

Communicating in the Workplace

Administrative Accounting and Bookkeeping Program

Handout: Routine & Persuasive Messages

Once you understand the communication process, using the elements of storytelling may be the most powerful technique for elevating your communications skills. But another important skill (perhaps the second most powerful) is knowing how to structure your messages for specific purposes. The basic choice here is between the Direct and Indirect approach.

Direct vs Indirect Approach

Direct Approach

In the Direct Approach, you get straight to the point in the opening and follow with the reasons in the main body. This is appropriate for routine messages and requests that are unlikely to encounter resistance. By getting straight to the point, it offers the advantages of saving the recipient's time (which is usually appreciated!) and emphasizing the sender's honesty.

- Essential message in the opening.
- Reason(s) in the body.
- Pleasant closing.

The Indirect Approach

In the Indirect Approach, you begin with an opening buffer statement to establish rapport with your receiver, then give the reasons for whatever message you're delivering, followed by the message. This is followed by a forward-looking closing that attempts to maintain the relationship.

- Opening Buffer
- Reasons
- Bad News
- Closing

When to Use the Direct Approach

Typically, the Direct Approach is used:

- For routine messages and requests.
- For bad news when it is not too significant (e.g., small increase in cost).
- When the receiver may overlook the bad news.
- When the receiver prefers directness.
- When firmness is necessary (e.g., collection letters).

When to Use the Indirect Approach

Typically, the Direct Approach is used:

- When the message contains news that will upset the audience.
- To show sensitivity.
- To soften the impact of bad news.

Business Writing Example

To put all this together, here is an example of not-good workplace writing. It is written in the direct approach, which is correct for this sort of informative email, especially as it's admitting an error which affects the recipients. (The direct approach doesn't waste their time and demonstrates the sender isn't trying to hide the error or evade responsibility for it.) However, its effectiveness is reduced by the use of passive voice. The email is also overly formal and excessively wordy, in contradiction to several of the language guidelines and the previous reading. Finally, it includes many outright grammar, style, word-choice, and spelling errors.

Payroll Processing Email (Original)

This is to inform you that last month our central accounting department changed it's computer program for payroll processing. When this computer change was operationalized some of the stored information was not transferred to the new information database. As a consequence of this maneuver several errors occurred in employee paycheques (1) health benifits were not deducted (2) RSP deductions were not made and (3) errors occured in Federal withholding calculations.

Each and every one of the employees effected have been contacted; and this error has been elucidated. My staff and myself has been working overtime to replace all the missing data; so that corrections can be made by the August 30th payroll run.

Had I made a verification of the true facts before the paycheques were ran this slip-up would not have materialized. To prevent such an error in the future I decided to take the bull by the horns. At this point in time I have implemented a rigorous new verification system. I am of the firm opinion that utilization of the new system will definitely prevent this perplexing event from reoccurring.

Payroll Processing Email (Better)

Last month, our Central Accounting Department changed its program for payroll processing. Unfortunately, some information was not transferred to the new database, resulting in several errors in employee paycheques:

- 1. Health benefits were not deducted,*
- 2. RSP deductions were not made, and*
- 3. Errors occurred in Federal withholding calculations.*

All affected employees have been contacted and the errors explained. My staff and I have worked overtime to replace the missing data, so corrections can be made for the 30 August payroll run.

Had I verified the data before the paycheques were run, these mistakes would not have happened. To prevent future errors, I have implemented a rigorous verification system. I believe this will prevent errors from recurring.

Notes on the (Better) Version

The solution fixes the following errors and lapses in style:

- Eliminates the redundant and pompous opening phrase (“This is to inform you...”).
- Corrects the wrong form of “it’s” (a contraction for “it is”) with “its” (the possessive).

- Eliminates the redundant “computer” in front of program (and “information” in front of database).
- Corrects the spelling of “benifits”.
- Rewrites the evasive description of the error to state what happened concisely and directly.
- Formats the errors in a numbered list for greater clarity.
- Replaces the incorrect “effected” with “affected”.
- Eliminates pompous words such as “elucidated” and “utilization”.
- Rewrites the passive opening sentence of the final paragraph in the active voice.
- Eliminates the redundant “true” in front of facts (facts, by their nature, are “true”).
- Replaces the excessively formal “reoccurring” with the more direct “recurring” (you can almost always replace “utilize” with “use, on the same principle).

Persuasive Messages

Persuasive messages (such as sales or marketing communications or favour requests) usually use the direct approach. The straightforwardness of this implies honesty and an expectation of success. The indirect approach would normally only be used where you anticipate a lot of resistance. However, there are some special considerations for how you structure a persuasive message to make it more — er — persuasive.

Opening

Use the opening as a short buffer before making your request. Gain your recipient's attention by mentioning a feature of the product (for a sales message) or promise of a benefit (for a favour request). It can help to gain attention with a startling or unexpected statement.

Body

Reduce resistance and build interest and desire in the body. You can do this by offering something valuable. You can also make an emotional appeal (involving status or self-image) or a rational appeal (such as saving money or increasing efficiency). Either way, focus on audience benefits; what does this mean to them?

You also want to anticipate potential objections and deal with them before they can be made. Mention performance tests, polls, or awards. Use testimonials (with permission). And offer a guarantee or warranty, if applicable.

Closing

Use the closing to motivate the recipient with an effective call to action. Offer an incentive or a guarantee of satisfaction. It's important to limit the offer with a deadline. And this is vital: make it easy for the audience to respond.

Persuasive Message Example

Here's an example of an effective persuasive request for a favour from a fellow employee who doesn't have to do what you ask of them (so you must be persuasive!).

Scenario

A fellow employee in your department has recently returned from a holiday in Bali, where they photographed several exotic species of birds. The photos are excellent, and you're an enthusiastic member of the local birding society. It would really be a feather in your cap (so to speak) if you could persuade this person to come and discuss their trip and show some slides at your next club meeting. A nice supper is part of these meetings. Are there any other benefits you could suggest to them for granting you this favour?

Persuasive Message

Opening Buffer: Hello NAME, I truly enjoyed seeing your Bali photos yesterday. They're excellent — not just the usual holiday snapshots most people take. They really deserve a wider audience.

Building Interest in the Body: You know, I might be able to help with that. My birding club has an opening for a guest speaker this Saturday.

Reducing Resistance in the Body: If you sent me a selection of your photos, I could make up a slide show for you. Then, all you'd have to do is show up and present. We don't have any other business, so the whole thing would only take a couple of hours: 6:00–8:00p.

Motivating Action in the Closing: These events always include a very nice dinner, which I think you'd enjoy. If you get your images to me by tomorrow night, I can make it happen for you.