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Use this email format to simplify your overflowing inbox

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BY STEPHANIE VOZZA
5 MINUTE READ

Connection and collaboration are important buzzwords in today's workplace, but that often means we're available around the clock via email. While many of us complain about overflowing inboxes, maybe



"Just a few years ago, not everybody could connect to their work email from home, but today, everybody has access on their mobile phones," she says. "Bosses have let up a little on the pressure, but coworkers are working around the globe. We expect our colleagues to respond quickly. If we don't, we can hold somebody else's work up."

All too often, we can end up sending six or more emails back and forth to work through a problem, when just one would have sufficed, says Booher. "We expect people to be mind readers," she says. "We leave out so many details, without thinking through the whole situation."

Or there's the opposite problem, sending an email that feels like a brain dump, says Booher. "They say, 'Here's this issue' and dump out everything they're thinking and end the email with 'Thoughts?' Thoughts about what?"

As a corporate communication expert and coach, Booher has trained clients from major corporations, such as Coca-Cola, Lockheed Martin, and IBM on a more effective way to email. She calls it the MADE format.

"Just because email is a casual form of communication doesn't mean we should waste time on it," she says. "A quick format involves 'message,' 'action,' 'details,' and 'evidence.' Ninety percent of emails can fit that format, saving time for the sender and receiver."

Here's how it works:

MESSAGE

Begin the email by providing an overview up front. In most cases it can be a sentence or two, says Booher.

ACTION

Next, spell out the action you want, which could be something you will do or something you want the other person to do. For example, you might be making a recommendation, asking for follow up, or notifying the person of a step to take.

DETAILS

This is where you include the "who," "what," "when," "where," "why," and "how." Not all emails will need each of these detail categories. Some will be brief and may be included in the message and actions. But generally "why" and "how" need elaboration. For example, why is the action important? Or how do you take action?

EVIDENCE

Finally, include evidence if needed. This section is optional, says Booher. You might attach a helpful diagram, a proposal, or a form you need filled out. Evidence makes the message more authoritative,



AN EXAMPLE

Booher shares this example of an email that can be made better using the MADE format. Here's the email before:

Darren,

The recent function for our engineering group held at the Aquarium was a tremendous success for us. From previous functions we've sponsored, the number of estimated attendees (225–250) was very realistic. The attraction of the Aquarium was most appealing to this group, and therefore a crowd of more than 475 attended.

With the unexpected overflow crowd, I understand the lack of enough food. In that regard, you and your staff handled themselves very nicely.

But I'm very disappointed in another matter. When we originally agreed on the Aquarium for this event, the facility was to be exclusively for our organization and its attendees. Needless to say, you did not abide by that agreement. Instead, you held another function in the area where we planned to conduct our entertainment session.

You mention stress put on your staff, but I want you to know that this is a significant event for our engineering group and their management team. Your decision to schedule another client group for this same space in the Aquarium put me in a very difficult position. You took space away from us that was part of our original agreement.

In my opinion, the proposal that our representative presented to you is fair and forgiving. You and I want this handled professionally and quickly, so please review your numbers once again, and take into consideration our position, so we can finalize our proposed payment for this event.

Sincerely, Pierre Gustavson

Don't bury your point at the end of your email, says Booher. Here's a more effective way to write this same email:

Darren,

We need a resolution on the open contract with your organization regarding the event sponsored at the Aquarium on October 5 for our engineering group and management team.
[Message]

When we originally agreed on the Aquarium for this event, the facility was to be exclusively for our organization and its attendees. Needless to say, you did not abide by that agreement. Instead, you held another function in the area where we planned to conduct our entertainment session. [Message]

FOLLOW

LOGIN



This is a significant event each year for our engineering group and their management team. Your decision to schedule another client group for this same space in the Aquarium put me in a very difficult position. You took space away from us that was part of our original agreement. [Detail: Who & Why]

I've reattached our proposed payment. Shall we handle this professionally and quickly? Please contact me with your response. [Evidence & How To]

Sincerely, Pierre Gustavson

ONE EXCEPTION TO THE MADE RULE

Using the MADE format makes writing emails easier to organize, says Booher. But there is one type of email that shouldn't follow this format. "Negative messages need to start with 'why' first," she says. "You need the criteria reasoning up front to soften the message. If you're doing a layoff, for example, you'll explain the bad news up front."

Thinking of the MADE format can help you write shorter emails that explain your thoughts and details clearly. "People don't understand details until they have the message up front," she says. "Once you learn how to summarize well up front, the rest of the email can be cut almost in half. It's not only shorter; your emails will be clearer, and that makes a lot of the time-consuming back and forth unnecessary."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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