

Why is miscommunication common in the virtual workplace? Lack of context. And it's not just that e-mails and phone conversations lack a person's visual reaction to what you've said.

Think about the information you can glean just from the seating arrangement in a physical conference room — who sits next to whom, who's at the head of the table, who has put a little extra distance between herself and her neighbor, and so on. All those cues are missing in a typical teleconference.

As a result, even the simplest of things can be misinterpreted. For instance, does the use of an exclamation mark in a text message (“I didn't know that!”) indicate that the writer is excited, surprised, or angry? Before sending an important e-mail, ask someone else to read it just to make sure it won't be misconstrued. Moreover, I strongly advise that virtual communications use respect, positive affirmations, and gratitude to set the right tone and proper context. “When you have shared context and you exchange information, you'll have a shared understanding,” says Karen Sobel-Lojeski, a professor at Stony Brook University. To achieve that shared understanding, I recommend the following best practices:

**Fight the “illusion of transparency.”** We often think that others are more in synch with what we're thinking than they really are. The obvious fix for this illusion is greater empathy. Put yourself in the position of the other person. Actually visualize that individual in his office as you send him an e-mail. Since virtual teams might lack the necessary context for empathy, managers should encourage team members to share information about themselves, perhaps on an intranet site. Researcher Yael S. Zofi recommends that virtual team members actually give a video tour of their offices or cubicles to provide a mental image for others when communicating through e-mail, phone, or texting.

**Speak the right “language.”** In the book “The 5 Love Languages,” author Gary Chapman describes five different preferences people can have for expressions of love — through affirming words, spending quality time, gifts, acts of service, or physical contact. Similarly, we all tend to prefer a certain “language” for communications at work. Some people are more quantitative (preferring raw numerical data) while others are more visual (favoring pie charts and bar graphs). For others, storytelling and anecdotes are best. Managers should encourage teams to express such preferences at the start of a virtual project. In one study team members shared their Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to provide a feel to co-workers for how they perceived the world and processed information. Knowing

communication style prevents misinterpreting someone's curt e-mail as annoyance or anger if you're aware of his typical brusqueness. Amplify the signal. We often communicate less information than we think we are, a syndrome psychologists call signal amplification bias. Virtual teams, lacking contextual cues that the other person hasn't understood what we're trying to say, often hear only too late that "I thought it was obvious that..." or, "I didn't think I needed to spell that out." How to avoid signal amplification bias? Spell things out! Don't just say, "Circle back with me." Do you want final input to a decision or just want to be informed of the decision after it's been made? For important communications, Yael Zofi advises her executive clients to use more than one medium. So, for example, if you have a phone conversation about possible delays in a project, follow up with an e-mail to minimize misunderstandings.

**Remember that the medium is (partly) the message.** When Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase, "The medium is the message," few could have imagined today's variety of communications media (e-mail, IM, texting, videoconferencing, online discussion boards, etc.). The resulting communication issues have multiplied as well.

Here's a classic example. An executive overhears a rumor at a conference and texts that information to someone on his staff. Later that day, he's baffled to learn that his entire team has been scrambling all morning to confirm the rumor, which he had merely passed along as idle industry gossip. The lesson here is that certain media (like texting) imply urgency, so be mindful and don't let the medium color your message.

**Respond promptly (if only to say you'll respond later).** A person's response time can matter as much as the medium. In general, people will interpret the promptness of your response to an email or voice message as an indication of the quality of your relationship. When your reply is tardy, the other party is left wondering whether you value that relationship or not. Of course, oftentimes a slow response simply means you were extraordinarily busy. But in a virtual environment, the limited contextual clues like response time tend to take on greater significance.

**Avoid sloppy e-mailing.** A new status symbol in today's generally more egalitarian business environment has arisen: sloppy e-mails. One provocative study found that many executives have write terse e-mails with half-sentences, bad grammar, and atrocious spelling. The underlying message is that those individuals are far too busy to be bothered with writing perfectly polished text. Unfortunately,

sloppy e-mails at best require wasting time trying to decipher them, and at worse cause workplace misunderstandings and costly errors. For offenders who claim they simply don't have time to write better emails, researcher Jaclyn Kostner doesn't mince words: "I tell them you have to find the time; otherwise, you're not fit for the job and somebody else should be doing it. Or maybe you need to offload some responsibilities because there's no excuse for sending people cryptic emails."

Finally, encourage everyone to expect problems. At the start of any virtual project, experts recommend a "meta communication" of basic guidelines, such as how quickly people should respond to e-mails and what media should be used for which purposes (for instance, all team meetings will take place through videoconferencing). A major component of that document, according to Pam Brewer, a professor at Appalachian State University, should be a mechanism for resolving such communication problems as the volume of e-mail becoming unmanageable. Setting the expectation that there will inevitably be problems makes everyone much less hesitant to raise an issue. In fact, the team leader could emphasize that point by adopting the attitude of, "If no one has any communication issues, it's a sure sign that we really do have problems."