Influencing by Email

"Eats Shoots and Leaves" the title of a book about punctuation by Lynne Truss only begins to describe the problem of communicating in the written word, let alone trying to influence someone using email. This sentence could describe the foraging habits of the wild Panda, or the behaviour of a psychopath! Similarly, your written words, can lead to all sorts of confusion. And, if you also consider factors such as context, busyness, volume of emails, cultural and personal biases, this makes influence by email an activity which is not for the faint hearted!

Using email for influence should be your last resort; ideally it is best done face-to-face or over the phone. However, our global organisations require that we often have to use the least effective means of influence to do our most important work. If you have to use email then try to make sure it has the highest impact possible.

Email is good for:

- Sending longer or complicated briefing messages as a first step
- Giving the receiver a chance to consider the information and their view before responding
- Providing a record where that is important
- Short or informal communication
- Immediate responses to progress issues quickly

The risks of using email:

- You don't know if the message has been read
- It can be difficult to control the response time
- You don't have any immediate signals to let you know whether your impact and intention are aligned for the reader, so you can't change your style in response to what you see or hear
- In-box overload may result in your important message being missed
- Emails can be impersonal

Tips for Using Email for Influence

- Use email only as **part** of, rather than as the **only** means of influencing your stakeholders. Supplement with a phone call, videoconference, or meeting for important issues.

- Pay attention to the "words". In email they convey most of the meaning.

    a. Choose them carefully and use short sentences to avoid ambiguity
    b. Be concise
    c. Avoid appearing abrupt. Vary your style and make it personal
    d. Never use jargon if you can think of an everyday equivalent
    e. Ask someone to read it before sending if it is important enough

- Try to convey your feelings about the issue in words or if appropriate with symbols. **Emoticons** – can be helpful (providing they are understood and they don't irritate!). Use different fonts/colours to emphasise parts of your message.

- Use the Influencing Planning Process to think through all the variables before you begin to write.

     a. This will clarify your objective
     b. It will give an idea of the push/pull flow of your email and the combination of behaviours that are likely to be effective
     c. It will clarify the action you require

- Be creative when writing an email – as well as Push Styles where you outline your views, consider using Pull Styles e.g.
  Being Open...."I am not sure how to proceed on this project"....or
  Building Agreement and Commitment...."at our last meeting we seemed to agree about"....or
  Demonstrating you have Heard...."from your last email I see that x, y, and z are important to you...."

Additional Points:

- When you send your email is important. Research shows the best times of day for emails being opened are 8am, 9am, 3pm, 8pm – remember time zone differences. Emails also have the greatest open and action rate in the first hour after they are sent.

- Who the email is sent to is important. Be discerning about who you send it to, and only copy people who are actually involved or need the information.

- Make the subject line informative and make it stand out. Emails with headlines that grab peoples' attention are the ones that get opened and dealt with first.

- Make it personal – research shows that those who started a negotiation over email with no personal interaction, ended up in stalemate 30% of the time. Those who personalised it by introducing themselves and providing some personal details before getting down to business, were more successful at reaching a resolution and stalled only 6% of the time.

- The purpose of the email should be clear at the beginning. Is it for "Action", "Information", "Response required", or "Approval". Signal the purpose in the subject line. This can lead to up to twice the response rate of traditional messages.

- Sign the email – a personal signature, even a digital one, will make the recipient feel as if you're "talking" to them individually.

- Call to action – even if it is already contained in the subject line or in the body, it must always be in the final sentence of the email.

References

Truss, Lynne (2003) "Eats Shoots and Leaves". London: Profile Books Ltd

Orwell, George (2006) "Politics and the English Language". Peterborough: Broadview Press

www.cgwa.com/tag/influencing-by-email

www.influence-people-brian.blogspot.com