2 HOW TO BUILD SUCCESSFUL MESSAGES

> ## LEARN HOW TO . . .
>
> **2.1** Use a step-by-step planning structure for every message to achieve what you want
>
> **2.2** Identify your immediate and long-range goals and address both in every message
>
> **2.3** Characterize audiences systematically to frame messages to their perspective
>
> **2.4** Communicate across personal and generational differences to genuinely reach people

In the working world, skillful writing means messages that accomplish goals. But it's far more than a way to achieve *immediate* goals or serve an employer: Writing is a powerful tool for moving toward your own long-range ambitions, a tool to use consciously.

From emails to proposals to blogs to résumés, every message offers a chance to build toward your future. The better your writing, the more you succeed in every role. Writing gives you one of the best ways to showcase your strengths and demonstrate your value. Good writing opens doors and gives you extraordinary opportunities to connect with people anywhere and everywhere. It enables you to build and sustain positive relationships.

There's more incentive yet: You'll find that practicing the principles of writing well improves your thinking and problem-solving skills. It empowers you to speak well for yourself in every medium, including the spoken and visual.

This chapter gives you the foundation for planning all your messages and documents and making the right decisions about content, structure and style.

PLANNING SUCCESSFUL MESSAGES STEP BY STEP

Successful writers rarely plunge into any written communication—first, they plan. And always, they begin with two questions that guide them through every decision.

Question 1 : What's my goal? What do I want?

Question 2 : Who—exactly—is the audience: the person or group I'm writing to?

When you define your goal and consider your reader, it becomes much easier to figure out the content—the information, ideas or arguments that will produce the results you want. And when you systematically determine content, organizing your message becomes a more natural process, less of a challenge. So does choosing the right language and tone.

Whether writing an email, profile, report or speech, professional writers base their approach on how the factors of goal and audience intersect. Thinking this way may mean investing more time up front than you're used to. However, you save the time that you might otherwise spend floundering around for what to say and how to say it. Moreover, if you plan first, your results are so much better—immediately—that you won't begrudge the thinking time.

But why does even a "simple" email merit such thought?

Perhaps you've wished you could unclick Send after delivering one of these:

- a carelessly written message to a superior or colleague that was forwarded right up the company ladder

- an embarrassing private email to a friend that was widely circulated

- a careless tweet or social post interpreted in a way that damaged you

- a message that mistakenly reached people who should not have seen it, like competitors

- a carelessly written report or proposal that failed to represent you well

Unintended consequences can be dire. Remember the long run, too. Emails and many social posts never go away. As we see in scandal after scandal in the corporate and political worlds, they can usually be retrieved to disgrace or, in worst-case scenario, indict someone. Social media platforms especially lead us to be careless because they are so easy to use and value spontaneity. But the instant delivery feature of digital media does not mean you should communicate without thought. Ever.

Building a great reputation in any setting is a step-by-step, sustained process. *Every message is an opportunity to present yourself in the way you want to be seen.* In fact, because everyday channels are so important to the constant communication flow in nearly every organization, they offer a stellar chance to showcase your skills and create the impression you want.

Let's look at our two basic questions—what my goal is and who is my reader, or audience—in more depth. The answers give you the framework for a never-fail planning process that works for everything you need to write.

STEP 1: KNOW YOUR IMMEDIATE AND LONG-RANGE GOALS

In our early education, most of us had the same goal for a writing assignment, whether a term paper, book review, report or essay: Please the teacher and get a good grade. But in the business world, you need to know your goal for every piece of writing. What do you want to accomplish with the document? What's the desired outcome? What do you want the reader to do after reading your message?

This can be trickier than it seems at first glance. You must look past the obvious. Suppose, for example, you're coordinating a department workshop on a new software system. It will be held at lunch time, and it's a must-attend, so you might just write:

To: All employees

Subject: Mandatory IT workshop March 7

On Thursday, March 7, noon to 1:30 p.m., plan on attending IT's workshop on the new Mannerly System software, which will be rolled out company-wide May 1. All staff members are expected to attend. The workshop will be held in Conference Room G. Please acknowledge receipt of this message.

You may have received similar notices on a job. How did you react? Were you enthusiastic? Happy to give up your lunch time? Probably not. So, when you're the writer, *you can easily predict how people who receive your message will feel because it's how you would feel.* They'll show up because they must. But is that really the outcome you want? The session will be much more productive if people come in a positive frame of mind and motivated to learn. So, your message might better say:

To: All staff members!

Subject: Software Rollout Workshop, March 7

This Thursday our IT gurus will show us everything we need to know about the Mannerly System software we'll all use starting May 1. Learn how Mannerly can cut your report prep time by 20% and give you instant access to backup data on demand. In addition to a general grounding, the demo will show you how to apply this cutting-edge system to your own specific needs. All hands on deck for this one—please confirm you'll be there.

Time: Thursday March 7, noon to 1:30 p.m.—a light lunch will be available

Place: Conference Room G

This version presents the meeting enthusiastically—enthusiasm is contagious!—and energizes the readers: The event is framed as a good and relevant opportunity with clear benefit to them. The message sets a team feeling in the first sentence instead of a bored, dictatorial one. It goes on to talk in terms of "you" and "your" instead of the impersonal language of the first version.

Put Bottom Line on Top

Notice too how quickly the message gets to the point. Today we're all impatient (which you know from your own experience) so you must find a way to draw scanners into your communication. The best way to do this is by appealing to self-interest. Marketers call this the WIIFM principle—focusing on "what's in it for me." In this case, the message's readers will find out how to save time and trouble and prevent problems in their own arenas.

As a member of the business world, always remember that *there are no captive audiences.* Very few people *must* read many messages they receive. They must choose to. You must earn their attention quickly and justify it by delivering something they want.

When you're addressing people with whom you have different relationships, or who work on different levels, there's more to consider. Their status, stake in the subject and expected contribution to the meeting should be considered. Version 2 sounds like it's addressed to subordinates. If you're writing to people over whom you have no authority, an invitational tone rather than a command, no matter how team-oriented, is more appropriate and will work better.

A message to the department head might begin like this:

Dear Joan: I've set up the training on the Mannerly system for Thursday at noon in line with your schedule. The whole department will participate. I've put your intro first on the agenda, which is attached. OK?

On the job, you want even a simple message to reinforce your professional image with superiors, colleagues, coworkers, collaborators, suppliers, and everyone else you write to. It should contribute to your relationships in a positive way. Well-written messages advance both your organization's interests—and your own long-range goals.

If defining "goal" appears more complex than you expected, and sounds like a lot of weight for an ordinary email to carry, how much thought should go into a complex document like a proposal or report?

Often, quite a lot. But fortunately, the process you're learning applies to every kind of document, both digital and print, and can soon be applied intuitively. Practice with everyday materials pays off with the "important" documents. *At heart, good writing is good thinking,* so developing your writing skills helps you in many ways. You're better able to define and solve problems, understand and engage others, impact their perceptions, and influence their actions.

Define Goals to Narrow Your Vision

When you closely identify a document's purpose—or the role it plays to accomplish a purpose—you gain surprisingly helpful insights. The cover letter you write for a proposal, for example, need not bear the burden of selling your idea or product or service. It just needs to set the stage for the reader to view the proposal itself in a favorable light and demonstrate that you've read the specs carefully and understand the problem.

Similarly, cover letters for résumés needn't summarize your credentials. Aim to promote the reviewer's interest in reading the résumé by highlighting what a good match you are with the job (and by showing that you write well). The résumé's job, in turn, is to advance you to the next step, usually an interview, or producing a work sample.

Clear goals give you clear guidelines, whatever the medium. And articulating your set of goals can save you from unnecessary work and mistakes.

Put Your Goals Analysis to Work

Here's how to begin your new systematic writing strategy: Practice defining the goal of every message you write on as many levels that apply. Write them down. Writing sharpens our thinking because it pushes us to be more specific.

Suppose you want coworkers to participate in a race you're creating to benefit a cause close to your heart. Your goals include the most obvious—enlisting runners. But is that all? A little thought might lead you to add additional goals:

1. Encourage monetary donations to the cause

2. Draw a supportive audience to watch the event

3. Interest people to help coordinate the event

4. Raise public awareness of the importance of this cause

In fact, #4 is the ultimate reason for creating the event—to raise the charity's profile for the long run. This becomes apparent when you write down your specific goals. So, developing a list like this channels your thinking not only on what your communication should accomplish but on how to better structure the event itself. Well-run organizations listen to their public relations advisors in part for this reason—working out *how* to communicate something creates insight on *what* to communicate. Did you notice that the second version of the IT meeting added that "lunch will be available"? Thinking about how people will react to a message prevents smart leaders from making costly mistakes. It will do the same for you.

In the case of the race, you want to initiate, recognizing your chief goal suggests additional subgoals. You need advance publicity to draw good turnout and follow-up publicity to further spread the word. You might also be prompted to devise ways for the "watchers" to have fun.

Also, to consider is whether an effort like this can contribute to raising your own profile. It could be an excellent way to showcase your leadership skills, get to know colleagues better and relate to new people by working toward a common cause. Does this calculate? You decide. But keep in mind that *you* are always a part of every message and project you engage in.

When you're conscious of your personal goals, you automatically act in line with them. You recognize opportunities you might otherwise overlook to learn, make a productive contact, or volunteer for an extra assignment. And you see ways to build toward your goals in almost every message you write, whether an email or a report or a presentation.

Consider this example:

Bill has been elected a board member of his professional association. No one ran against him, so he doesn't take it seriously at first. He dashes off a memo to his boss:

Mark, guess what? I'm now on the WBEL board. LOL?

Then he thinks some more and realizes he has an opportunity to

- raise his profile in the department,

- strengthen his relationship with the person he reports to, and

- perhaps bring himself to the attention of higher-ups in a positive light.

He rewrites it this way:

Mark, I'm happy to report that I am now a WBEL board member. I was elected last night. As of June, I'll be involved in all the decision making about programs and venues and, of course, look forward to contributing our company perspective and making new contacts for us.

The inauguration lunch is on May 1, and I'd be honored if you would come as my personal guest. Can you attend?

This message is likely to accomplish all three of Bill's goals.

Note, of course, that the goals you make evident in a piece of writing must not be at odds with those of your employer—unless you're aiming to lose your job. Let's assume for now that your goals and those of your employer are basically aligned (though the more aware you are of your own long-term goals, the more selective you'll feel about where you want to work and what you want to work at).

Aim in all your messages to pursue both your employer's goals and your own. That doesn't suggest you should work in self-promotional statements. It means, in all your communications, take the trouble to write as you want to be perceived. Write thoughtfully, using techniques demonstrated in this book, and you own the power to build your image over time as someone who's valuable, resourceful, reliable, creative, responsive … whatever—you fill in the blanks.

If you plan to run your own business, or take on gigs, the ideas apply as much and more. Without good communication you won't win the jobs. When you do score the work, you probably need to deliver good reports, documentation and/or presentations to earn future assignments.

When you work remotely as an employee or project hire, good writing is essential for even more reasons. People you may never meet in person judge you on the quality of your written communication and preparation for meetings. Effective collaboration and leadership, too, depend on excellent communication, whatever the enterprise or industry.

So far, it's been all about "you." Now let's move on to "the other"—the person or group you're writing to.

STEP 2: CHARACTERIZING YOUR AUDIENCES AND UNDERSTANDING THEIR PERSPECTIVE

Here is why understanding your audience is key to success every time: When it comes down to it, most messages ask for something. The request may be basic:

Please send me technical specs for your Model G.

A request may be implicit rather than stated:

Please read this message and absorb the information in it.

Or a request can be overt, asking for agreement or action:

Let's get together next Tuesday to plan the agenda.

or

Can we delay the project deadline so we can collect more bids?

If you're asking anyone for something—even if it's only to pay attention to the content—you want your message to be properly received and better, acted upon. So, you must communicate in terms the reader can hear, understand, and relate to. And you must immediately signal that the message has value in the readers' terms—not your own.

Suppose you want your supervisor, Jane, to assign you a bigger office. You must make your case in a way that makes sense to her. Will she care that the move makes the office workflow more efficient? That it better reflects the staff hierarchy? That you'll be able to hold necessary meetings in your space, or be closer to her office? Is concern for staff members' well-being and job satisfaction one of her key concerns? To succeed, you must focus less on why the change would benefit you, and more on why it would contribute to Jane's priorities.

Understanding your audience also helps you anticipate possible objections early on. Say you want Jane to approve your working from home part of the week. You might agree on some factors, for example, that the commuting time you'll save benefits both parties. But realistically, taking her viewpoint tells you there are potential negatives for her personally and by virtue of her responsibilities.

As a supervisor, she will probably worry that quality of work and team collaboration will suffer. Can you demonstrate that when you have worked remotely, you were especially productive? Can you back this up with research data showing that remote workers have proven more productive globally? Can you suggest extra communication practices to counter her fear that you will fall out of the loop and contribute less to the team?

Whether you talk to Jane about all this and/or make your case in writing, your chances of success are much higher when you frame your message within the individual's perspective. People are different—in how they perceive, what they care about, how they make decisions. This simple truth is a key takeaway of this book. In the workplace, you'll interact with a variety of people you've probably not experienced elsewhere—and must work well with them. Moreover, if you're a newbie, it will often be up to you to prove your value and take the initiative toward good relationships. If you want people to understand and appreciate you, you must first extend yourself to understand them as individuals and in their roles.

How does this translate to practical terms? if your department head cares primarily about the quarterly profit and loss statement, it isn't smart to suggest a workplace improvement because it would make people happy and expect to succeed—unless you could prove that happy

people are more productive. If you want to persuade employees that a new benefit is as good as the one it replaced, telling them how much the company saves gets you nowhere. They want to know how their lives will improve—or at least not suffer—in real-world terms.

The bottom line is that in addition to defining "what do I want" for each message you write, you need to know "who is the person I want it from"—your audience. It's the only way to determine your best content: the facts and ideas that will achieve your goal with the individual or group you're addressing; what to emphasize; what language, structure and tone will help this message succeed. And what communication channel to choose.

That said, how can you know your reader well enough to understand their motivation, values and preferences?

Psychologists call this "perspective taking," and acknowledge that it's extremely hard to truly see through another's eyes. Human beings are complicated and own totally different histories. Generally, we believe things without knowing why ourselves. ***I can't teach you how to read minds, but I can show you how to pay attention and observe your supervisors, coworkers and clients more closely.*** This will vastly improve how you communicate and interact, both in person and in writing.

Just reading this material will sharpen your awareness of how people differ and what factors to consider. Genuine interest in other people will always reward you because no matter what kind of career you want and what technical expertise you develop, *almost all work is ultimately about people and your relationships with them.*

Observe People to Predict Their Response

Just as in your social life, the best way to know someone is to thoughtfully interact and observe.

As a trial attorney will tell you, the clues about who someone "is" abound. Notice what people say and do, how they use their voice, what they wear and how they wear it, what they read, how they walk, what they laugh at, how they say hello, how they decorate their office. If you spend time with people or are familiar with their work environments, observe and listen. Active listening with your whole attention is the best way to understand other people and how they will react to your messages. Open your perceptions to notice what people in your life talk about, what triggers positive and negative reactions, what guides their decision-making, what matters to them and what worries them, how they communicate and more.

If the person is important to you—a boss or significant connection—*back your observation up with research*, so easily done for everyone in the business world. Online profiles give you insight into their full background and experience. What people choose to say about themselves on a professional site like LinkedIn, and post on social media sites, tells you about a lot beyond the basics. You can also ask other people for insight and even advice on how to get along with someone to whom they relate well (but be tactful).

And ask questions! Provided your questions are appropriate and don't exceed relationship boundaries, most people welcome the chance to talk about themselves, explain things and tell you what they think.

The best salespeople customarily ask open-ended questions like this: "I'm curious—how did you achieve your position here?" Then they listen carefully and interact according to their

on-the-spot analysis. This approach isn't manipulative. It respects the premise that we have individual perspectives and patterns. Good salespeople may conclude from such a conversation that their product or service is not what the prospect needs and may even recommend another avenue. But if it looks like a match, they know how to frame the pitch. In the workplace, understanding other peoples' frameworks helps you know how to talk their language.

Recognizing Personal Filters

Every one of us comes to work (and to life) with a built-in filter that evolves over time through the interplay of genetic traits and everything that makes up our life experience. We interpret everything we encounter and that happens to us through this filter, which also determines our expectations, reactions, assumptions and fears.

Basic demographics can be important, such as age, socioeconomic status, cultural background, when and where we grew up, education, and gender/gender identification. Beyond such overt factors, when someone is important to you—like a supervisor or client prospect—consider:

- What do they care about? What makes them happy?
- What interests them? Motivates them?
- What are their priorities?
- What are their strengths and weaknesses?
- What obstacles have they overcome?
- What keeps them up at night?
- Leadership style: Top-down, collaborative or somewhere in between?
- Management style: Fair, consistent? Or not?
- Decision-making style: Slow or quick? Based on what?
- Open to new ideas? Willing to take risks?
- Likes confrontation or avoids it? Willing to negotiate?
- How do they react to opposition?
- General confidence level and any apparent insecurities?
- Sensitive to people's concerns?
- What makes them angry? Frustrated? Bored?
- Do they have a sense of humor? (Assume not)
- Are they comfortable with emotions in the workplace? (Assume not)
- Any apparent pro or con feelings toward people your age, or other biases?

Think also about specific factors that affect how to communicate with everyone.

- What is their relationship to you, both by position and inclination?
- How do they prefer to receive information: email, in-person, letter, phone, text, social media channel? PowerPoint? Formal or informal reports?
- What kind of explanations do they prefer: big picture? Detailed? Logical? Statistical?
- What is the best time of day to approach them? (Salespeople often aim for after lunch.)
- Do they have the authority to give you what you want?
- What are their hot buttons?
- What makes the person look good to their bosses?

Your readers' relationship to your subject matter merits thought. If you're requesting an expensive piece of software, for example, are they comfortable with technology? Knowledgeable? Open to innovation? What questions might they pose?

And try looking at the work you do, and your whole unit does, through the eyes of the person responsible for the team's success. They are bound to care about productivity, collaboration, office dynamics and much more that affects the quality of work done. They will inevitably have good days and bad days, though good managers endeavor to shield subordinates from the bad ones. They have a whole array of pressures on their own performance: meeting budgets and targeted goals, fostering talent, evaluation by their own higher-ups. Be sensitive to what's happening around you and you will communicate much more effectively, and you'll be someone people *want* to work with, and help.

Don't ever doubt that you see the world through your own filter. The more conscious you become of your filter's characteristics, as well as those of people with whom you communicate, the better you'll succeed. *Treat communication as a bridge between different worldviews, and you'll be way ahead in your personal life as well as business life.*

The good news is that once you start thinking about your audience analytically, doing so becomes second nature. Of course, the higher the stakes, the more thought it's worth. An email or text message asking a friend to meet for lunch won't require a review of their comfort level with new ideas. But if you want to get project approvals from your supervisor, win a reach job or convince a client prospect that you're worth 20 minutes of their time or close a sale: audience analysis is your friend.

Practice Reading Between the Lines

A critical difference between written and spoken communication is that when we converse, we automatically adapt what we say, and how we say it, based on the person's responses. We see facial expression, body language, and gestures. We hear tone of voice, pauses and emphasis. All these clues tell us when to elaborate or shift direction … whether a statement is important or meant as a joke…how the other person feels about the subject and reacts to each point we make.

Writing of course lacks all these clues. To counter this absence, bring your in-person experience with your reader to your writing. For example, consider any frame of reference they speak from and phrases they repeat. If they cite statistics, talk about teamwork, or seem indecisive or worried, you might speak and write in ways that make sense to them or reassure them.

Such strategies are not exploitive: You build rapport when you look past your own perspective and give thought to understanding others. Observe, analyze, and take the initiative to find common ground. Establishing that you're on the "same wavelength" benefits everyone. In fact, when you pay close attention to another person's orientation and interests, it's usually interpreted as personal charm.

And thoughtfully viewed, what and how people write provides major clues to who they are. Messages may be formal or informal, carefully written or careless. Language can be old-fashioned, contemporary, or breezy. The thinking behind a message may be clear and well organized, or not so much. Writing can be straightforward and energetic, or meandering and hedgy. People who put their credentials into every message probably lean toward formal and careful writing.

Moreover, it's startling how much "attitude" is often revealed in even a short, simple email or post. In a large communications department I managed, policy was for at least one other person to review every significant piece of writing going out of the office. The feedback rarely concerned technical issues like grammar. Instead, comments focused on observations such as "I gather you don't like this person" or "You're recommending this course of action, but it doesn't sound like you believe in it."

It can be extremely hard to keep your own feelings out of your writing, so be aware of that challenge (and have a friend check out your message when it matters). Almost always, it's against your interests to betray negative emotions such as anger, frustration, and impatience. Communicating them in writing makes you look childish, self-centered and small-picture-minded. The impact on others may be indelible: that's the power and risk of the written message.

Practice the reverse awareness, too. Keep your antennae up for clues to other people's feelings when you're on the receiving end.

Reading between the lines is an especially practical technique when you're applying for a job or responding to a request for proposals (RFP). Read the ad, posting or RFP a dozen times, and pick up its language, hot buttons and clues.

You can also pick up the subtext of a message by paying close attention to what is *not* said and general "atmosphere." A good way to do this is to frame questions and imagine the answers. For example, why did this job ad specify "attention to detail," "detail oriented" and "meticulous follow-through" so many times? Perhaps the last person in the job fell through in this area, which tells you to marshal your evidence of this strength.

BRIDGING PERSONAL AND GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

So far, I've been telling you how to use your powers of observation to characterize individuals. To supplement this approach, it's useful to draw on analyses that an army of marketers, politicians and consultants develop for taking a broader view of the differences between generations.

While we human beings are as unique as snowflakes, it's also true that we are shaped by the environment we grow up in and what happens during that time. In big picture terms, we have a lot in common with people who share our timeframe. Experiences like living through periods of war, economic depression or limited opportunity obviously impact us, as does feeling discriminated against. But so does the prevalent technology, pop culture of the moment, political situation and innumerable other circumstances.

Of course, no two sets of experiences are exactly alike, and we react individually to what happens. Therefore, don't take these generalizations as stereotypes. Check the descriptions against your own experience and apply common sense. It's foolish to assume, for example, that someone over 60 is technology averse and out of date. Or that all 20-year-olds have short attention spans and don't read books.

Still, the generalizations affect how the generations perceive each other and what they expect, so reviewing them is helpful. They might illuminate some of the experiences you've already had. And the profiles offer insights into how each generation tends to communicate.

Every method you use to see past your own life filter promises to save you pain and give you gain. Most organizations consist of a generational mix. Understanding the perspectives of people who are older and younger than you equip you to interact better in authentic ways—and helps other people understand and value you more.

Understanding Your Generations

Generation Z: Born 1995 or Later

Gen Z is characterized as the most diverse generation, and the most accepting of diversity in race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Members value honesty, integrity and authenticity. Having grown up with the digital world at their fingertips—or on their wrist—they look to these devices for information, entertainment and communication. This is a pragmatic and risk-averse group with a strong work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit. Members favor stability and are in general cautious and even pessimistic about their future, reflecting economic and international uncertainties of their life experience. Gen Z'ers shy away from "long form" materials such as books, magazines and newspapers; they prefer video, gaming, and media like TikTok and Instagram that center on bite-sized communication based on images and short captions. They look to social media for news, self-expression and networking but are aware that virtual connections can turn negative. Gen Zers have short attention spans and expect speedy and brief communication. They avoid telephone and email when possible and resist challenge to their beliefs. However, many Gen Zers do want face-to-face interaction with coworkers and supervisors. Gen Z is a large cohort, so opportunities will be competitive. Of all generations, Gen Z is likely the most impacted by the isolation, losses and disappointments of the COVID-19 pandemic of the 2020s. The long-term effect has yet to be known but the need for initiative, resilience and adaptability are givens.

Millennial Generation (Generation Y): Born 1981–1995

Brought up with devoted support, Millennials are strong users of digital technologies and instant communication media: Facebook, YouTube, and online gaming are natural environments. They are culturally tolerant and liberal in views as well as civic-minded. They

come to the workplace with high expectations and desire to shape their jobs to fit their lives. They dislike following orders blindly and do not automatically grant respect to the more experienced. Millennials like to know *why* and want to work on their own without being micromanaged. They have short attention spans, want opportunities to learn, like challenge and change. They dislike repetitive work and want the workplace to be fun. Many are creative and optimistic but not company-loyal. They like to participate rather than watch, and desire frequent feedback and encouragement. Many prefer text messaging and social media networking to face-to-face communication or telephone. This is a large and therefore competitive generation.

Generation X: Born 1965–1980

This is a relatively small cohort. Many members now occupy middle-management jobs and are likely to be your immediate supervisors. Brought up in the first period of two-income households, rising divorce rate, and latchkey environment, Gen Xers value independence, self-sufficiency, freedom, responsibility and resourcefulness. They are comfortable with computers and technology. While ambitious and hardworking, they want work–life balance. Gen Xers possess entrepreneurial spirit, like flexible hours and in many cases a chance to work at home part of the time. They favor diversity, challenge, creative input, autonomy and independent work, though most team well. They tend to be adaptable and highly responsible. Their communication preferences bridge between old media and new, but many Gen Xers are less comfortable than younger people with sharing personal life details in social platforms.

Baby Boomers: Born 1946–1964

This is a large group whose members continue to retain power in corporations, law firms, consultancies, nonprofits and most other organizations (except startups and dotcoms), though they may be so high up as to be invisible. Baby Boomers are loyal, work-centric and cynical; value office face time; and are motivated by perks, prestige, position, prominent levels of responsibility, praise and challenges. Boomers define themselves by professional accomplishment and are sometimes charged with being workaholics. They are highly competitive, generally confident, and comfortable with confrontation and hierarchical structure. They don't always like change but will challenge established practice. Though of retirement age, many continue working and believe that younger generations should "pay their dues"—like they did. For example: fulfilling assignments without complaint, showing respect and writing well-structured, well-expressed, well-edited messages. Most Boomers like email, often present themselves on LinkedIn and similar business sites, but may find the fast-moving social landscape an uncongenial challenge.

To learn more, search "generation gaps" or "generational differences" online. Thousands of articles, blogs and research reports will come up written from business management, HR, marketing and other angles. Check out "creating personas," too, which brings up audience analysis templates favored by online marketers.

Here are a few aspects of generational analysis that affect communication.

Communicating Cross-Generation

Roughly speaking, different age groups are comfortable with different ways of interacting. Note that many Boomers like face-to-face meetings and telephone contact. Sending them important messages in text format or using its shortcuts in your emails may boomerang. And hesitate to friend a Boomer colleague. Many prefer to keep their business lives separate from the personal. And they prefer that you do, too: If you post an unduly revealing page, comment, photo or video, prepare to face negative consequences from your company executives and those at other companies where you want to work.

On the other hand, Boomers and Gen Xers are learning that to effectively reach Gen Z members, their messages should be brief and to the point. They may well consider delivering them via a social channel. They can respond to the younger people's need for in-person communication by providing those opportunities.

As a workforce newcomer you will probably report to Gen Xers and Millennials. Boomers may be more distant, but some are probably ensconced in high-level positions, so don't dismiss the need to accommodate their preferences in some of your communication. If you're a Gen X or Millennial, here are some specific tips for improving your cross-generation interactions.

Show Initiative.   Do more than you're asked, offer to help at crunch time, work late cheerfully if needed. Most supervisors, especially Gen X or older, like to know you take the job seriously and care about doing it well. It puts you on the older generations' wavelength and builds respect.

Ask Productive Questions.   Rather than wondering how you're doing, perform reality checks. Ask your boss, were you satisfied with how I handled this? Can I do it better next time? How can I contribute more to the team? How can I show I'm ready for more challenging work?

Write Carefully and Correctly.   Plan the message, even if it's a quick email or chat channel; resist using text-type shortcuts and style if you have any doubt about how the person will react. Proof for spelling and basic grammar—many members of older generations take this as a sign of respect, and careless writing irritates them.

Avoid Coming Across as Dismissive of Older People—or Anyone.   For example, don't assume others are less up to date technologically than you are. Even if they are, nothing kills a relationship like a superior attitude. If someone expresses opinions you consider outdated, or are contrary to your values, think before you speak. Aim to listen without judgment.

Show Appreciation for Older Colleagues.   Their experience, achievements, and knowledge of the organization deserve respect. They can be invaluable sources of information about the company culture, how to get things done and what to avoid. Ask for advice and engage them with sincere questions. If you have your own expertise to share, offer it tactfully. Managers give high priority to promoting good relationships among cultures and generations and demonstrating that you contribute to this cause benefits you.

It helps to remember that each person's *position* in great part determines how they see problems, challenges and requests. If you ask "Jane" for a new computer, she must consider the

impact on department budget, whether the new unit will integrate with other technology, and coworker attitudes—will everyone ask for new computers if she says yes? So, she has a lot to think about other than making you happy.

Yes, understanding other people sounds like a lot of work. But once you've absorbed the ideas, you will find yourself putting on your analyst hat instinctively. It's worth thinking through many of the factors covered in this chapter to create a written portrait of the people important to your life. It will yield surprising clues about how to better relate to your supervisor or a difficult coworker, for example. It can even show you how to turn a sour relationship around.

Here's an extra idea for gleaning insights into people that can work as a shortcut.

Tap Into Your Intuition

Intuition is knowing something without knowing how we know it. Once you start using your observational powers, you can connect your impressions of someone you know by tapping into your intuition.

Here's an interesting technique drawn from the psychologist's repertoire. Let's say you must write an important message to someone you know, or have met, whether a supervisor, client prospect or hiring officer. Before writing, spend a few minutes bringing the person alive in your mind in as much detail as you can. Picture their carriage, dress, manner, expression, gestures, body language; hear them speak and laugh. Visualize their office or other environment in full detail: what's on the desk, the walls, the floor? Then write from this visualization and see how it magically shapes your content choices, language and tone. Take this even further: hold an imaginary conversation about the subject of your message. Ask for what you want, imagine the reaction, note the objections or agreement you sense. Hear the questions and answer them. If you're preparing for an important conversation, use the insights you gain this way—even if they're hard to rationally explain—to plan a productive conversation. This technique works because we always know a lot more than we think.

Putting Your Insights to Work

Taking a minute to think through your goals and audience helps you handle a host of tricky situations and sail through everyday messaging advantageously. Let's try a few examples of how to work through the process.

Challenge 1: Jill is a newer member of the team and wants an interesting assignment that she knows is competitive. She could just write:

John, I know you'll soon choose the team for the Green Project, and I want you to know how much I'd like to be a member. I'll really appreciate the opportunity and will do a great job.

She realizes that expressing enthusiasm might not gain her the spot. Here's what happens when she thinks through her goals and audience in writing:

Goals, immediate: What do I want?
Let John know I'm interested and enthusiastic for the role
Make a good case for my candidacy so I win the job

Goals, long-range:

Present an up-to-date picture of my qualifications to remind John of my experience and potential value

Establish my interest in more challenging work

Position myself for future opportunities whether I win this one or not

Decision-maker profile:

John is a Gen X who makes thoughtful balanced decisions, responds to initiative and resourcefulness, and takes pride in being a good mentor. He likes information and at times has taken a leap in decision-making, provided success looks likely. He tends to ponder decisions carefully. I've heard him complain that my generation feels entitled and wants too much support.

Insights:

I need to communicate that I am reliable, can work independently, and have a good track record with teaming; that I am confident with the subject matter for good reason. It would be smart to provide him with written information. I can alert him to my interest personally, and follow up with a concrete, in-depth written account of why I am equipped for the role via training and experience so he can feel assured that I'll do it well. I can note how much I appreciate his mentorship and how it's prepared me to move ahead.

Notice how spelling out what she wants, and the audience she wants it from, goes far toward telling Jill the right content for her message AND how to deliver it.

Challenge 2: Harry's boss, Melanie, has failed to deliver the info he needs for a report he's responsible for and the deadline is imminent. Harry's first impulse is to send a memo like this:

Melanie—I really need the project specs you promised to give me. I'm at a total standstill! Deadline is Tuesday. When will you send???—Harry

Analysis might better serve him like this:

Goal, immediate:

Receive the missing info ASAP

Submit a good report on time

Goal, long-range:

Sustain/improve a good relationship!

Build image of myself as capable and resourceful, someone to count on and able to back her up, and a considerate person capable of major responsibility.

Supervisor profile:

Melanie is an older Gen X whose communication, both written and spoken, tends toward the formal. She is very conscious of her authority. She gets grumpy during crunch time, like right now—she's working late many nights and looks harassed. I've heard she's under pressure from higher-ups to produce better numbers. A phone call or request for a conversation will probably irritate her, but she does keep abreast of email.

Insights: To get what I need right now and looking forward, I need to see past my own challenge and frustration, consider where Melanie is coming from, and address her respectfully and a bit formally.

This might lead Harry to write something like this:

Hi Melanie—To follow up on preparing the Bluenote report, here's a final outline of the full document. Everything we discussed is incorporated and I've marked the places where the specs will go. As soon as I have this info, I'll plug it in, and we'll be all set to meet the October 9th deadline.

I know what a busy time this is. Can I help with pulling the specs together, or lend a hand in any other way? I'll be happy to contribute.

Best, Harry

If you think the second version is a bootlicking waste of time, think again. Harry's credibility and professional image are very much at stake here. Had he sent the spontaneous annoyed version of the note, Melanie may not have visibly reacted to the abrupt style but would have thought it rude and inappropriate. She would feel disrespected and remember it. If Melanie were a client rather than an employer, she might even talk to Harry's higher-up about it.

Look at it as necessary business protocol to write in a respectful—no, not obsequious—tone. To everyone. No matter what their position relative to you. If Harry were addressing a coworker, either of higher or lower rank, he would still need to write the courteous and considerate message if he wants to succeed and wants to foster the relationship. And by the way, bosses take full note of how staff members treat coworkers and their own subordinates.

The guidelines apply equally when you report to a young boss or client. They may in fact be especially sensitive to signs of respect and disrespect. Don't mistake an informal atmosphere, or even one where egalitarian principle is proclaimed, for one that welcomes signs of disrespect. And assume this is the case with all clients and customers. They do not want to be addressed as peers or feel ordered around by an associate, especially a junior one.

Always remind yourself that *work is about people.* Think beyond your self-interest to consider other people's challenges and problems. Everyone has "technical" work, the stuff that you've learned in preparation for your career and the expertise you develop. *But what often matters at least as much and can even override expertise is how you work with people.* In the second message, Harry's offer to help Melanie at a tough time reflects his recognition that it's not all about him. And it will signal to her that he sees the larger context, as well as being a considerate person ready to contribute more.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS IN A DIVERSE WORLD

The workplaces that await you will probably present you with a highly diverse workforce. Whether the organization is big or small, you are called on to work with people of different ages, gender identities, nationalities, culture and capabilities. So, your people skills, which this chapter is devoted to fostering, are paramount to your personal and professional success. Interacting with all people in your space with sensitivity is critical.

This is not always easy because coworkers and colleagues come to the meeting point with life experience so different from yours that in many cases it's impossible for you to imagine their perspective. Moreover, this degree of diversity is new to many organizations, and they may not yet have the guidance and support systems in place to promote unity. The key is the spirit in which you approach this challenge. Be open-minded, accepting, and always, respectful. You may not always understand people's needs and viewpoints but can remind yourself that they have no less value than your own, and what you're accustomed to.

Specific issues like adaptations in language are covered in the following chapters. But more important is the connection to relationship-building. To thrive in today's career place, we need awareness not just of our own personal filters, but some human tendencies that can hinder us from seeing beyond ourselves.

One such tendency is called the "affinity bias." Psychologists explain that by nature, in general, we unconsciously like, trust, and flock to people who most closely resemble ourselves. This predisposition often tilts us toward a likeness in the friends we choose, the groups we join, and the families we build. In work situations, separating ourselves from people unlike ourselves and drifting to a limited world of those with whom we have a lot in common is very much against our self-interest. To prevent this narrow thinking is why organizations create diverse teams: A single perspective rarely succeeds.

In our own self-interest as well as an employer's, we are called on to:

- Resist an "us" vs. "them" mentality

- Avoid making assumptions about other people's capabilities, value, or identity

- Extend our powers of empathy to embrace people in all their variety

- Stay aware of the unconscious bias element of our personal filter

- Listen to other people, observe, and pay attention to their needs

Remember that whatever their age, sexual identity, nationality or condition of disability, everyone wants to be liked and included. Avoid disparaging anyone, even in your own mind: Both in person and writing, dismissive attitudes communicate far too easily, especially in an atmosphere of heightened awareness.

Stretching our horizons and looking past easy judgment takes consciousness. An insight into what happens when we overlook our own latent tendencies emerged in studies of hiring practices. Researchers found that employment managers make better decisions when they do *not* meet job candidates. In person, it was concluded, they are swayed by personality and one-on-one connection—in other words, affinity bias. More objective decisions based on written qualifications, recommendations and work samples proved to be more successful.

Another kind of consciousness-raising relates to language use. Language is a vital element of how we identify ourselves, and therefore groups that have felt historically marginalized are working to raise our awareness of wording we use thoughtlessly, but whose import is offensive.

For example, to call a demanding person a "slavedriver" who "cracks the whip" is obviously a historical travesty. To advise a woman "to smile more often" is demeaning. In any wording, to refer to someone as "over the hill" or just "old" is insulting. And to label someone based on a nationality, or disability, devalues the individual.

The only solution is to aim for respect, consideration, and kindness. Build your awareness of language which may have hurt others and use substitute wording. We'll look at this more specifically in Chapters 4 and 5.

Writing to People You've Never Met

Often, you're writing to people you haven't met yet and may never meet, whether supervisors, remote-team colleagues, partners, or a prospective employer or customer. As more enterprises operate with virtual teams in scattered locations and minimize colocation, this happens increasingly. How do you characterize people then?

Online research plays a bigger role. Scout especially for opportunities to connect visually. If you're writing or preparing to meet with someone you've not met for an interview, or to pitch a service, look online for video of the person. This gives you a good feel for being in their presence.

Phone conversations also tell you a lot. Listen for the individual's conversational pace— what provokes enthusiasm, any repeated words or phrases that indicate a focus or concern or a way of thinking. One individual may cite numbers often and another may show an interest in people or ideas. Observe their written messages too for clues. Do they use personal language, technical terms, generalizations? And, of course, ask direct questions if the context allows, such as "What kind of data would you like to see and at what level of detail?" or "How will we communicate to coordinate our tasks?"

Inventing an Audience

Another useful strategy when you're writing to someone you don't know is to invent a construct of what that person is most probably like. If it's an employment manager, for example, visualize others you've known who held that job and consider what would interest and impress them. Or just take a few minutes to see through their eyes and figure out what—if your positions were reversed—the HR director would care about and want to know. Ask yourself, what's in the other person's self-interest in this situation? Assume their role for a few minutes and you'll have helpful answers.

It's always easier to write to an individual than to an anonymous abstract person. But if you can't conjure one appropriate to the situation, then write to a Standard Modern Businessperson—SMB. You can safely assume your SMB wants your written message to be

- respectful but friendly

- clear on your reason for writing

- well planned and written

- logical in its progression of facts or ideas

- targeted to their self-interest (the what's-in-it-for-me factor)

- self-contained—doesn't require research or reference to documents

- just-right length: as brief as possible to get the message across

- objective, nonemotional and positive in spirit

- oriented to solving a problem rather than posing one

- attuned to their perspective and needs

You can also assume that your SMB is a human being and put the old Golden Rule to work on your behalf. All (or nearly all) of us want to feel liked, valued, part of the team, respected. When a message doesn't convey these things implicitly, our reaction is negative, whether the message itself has merit. And we especially do not like anything that actively makes us feel

- overlooked or left out

- disrespected

- disliked

- uncomfortable

- depressed

- inadequate

- laughable or ridiculous

Make It a Practice to Never Criticize Anyone in Writing, Whatever Their Relationship to You. This applies to informal situations and most formal ones, except for performance reviews and documentation. A careless written remark can easily torpedo a relationship and create a permanent enemy. Similarly, irony and sarcasm are risky ingredients in business writing. When you criticize someone in person, you can establish a supportive atmosphere and listen responsively. And when you say something sarcastically or ironically, your tone of voice conveys "I don't really mean it."

But a critical or sarcastic written memo can devastate your audience and boomerang badly. To some extent, the absence of feeling in written messages can be remedied by using emojis and creative punctuation, but not everyone responds to these techniques in the same way, so this is risky unless you know your reader well. This applies 110% to online media. If you don't want a viral reputation as a nasty human being, refrain from posting negative personal comments anywhere.

Here is the flip side: It is a rare individual who doesn't want to look good to colleagues and staff—and especially superiors. And we relish good news, including any about a staff member or the department. So, make the most of every opportunity to bring good tidings, and craft those

messages well. These are the documents most likely to ascend the corporate ladder and help pave your own way.

Always practice a generous spirit in praising other people's accomplishments and share that news. It takes confidence to honor others, and people intrinsically respect those able to do so. Not to mention how well disposed the other person will feel. Actively look for opportunities to connect with allies and build a network, whatever your working context. Be creative! Here's an example.

Ben worked for a brokerage firm in his early career, and as a new person on the job, found himself with time on his hands. Eager to learn, he approached a longer-term team member who he admired—Jack—and offered to help him when his workload was heavy. Jack was happy with the help. Ben was so pleased with what he learned from working with Jack that he wrote to the department head telling him how skillful Jack was, how good a mentor, and how fortunate the firm was to have him on staff. The manager was impressed not only with this testimony to Jack, but with Ben's generosity of spirit and the acumen demonstrated in his message. Ben was soon promoted, and Jack became a long-term appreciative colleague.

VIEW FROM THE FIELD: PRACTICE SOCIAL SKILLS AT WORK

Everyone knows the Golden Rule—treat other people the way you want to be treated—but try the Platinum Rule: Treat others the way they want to be treated. This is harder because not everyone wants to be treated the same way. Beware the false consensus: believing that your own values and ideas are "normal" and that most people share these thoughts. Pay attention to the hints. Here are some guidelines:

1. Assess the environment and don't start out too casually. In case of doubt, begin more formally. Once you've said, "Hey Mandy, what's happening?" it's hard to go back to "How are you, Ms. Davis?"

2. Respect other people's religious, political and cultural feelings without anger or impatience. Try to understand—you don't have to agree.

3. Ask questions—you can't be an interesting person unless you are interested in the thoughts of others. Ask the other person's opinion before stating your own—"What do you think about … ?"; or add the question after giving your own. But don't ask a question you would not want to answer.

4. Embrace diversity in all directions. This includes people older and younger than us.

Practicing good manners—which communicate that we care about other people—is the heart of social skills and basic to civilization. Manners are the great equalizer. They apply to everyone and are the opposite of being elitist, arbitrary and artificial. Social skills expressed as beautiful manners are in your best interest. People who can handle any situation with grace, humor and poise will always be valued in the workplace and everywhere else.

Source: Margery Sinclair, CEO of Good Manners Are Good Business and author, *A Year of Good Manners*

Assessing Corporate Culture

Rather like people, every enterprise—corporate, nonprofit or government—has its own culture. It develops over time according to the industry, company history, leadership and many other factors. You do your best work, and are most valued, when you understand a company and the industry it's part of. Don't expect to comment on corporate strategy (though a growing number of organizations consult young people to better understand them and access their skills). But whatever your job level, a solid grasp of the big picture enables you to recognize opportunities and contribute to company priorities. You'll interact more effectively and write better messages, too.

However, you'll seldom get good answers if you ask anyone, "What's the culture here?" Most employees, especially those long entrenched and at top levels—take the daily culture for granted: how things are done, how people interact, and what is valued. A huge percentage of executive hires fail because neither the organization nor the incoming leader anticipate the possibility of culture clash. So, it's up to you to observe. Consider the obvious: how people dress, what their offices look like, how they interact. Is the atmosphere competitive or collegial? Formal or friendly? Do people mostly work alone or is teaming important? Check out how the organization presents itself in written materials and online, and what current and past employees say about it on sharing sites.

Further, identify good sources of information right next to you and ask specific questions. Experienced colleagues are likely to welcome your interest and asking their advice helps you find common ground. Most supervisors are glad to encourage your interest in becoming a useful member of the team.

Here are some of the big-picture elements worth knowing:

- How does the enterprise frame its mission? Express its values?

- How are decisions made—and by whom?

- What is rewarded? Who is valued?

- What behaviors are discouraged?

- What are the organization's immediate and long-range goals?

- What challenges does it face? Who are the competitors?

- What are the company's strengths and competitive advantages?

- What is its communication style and preferred channels?

Writing to Groups

Writing to groups is often more complicated than writing to individuals. Professionals who design communications for big groups, like mass markets, customarily segment the audience and tailor different messages to each because the same one will not succeed with all. Similarly, a large

company sends different information to employee groups about subjects like a reorganization because their concerns are different if they are managers or office workers or subject specialists.

There are times when you should segment your messages too. If you're sending a résumé or inquiry to prospective employers, for example, you'll need to take a different tack for consulting firms and marketing departments.

Often, however, one message must be effective for a wide range of people with different educational levels and interests. Good presenters often pick one person at a time to focus on while speaking. Similarly, many good writers think about one individual, or imagine one, and write to that person.

Here's how Warren Buffett, known for his remarkably clear writing on complex financial subjects, pulls it off:

> *Write with a specific person in mind. When writing Berkshire Hathaway's annual report, I pretend that I'm talking to my sisters. I have no trouble picturing them: Though highly intelligent, they are not experts in accounting or finance. They will understand plain English, but jargon may puzzle them. My goal is simply to give them the information I would wish them to supply me if our positions were reversed. To succeed, I don't need to be Shakespeare; I must, though, have a sincere desire to inform.*
>
> *No siblings to write to. Borrow mine: Just begin with "Dear Doris and Bertie."*
>
> —Warren Buffett, from A Plain English Handbook: How to Create Clear SEC
> Disclosure Documents

Rather than writing to a faceless group, then, try picking a typical representative of the audience to think about, and assemble a list of characteristics from the audience analysis outlined earlier in this chapter. Different factors count depending on your subject and goal. If you're presenting a new companywide data entry program, for example, it's important to consider education, probable degree of knowledge, possible resistance and the audience's view of what's in it for them (which encompasses "how much trouble will this cause me"). Search "developing a persona" in your web browser for useful guidelines. Entrepreneurs commonly use this technique to envision their prospective clients or customers and base all their media messages on the profile they create.

Gatekeepers and "Serial Audiences"

Often a document needs to be read by different people or groups in succession. There may be a gatekeeper—for example, a manager's assistant—who vets incoming messages and may choose not to pass some of them on to the boss. And with nearly every job application you send, there's probably an entire spectrum of people and machines with the power to short-circuit you.

In other situations, anticipate if a message is likely to ascend the company ladder. You deliver a project report to your boss, for example, and see a good possibility that it will be forwarded on up. Or you submit your consulting proposal to the executive who invited it, and you count on their passing it on to the relevant department head.

Here are ways to handle this:

- Be very conscious that you're writing to a serial audience when preparing the message.

- Avoid anything that could annoy the immediate recipient and anything not suitable to the audiences that may lie beyond.

- Use all the principles of good writing, and proof carefully.

- Err on the side of formality when unsure of the tone to take, but at the same time, keep your language natural.

- Keep your eye on the ultimate target—the primary audience—the person or group that will ultimately make the decision to hire you or deliver whatever you're asking for.

- Befriend gatekeepers who can usher a message on or kill it. It's best to have your supervisor's personal assistant regard you favorably, for example. Public relations people and politicians court editors and reporters for the same reason: They are mediators.

Remember that today's gatekeepers include machines. A résumé that lacks industry keywords has a good chance of being screened out. A blog or website that doesn't incorporate the right search terms may be ignored by search engines and won't bring them to your audience's attention. Don't write for algorithms—always write for people—but don't ignore the gatekeeper function.

Messages to the Universe: Digital Media

Digital media give us something that never existed before: a way for just about anyone to reach millions, even billions, of people across the country and around the world, with a click, every day, any time. All the rules of marketing and advertising are morphing into new "truths" as a result.

Anyone can now get a message out via a website, blog, tweet or social media post, for example. But when an audience is so vast and indefinable, how can you understand it to shape an effective message?

The premise of goal and audience now works this way: ***Instead of knowing to whom you're writing and tailoring the message, create a message that your ideal audience will want to find***. Through search engine optimization and global networking, this potential audience has the means to find you, rather than the other way around. And if you give it something it wants or needs, leverage that interest intelligently and stay persistent, your audience will come.

So, it's even more important to think about your goals and intended recipients in depth and figure out their age range, education, interests, values, worries, hot buttons and all the rest. This will be covered in depth in Chapter 10, "*Craft You're Writing for the Interactive World*."

Here's the takeaway right now: Don't throw out the basics of effective communication because the technology is new and the media channels behave differently. The principles remain as important as ever, and I promise they won't change. But they may need reinterpretation.

SUMMARY CHECKLIST: BEST PRACTICES FOR DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE MESSAGES

Do

- See every written communication as an "ask"

- Plan every message before you write it

- Consider your immediate goal: What do you want to accomplish? How do you want your reader to react?

- Think about your long-range goals: How can this message contribute to them? Improve a relationship, your reputation, your prospects?

- Analyze your audience's WIIFM—why should they give you what you want?

- Accept the genuine differences in the perspectives we bring to the workplace and try to see through other people's eyes

- Practice empathetic listening, observe people in your orbit closely, and use your experience-based intuition to connect with people inside their own framework

- Construct written profiles of people important to you and research those you do not know in person to invent personas

- Work to bridge divides between generational cohorts and other groups, demonstrating respect for all

- Investigate the company culture you are part of to understand how to communicate, contribute, get things done and be valued

Do not

- Write careless messages that may be interpreted as disrespectful or cause confusion

- Disregard what different message formats can realistically achieve

- Forget the central importance of establishing and maintaining good relationships through every message you write

- Ignore your own personal filter and resist understanding it

- Give in to the affinity bias that leads us to trust and associate only with people more like ourselves

- Criticize or disrespect anyone in writing

- Write impatiently or sarcastically to a boss, VIP, coworker, subordinate, client, or anyone else

- Risk your reputation and relationships by using thoughtless humor or posting negative material on any social media channel

And Never

- Make assumptions about other people or see them as stereotypes rather than individuals with their own histories, priorities and value

- Focus on your own needs, opinions and predilections when you communicate and fail to consider other perspectives

- Throw out the basics of effective communication when you engage with a new media channel

In the next chapter, we'll explore how understanding goals and audience enables you to chart the content that will achieve your goal, and say it right.

PRACTICE OPPORTUNITIES

I. Chart Your Own Goals

If you're now a student, based on this chapter's discussion of goals and your personal agenda, write down your essential goals for

- this year of study

- the entire degree program you'll be completing

- the first year of the job you hope to get after completing your program

Write in as much detail as you can. Consider whether this effort gives you a different perspective on what you want to achieve—and what difference that might make in what you do, how you spend your time and how you prioritize.

If you're already engaged with your career, think about what you want to accomplish this year and longer term, the opportunities that will help, and ways you can envision gaining those opportunities on the job and outside. Write it all down. Writing is a terrific tool for helping yourself—the best way to reason out big life questions as well as small ones. It challenges you to figure out what you want and how to get it by revealing gaps of logic and skills you need to develop. Thinking your goals through this way also alerts you to opportunities you'd otherwise overlook.

II. Team Challenge: Strategize a Difficult Message

In a way like how the Standard Modern Businessperson is outlined earlier in the chapter, construct a Standard Modern Supervisor. What characteristics are people in supervisory roles

likely to share? What are their probable needs and expectations from employees? Their goals, pressures, and sensitivities? Does the generation a supervisor belongs to suggest additional characteristics?

State a problem you anticipate on the job you'd like to have. For example: Your supervisor isn't giving you the learning opportunities you want. In small groups, see how many ways you can come up with to frame a productive conversation, taking account of the supervisor's probable perspective and responses. Prepare for a face-to-face discussion in writing: your opening line, expected response, and major points to make. (For guidance with preparing for a spoken exchange, see "Prepare Talking Points for In-Person Occasions" in Chapter 11.)

Collaborate on writing a message asking the supervisor to meet with you to present your case.

III. Review an Earlier Message

Select a substantial email or letter you wrote recently and review it from the perspective of this chapter. If it yielded disappointing results, all the better. Analyze: Did you define your goals well, including those beyond the obvious? Would considering your goals more analytically have affected your content choices? Did the message make your immediate goal clear? Did you pitch the message well to the specific audience? Did you give the reader a clear WIIFM element? How would you evaluate how well the message served your personal goals? How might you write the document differently now? Try it.

IV. A Thought Experiment

Psychologist Dan Ariely suggests that to understand people with opposing views, ask yourself whether your own view would be different if you had grown up in a different environment. For example, if you oppose gun ownership, would you feel differently if you grew up in a family that enjoyed hunting as a family bonding experience? If you feel strongly about protecting the natural environment, might you have a different perspective if your family income depended on the mining or lumber industry?

Choose someone you know who has a distinct perspective on something, such as a favorite sports team or type of music, and ask them to imagine whether growing up in a different family would have given them a different viewpoint. Then ask yourself the same question. Does this experiment bring you closer to understanding each other?

V. Team Project: Define Your Generation

In class or as an assignment:

Work with others in your general age group (preferably in a group of three to five) to review the description of the generation you belong to by virtue of when you were born.

Discuss

Which described qualities do you agree with?

Which do you disagree with?

What else should have been included?

If you come from different countries and cultures, can you find differences? Similarities?

WRITE

Collaborate on writing a description of your generation that you believe to be more accurate, in at least 250 words. Include cultural comparisons. Share with the class and talk about the results.

VI. Discuss Communication Differences

Contribute to a class discussion one personal experience that demonstrates a difference between your generation and another. As a group, come up with additional factors beyond those outlined in this chapter that can improve cross-generational communication.

VII. Profile Your Supervisor

If you're currently working, your supervisor is your best candidate for this. If not, choose someone you've reported to in the past at any kind of job. Or a teacher.

1. Write a characterization of the person, considering the various factors described in this chapter. Consider age and generation, communication style, personality, status in the organization, office appearance, and as many of the other factors as possible. (If this sounds challenging, think about what you'd tell your younger sister who would take over the job when you leave or are promoted.) Write up the profile (aim for at least 300 words).

2. Review the profile and write down everything your analysis tells you about how to best communicate with this individual and achieve the results you want. Include clues and intuitions as well as clear indicators.

3. Write an email to the person requesting something you anticipate will be a hard sell: for example, approval to attend an expensive professional development workshop, buy a costly new piece of technology or work from home three days per week.

VIII. Profile an Organization

If you're currently working, choose that organization. If not, pick one you've worked for in the past, perhaps as an intern or summer employee. Write a detailed profile based on the ideas in this chapter, as if a close friend asked you for insights on how it works and what it's like. Cover how to succeed, people who are good resources, hot buttons to be aware of, general tips.

IX. Profile Yourself

Write a description of how you think you present to other people in a work context, such as your manager and/or a coworker. Describe your communication skills and preferences, your strengths, priorities, motivation, sensitivities, personal interaction style, hot buttons—plus as many additional characteristics covered in this chapter as you can. Can you identify elements of your personal filter?