

# Communication

## *General Communication*

Set expectations with your customers as to the best way for them to reach you (day, time, and method) and likewise learn the best way for you to reach them.

Set an acknowledgment expectation of one business day and a personal standard to acknowledge within four hours.

When you are unable to resolve an issue in one contact, estimate the time needed and commit to a follow up date.

Record this date and keep the appointment even if you are still working on a final answer: "I'm just calling to tell you I have nothing to tell you." Set the next appointment.

Create a separate phone or communication log for each contact. This allows you to sort, prioritize, delegate, make notes, and file contacts. Document the date, time, and points you made. Standardize abbreviations you use to make this faster.

Excepting real emergencies, batch communications whenever possible. For example, minimally return calls once in the morning and once in the afternoon.

Set up "talk to" agendas for the people you communicate with regularly. Accumulate a list of subjects and cover all of them in one call to each person—they will all appreciate not being interrupted repeatedly and you will save yourself time.

When you are unavailable for an extended period of time, arrange to have someone else cover for you—at least to the extent of acknowledging your calls and explaining when you will return.

Avoid making commitments for others without their consent. "I'll have him call you this afternoon" is a set up for customer disappointment. "I'll give him the message" is more accurate unless you know for certain the party you are referring to is available and willing to follow up.

When a customer comes to you, own the issue. While it may be outside of your area of authority or expertise, ensure that the party who should handle it learns about it and follow up with the customer to confirm the issue was resolved.

Instead of saying "you'll have to call Joe on that" talk to Joe yourself and ask him to contact the customer. "It's not my department" fails to satisfy customers.

## *Phone Calls*

Plan points to make in each call. Planned calls average 7 minutes; unplanned calls take 11-12 minutes.

When you place a call be ready to leave a message—88% of the time the person you call will be unavailable; 50% of the time, the two of you do not need to talk directly anyway. For example, avoid saying just "call me" and instead say "I have two questions. First. ... and second ...."

In all phone messages, include your first and *last* name, phone *and* extension number.

If you need a call back, say so and provide a couple of times you will be available—then be available at those times.

Follow up each contact immediately, marking your calendar and so on, before moving to the next task.

## *Emails*

Confirm that complete and accurate contact information automatically appears at the bottom of every email: your phone and extension number, fax number, and mailing address.

Avoid using your “in box” as a staging area. Establish “save” or “print” folders for email you want to follow up on.

In emails, avoid the use of ALL CAPS—the typographical equivalent of shouting

Compose complex or emotionally charged emails off line and paste them for sending once you have edited the content.

Keep in mind that you may be required to present all emails in a court room.

## *Faxes*

Include your contact information clearly and accurately on a fax cover sheet along with the total number of pages you are faxing.

Avoid assuming that because you faxed an item it was received. Leave a message that the fax is on the way.

When sending a long fax, call first to alert the receiver.

## *Meetings*

Meetings are typically held for the purpose of sharing or creating information or for making decisions. Before holding any meeting, ask whether an alternate method of communicating would work as well.

When meetings are necessary, make them productive and efficient. Include those who can contribute, those who would benefit from hearing the discussion, or those affected by the outcome.

Meeting leaders should

- Have an agenda.
- Remind reception about the meeting, who will attend, and what time you will end or take a break.
- Start on time.
- Ensure the group proceeds through the agenda in an orderly fashion.
- Encourage participation, allow everyone an opportunity to talk.
- Have sufficient copies of materials to be distributed.
- Review notes from the previous meeting and ask for relevant updates.
- As action items are identified, make note of who will follow through when an update is due.
- Distribute the minutes of the meeting within 24 hours.

Meeting participants should

- Arrive on time.
- Arrive prepared.
- Turn phones, pagers, and radios off (unless someone is waiting for urgent information).
- Listen carefully.
- Contribute relevant, positive comments.
- Avoid sharing war stories unless they are relevant to the topic under discussion.
- Avoid negativism, whining, and blaming.
- Offer suggestions and solutions.

Confirm that the location is convenient to the attendees and appropriate for the size of the group and length of the meeting.

Set a date and time and provide sufficient notice so participants can prepare and attend without rescheduling other appointments.

Announce the meeting on one sheet including the date, time, location, participants, and questions to be addressed.

Hold routine meetings at appropriate intervals—far enough apart that significant new information is covered, but not so far apart that people are making decisions in an information vacuum.

Routine meetings should have standardized agendas including room for notes and an opportunity to raise new issues.