



# The Well-Practiced Manager

Professional Development  
Resource for  
Boston College Managers  
and Supervisors

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## From the Director:

Did you know that the first email was sent in 1971? This form of communication wasn't even really known as an "email" – short for electronic mail – until the early 1990s. Since then, however, it has become such an integral part of

conducting business that it's hard to imagine getting much done without it.

We use email so often for so many purposes that it's easy to slip into bad habits and use this powerful communication tool carelessly and ineffectively. When we aren't thoughtful about our emails, we can end up creating confusion, causing dissension and making our jobs more complicated.

In this newsletter, we offer some guidelines and tips to better utilize email and make the most of your time. There are benefits to taking some time to think about how we use emails and structure emails. This is a way we can enhance our communication and improve our effectiveness.

Sincerely,

*Bernie O'Kane*

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## Take Charge of Your Emails for Better Communication

In the workplace, email has emerged as a sort of hybrid communication tool. It is like a memo or letter in that it's written, stays around until it's trashed and can easily fall in the hands of someone other than the intended reader. But it's also like a voice mail since a message is conveyed without the need for a conversation. And yet, it can resemble a conversation because of the immediacy of the response.

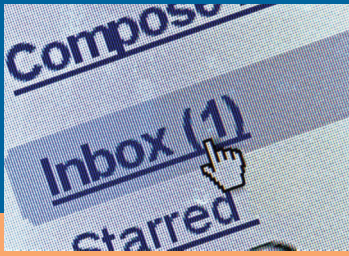
Email certainly has its advantages. It's easier to write than a memo and faster to deliver. It doesn't require picking up a phone or risking a lengthy conversation. And, it provides a connection that may not be as deep as a face to face talk but can be as effective for some purposes such as setting up a meeting or sharing information.

However, email also has all potential downfalls of other forms of communication plus more due to its hybrid nature. People may be more careless than with a memo because an email or text is so quickly written and sent. And without the visual or auditory clues of a conversation, it's more prone to misunderstandings.

The best way to avoid these pitfalls is to combine the guidelines for those other forms of communication. This also applies to text messaging when it is used in the workplace to augment or replace emails.



*continued*



## Taming your Inbox

It is not uncommon to have dozens if not hundreds of emails in the inbox. While this works for some, if you find it overwhelming or you're losing track of important information, then clean it out.

- **Set up folders within your system.** You could label them by project, sender or action needed.
- **Set up filters** to automatically send emails into folders.
- **Ask yourself why you are saving an email.** Is it something you need to know or want to read later? File it. Is it something you need to take action on? Put it on your task list. Are you not sure? Set up special folder just for those messages.
- **Unsubscribe.** Legally, senders are supposed to include an option to get out of future emails. Take advantage of that.



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## Include Some Formalities



While emails are generally a quick form of communication, you will still connect with the reader more if you use conventional formalities such as a greeting and sign off. It also lets you set the tone and show some personality. If you want to be more casual and friendly, greetings such as, “Hi, Hello, or Greetings,” work fine. If you want to be more formal, a traditional, “Dear” is in order. As an email thread evolves into a conversation, you no longer need a greeting.

When signing off, “Bye, Ciao, or TTFN” are fine for casual conversations and close friends. But more formal notes call for a “Sincerely, Yours, Best, or Best Regards.”

## Grab the Reader from the Get Go

Getting a reader's attention starts with the subject line. With dozens of emails pouring in every day, we're relying on the headline combined with the sender to determine what gets looked at and dealt with first. Let your reader know what's in this email and why they need to read it.

In the body of the email, state the reason for the email at the top followed by the background information. If you start with the background, you risk losing your readers' attention. And, they might miss the point of the email if it's buried too far down.

## Say What You Need to Say

In general, short and to the point is best with any written communication. However, you don't want to be too cryptic. One way to avoid this is to summarize or use bullet points at the top of the email and then elaborate below. If you need decisions made, it can be helpful to list the questions in one place or highlight them to make it easier for your reader to respond.

## Proofread for Professionalism

Because emails are so easily generated and we send so many of them, it's easy to forget the basics of good grammar. Still, this email, even if it is one of hundreds, will give the reader an impression of you whether or not it's warranted. Spelling errors and careless mistakes can send the wrong message or create confusion. If it's late in the work day, consider saving important emails and sending them the next morning.

## Watch Your Tone

One of the biggest risks of email is that it doesn't convey the subtle clues we use in conversations. A joke can come across as offensive. An innocent remark can be construed as an insult.

An email doesn't have to be devoid of personality, but you should be aware of how your reader might perceive what you've written. After all, regardless of what you intended to say, you will have to deal with what your reader thought you meant. Keep in mind that an email sent could appear anywhere – be cautious with what you write.

## Know When It's Time to Talk

As great and convenient as emails can be, there are times when it's better to just pick up the phone or walk down the hall. This is true if an issue is particularly complicated or if a few words can clear up or prevent a misunderstanding. Avoid sending emails when you are angry. Don't write anything in them that you wouldn't say in person and don't write anything that you wouldn't want repeated.




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