Writing to Effect Organizational Change

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The choice is not just about grammatical correctness.

It is about the ways we influence others.
Understanding the power of language

• *Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function as a deflection of reality.*

• *Kenneth Burke*
Language acts as a screen shaping our understanding and observations

Language describing company in 1999
- creating open, transparent market place,
- replacing the dark, blind system
- nonconformist, defiant, visionary
- facilitate the flow of information and expertise
- respond quickly
- empower individuals
- craft innovative and substantive solutions
- “Most innovative company in America.”

Language describing company now
- secretly created a complex web of off-balance sheet financing vehicles
- pursuit of personal wealth
- extreme incentive schemes
- abused their power and privileges
- manipulated information
- engaged in inconsistent treatment of internal and external constituencies
- put their own interests above those of their employees and the public
- failed to exercise proper oversight or shoulder responsibility for ethical failings.
All communication (written, spoken, or visual) occurs within and is responsive to a context.

- In school, we write and read to learn.
- In the workplace, we write and read to do.
- In reading-to-learn, the goal is to create permanent knowledge by extracting and retaining information.
- But in reading-to-do, the goal is to carry out a task, so information is read, used and then, eventually, forgotten (Sticht).
The communication we do as part of work is goal oriented: it seeks to get people to do something.

- Make a decision
- Change a belief
- Buy a product
- Carry out a procedure
- Comply with a policy
- Contribute or invest (ideas, money, time)
To move people to action, we also need to consider how the author, information, and audience function as central components of communication.

- It takes more than an effective choice of words to influence others.
- It requires the careful and ethical application of strategies for influencing others.
Strategies for influencing others

• When communicating, we must use strategies to build trust, believability, and connection. We want to build relationships with others and have them value the information we give them.

• There are three categories of strategies:
  • Appeals to character of the writer/speaker
  • Appeals to logical information
  • Appeals to the needs, values, and emotions of the audience
People are influenced by those they trust and respect.

• As a writer, if you want to influence change and have people to act on what you communicate, you need to establish your credibility.

Strategies for establishing credibility:
  • Provide professional credentials
  • Emphasize past experience (successful projects, large clients)
  • Write clearly, concisely, and correctly (used specialized language only for a specialized audience)
  • Establish a professional, confident, audience-oriented tone
People are influenced by accurate and usable information

• To motivate people as a writer, you need to prove the high-quality of your information, and you need to ensure the reader can access the information.

Strategies for establishing the quality of the information:

• Provide evidence and support for all your claims (data, examples, expert testimony, etc.)

• Explain how the information was gathered (method, research, secondary sources)

• Present information using logical organization and professional genres

• Use headings, graphics, and color to help the reader locate and understand information
People are influenced if their interests, needs, and values are supported.

• Understanding and connecting with your audience is critical to your success in affecting change.

Strategies for influencing audience

• Show the audience that you understand their needs or concerns
• Explain how change will meet their needs and address their concerns
• Highlight your commonalities with the audience (shared values, needs, concerns, experience). (I am like you)
• Appeal to emotions (happiness, sympathy, desire (success), etc.)
• Make it easy for them to locate and use information
• Address your audience at a level and tone they appreciate.
Be aware of the characteristics of action-oriented audiences

• eager to act and to do something meaningful
• do not like to read
• develop schemas or mental models of how things are done, and they apply these to new situations
• want to be in control of their own activities
• will “jump the gun” in order to act
• will skip around to find what is important to them
• want to know why they need to know something
• are easily overwhelmed
Also note the characteristic of a web 2.0 culture.

• The millennial generation, born between 1981 and 1996, has never known a world without computers. Described as the “global early-adopter generation” (Multinational, 2009), they are always connected (Pew, 2010) and they interact with information a little differently.
  • Rely more heavily on standard organization of information and expect to find information quickly
  • use design and usefulness of information to determine credibility
  • look for “trigger” words as they scan over content (a trigger word is one that matches their goal)
  • Overwhelmed by large volumes of information
  • Confused and discouraged by the smallest usability problem
Document design makes a strong first impression.

• The effectiveness of your written content will depend on the first impression made by the look of your document.

Guidelines for design:
• Use company logo and follow branding guidelines
• Make your headings informative
• Use levels of design to show levels of information
• Avoid “chart junk”
• Use white space generously
Be Ethical

• Language has the power to shape people’s understanding and observations about reality.
• It motivates people to act, and as such, it can be used to manipulate and mislead.
• An ethical writer --
  • Presents information objectively and truthfully
  • Avoids appealing to negative or base emotions
  • Puts the welfare of others before personal gain
  • Follows the ethical guidelines of their profession