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In the military, we receive training or a manual on every piece of equipment and program we use except for one very important one: Email. Although it's our least preferred method of communication, it's one of the primary ways we communicate in garrison and combat. And many of us never learn to use this medium correctly.

Why does it matter? It matters because being able to *effectively* communicate through writing provides leaders and staff officers with understanding and the ability to act. And if we're doing it *efficiently*, we give the person we're communicating with time back to focus on other things besides reading emails.

We weren't concerned with email etiquette until we started working in a senior leader headquarters, where time is a critical resource and brief and precise communication is important. Many decisions with operational and strategic implications are approved and disapproved based on the words in an email.

Looking back over our careers, we realized that we've left a wake of rambling and confusing emails. Our goal with this post is to share the lessons we've learned (the hard way) working in executive communications.

7 Unwritten Rules for Email

1) Address properly. Who needs to take action? Be clear by including those names in the To: line of the email. Copy everyone else who needs to be in the know or can jump in and provide additional context in the CC: line. Never use BCC: because it's shady and erodes trust within the organization.

2) Bring clarity in the subject line. The subject line should provide the purpose of the email. We like to start with descriptors such as (Inform) (Approval) (Inputs needed) (Action required), with the remainder of the line clearly laying out the subject in one sentence.

3) Be brief, be brilliant. Open emails with one or two sentences that describe the purpose of your correspondence. When you do it well, you don't need to write the letters "BLUF" because it will be inherent. If you have a suspense, include it up front. And then end your paragraph there.

Move on to the next paragraph because skimming readers will. (See what we did there?)

Use the second paragraph to provide 3-4 sentences (or reader-friendly bullets) that support your bottom line. If you have additional information, consider labeling it **Additional Context** or putting it under your signature block and direct them to read there if they need it.

4) Know that commas and semicolons aren't our friends. If possible keep your sentences short. Avoid long compound sentences full of commas and semicolons. You run the risk of confusing your message. A period gives the reader a natural stop.

5) Always be closing. In the conclusion of your email, reinforce your call to action one more time or provide a short final summary. If you have to send a dense email it's a great way to remind the reader why you sent the email in the first place.

6) Avoid requiring a legend. Highlights, bullet points, and numbered lists are a great way to key readers into the main points of your email. Avoid using multiple methods of calling out points such as mixing highlights with italics with different colored fonts.

7) Say yes to the simple signature block. Make it easy for others to find you. Include name, office, phone number, and email. Including your phone number allows others to call if they have any questions instead of using email. Avoid using multiple fonts and colors or pithy quotes.

Make the most out of email

Communication is a prerequisite to action. As long as email remains one of our primary modes of communication, leaders need to understand how to get the most out of each electron sent. We hope this guide provides you with the tools necessary to be successful.

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