

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Taming Email ▶ 12/05/13

Three executives—one landmine

Mitchell, a senior vice-president at a consumer products company, led a worldwide division of 1,200 people. Nine months before our coaching began, he'd rolled out a major initiative he had hoped would be a shot of adrenalin for the division. Instead, people had received it, he said, "with a big yawn."

Ryan was a senior director at a software giant. Unlike Mitchell's large, global audience, Ryan's team was made up of just five engineers. In his year-end feedback, four of the five had raked him over the coals. They described him with words like, "uncaring," "mean" and "brutal."

Jessica adored her role as a VP at a television network and was on track to be promoted to SVP within a year. Each of her shows had a dedicated creative team, marketing team and producing team—all of them geographically diverse.

"We do brainstorms through email and they're fantastic," she said. "But no one can keep track of all the ideas. We keep covering the same ground over and over. It's insane!"

Brief detective work on my part revealed that all three of these high-performing executives had stepped on that most treacherous workplace landmine that has ended careers and resulted in prison sentences: email.

Email in its place

Mitchell rolled out his initiative in a series of lengthy, well-written emails. In return, he received a yawn.

Ryan delivered performance feedback to his engineers via email. In return, he received a scolding.

Jessica and her team used email to generate terrific ideas they couldn't retrieve later. They wasted precious hours. And they always worried they'd lost a gem.



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Because email consumes such a huge part of our workdays—some studies say up to 25%!—any action you can take to make your email even a little more productive can have huge payoffs.

Of course, entire books are devoted to email protocol. And user guides are full of instructions about how to program your software so it will sort your email more efficiently. Those are important resources. Please use them.

But I want to give you my top six email tips. Using any one of them will buff your emails. Two or more will improve your effectiveness. Applying all six will give your emails executive presence.

Ready? Here goes.

#1 EMAIL ≠ STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Mitchell rolled out his initiative through a series of four emails. I saw them. They were beautifully written. And long.

I wasn't surprised he'd used email to communicate his strategy—many leaders do. It's an understandable choice given that more and more teams are spread out across time zones and continents. But I'm also not surprised when I hear that, like Mitchell, these leaders get a big yawn in reply.

I asked Mitchell how many emails he got everyday. He said about 300.

When did he read his emails, I asked. He said he often read them on the elevator between meetings.

How did he decide which ones to open? He said first he looked at the sender, then the subject line, then whatever text was visible in the preview window. Only after those three tests would he actually open an email.

"Don't you suppose," I asked, "that people in your division are just as busy as you are? What makes you think they would take the time to read and think about each of those long emails of yours?"

He smiled impishly. "Because they're from me!" And we both laughed.

I told Mitchell what I tell many of my clients: don't use email as a leadership tool. Your email is going to be scanned on the run in a preview window. Write accordingly. So here is the first of the six tips for improving your email:



Tip 1 *Email is not an effective communicator of strategy. Or a decision making tool. Or an inspirational jolt. Use email to convey information.*

When you need to communicate new initiatives or changes in direction, use email as a follow-up to a video conference or webcast.

#2 EMAIL ≠ MANAGEMENT

Ryan was defensive when I asked to see the emails he'd been sending his team. "They're not tirades," he said. "I wasn't ranting or name calling."

True, he wasn't. But he was sending very specific performance feedback to his engineers. Ryan's emails had words like "bad choice," "big mistake," "unacceptable" and "ineffective."

By themselves those words might not appear emotional, but I understand why the engineers had an emotional reaction when they read those words about themselves. Small wonder they struck back.

Tip 2 *Email is not an effective management tool. Or a way to guide projects. Nor does it succeed when communicating any message with any emotion in it. Email is best suited for information.*

On the other hand, I encourage you to send "Bravo!" emails often. Email is great for quick acknowledgements of small wins.

EMAIL ≠ FLOWING CONVERSATION

Jessica's dispersed teams used email as a forum for developing their shows.

She said, "Just the other day I spent I don't know how long trying to find an idea one of my producers had suggested a month or so ago. I finally found it, but it was buried in the middle of an exchange about one of our other shows!"

Email threads often flow like robust dinner conversations. But they're not effective as wide-ranging conversations. Emails are business documents.

I shared my three rules about subject lines with Jessica. They are Tips 3, 4 and 5.



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#3 EMAIL ≠ CATCH-ALL COMMUNIQUES

Each email should only be about one topic.

This doesn't mean you can't write about multiple items within one email. For example: "5 action items for the Denver meeting" is a great subject line. Are there five items? Yes. But it's all about one *topic*.

And, next quarter, if you need to reconstruct what went wrong during the planning phase of the Denver meeting, it will be easy to collect the history.

This one discipline saved Jessica and her team countless hours of frustration. This third tip requires a shift in your thinking:

Tip 3 *One topic per email*

#4 EMAIL ≠ A TANGLED TRAIL

Email threads can continue for weeks with dozens of people chiming in. The discussion rarely remains on the same topic for long. The tendency is to simply hit "reply all" time after time, leaving the original subject line in place.

You might be adhering to Tip #3—one topic per email—but the body of your email could be a completely different topic from the subject line. The fourth tip requires discipline:

Tip 4 *Change the subject line as the content changes*

#5 EMAIL ≠ DIRECTIONLESS MUSING

Create subject lines that state clearly what action you want from the receiver:

SUBJECT: "Agenda items" is not an actionable subject line. The receiver doesn't know what you want.

SUBJECT: "DEADLINE TODAY—Submit off-site agenda items" is actionable. The receiver knows exactly what you want.



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SUBJECT: "Candidate interviews" is not actionable.

SUBJECT: "SIGN-UP: VP candidate interview time slots—RESPONSE NEEDED" is actionable.

SUBJECT: "Meeting recap" is not actionable.

SUBJECT: "Action items from 10/20 Staff Meeting" is actionable.

Tip5 Write actionable subject lines

#6 EMAIL ≠ PING-PONG DIALOGUE

With all three of these executives I shared my number one secret for reducing email ping-pong. It's simple to understand but a challenge to execute: *stop asking questions in email.*

When we're talking on the phone or sitting across the desk from someone, it's natural to ask, "Is that ok?" or "What do you think?" or "Would it be all right if I...?"

We naturally write those questions into our email. But email does not need to be a back-and-forth dialogue.

Every time you type a question mark in an email, ask yourself how to change the question into a statement. Instead of, "Is this okay with you?" write "At the end of business Wednesday, I'll do as I've stated unless you direct otherwise."

Eliminating questions from your email is not an easy shift in style. If you can do it, it will give you three benefits: 1) You'll remove a burden from the receiver because you won't convey that you're waiting for their reply. 2) You'll reduce how many emails you send and receive. 3) You'll sound more assertive.



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The sixth and final tip for improving your email:

Tip6 *Stop asking questions in emails*

Are there more ways to improve email? Of course. But these six, applied consistently, will give your emails *The Look & Sound of Leadership™*?

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