachable tone, conciseness is not enough. You should also use active sentence constructions: “we will identify your expectations.”

Do you prefer **Proposal #3**? No wonder—it is personable, direct, and displays the “you” attitude: “the best results for *you*,” “what *you* require,” “we understand *your* priorities.” Its clear and concise style gets right to the point:

- We will conduct interviews to understand your priorities.
- We will obtain agreement from all stakeholders before proceeding with the search.

What competencies do you need to write clearly and concisely?

1. Communicating clearly and effectively

- Face hard truths and tell it like it is.
- Show empathy and understanding of both team and individual needs.
- Translate complex thoughts into language people understand.

2. Interpersonal understanding

- Understand other team members by assessing—or at least considering—their strengths and limitations.
- Consider others’ points of view.
- Tailor your message accordingly.

3. Accountability

- Establish in team members a commitment to achieving results.
- Regulate the behaviour of team members.
- Manage in a situation-specific manner to make people accountable.
- Use well-thought-out action plans.

To communicate clearly and effectively, say what you mean without obscuring it in formal phrases and passive constructions. Show empathy for your readers and use easily understandable language.

When writing to your team, understanding and considering other points of view will help you strike the right tone and tailor your message.

Finally, accountability—clear assignment of tasks and a commitment to results—will motivate others to read and act upon your written word.



Don't keep your readers at arm's length

As we saw in Proposal #1, an overly formal style is often wordy, stuffy, and impersonal. It may also alienate your readers rather than impress them. Such language is bad enough in proposals and other documents considered “formal,” such as reports, white papers, and company announcements. It's even worse on an interpersonal level. Consider the following example:

From: Therese Lemieux
To: Carl Kotlikoff
Subject: My appreciation

Dear Carl,

It has come to my attention that your contributions were extremely valuable in resolving the Myers issue on Tuesday last. Your dedication and creative thinking on this endeavour are truly appreciated, and I look forward to a comprehensive debrief upon my return from Singapore. Appropriate arrangements should be made with my PA, copied.

Very truly yours,
Therese

Activate your verbs

One of the chief culprits in wordy and formal writing style is the passive voice. In the active voice, the subject performs the action of the sentence. In the passive voice, the subject is acted upon. The active voice is more friendly and direct.

Passive: Appropriate arrangements can be made. [*Who can make them?*]

Active: Please get in touch with my PA to make arrangements.

Despite its frequent use, the passive voice is no more authoritative or professional than the active voice. Passive sentences, besides being wordy and indirect, are weak and indeterminate, often obscuring who is accountable for what.

In the following message, after an action-oriented subject line, urgency and accountability are lost in a welter of passive constructions. Who is accountable for the next step?

From: Diego Soto
To: Carla Giorgis, Ted Moritz, Leslie Haile
Subject: Urgent help needed on Briggs: alternative plan by EOD tomorrow to me

Folks,

I just got back from the Briggs meeting. The plan was flawed—there was an error in the statistical model, and it was pointed out by the client right away. Confidence is being lost in our work, and changes will need to be made quickly. Another meeting is tentatively scheduled for Thursday, when a revised plan must be presented.

An alternative plan must be prepared for my review by end of business tomorrow. Let me know if you have any questions.

Diego

Another example of a cumbersome and wordy passive construction:

Passive: It was decided by the Board that the strategy was ineffective.

Active: The Board decided that the strategy was ineffective.

Look what happens when you activate passive sentences and assign accountability—the tone is more direct and roles and responsibilities are immediately clearer. Note how the headlines clarify accountability and leave no doubt as to who does what and next steps.

From: Diego Soto

To: Carla Giorgis, Ted Moritz, Leslie Haile

Subject: Urgent help needed on Briggs: *three* alternative plans by EOD tomorrow to me

Folks,

I just got back from the Briggs meeting. The plan was flawed—there was an error in the statistical model, and *the client noticed it* right away. Since *they are losing confidence* in our work, *we must make changes* quickly. Another meeting is tentatively scheduled for Thursday, when *we must present* a revised plan.

Action requested

Carla and Ted, please prepare an alternative plan for my review by end of business tomorrow. Let me know if you have any questions.

Next step

Leslie, please set up a team meeting on Wednesday so we can review the new plan before presenting it to Briggs.

Diego

The passive has its place

Why keep the phrase “Another meeting is tentatively scheduled”? Passive voice works well when the action described is significantly more important than the person performing it. In this case, it doesn’t matter who scheduled the meeting.

Formal or informal?

Formality also has its place—for example, if you need to match the formal style of a customer or partner in certain cultures. In your everyday correspondence, however, strive for brevity, clarity, and friendliness. Here are two examples, one formal and indirect, the second friendlier and, mercifully, shorter.

You may also use the passive voice when you want to be tactful and avoid assigning blame:

The project was delayed because the simulation wasn't run last night.

From: R. J. Shapiro

To: Carol Brennan

Subject: Your invitation appreciated

Dear Carol:

Your invitation to speak at the November meeting of the regional chapter of the National Management Council is sincerely appreciated. The topic, performance appraisals by first-line supervisors, will without a doubt be well received by all participants. It is important, however, that the problem of evaluation of employees not meeting performance standards be emphasised, with the inclusion of recommendations for the improvement of appraisal techniques.

Unfortunately, your invitation must be declined, as my presence in New York during the week of November 11 is required. Marianne Baker, director of Human Resource Development at PRQ company, should be contacted regarding her possible availability to address the Council. An excellent presentation would be assured if she were invited. There is no problem having my name mentioned as a reference.

Again, your confidence in extending the speaking invitation to me is sincerely appreciated. If help on future council activities is needed, please be assured of my willingness to help.

Very truly yours,

R. J. Shapiro

How many passive constructions did you spot in that example?

See how the tone changes, and readability improves, once you eliminate the passive voice.

From: R. J. Shapiro

To: Carol Brennan

Subject: Speaker suggestion for 11/13 National Management Council meeting

Dear Carol:

Thank you for asking me to address our National Management Council chapter on November 13. I'd like to accept the invitation, but unfortunately, I'll be away on business that week.

The topic, training first-line supervisors to write performance appraisals, is excellent. Fairly and candidly rating employees who are not meeting performance standards is a critical competency.

An alternative speaker

You might call Marianne Baker, Director of Human Resource Development at PRQ Company, to make the presentation.

Tell her that I recommended her. She's top notch.

I appreciate your invitation. If you need help on other council activities, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Bob

Concise—or blunt?

As a good leader, you respect your readers' time and get to the point quickly. There is, however, a fine line between blunt and concise. To judge where your tone falls on that line, read sensitive messages out loud. If someone said that to you, how would you feel?

How do you avoid Leadership Mistake #7?

1. Communicating clearly and effectively

- Face hard truths and tell it like it is.
- Show empathy and understanding of both team and individual needs.
- Translate complex thoughts into language people understand.

2. Interpersonal understanding

- Understand other team members by assessing—or at least considering—their strengths and limitations.
- Consider others' points of view.
- Tailor your message accordingly.

3. Accountability

- Establish in team members a commitment to achieving results.
- Regulate the behaviour of team members.
- Manage in a situation-specific manner to make people accountable.
- Use well-thought-out action plans.

Wordy and overly formal language will not motivate your readers. Clear and concise writing will.

How would you improve the tone of these messages?

- I got your message, but I don't know what you are talking about.
- What were you thinking?
- Since when have we been charging an extra 10% on Product X?
- I read the new procedure—why are you doing it that way?

Success Strategy #8:

Knowing when to write vs. talk

Achieve Strategy #8 by overcoming Mistake #8: Writing when you should talk

How do you communicate bad news? Have you ever hidden behind an email message like this one?

From: Sean Valverde
To: Carlos Batista
Subject: Leadership opportunities

During the past three years we've worked diligently to create a leadership organisation. We've accomplished many of our goals and are moving towards embodying a learning culture that values its employees. That being said, we have many opportunities to build our leadership organisation. Our Leadership Fast Track is one of many programs that will accomplish our goals.

Overall, we're pleased with the progress of the Leadership Fast Track. However, we have benchmarked our results with comparable companies, and found that there are many differences in the composition of employees who serve in the Fast Track. Therefore, we've decided to limit the number of Fast Track participants. As a result, we will no longer have you participate in Fast Track.

Leadership continues to thrive in NKO Company. I know that there will be many opportunities to continue our drive forward and accomplish our vision. I have appreciated your participation in Fast Track and will be alert to other appropriate opportunities for you in the future.

Sincerely,
Sean

Chapter summary

Success Strategy #8: Knowing when to write vs. talk

Leaders can present their best selves and convey information most clearly when they know whether to deliver a message in text or speech.

Mistake #8: Writing when you should talk

We learn best from our mistakes. In this chapter we'll discuss the eighth of the 10 top mistakes leaders make in writing and give you the strategy to prevent that mistake.

Real-world writing samples

This chapter includes real examples of written messages that would have been better communicated face-to-face or voice-to-voice.

“Never write anything in an email that you wouldn't feel comfortable reading on the Jumbotron in Times Square.”

—The Wall Street Journal
Guide to Management





Email? Phone call? Face to face?

Everyone—especially a leader—loves to communicate good news. But we all have to communicate bad news at some point. Part of your responsibility as a leader is to deliver a tough message using the proper medium.

However unpleasant the task, deliver bad news face to face whenever possible. Resist the temptation of ducking your responsibility by doing it in an email.

What should Sean have done?

The answer is simple—he shouldn't have written at all. Sean should have taken the time to meet with Carlos in person to soften the blow. If a follow-up email had been necessary to document the conversation, then the tone should certainly have been less distant and more personal.



What competencies do you need?

Two leadership competencies will help you decide when to write, when to pick up the phone, and when to meet face to face:

1. Communicating clearly and effectively

- Face hard truths and tell it like it is.
- Show empathy and understanding of both team and individual needs.

When you are delivering bad news, don't hide behind email—do it in person. Make sure to consider the feelings of your recipients. You may soften the blow, but don't whitewash the hard truth.

In some situations, it's simply not possible to deliver the news personally. Especially in a large multinational company, an electronic message may be the only way. If you can't do it by phone, consider a virtual meeting instead of email. It's much easier to show empathy and “read the crowd” voice to voice than in writing. You may also need to address reactions and questions immediately.

2. Bias for action

- Think over the problem before taking action.
- Use analysis to implement a solution.
- Appropriately and consistently decide when to act and when to delay.

Plan your communication, whether written or spoken, by creating an audience profile—what we call a Focus Sheet (see *Success Strategy #1*).

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. How will each audience member react?
2. What do I want my audience to do, think, or feel?
3. What makes the situation problematic?
4. Are there any cultural issues to consider?
5. Is there any information that would soften the blow?



More on when not to email

Easy though it is to send an email, many situations do require a face-to-face meeting, or a phone call at the very least. Even for the best writer, email is not very good at expressing tone. Brevity, for example, can be misinterpreted as rudeness. A sensitive subject is open to misunderstanding—especially when a manager is writing to a subordinate. In particular, ironic statements like this example can often be read as literal:

You haven't filled this position in six months—why hurry now?

Never email in the following circumstances:

1. When you're angry

Remember the irate CEO in *Success Strategy #6: Using the right tone?* Rather than dashing off an angry email, he should have thought about the situation first, asked himself the Focus Sheet questions, and then responded.

2. To deliver bad news

Sean's email, which opened this chapter, is a perfect example. Here's another one. Joseph arrived at work one morning as usual and couldn't log on to his computer. Instead, the following message popped up on his screen.

Subject: Your future at Vertigeau Systems

Dear Joseph:

I am sure you are aware of the poor economic conditions affecting this industry. Because of this fact, we have had to eliminate certain positions. I'm sorry to say that yours is one of those to be eliminated.

Your computer access has now been terminated. Security are on their way with a few boxes to help you pack. Pauline in HR will be around shortly to explain your generous severance package and collect your key card.

We wish you every success in finding a new position, and we extend our thanks for the good work you have done for Vertigeau Systems.

Sincerely,

Colin Wilkerson

HR, Vertigeau Systems, Inc.





3. To give corrective feedback, either personal or performance-related

Though praise translates easily to email (“Chris, your proposal was a knockout!”), corrective feedback does not (“Pat, you could have done better on this”). Such comments can easily be misinterpreted. Because your intended tone is so difficult to interpret in email, criticism almost always sounds worse from the computer screen than when face to face. If you have guidance to deliver, do so in person or video chat.

4. To apologise

Do you think you should send the following message, no matter how thoughtfully worded? However heartfelt the apology, it is always better in person, either face to face or over the phone.

From: Anita Davis

To: Ryan Falola

Subject: About yesterday’s meeting

Hello Ryan,

I shouldn’t have brought my complaints to light in front of the team. Next time I will let you know privately. It was wrong to embarrass you like that.

Please ask me if you have questions about what needs to change in the packet. I hope we’re on the same page now.

Kind regards,

Anita

Pick up the phone already!

You and your colleague have been sending emails back and forth, but you're still not on the same page. It's way past time to stop meandering through email and call. The COO and Director of Human Resources in the following email thread would have saved themselves a lot of time and confusion if either one of them had phoned after the initial interchange. How often have you found yourself caught up in a similar situation?

From: Emily Edelstein
To: Charles Agostino
Subject: Do we need to choose a new prescription plan by TOMORROW?

Does our prescription coverage from Compassionate Health end this week? People are worried that their meds won't be covered.

Emily

When is voice-to-voice the best way?

- When a message generates a string of more than four replies for clarification
- For immediate action—there is an unexpected meeting in two hours and the reader is not responding to your emails or texts
- For an issue that will likely trigger an in-depth follow-up question

From: Charles Agostino
To: Emily Edelstein
Subject: RE: Do we need to choose a new prescription plan by TOMORROW?

Compassionate Health prescription coverage doesn't necessarily end this week.

However, it becomes secondary coverage on Wednesday. At that point, Compassionate Health will pick up only what it assumes isn't being covered by another program.

So if you have any employee that has a prescription need that can't be filled by tomorrow but will come up in the next couple of weeks, it would probably be a good idea.

Charles

From: Emily Edelstein
To: Charles Agostino
Therefore, if there is no other program Compassionate Health will pay it all? That is how I interpret your words. This is thorny.
Thanks for your patience,
Emily

From: Charles Agostino
To: Emily Edelstein
No, as I explained, Compassionate Health would only pickup what it assumes ISN'T being covered by another plan. So they if they assume only some kind of co-pay is remaining, that's all they would pay.
Charles

From: Emily Edelstein
To: Charles Agostino

So again if I read that there will be costs, no other plan covering it, so Compassionate Health will pay. I have to go to a meeting.

Emily

From: Charles Agostino
To: Emily Edelstein

??? I don't know how you're getting that. Sorry. I don't know how to make it clearer.

Charles



How do you avoid Leadership Mistake #8?

Let's revisit the leadership competencies that will help you decide when to write, when to call, and when to meet face to face.

1. Communicating clearly and effectively

- Face hard truths and tell it like it is.
- Show empathy and understanding of both team and individual needs.

Leaders face the facts, tackle unpleasant tasks head on, and have compassion for their people in a difficult situation.

2. Bias for action

- Think over the problem before taking action.
- Use analysis to implement a solution.
- Appropriately and consistently decide when to act and when to delay.

Of course you're busy, but think before you write. Take a few minutes to review the Focus Sheet questions at the beginning of this chapter. If you don't, you may end up devoting a lot of time to damage control.

Strategy for success #8:

Knowing when to write vs. talk

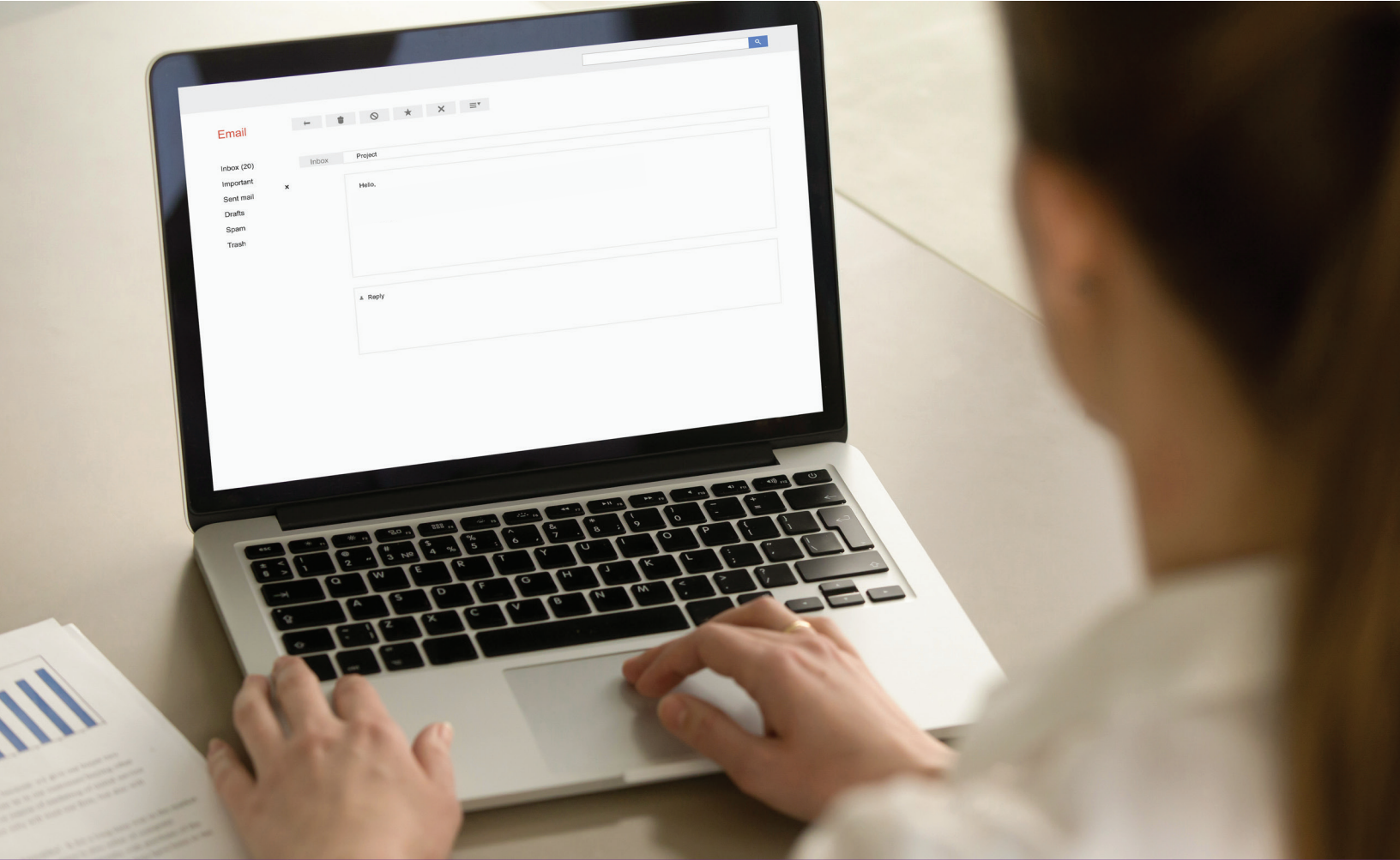
There is no excuse for dashing off a message in anger. People in leadership positions should model how to manage their emotions in writing as well as face-to-face—and resist the temptation of avoiding responsibility by delivering bad news by email.

Remember, email is forever. None of us wants to make permanent something we wish we hadn't written.



“I’m a firm believer in occasionally communicating in the old-fashioned way—a real live conversation! Having the attention of a leader with real ‘face time’ can show people that they are ‘worthy’ of the leader’s time—and encourage ‘real time’ communication with tone and a chance to see reactions.”

—Karen Glickstein on LinkedIn



Success Strategy #9:

Writing constructive feedback

Achieve Strategy #9 by overcoming Mistake #9: Criticism; shotgun feedback meant for a few

We talked about delivering guidance in person rather than in writing in Chapter 8, but managers do often have to provide feedback in writing.

The example on the next page is from an actual performance feedback email. The intent was to motivate and develop the employee. The result, however, was that the employee resigned the next day.

“Excellent firms don’t believe in excellence—only in constant improvement and constant change.”

—Tom Peters

Chapter summary

Success Strategy #9: Writing constructive feedback

Your ability to influence and motivate others, develop people, and exhibit interpersonal understanding are key competencies in delivering constructive feedback.

Mistake #9: Criticism; shotgun feedback meant for a few

We learn best from our mistakes. In this chapter we’ll discuss the ninth of the 10 top mistakes leaders make in writing and give you the strategy to prevent that mistake.

Real-world writing samples

This chapter includes an example of less-than-constructive feedback that failed to achieve its intended goal, and a more positive message likely to get results.

From: Peter Gilbert
To: Giles St. Gregoire
Subject: Follow Up to Discussion on 1/31

As a recap to our meeting yesterday, we discussed several issues that are leading me to become uncomfortable with you as a supervisor. I brought the issues to your attention that are causing me to worry about the status of our deliverables, and to get your feedback as to what I can do to help you bring you to the level you need to be in order to be successful in your role as a supervisor.

You and I agree that you have not been effective for the past few months. You have not been taking the “ownership” of your team, your duties, and your deliverables that is necessary for you to be successful in your supervisor role. There are several areas that will require dramatic improvement if your intent is to be a success on our team. Below is a summary of what we discussed today:

- **Monitoring of staff:** This is something that must happen within your staff in order for you to be successful in your role as supervisor. Up until now, you have not monitored or audited your staff in an effective way.
- **Process and procedures:** We discussed the fact that you are beginning to fail in your supervisor role because you don’t understand the processes and procedures that customer care specialists are involved in. I continued to stress the importance of learning the core procedures, and not being too proud to ask questions until you are clear on the process.
- **Training and cross-training:** We discussed your hesitation to bring on new employees because of your discomfort with the training process. Part of the training process is that you must follow up, monitor, and coach the person, not always do the job yourself.

I expect to see significant improvement in these areas by 3/1. I believe you can do this job once you change your frame of mind and start thinking like a supervisor. I am always available for you to come to me with any concerns, problems, or advice. I want everyone on our team to be a success.

What’s wrong with this email?

If the purpose of this message was to motivate and develop the employee, it totally missed its mark. The problems include:

- focus on attitude rather than behaviour
- sweeping generalisations and judgments
- lack of supportive feedback
- lack of specificity
- little discussion of the impact of behaviour
- few concrete improvement steps
- overemphasis on negatives
- a harsh and critical tone, heightened by wordy and cumbersome sentences

This manager failed to exhibit three competencies

1. Ability to influence and motivate

- Address actions—not attitudes. “Too proud to ask questions” is a value judgment of the employee’s attitude.
- Don’t judge or psychoanalyse. “Change your frame of mind and start thinking like a supervisor”: another value judgment.

2. Developing people

- Give both supportive and corrective feedback. Besides “I am always available for you to come to me,” there is not much supportive feedback in this example.
- Be specific: use examples or quotes. “You have not monitored or audited your staff in an effective way” and “your discomfort with the training process” are vague generalisations.

- Point out the impact of behaviour. “Causing me to worry about the status of our deliverables” is equally vague.
- Present concrete improvement steps. Again, “learning core procedures” and “asking questions” are vague.
- Don’t undo or negate positives. Was there really nothing positive to say about this employee’s performance? Surely that indicates incompetence in hiring and training on the manager’s part.

3. Interpersonal understanding

- Use a personable, positive tone. We all know that people respond more favourably to a constructive tone, but many leaders lose sight of this.

What is shotgun feedback?

Employing a shotgun approach—targeting many with criticism or feedback meant for a few—is an ineffective, and even lazy, way to manage. More conflict-averse managers may not want to single out anyone, so they aim their criticism at a wide audience, hoping that the target will shape up without a direct confrontation.

Another unsuccessful management tactic is to fire off a round to the entire organisation without bothering to identify the culprit. This technique is especially corrosive when done in anger.

Distribution lists: shorter is better

Speaking of the shotgun approach, countless readers waste time reading information that does not apply to them. Companies could save hundreds of hours if writers would update their distribution lists regularly. And when too many people receive a copy of a message, its effectiveness may be lost. Readers may think that, if the subject applies to everyone, it can't be very important. People will start ignoring you if you cc them indiscriminately.

The message to the right is far clearer and more encouraging than the email from Peter to Giles.

What changes could improve it even more?

An example of helpful written feedback

If you must give feedback in writing rather than face-to-face, be sure to

- explain why the changes you suggest are important
- give a real example of each issue you discuss
- offer support—and deliver on that promise.

From: Bill Hart

To: Joe Dale

Subject: How to create outstanding weekly summary reports

Hi Joe:

You mentioned that you want to follow our company processes correctly while you learn your position. I'm glad you're committed to doing a great job.

Please follow these tips for submitting great weekly summary reports:

1. Submit your weekly summary reports on Mondays

You submitted your last report a day late. It's important that you submit your reports by the end of the day on Monday so the management team can review them on Tuesday morning. The senior execs need to know how last week went so that they can make adjustments for this week. If you are having trouble meeting deadlines, please let me know how I can help.

2. Review your weekly reports for accuracy

I noticed a few typos in your last report, and some of the math on the last page was incorrect. I'll give you a copy of my hand edits so you can see what I changed. While you're still learning our process, ask Veronica to review your reports. She's experienced and happy to help.

You've been making some great progress during the past six months. Please let me know if there's anything I can do to make your job easier.

Bill

How do you avoid Leadership Mistake #9?

Here's a recap of the leadership competencies you need to write constructive feedback:

1. Ability to influence and motivate

To motivate and influence your people, focus on action, not attitude, and avoid personal judgments.

2. Developing people

Be supportive, be specific in your feedback and expectations, point out the impact of behaviour, present concrete improvement steps, and include the positives.

3. Interpersonal understanding

Like all good managers, use an encouraging and positive tone, temper your criticisms, and avoid shotgun feedback.

“Managers who successfully navigate the challenges of dealing with unacceptable performance create a culture where good performance is honored while at the same time increasing their respect, credibility and influence.”

—Performance Coaching for Business Results,
Impact Achievement Group



Success Strategy #10:

Respecting cultural differences

Achieve Strategy #10 by overcoming Mistake #10: Writing culturally insensitive messages

Technology today is advanced enough that organisations have expanded to include offices all over the globe. But while we have the necessary tech to reach our global teams, it takes tact and effort to successfully lead them.

The example on the next page is an email sent to a team in Seoul, South Korea from a leader in New York City. The leader wanted to update the team on a project's status and request crucial, time-sensitive next steps. The unfortunate result was team-wide complaints and disengagement.

“Poor communication accounts for an average loss of \$62.4 million per year at companies with 100,000 employees and \$420,000 per year at companies with fewer than 100 employees.”

—*The Cost of Poor Communications*,
a survey by David Gross, cited by SHRM

Chapter summary

Success Strategy #10: Respecting cultural differences

Leaders can build relationships and drive productivity with messages that show thought and are strategic for global organisations.

Mistake #10: Culturally insensitive messages

We learn best from our mistakes. In this chapter we'll discuss the last of the 10 top mistakes leaders make in writing and give you the strategy to prevent that mistake.

Real-world writing samples

This chapter compares examples of clear, attuned writing with insensitive, confusing messages that disengage, frustrate, or—worst of all—alienate readers.



From: Allison Janetti
To: Jung Ah Kwon
Subject: Hanson project update

Jung Ah and team:

I spoke today with our client, Hanson, about the roles they need our help filling. They passed along the attached basic job descriptions, which they need us to fine-tune and proof before we can get the ball rolling. They pushed up the deadline, and now need these up and running by EOD February 6—I approved this even though it's coming up soon since it still gives your team five full days to work on it. By my ballpark, that's enough time to get this project off the ground. Your team has the login information and posting guidelines for Hanson's system already, right? Let me know if anything comes up.

Best,
Allison

What's wrong with this email?

The purpose of this email was to concisely explain the new deadline and requests from the client. While it was certainly concise, it's full of other problems:

- it relies on idioms, which may seem like a way to make a message feel casual but are confusing for non-native English speakers
- the action requests are unclear and hidden
- it makes no effort to address that accepting a new, shortened deadline without consulting the team involved may introduce problems
- the deadline falls during an important three-day Korean holiday
- it demonstrates that the writer doesn't even know the level of this team's knowledge or expertise
- it doesn't take into account the time difference between New York and Seoul.

What should this leader have done?

This leader failed to show four competencies critical to communicating globally:

1. Be aware of time zones

One of the most obvious, but often overlooked, strategies for minimising cross-cultural barriers is being mindful of different time zones. While Allison sent her email the morning of February 2, by that time, it was past business hours in Seoul. This means that before they even read the email, the Seoul team had already lost a full day to work on the project.

Leaders should always be aware of the time zone they're sending an email to or scheduling a meeting with. Try to avoid non-business hours, but if that's not possible, figure out a way to take turns working during unusual business hours so the onus isn't always on one side.

2. Present the necessary details clearly

This leader made an effort to keep her email short, but unfortunately, conciseness isn't everything. The message presented vague action requests and also hid a request for vital information about the team itself. After reading this email, the team would have needed to reply with several questions before they could get started on the project—slowing productivity to a halt on an already short deadline.

This leader should have explained what specific changes needed to be made to the job descriptions, and should have included the login and posting guidelines for the client's system.

3. Avoid idioms or confusing language

While this South Korean team speaks fluent English, there's no harm in being as clear as possible when communicating across languages. Phrases like “fine-tune,” “get the ball rolling,” “ballpark,” and “get it off the ground,” may seem commonplace, but it's possible they would trip up non-native English speakers.

Leaders should double-check their messages and swap these out for clearer, more literal options.

4. Know and respect unfamiliar holidays and traditions

No one expects your leaders to know every country or culture's specific holidays. But this leader could have checked in with the South Korean team lead about the deadline change before accepting the client's request.

Everyone should have the chance to celebrate their traditions without the pressure of missing deadlines and disappointing—or losing—clients. Asking employees to forgo important holidays gives the impression that your leaders neither care about nor respect their teams' time and lives outside of work.

A strategic cross-cultural email

From: Allison Janetti
To: Jung Ah Kwon
Subject: Possible deadline change and updates on Hanson project

Jung Ah:

Good morning (or, for you, good evening)! I spoke today with our client, Hanson, about the roles they need our help filling.

Requested deadline change

The client's CEO has gotten involved on their end of the project and as a result, they're hoping to push the deadline up by a week, to EOD February 6. I know that's a faster turnaround than we expected—is that possible for your team?

They need updates to all ten job descriptions

I've attached their basic job descriptions here. We'll need your team to

- optimise keywords and phrases throughout to match SEO rankings
- add a unique company description and values section based on Hanson's "About us" page on their website
- use white space, bullets, and fonts to make the descriptions more visually appealing
- add links to Hanson's website wherever specified in each document.

Hanson has specific posting guidelines for their system

I've attached a document that includes the new login information for Hanson's system. This also includes their company guidelines for posting job descriptions.

Please let me know if you have any questions about these updates, or if you want to hop on a call when you see this in the morning.

Leadership writing tactics

Drive productivity using clarity

Time zones can cause extra trouble when it comes to email back-and-forth. An email conversation that might have taken an hour for two people in the same time zone can mean losing days when communicating globally. So avoid the painful "email ping pong" at all costs by including in your initial email all the information your reader could need.

As a leader, you should be clear when you're delegating tasks. Analyse your readers and define your purpose for writing the message, then share that clearly.

- What's the reason you're writing this email?
- What do you need your reader to do?

Brainstorm the reader's potential questions about a project and preemptively include the answers in your message.

Build relationships by showing understanding and respect

This second email shows not only that the writer is aware of the time difference, but that she is willing to take a call outside her own normal hours to facilitate the project.

Relationships are about give and take, and for leaders, putting the onus on yourself occasionally shows that you know you are more than just a delegator in charge.

- Asking about a deadline change rather than just appointing one shows that a leader cares about workload and stress level.
- Explaining the reasoning behind a change (the CEO's involvement) is incentive for the team to rally together and try to make the client as happy as possible.

Instead of feeling dejected and bitter about having to work through a holiday, this team would likely feel motivated and engaged to get the project done as soon as they could to support this leader and their client.

LinkedIn's 2018 Workplace Learning Trends report found that the workforce's #1 priority is developing soft skills. To define them, soft skills are "the personal attributes that enable a person to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people."

How do you avoid Leadership Mistake #10?

Two leadership competencies are vital to avoiding Leadership Mistake #10:

1. Focus on clarity

This is twofold: be clear in the language you're using—down to word choice—but also make your action requests, deadlines, and other important information as clear and concise as possible.

2. Make an extra effort to be knowledgeable and understanding

Being aware of cultural differences will require some effort—there's no way around it. But it's a worthwhile investment of a leader's time because it produces teams who feel appreciated and are more engaged and productive as a result. A team who knows their leader cares about them outside of their performance at work is invaluable.

Spend a few minutes planning messages before you start writing. It may seem like a waste of time, but it will actually save you time in the long run by eliminating back and forth.



About the author

Deborah Dumaine, best-selling author and founder of Better Communications (acquired by Ariel in 2016), is a pioneer in improving business writing quality and productivity. For more than 35 years, she has set the standard in business writing by responding to the needs of corporate writers.

Client results have consistently shown that effective business writing increases credibility and hones leadership skills. Prompted by her ongoing commitment to help companies succeed, Deborah wanted to know what impact an ever-changing business environment might have had on the written communication needs of today's workforce. To answer that question, she interviewed global learning leaders from GE, Deloitte, Red Hat, and more. *Write Like a Leader* is the culmination of insights gathered from these interviews and Deborah's vast expertise in business writing.

About Ariel

Ariel develops powerful and authentic communication skills to drive better performance for leaders and teams. Our integrated suite of programs is delivered via classroom, virtual classroom, and a digital offering to provide flexibility in learning. Whether you need to develop your next generation of leaders, connect global teams, or keep your workforce engaged and motivated, we can tackle your most pressing business challenges to ensure that your teams write, speak, lead, and sell with impact and emotional intelligence.

Visit us at www.arielgroup.com.au

