



By Joe Byerly

Anyone who has worked directly for a battalion commander or above probably has experience writing “ghost notes.” These are emails a subordinate writes and addresses for their boss to send to other people. Ghost notes can be weekly or monthly sitreps, updates on an ongoing situation or emails asking for additional resources. No matter the type, they are the “easy button” for the commander because all they have to do is hit “send.”

Recently, I worked for a senior Army leader who encouraged his subordinate commanders to own their communications—meaning, write their own emails. As I reflected on his guidance, I realized there are benefits to communications ownership. I witnessed many of these benefits firsthand as I watched him communicate with senior military leaders, senior civilian leaders and his own commanders.

### **Greatness and Writing**

One of the best ways to work through a problem is to write it down. Throughout history, leaders who found themselves in tough situations sat alone with their thoughts and worked through them using pen and paper.

Marcus Aurelius, who served as Roman emperor for almost two decades, wrote his *Meditations* to work through daily leadership challenges, wars and a pandemic. In the week leading up to the D-Day landings, Gen. Dwight Eisenhower wrote himself letters to help work through risks, opportunities and necessities of operations.

Both Marcus and Eisenhower used writing to achieve clarity of thought. This point is underscored by author Stephen King, who has said writing is “refined thinking.” In our minds, our thoughts are clear, but real clarity doesn’t come until those thoughts are solidified in writing. The process of framing an email, capturing important points and discarding nonessential elements helps us gain more clarity.

### **Sound Authentic**

Over the years, I have worked under multiple commanders while in staff positions, and the best ones never let me draft their intent for operations orders. They wanted to own those. At the time, I didn’t understand it—thinking it was one more staff drill I could handle for them. But as I gained experience, I realized they wanted that section of the operations order to reflect their voice.

We all have a voice when we write. This voice is our certificate of authenticity. When commanders write their own correspondence, their voice comes through. When someone else drafts an email, using words and phrases the commander wouldn’t normally use, others can tell someone else wrote it.

Authenticity in communications is important for two reasons. First, subordinates will know if the intent, the guidance, the policy, etc., is the commander’s, or if it is another product

produced by staff. They are more likely to follow it and adhere to it when they know it comes directly from the commander's mind and is not a draft by a random staff officer.

Also, commanders who write their own communications tend to reinforce the message by repeating what they wrote. The senior Army leader I worked for occasionally wrote guidance that he sent out in an email. He then repeated key words and phrases from the document in meetings, during battlefield circulation and in one-on-one discussions. Everyone knew he wrote the email because he owned it and talked about it; his guidance didn't become memorandums left on a bulletin board in a headquarters.

The second reason authenticity in communications is important is that it signals leader involvement in an issue. I have learned that many senior leaders can tell when a subordinate commander's email is authentic or a staff-produced ghost note.

Every time there was a change or inflection point in the strategic situation, my boss would provide a one- or two-page update to his commanders. He always wrote these himself, for the reasons mentioned above. I found out from those commanders' staff members that their bosses read these emails because they knew it was from him, and that if he took the time to write it, they should take the time to read it.

Communication can be frustrating. Sometimes it is like tapping out a song you have in your head and expecting another person to immediately know the tune. It is hard to convey an idea in your head to someone who may not have the same background or experiences as you, or who wasn't in the same room when you had a conversation.

Communication is a skill that takes practice. We need repetition. Leaders who write their own emails gain needed communication experience when it matters. I have also learned that speed comes with practice. I can write in hours what used to take days.

### **Honing the Skill**

I recognize that commanders have a lot on their plates, and it isn't feasible for them to spend hours writing and responding to emails. There are many ghost notes best produced by staff in the interest of time. However, when it comes to communicating up or down the chain of command on key issues, or writing guidance on important topics, it is best for commanders to own those.

Great leaders are also great communicators, but the ability to communicate effectively and efficiently takes time to develop. By owning communications, commanders refine and hone this skill. They also have an opportunity to work through problems and refine their thinking through the process of writing. Finally, they gain authenticity in their communications—an important factor in ensuring that “message sent” is “message received.”

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