

*"Email takes too long to solve problems." Larry Page, CEO/Co-founder, Google*

## **Email Rules of Engagement**

People overestimate both their ability to convey their intended tone- be it sarcastic, serious or funny – when they send an email, as well as their ability to correctly interpret the tone of messages others send to them.

In the late 1960's, Dr. Albert Mehrabian conducted a study to determine how we communicate. He concluded we respond to communication most by the tone and language, not words.

7% words  
38% tone  
55% body language  
*Dr. Moravian, 1967, Stanford*

To make things more complicated a 2005 study at the University of Chicago, and published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, claims that nearly 44% of email messages are misunderstood. Those same messages conveyed by phone had a 75% success rate. While time and volume surely has only added to the complexity, recent estimates note that 70% of emails are misunderstood. Another study on communication in the 50's, noted that we only retain 10% of what we read.

In most of the studies, the sender overestimates the clarity of their message. They are often surprised when the recipient receives the message with a different impact and intention. That misinterpretation is what usually leads to a flurry of counter emails that leave everyone asking – what does this mean? Add to that, the sheer volume of emails we all get each day, and it is a wonder any emails are understood at all.

Our personal prediction, based on our work inside corporations, is that 4 emails equal one phone call; 8 emails equal one face to face discussion. As Larry Page notes, "Email takes too long to solve problems." The problem is most people depend on email as their primary source of communication, thereby unknowingly thwarting their ability to effectively communicate.

This constant business communication challenge has led us to suggest these Email Rules of Engagement.

### **RULES**

1. Remember 2 facts: 44% of emails are misunderstood and 93% of communication is non verbal.
2. Email is OK for facts or exchange of information, but completely ineffective for meaningful discussions or disagreements.
3. Use "reply all" – when you agree and applaud in public
4. Do NOT use "reply all" – when you disagree with one person and feel tempted to point that out to everyone. Voice concerns in private between the disagreeing parties. This also best done real time and off-line. *See Rules #1 and #2.*
5. Avoid using emails to "Change the Conversation". (ie: "Let's change the goals of the strategic plan retreat"). What ensues is a blizzard of emails written very early in the AM or late in the PM and the result is Rule #1 or Rule #2. Change the conversation exchange of ideas is best reserved for phone or in person dialogue. Otherwise, we revert back to Rules #1 and #2.
6. Remember emails are one dimensional. We can't see the facial expressions or tone of voice to see the intent. Thus intent and impact are different. *See Rule# 1.*
7. Before sending, read your email out loud to yourself and pause before you hit "send". If your intention is to debate, blame, disagree or engage in semantics, hit "delete" and pick up the phone.