Using Email to Enhance Relationships

I have been accused of favouring verbal communication in recent articles and so I thought it was time to revisit one form of written communication – emails. There are plenty of tips available for efficient and effective use of email. For me, however, the challenge of wisely using email is to recognise the risks to my relationships of sending messages without the ability to modify or clarify them with my tone and body language. This month, therefore, let's think about some ideas for deploying email with the aim of <u>enhancing</u> relationships rather than inadvertently damaging them.

Let's start with some risk mitigation principles. In my experience, most of the relationship damage occurs when messages are misunderstood with regard to the emotional attachments. This can occur when emotion is inappropriately included in the email because the sender is feeling emotional. Tips for avoiding emotional impact include:

- Don't use CAPITALS and be careful of exclamation marks!!!
- Pause before hitting the Send button if you are feeling stressed and check how your tone may be interpreted
- If you are feeling really emotional, save your email as a draft and re-read it tomorrow morning
- Be consistent with your sign off (eg Don't omit "best wishes", if that is your normal style, just because you aren't feeling that friendly)

The other type of misunderstood emotion is when nothing was intended and the reader has formed an incorrect conclusion based on an innocent action or error. Tips for managing this risk include:

- Be careful with your use of humour. Not everyone shares your delight in showing off your keen wit. Sarcasm, in particular, is dangerous.
- Ensure that you are using their right name (ie their preferred name). She may have been introduced at the social function as "Macca" but she may prefer her given name for work emails.
- If you are hitting the Forward button be conscious of what may be attached in the email trail.
- Think about when to use Reply rather than Reply All. Sometimes the reader may not want everyone sharing in your response.
- Be very selective in your use of the cc and bcc functions. It's not just about clogging up inboxes but demonstrating respect.

These reminders are probably second nature to sensitive or bitterly experienced readers. Let's now turn to the positive side of the objective. What can you do to enhance your relationship when using email, noting that it is generally regarded as "impersonal"?

Here are some ideas which you might like to experiment with:

1. Rapport

I recognise that email is praised for its brevity but, just occasionally (and for the right relationships), add in some "small talk". This reminds the reader that you know something about them and perhaps have something in common, as well as treating them as a person. It may be as simple as "How was your ski weekend? I heard that conditions have been good this season."

2. Appreciation

Take a few keystrokes to express your thanks for their recent contribution, whether it is the attachment they provided in their last email or a broader example of assistance. Similarly, note progress and acknowledge talent. eg "I think the project is back on track thanks to your insightful suggestions".

3. Visuals

If the person you are emailing is based a long way from you and the relationship is likely to be both important and ongoing, why not add a picture so that they can visualise who they are typing to. (Again, be careful of what else is in the photo). In the same way, if the written explanation is becoming complex your reader may appreciate you attaching a chart or diagram to clarify. (eg Sometimes an organisational chart can help your reader understand who is who in your business).

Finally, if the relationship does fracture as a result of an unfortunate email, please do not attempt to restore the relationship via email. Go and visit or get on the phone - and remember the tips when delivering bad news (Oct 2009) or handling difficult people (Sept. 2010).

Despite what many people say about email, I believe it can be used to foster good relationships. At a minimum, let's avoid damaging our relationships….