Your E-mails Communicate More Than You Think

By Ginger Lapid-Bogda. Ph.D.

Most of us write multiple e-mails every day, yet how often do we think about the many messages they convey beyond our actual content and intended impact? Our e-mails actually communicate information that can cause unintended negative and positive reactions in the e-mail recipient. Moreover, our e-mail writing styles actually reflect our Enneagram styles. When we use the Enneagram as a way of understanding our e-mail communication styles, we not only improve the way in which we communicate with others, we also learn more about ourselves and dramatically increase our personal and professional development.

> "It c*an't* be that easy," Janice exclaimed. "You mean I can actually change my habits while I'm writing my e-mails?"
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> Janice, a Four, had learned that Fours unconsciously engage in self-referencing behavior -- actions that pull the conversation and attention away from the other person and toward the Four. One way Fours do this is by frequently using the words *I*, *me*, *my*, and *mine*. In the two short sentences above, Janice used these words four times.
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> "In answer to your question, yes, you can," said the Enneagram consultant. "In the two sentences you just said, you can eliminate all the *I*, *me*, *and mine words and instead say, "'It can't be that easy! You mean a person can change while writing e-mails?'"*
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> Janice learned that e-mails were a good way to practice this skill. When she wrote them, she could immediately see her overuse of these words. All she had to do was delete the self-referencing words and rephrase her sentences. Not only did her e-mails become more effective, but her speaking habits changed as well.

This self-development activity sounds simple, and it is. The first step toward changing is simply to *pay attention to yourself*. First, Janice will see the words after she writes them and will change them. Next, she will catch and modify the words before she even types them. Eventually, her new writing style will come naturally and without effort. In speaking, Janice will learn to focus less on herself and more on the content of the discussion and on other people. Simple actions such as this exist for people of every Enneagram style; that is the elegance of the Enneagram. This article provides e-mail examples for Enneagram styles Four, Five, and Six.

Enneagram Style Four – Althena

In the following e-mail, Althena informs her co-workers on a team that she must miss a pre-scheduled conference call.

Hi Everyone,

First, I'd like to let you know I'm healing well from my surgery. It didn't quite go as I had hoped and I ended up needing a transfusion and had a couple of other post-surgical complications. I was home in 2 days, and out taking a walk on the 4th. I'm feeling quite good considering everything, the pain is manageable and now and then I forget and have to remind myself to slow down and not do too much.

That said, there are doctor's appointments, including Monday at 3:00. I remember our discussion about moving to this time, but it's the only time of the day I'm unable to participate. I want to say thank you to all of you who sent me e-mails and cards inquiring about my health.

With regrets – Althena

Analysis

In Althena's e-mail, she uses the words *I, my*, *me*, and *myself* fourteen different times. Fours tend to use these words so frequently that they are usually unaware that they are doing so. In addition, Althena spends most of the e-mail discussing her own personal experience with a recent surgery, although the ostensible purpose of the e-mail is to inform and apologize for having to miss a pre-scheduled business conference call. Because of the continual use of personal words and the frequency of telling personal stories, others often perceive Fours as "self-referencing" -- focusing the conversation and attention back to themselves.

Again, this e-mail has many positive characteristics; it is personal, warm, and informative. However, Althena could challenge herself, and simultaneously increase her self-awareness by doing the following:

- Reduce the number of self-referencing words -- *I, my, me, mine*, and *myself*
- Place less emphasis on the personal situation by using language that is less personalized, more objective
- Focus more on others than on herself

Here is one possible way Althena could rewrite her e-mail.

Hi Everyone,

Thank you all for your concerns about my recent surgery. The healing has gone remarkably well, and the biggest challenge right now is to slow down and let the recovery process take its course. Unfortunately, a doctor's appointment will prevent me from attending the scheduled conference call.

With regrets,
Althena

Enneagram Style Five – Martin

The e-mail example for Fives is a series of e-mails because the sequence and cumulative impact of these e-mails most clearly reflect both the Five's language patterns and the Five's core issues. These e-mails between Martin (a Five) and Sarah discuss the possibility of carpooling to a staff party. They begin with an e-mail from Sarah to the entire staff. Both Sarah and Martin know the Enneagram, and their knowledge and self-awareness are expressed indirectly in the later e-mails.

Email # 1 from Sarah to ten of her co-workers regarding an upcoming staff party

This party sounds like so much fun. I wondered if anyone would be coming from the Southside who might like to make the drive with me. That probably only includes Martin and/or Trish, but, who knows?
- Sarah

Email #2 from Martin to Sarah

Hi Sarah,
I can pick you up, no problem.
- Martin

Email # 3 from Sarah to Martin

Hi Martin,
Or I can pick you up! Either way. Where do you live or would you be coming from work?
- Sarah

Email #4 from Martin to Sarah

Hi Sarah,
Looking forward to it. I live and work in Southfield…okay so I live in my car...what's the big deal? Just kidding. I get off from work at about 5:00 pm so we could be fashionably late.
- Martin

Email # 5 from Martin to Sarah

Hi Sarah,
Well, I've got this new Blazer, and you know about my trust issues already, so what the heck, I'll pick you up. What's your address?
- Martin

Email # 6 from Sarah to Martin

Hi!
I forgot about the privacy and autonomy issues involved! Forgive me!!
- Sarah

Analysis

This series of e-mails illustrates four characteristics of Fives when they communicate:

- Minimalism in number of words used to express a thought
- The need to preserve their autonomy and privacy
- The ability to be self-reflective (in a wry way)

- Moderate self-disclosure (the sharing of information about self) when they know and trust someone

Although all Martin's e-mails are short, Martin's e-mail #2 is especially minimal. In it, Martin immediately suggests that he pick up Sarah, although her initial e-mail, email #1, does not imply that she wants a ride; she simply asks for someone to ride with her. However, it is very clear in this sequence of e-mails that Martin wants to drive (thus preserving his autonomy), and that he does not want to give Sarah his address or to pick him up (thus preserving his privacy).

Martin's self-reflection and self-disclosure can be seen in e-mails #4 and #5; Martin sent e-mail #5 without having received any response from Sarah to e-mail #4. In e-mail #5, Martin explains why he prefers to pick her up, for example, when he refers to "my trust issues."

This series of e-mails clearly resolves the question of who would pick up whom and illustrate Sarah and Martin engaged in a mutually amusing interaction, Martin, however, could use situations such as this to work on his Five language patterns. Doing so would call to his attention to the even smallest ways in which our Enneagram styles influence our communication styles and our behavior. For example, Martin could do the following:

- Elaborate on each idea
- Include real feelings along with thoughts
- Be more forthcoming about his desires at the earlier stages of communication

For example, Martin could have written Sarah only one e-mail -- saving them both a great deal of time – saying the following:

Hi Sarah,

I would be happy to go to the party with you. That day, I will be getting off work about 5:00 pm, which might make us fashionably late. My preference is to pick you up and hope this is OK with you. Why don't you e-mail me your address?

- Martin

Enneagram Style Six – Sheldon

Two e-mails from Sheldon, an attorney in a large law firm, were sent to a human resource staff member who is in charge of an employee morale survey. Sheldon sent the second e-mail within an hour of having sent his first e-mail, although the human resource staff member had not responded yet to his first query.

Email # 1

> *I am slightly confused. Our group has only four employees in Chicago. One has only been there a year. How can we have a 64.7 % response rate?*
> *- Sheldon*

Email # 2

> *I certainly don't believe new employee's responses have any meaning. My recollection, though, was that we were not going to survey them.*
> *- Sheldon*

Analysis

While the issues and questions that Sheldon raises are legitimate ones, a contextual issue may be helpful in clarifying why these e-mails reflect the typical Six language patterns. The survey to which he refers was sent to several thousand employees. Of the seventy attorneys in management positions comparable to Sheldon's, he is the only attorney who reviewed the preliminary response rates from the morale survey at this level of scrutiny or sent an e-mail asking for clarification.

In these e-mails, Sheldon writes about specific details. His words, combined with the fact that he sent two consecutive e-mails, express his underlying anxiety about the survey results. His concerns arise before he has actually seen the survey results; he is anticipating what the data may say (particularly negative data) as well as how useful the information will be, thus reflecting both the discerning minds many Sixes possess and their tendency to create worse-case scenarios.

If Sheldon wants to use his e-mails as a means to practice new and different language patterns, however, he can do the following:

- Use the recipient's name at the start of the e-mail, thus communicating more warmth
- Collect his thoughts and send one e-mail only, thus conveying less stress
- Reduce the amount of concern and fear implicit in his words
- Imply that the recipient of the e-mail will effectively handle the issues he raises

Sheldon can collapse his two e-mails into one and have rewritten the e-mail this way:

Dear Cathy,

When I received the e-mail about the response rates for our Chicago group, I did the math and wondered about the 64.7% response rate. That group has four employees, one of whom has been there only one year.

My recollection is that we were not going to survey employees who are new because they would have had limited experience with the firm.

Your answers will be very helpful to me in understanding this process and yielding data that will be useful.

- Sheldon

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