

REMOTE CONTROLS FOR COMMUNICATION SUCCESS

CAROL KEERS, CHANGE MASTERS®, INCORPORATED

American drivers spend 3.4 billion hours stuck in traffic each year, but that's nothing compared to the number of hours business people spend regularly on remote communications. Because we are now totally dependent on remote communications as a necessary tool to keep businesses going, it's time to evaluate who's the slave and who's the master.

Working remotely is a fact of life for most of us, so getting the most out of electronic and other interactions without bruising those working relationships is crucial. The opportunity for misunderstanding rises exponentially when using electronic and remote communication.

Remote communications will continue to expand as more people work at home, offsite and around the globe. Their success is dependent on the effective and respectful use of electronic tools. These tools can have an immediate positive impact on organizational results and performance – or they can make your life miserable. Some organizations are working very hard to try to establish processes that will create clearer and more appropriate electronic communication approaches - but they are in the minority.

We surveyed 350 of our clientele in 25 different companies to hear about their real life experiences with the challenges of making remote communication work. They loved aspects of the technology, but their frustration with it was equally strong. We've listed their frustrations and best practices on our website at www.changemasters.com.

Our electronic communication tools are a very recent phenomenon. They just got handed to you one day. You were taught how to turn them on, file messages or save them, but you were given relatively little training about how your messages create a perception with others. We are completely reliant on them today, and they unquestionably improve our ability to effectively conduct business, but they can have a decidedly chilling impact on leadership perceptions if used incorrectly.

Respondents estimated getting an average of 100-150 emails per day which were consuming 3.5 hours of their days on average. Worse yet, only about 20% of them were really necessary for them to do their jobs. As one person noted, "People will send 30 messages versus making one quick phone call – they email first and think second. They'll send an email at 5:30 on a Friday afternoon with an 8:00 am Monday morning deadline. There are way too many negative emotions and "zingers" reflected in electronic communication. Unfortunately, it comes off as totally passive aggressive. They use electronic interaction as a crutch to avoid dealing with the tough issues directly, thereby doing more damage than they ever realized".

What's clear from our findings is that we have a love / hate relationship with text messaging, email, voicemail, conference and video calls.

That disconnect was reflected in the following findings:

52% of our respondents noted that people will say things electronically that they'd never say face to face

70% agreed that due to the less personal nature of the medium, false assumptions are made which undermine relationship

71% acknowledge they literally forget people who are “out of sight, out of mind”

The top three most consistent issues in our survey revolved around:

1. the loss of personal connection / difficulty of maintaining relationships created by excessive reliance on the medium
2. rude or insensitive “e-missiles” creating conflict and misperception
3. the fear of turning the workplace into a 24/7 environment impacting families and overall productivity

Remote communications are all a matter of degree. It can feel just as distant when you’re on a different floor of a building or working at home as when you’re on the other side of the world.

When used well, electronic communications are a great tool for time-shifting communications, keeping multiple people informed, exchanging data, etc. The examples of misused text and email messages were widespread. Some of the more frequent issues listed:

- Sending copies of every message in an exchange to people who do not need to know.
- Poorly written messages with grammatical errors and misspelled words.
- Electronic messages that are too long to read with no clear point.

What is the true effectiveness of participating in a conference call while driving in heavy traffic and swearing at the person in front of you, as several respondents noted? Many conference calls and video conferences are low quality in terms of the sound quality as well as the way they are conducted. Other issues included:

- Large calls where people do not mute when they are listening, hearing toilets flushing, dogs barking, dishwashers thumping or children crying
- Unclear agendas and reporting responsibilities often make participants feel they are a waste of time.
- The challenge of making communication smooth, engaging and authentic due to the technical limitations of video conferencing or audio conference calls

In terms of best practices, one of the strongest statements in our survey findings was that remote communication works much better after there is a personal and in-person relationship. Leaders who quickly establish the face-to-face relationship are able to more effectively communicate electronically later.

In addition to the face-to-face recommendation, survey participants suggested:

- Have a remote coffee break where you talk about non-business topics like you would with someone onsite.

- If there is an informal discussion on an issue, get the remote person on a conference call to include them in the conversation, or at least let them know what you're discussing
- To make up for missed hallway conversations, cycle regularly through all your employees or centers of influence to make sure you connect and keep the relationships strong

Being more assertive and imaginative to demonstrate successful remote leadership communications will get you that productive inclusion. Help everyone feel included.