enLumen
Leadership Services

How (vs. What) to Communicate
The Method Matters

Never in history have we had so many options for how to communicate with each other. Face-to-face was once the only alternative. Then we added written words and pictures – although before paper, being carved in stone was a constraint! Radio and telephone introduced real-time remote options, and now the internet offers many ways to communicate with almost anyone, anywhere in the world instantly.

But all communication channels are not created equal – each has advantages and disadvantages. Communication quality is measured by what's received, not what's transmitted. And the method you choose may impact how your message is received and understood.

So when choosing whether to communicate face-to-face, by phone, paper, email, text, or a social media channel, here are a few factors to consider (I'm thinking mostly of one-to-one communication, but mass communication requires similar considerations):

1. **Relationship.** Relationships can be damaged by bad choices of communication channels. Respect relationships by considering…

   a. …*the receiver's preferences*. Everyone has preferred ways to communicate, but we don't all share the same preferences. I try to learn and accommodate their style.

   b. …*the emotional content*. No matter how many happy faces we use, emotions get distorted when we can't read someone's tone and body language.

   c. …*the value of instant feedback*. Real-time communication allows me to adjust my delivery based on how my message is being received. Sometimes that's important.

2. **Disruption.** When my phone rings with a call or text, I'm disrupted from whatever I'm doing. True, I can turn the phone off when I'm planning to concentrate, but not every intense conversation or activity is planned. Respect the recipient by only using disruptive channels when it's important and appropriate to do so. Consider whether an email they can open at their convenience would be more considerate than a text or phone call.

3. **Efficiency.** The pitfall is that we often think of our own efficiency but fail to consider the other person's. It might be quickest *for me* to leave a voicemail, but if it creates work *for you* to listen and write it down, I should save you the effort by sending an email. Disruption (see above) also impacts the receiver's efficiency.

4. **Permanence.** I remember being told early in my management career to "commend in writing and correct verbally". Written praise can be retained for ongoing encouragement but the verbal correction can fade into history. Of course, the written record may be important, but even then I suggest a verbal conversation followed up by a written record.

5. **Confidentiality.** I'm amazed at (and sometimes guilty of) in-person or cell phone conversations that occur with no sensitivity as to who can overhear. Also remember that once something gets sent electronically you have no control over where it goes beyond the intended recipient. Ever see a forwarded email string with sensitive information buried in it? Or the screenshot of a social media message that gets posted elsewhere?

Good communication isn't just giving good data.