Something to Talk About – A conversation guide for church leaders

By Bob Osborne, EFCA West
Director of Church Leadership and Organizational Development
(bob@efcawest.org)

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Digital Communications – To Send or Not to Send…

Note: This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders' conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams.

Prior articles can be found at www.efcawest.org. Click on the Church Leadership tab to get to the archive.

Confession is good for the soul.

Have your ever pressed "Enter" on your keyboard only to discover that the message you've sent has been dispatched to the wrong person or persons? Has it been forwarded to people that you didn't want to see it? Has it been misinterpreted by the recipient resulting in a fractured relationship? Has it resulted in a series of dueling digital messages as you and the other party tries to convince the other of the rightness or your own cause and the wrongness of theirs? If so, this article is for you. Having some guiding principles for digital communications are important in organizations and in personal relationships. Just as in face-to-face communication, there are some aspects of digital communication that are problematic. And, rather than sending multiple digital messages to one another to address this topic, it's something to actually talk about.

There has been a whole series of revelations about corporate and personal email and other digital correspondence that has resulted in serious damage to personal and corporate reputations. I was quite tempted to relate some actual church stories of "emails gone bad," but couldn't figure out how to anonymize them enough so as to not create relationship problems with those involved. After all, this digital document you are reading, distributed through an email blast is a digital communication, too.

As church leaders, we are to be people of high integrity and Christ-like behavior, and it is important to ensure that our communication with others, digital and verbal, is consistent with our faith. What can we do to help us avoid the pitfalls of others in the area of digital communication? I'm glad I asked. Here are some things I've gleaned from many a presentation on digital communications pitfalls.

Digital communications are quick, easy, and allow recipients to receive the message or information at their own convenience. They can be quite useful, but they can also be problematic when used in situations where they have proven to be ineffective. When should we avoid using digital communication?

- When dealing with issues that have any significant emotional attachments. If 80% of face-to-face communication is non-verbal, imagine the difficulty in accurately communicating emotion or any other communication nuances digitally. Try this exercise: Say the following sentence 8 times, each time strongly emphasizing a different word: "I didn't say she was the one responsible."

Each time there is a slightly different connotation and meaning depending upon the word that is emphasized. Communication involves more than just words – digital communication is usually just words, and can result in much interpersonal damage when used in emotionally-chareged situations.

- When addressing disagreement. Using digital communication to address a disagreement often results in dueling emails/texts. When someone sends an opposing treatise to you, avoid the temptation to avoid an in-person confrontation by dashing off a quick text or email. Find a time to meet with them personally or call them on the phone to attempt to resolve such issues. Remember, any email you send back can be distributed all around the world and used against you. Don't fall into that trap.
- Avoid digital communication in matters involving highly confidential or sensitive information. Remember, you do not know who is on the receiving end of the message. It could go to a computer that is turned on but not monitored, and any passer-by would have access to the message. And, if a recipient passes the message on to others, you could have a real mess on your hands. One tactic we use at my home church on such matters is to send the elders a text message or email asking them to call the pastor or board chairman about a confidential matter. The calls come. Quickly. And we eliminate the risk of creating a document that could live forever.
- Don't use digital communication to criticize, chew people out, or otherwise be critical of their work. Have the courage to do these things, if you have to, in person. If giving is down, don't send a mass email – preach.
- Don't send a corrective or negative email to an entire group when only one or two members of the group need the admonishment. You know the drill, one person does something wrong so the boss sends an email to everyone telling all not to do that. These are always poorly received. Have the courage to correct individual behavior personally.
- Don't send a digital message or reply when you are tired, angry, in a hurry, or worked up. You can never take back what you send out into the digital realm. Give all digital communication serious thought.
- Don't assume that any digital message you send it actually received or read by the recipient. If it's that important, request that each recipient send a message back that they have received the message. Don't trust delivery or read receipts.
- Remember, it's the communicator's responsibility to ensure that the recipients actually receive and understand the message, and that's hard to do digitally in many cases.

When might we want to use digital communication? Consider the following.
- Digital communication is great for sending out information such as the dates, time, locations and particulars of meetings or events. It is quite effective for passing on general information.
- Digital communication generally works fine to disseminate non-confidential information such as meeting agendas and background reading.
- Digital communication generally works fine for routine interpersonal communication when all is well relationally and it doesn't matter if what you write might be shared with others.

Blogs and social media are also forms of digital communication and they both present unique challenges among our church families and especially for church leaders. We'll talk about them another time.

How do you use digital communication both personally and within your leadership team? Do these ideas resonate? Any war stories to share with one another? Can you share a time when you were hurt by digital communication? What would you add to the list? Are you comfortable with what you currently distribute to others via the digital world? What are the digital communication principles that should be in play for your church?

That's something to talk about.

Let us know how your conversation goes. Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at bob@efcawest.org.