

Outsmart Your Next Angry Outburst by Peter Bregman

Robert and Howard* had always gotten along well. They'd worked on several projects together and considered each other friends. So when Robert discovered that Howard held a strategy meeting and hadn't included him, he felt betrayed. He immediately shot off a text to Howard: "I can't believe you didn't include me in that meeting!"

Howard was in the middle of a client meeting when his phone pinged with a new text. Stealing a look at his phone, he felt a jumble of things: concern, anger, embarrassment, frustration, defensiveness. The text distracted Howard, and his meeting didn't go as well as he had hoped. His anger grew as he thought about the fact that in a meeting earlier that week, Robert didn't support an idea Howard proposed to Jane, their CEO, even though before the meeting he'd said he liked the idea. So as soon as Howard stepped out of his client meeting, he shot off a curt, though seemingly unrelated, reply to Robert: "I can't believe you left me hanging in our meeting with Jane."

Two little texts — a sentence each — managed to upset a relationship that had been good for years. It took Robert and Howard weeks to be collegial again, and even then they felt the damage linger.

There are so many lessons in this brief but havoc-wreaking exchange. Some are easy: Don't text when you're angry. Ever. In fact, don't communicate in the middle of any strong negative feeling. Most of us should not use writing to express anger or frustration or disappointment; subtleties of feeling are often lost in texts and emails. And, of course, never check your phone in the middle of a meeting.

Being a skillful communicator takes thoughtfulness. So much of our communication has become transactional — a word here, a sentence there — that we forget communication, at its essence, is relational.

It sounds simple, but in reality there is nothing simple about communicating, especially when emotions are involved. I — and you, I am sure — see this kind of clumsy communication all the time. At one point or other we've all been Howard and we've all been Robert. Situations like this should encourage us to step back and commit to a clear, straightforward, easy-to-follow framework for communicating powerfully in any situation.

For starters, always plan your communication. As you do, remember that organizations are complex, people make mistakes, and what looks like political backstabbing may be a simple oversight. In difficult situations it helps to ask instead of demand, to stay curious, and to open up conversation rather than shut it down. Give the other person some benefit of the doubt.

Here are four questions to ask yourself before communicating.

What outcome do I want? It seems obvious, but in reality it's unusual that we ask this question. Often we react to what other people are saying, to our own emotions, or to a particular situation. But those reactions lead to haphazard outcomes. Start by thinking about the outcome you're aiming for, and then respond in a way that will achieve that outcome. In Robert and Howard's situation, the outcomes they wanted were very similar: to be connected, to be supported, to be included. Yet their reactions to each other brought them the exact opposite: disconnection.

What should I communicate to achieve that outcome? Once you know your outcome, identifying what you want to say is much easier. If I want to be closer to someone, "I'm hurt that you didn't include me" is clearly a better choice than "I can't believe you didn't include me!" That small word difference represents a huge shift in meaning. Of course, for many of us it's emotionally much easier to say "I'm angry" than to say "I'm hurt." One feels powerful, the other vulnerable. This is one reason why emotional courage is so critical to being an effective communicator and a powerful leader.

How should I communicate to achieve that outcome? Your goal here should be to increase your chances of being heard. So instead of considering how you can most clearly articulate your point, think about how you can predispose the other person to listen. Ironically, you don't do this by speaking at all. Just listen. Be curious and ask questions. Recap what you're hearing. Then, before sharing your perspective, ask if you've understood the other person's. If not, ask what you missed. If you hear a yes, ask, "Can I share my perspective?" A yes to this last question is an agreement to listen. And since you just gave a great example of listening, the other person is far more likely to return the favor.

When should I communicate to achieve that outcome? For many of us communication is a gut reaction. Robert shot off his text the moment he heard he had been left out. Howard immediately responded with his own text in reaction to Robert's. Neither one of them paused or were thoughtful about when they should communicate. The rule here is simple: Don't communicate just because you feel like it. Communicate when you are most likely to be received well. Ask yourself when you are most likely to approach the communication with curiosity, compassion, and clarity, and when the other person is likely to be generous and calm.

The problem with most communication is that it's easy. Anyone can thoughtlessly type out a 20-second text or a three-sentence email. But communication is a direct line into a complex web of emotion that explodes easily. Robert and Howard found that out the hard way.

Remember, an explosion can be avoided with a few simple questions that, in most cases, take just seconds to answer.

*Names and some small details changed to protect identities