GUIDE TO COMMUNICATING WITH PRECISION

Leaders do not judge your answer, decision, or proposal to be "good" or "bad", "right" or "wrong". When we hire smart people, we count on them to do the hard, diligent work so that their outputs are sound. What leaders do is evaluate how you got to your answer, decision, or proposal. Your thinking. Leaders do this by examining the assumptions you started from, and the process you used to arrive at your answer. Precision communication is important because it facilitates this peculiar process of evaluation. Here are some examples of how this is done:

- o Communicating the right level of detail helps leaders stay connected to the details of the business and enables them to audit.
- o Writing things down helps us to clarify the logic of our thinking, and as a result, we are able to test the quality of our work and make decisions on exact plans.
- o Leaders' minds can be changed with facts. Communications written with literal, concise and relevant data enable leaders to examine their own thinking, and can help them overrule their strongest convictions.
- o Sharing relevant information, with all the facts enables leaders to make the right decisions.
- o If a leader finds a flaw in one of your assumptions, or your process, then the usual action assigned is to change or correct the flawed assumption or process and then to redo the analysis. You then get back to the leader with a revised answer, decision, or proposal, usually with a very quick turnaround.
- o Challenging and engaging in direct conversation and detail supports exploring ideas fully.
- o Questions from leaders are precise. An effective response requires communicators to dive deep to answer the question- Is it true? If it is true, do we understand why? What is the plan to get it fixed? What is the root cause? How can we fix the root cause?
- o Proactive communication about issues helps maintain a nimble culture where we can demonstrate bias for action.
- o Respect is gained by communicating with the right level of detail, accuracy, timeliness and conviction which enables earning the trust of others.

PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNICATION

Clear communication implies clear thinking, and conversely, confusing communication implies confused thinking. The following general principles of communication will help you write and speak with clarity and precision. These principles can be broadly applied in all communication, but we find them useful in day to day business practices such as escalations, Status/Project updates, cross group and team communication.

Start with Why: Start with what you are trying to achieve. It should be a succinct summary that captures the purpose of the communication. This provides the context for the recipient that is needed to understand and respond to your communication.

Communicate with Concision: Try to write and say what you intend to say in 5 words vs 50. Be literal. It is assumed that everything you include in a communication is intentional, so it is important to pay attention to the details.

Support Communication with Data: Anything that can be measured should be measured; therefore, we expect that all communications should be backed with data. Where data doesn't exist, it should be presented as an idea or hypothesis.

Communicate Proactively: Proactively bring *relevant* issues to the awareness of leaders. Judge your timing. If you have an issue that is not relevant to the entire room participating in the current discussion or on a given email string, wait and bring it up in a more relevant setting/different email string.

Resolve and Communicate the Root Cause: Communicate resolutions that not only address the issue, but also to resolve the underlying problem that caused the defect.

Write in Narrative, and then Edit: Communications should be written in narrative form. Data and charts can be included in the appendix that supports the story. After writing out an initial paragraph/email, etc., read the first sentence and determine whether or not it communicates a concise point to the readers.

Show up Confidently: Be present and position yourself as an owner and a leader with deep knowledge of your subject. Be careful not to be over-confident, however, in areas you are not an expert.

Understand the Situation: Understand the audience; demonstrate the ability to correctly assess what type of communication is needed and react accordingly.

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Some of what we've learned about communication at other companies and at school – including some elements that could be considered "conventional wisdom" – may not apply at this point in your career.

1. **Define the question/decision that is being asked**: Don't jump into the solution before framing the problem. The audience needs to understand the situation in order to assess if you have taken the correct course of action.
2. **Determine the timeframe that the question needs to be answered**: Take the time to understand what it will take to address the situation. Do you need development resources to get to the root cause? Is your answer dependent on an external party? A complete answer that takes three days to achieve is better than an incomplete response written in an hour. If a complete answer will take more than a day, communicate your timeline to keep everyone informed.
3. **Answer the question that was asked**: If you are asked a question – answer the question asked. If you don't understand the question, ask for clarification. Then extrapolate if needed. If you don't know the answer, say "I don't know." Don't guess. Answer "who" questions with a name. Answer "when" questions with a date.
4. **Anticipate other questions that this question will generate:** Looking around corners is an important thought process and you should think about the next question that will be generated by your response. Common follow questions include: "How many customers were impacted?", "When will the root cause be fixed?", "Has a Cause of Error (COE) been completed?" Strong answers will ensure the next question is answered as well.
5. **Avoid hyperbole- literal language is preferred**: "32.4% Year on Year Growth (YoY growth)" is preferred over "huge growth"; "107K or 5.9% of customers were impacted" is preferred over "many customers were impacted".
6. **Assume zero context, but share only what is appropriate**: Step back from your understanding of the issue and include enough information to avoid multiple follow up questions about the background of the issue.

Common pitfalls:
1. Not actively listening to the discussion in order to address the right topic
2. Failing to follow-up with open issues or providing incomplete follow-up
3. Faking the answer - being overconfident when you don't have all the details
4. Responding with the answer you prepared instead of answering the question that was asked
5. Not thinking through all the scenarios
6. Making statements of fact that aren't supported by data
7. Over or under sharing context/detail
8. Generalizing or using jargon, slang, pompous language
9. Using idioms that do not translate to a global audience (i.e. out of left field, elephant in the room, hit it out of the park)
10. Making excessive use of adjectives and adverbs