

# DEVELOPMENT

## Leadership in Writing

Best practices and worst mistakes.

By Deborah Dumaine

Hot topic though it is, leadership remains an elusive goal for many. Good leaders must connect the dots between vision, strategy, and results. They must know where their organization is going and how to get it there. Besides the difficulties of leading successfully in face-to-face situations, today's leaders confront the additional obstacle of leading from afar. They have the task of clearly communicating their leadership and inspiring their team through writing. As they strive to meet

that challenge, leaders often make these critical writing mistakes:

- giving unclear action requests
- covering too many topics in an email
- writing when communication should occur face-to-face
- using the wrong tone (for example, hollow cheerleading).

### Four vital skills

Forward-thinking managers know that strong writing is essential to an organiza-

tion's success. Transforming documents from productivity drains into action drivers can both jump-start and sustain corporate results. To achieve that change, you must demonstrate four leadership skills in your daily documents:

- Get results by driving action.
- Communicate ideas strategically to support company vision and goals.
- Create a positive and motivating work environment.
- Coach others effectively and constructively.

### Why write systematically

Many crucial initiatives are conveyed and implemented companywide via emails, written reports, and presentations. Unfortunately, managers frequently underestimate the power of writing because they haven't learned to use it to their advantage. For them, writing is a tedious or intimidating part of the job. But it doesn't have to be that way for you. Writing strategically will help you manage more productively, establish your credibility, and improve your image as a leader.

To write as a leader, you must plan your documents, target your readers, sequence your arguments logically, choose the right tone, and send polished documents—free from errors and jargon. The good news: Once you learn to do

this systematically, you'll increase your writing speed.

### The connection

Here's how those four vital writing skills link to better business outcomes.

**Get results by driving action.** Most people are frustrated when they receive documents with unclear action requests and next steps. Empower your team by providing well-defined assignments that minimize confusion. Compare the following instructions.

- Original instructions: It has been determined that we have some gaps in our leadership development program as newly promoted managers are feeling unprepared for their jobs. A needs assessment should be done, including the development of a plan, establishment of goals and a schedule, and assignment of roles. I'm interested in hearing your thoughts.

- Revised instructions: We must enhance our leadership development program to prepare our new managers for their jobs.

Actions requested by December 1st:

1. Assess our needs.
2. Develop a plan based on our needs.
3. Establish goals and a schedule.
4. Assign roles.

I look forward to discussing your recommendations.

The revised example emphasizes actions and deadlines. Managers will now be able to move forward and work more independently—eliminating back-and-forth communication that wastes everyone's time. Important tasks are less likely to fall through the cracks.

**Communicate ideas strategically.** Suppose you sent the following email with "Update" in the subject line:

"Recently we've had some incidents with our printing outsourcer, which I recorded and discussed with Tara in Finance. Once we had a report printed for a crucial client meeting and half of the pages were blank. We looked unprofessional. We discussed the cost of the mistakes and what they've done to correct the errors. Although they offered us some price breaks, we've been having problems all year. Tara and I think you should hire a new outsourcer. On another note, your XYZ Co. annual meeting is going to be on the third, rather than the fifth."

There are two problems with that message:

- The sequence and bottom line are unclear. In the example, the bottom line—the company should hire a new outsourcer—is located at the bottom of the email. Even the simplest messages should begin with a straightforward

## Writing and the Bottom Line

Don't think that writing can alter your organization's bottom line? Consider the following recent, real-life incident.

A CEO who thought he saw too few parked cars early and late in the day blasted an angry email to 400 managers. He complained that employees weren't working enough hours.

An employee forwarded the CEO's threatening email outside the company, and it was posted on Yahoo.com.

Stock market analysts and investors found out and were concerned that negative events at the company

were behind such an angry message from the CEO.

The *New York Times* picked up the story.

The company's stock price fell 22 percent, from US\$44 to \$34, in just three days.

That CEO learned an important lesson the hard way: Plan your messages instead of sending impulsive emails. His thoughtless action not only harmed his reputation as a leader but also severely affected his company's profitability. A two-minute reader-analysis process could have helped him avoid that catastrophe.

“As soon as you take one step up the career ladder your effectiveness depends on your ability to communicate your thoughts in writing and speaking.” ~ Peter F. Drucker

bottom-line statement followed by supporting arguments or analyses. That sequence helps your readers understand how each subsequent argument relates to the big picture. Without logical construction, your documents—including email—are usually unpersuasive. They risk being rejected or ignored.

- The message covers too many topics. This problem is rampant in email. It may seem counterintuitive, but sending a single message with multiple topics is less productive than sending several with one topic each, especially if you can summarize the topic in the subject line. Readers are looking for one action or key point. In a crowded message, they may skim over a crucial aspect, missing deadlines or action steps.

### Additional Resources

- *Business Communication (Harvard Business Essentials)*, by Richard Luecke for Harvard Business School Press
- *Communication Basics*, by Judy Jennings and Linda Malcak for ASTD Press
- *Instant-Answer Guide to Business Writing*, by Deborah Dumaine
- *Leadership Presence*, by Belle Linda Halpern and Kathy Lubar
- *On Writing Well, 25th Anniversary: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, by William Zinsser
- *Write to the Top: Writing for Corporate Success*, by Deborah Dumaine

In this example, readers might skip over the email because the subject line doesn't suggest that the message is urgent. If they did read it, they might miss the timeliest point: the meeting change. It would be better to send a separate email titled “XYZ Co. annual meeting changed to 9/3.”

**Create a positive and motivating work environment.** Consider the following email Gina received from her manager:

“Gina: My studies with comparable companies show that there are differences in the percent of employees who are included in the Fast Track program. As a result, we've decided to be more selective and cut all but our very best employees from the program. Based on our experience thus far in Fast Track, you will no longer be expected to participate. We hope to have other opportunities for you in the future.”

Intentionally or not, that email made Gina feel like a failure. Without explaining why, her manager says that she isn't good enough to participate in the Fast Track program. The sour tone, harsher than necessary, is hardly designed to motivate the employee or foster teamwork. This issue could easily have been resolved in person or with a friendly phone call, without sacrificing Gina's enthusiasm and self-worth.

Other issues that should be resolved in person or by phone include negative or corrective feedback, performance issues, and interpersonal situations. Before sending any bad news in writing, ask yourself if it's appropriate. You'll find it

difficult to convey a supportive tone—especially in email.

**Coach others effectively and constructively.** It's important to inspire your team, but you must be sincere and offer concrete advice. What could happen if you sent the following message?

“I know that all of you care as much as I do about the success of TXMN and that you'll do whatever it takes to meet your goals. Some may think that our goals are set too high, but I know you can do it. Despite the manufacturing glitches last October and the subsequent recall, we know our product is still the best. If you give it your all, we can meet our sales goals and make this year at TXMN better than last year!”

Your team would probably think you were full of baloney, and you would lose respect and credibility. Why? Hollow cheerleading has replaced substance in this email. Besides, do you really “know” how your readers feel? Instead of pressuring your team to achieve unrealistic goals, devise and share a strategic plan to help them meet target objectives. In this instance, the team needs to know how to counter buyer resistance due to the recent product problems.

### Leadership exemplified

Although writing has the potential to boost a good manager into a real leader, it's not generally recognized as a leadership tool. Strong writing skills will gain you respect and contribute to your organization's growth and profitability. Ultimately, managers who are the best at communicating through writing will take the lead in setting the direction for their organizations. They will move their people to achieve outstanding goals.

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