Hear ye, hear ye!

What's that you say? You want to communicate more effectively at work? Think not only message but also medium.

THE FIRST STEP In strong business communication is choosing the right method. "Most people default to e-mail," says Marsha Egan, the CEO of InboxDetox.com, a workplace-productivity coaching firm in Nantucket, Massachusetts. "But when you're trying to convey something that's more feelings than fact," she says, it's better to use the phone or speak in person, so tone and body language can limit misunderstanding. Examples? Pitching a detailed idea, reprimanding poor performance, or sharing complex info. (One quick chat can equal a dozen e-mails.) Increase your odds of success with these policies.

IN E-MAILS: GET STRAIGHT TO THE POINT "Your message should be no more than one screen long," says communications coach Karen Friedman, the author of Shut Up and Say Something. "Put the most important info—who, what, where, when, why—in the first few sentences. Go into detail only as needed." Use a clear subject line. If the topic ends up switching after some rounds, ditch the "Re: Re:" and start a new thread with a fresh subject. It is polite to recipients and makes searching (and toggling back and forth) easier.

IN PERSON: DON'T BE BORING Hit your most important point first, in case a chat gets cut short, says Friedman: "If the fire alarm was about to go off in the room and you could say only one thing, what would it be? Hold someone's attention by mentioning the payoff (saving time and saving money are favorites), and remember that most of us hear things through a filter of "how does this relate to me?" Deliver the answer and you'll have a productive exchange.

ON THE PHONE: STEER THE CONVERSATION Have notes prepared before you make a call, even an internal one, so you stay on track and don't forget anything. Keep pleasantries short. (Instead of saying, "How are you?" say, "Hope you're having a good day.") Next, state your business and how long it will take, says Egan: "I want to go over the presentation before tonight's deadline. Do you have five minutes?" Then stick to that time frame. "Confirm conclusions after the call," she says. Sending a brief e-mail reiterating the agreed-upon points or action items provides a record and ensures that important details don't slip through the cracks.

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WATCH YOUR MOUTH

We're all, like, always trying to, like, be careful about words and phrases that, like, chip away at our credibility, right? But as Lisa Schneider, the executive director of digital product management for Merriam-Webster, points out, some are so habitual, we don't even notice the problem. She recommends striking a few from your work vocabulary and explains why.

"HONESTLY" "This word distracts from your message and might even make people subconsciously wonder if there are times when you're not so honest. We often use it as an intro when we're frustrated and being blunt. If that's the case, simply say, "To put it bluntly."

"YOU GUYS" "Too casual for the workplace—it undermines your authority. If you all by itself sounds too stern, see if you can find a way to rephrase that uses the pronoun we. That feels both inclusive and professional.

"I MEAN" "There's a note of desperation in this phrase. It can come off as a plea to be understood. Take a beat when the "I mean" impulse hits and form a sentence with a strong start, like 'I want;' 'I suggest;' or 'I recommend.'"

—ADRIANA GARDELLA