

# Communicating with **NANCY STERN**

COMMUNICATION PLUS

## The More Connected We Get The More Disconnected We're Becoming

### Inside this issue:

The More Connected...	2
Continued	3
Q & A	3
Why Nancy Stern?	4
Program/Training Topics	4
Contact Information	4

***"We need to know when to push back on technology in our work and in our lives, to affirm our humanity."***

**-John Naisbitt**

We are riding a tidal wave of technology: Cell phones, faxes, email, laptops, the Internet, CDs, IPODs, VCRs, PDAs, Black-Berrys and pagers promise to get us more and more, faster and faster. And, they are making good on their promise. Technology has taken us to places we might never have gone. It has connected us with people we might never have met. And it has provided us with a way to access unlimited sources of information we might never have been able to access in a way that is fast, efficient and comprehensive. That's the good news. The bad news is there's a price to pay—interpersonal relationships are at risk.

According to *Internet & Society*, a 2000 Stanford University study, "the more time people spend using the Internet, the more they lose contact with their social environment." Additionally, Carnegie Mellon researchers found that people who spend only a few hours a week online experience significantly higher levels



of depression and loneliness than those who spend less than 2 hours per week to no time on the Internet. (Harmon, 1998, August issue, *Journal Star*, p.5.)

Although we know technology provides many benefits, we tend to rely on it too much for important interpersonal communication. It's a paradox. Technology helps us get in touch—and it prevents us from being in touch. It helps us save time—and makes us waste time. It helps us communicate—and it can prevent us from being understood.

As a consultant, I regularly see people strug-

gling to be understood. Interpersonal conflicts are widespread and listening seems to be a lost art. The more we rely on technology, the more these communication challenges become increasingly difficult. It's one thing to rely on email to keep in contact with people miles away, but it's quite a different thing to rely on email to keep in contact with your co-worker sitting in the cubicle right next to you.

We often hear people say they spend over two hours a day reading and responding to email messages. And that's just the average email user; some people receive as

many as 100-150 email messages a day. And, most of them require further clarification so still more email is sent and received. Surely some of those messages could have been communicated in person or on the phone, thus minimizing the probability of communication breakdown. Since about 93 percent of the impact of a message is non-verbal (eye-contact, gestures, posture, voice, etc.), that leaves only a seven percent probability you will be truly understood when you send email. That's not enough.

### **The more connected we get the more disconnected we are becoming.**

A client I was coaching told me she had a problem at work. Her coworker (who was also her friend) had been avoiding an important task that needed to be done before she could complete the project they were doing. She asked the coworker several times to "please get the work done," but when nothing changed, the client got frustrated and went to her supervisor for help. She explained her situation and expected he would confront the problem employee. Instead, his only advice was, *"Put it in an email."*

John, a software engineer who was employed for five years by a large wireless communication company, received a shocking email one Friday evening just before he was leaving work. *"Dear John; Due to the recent merger, we are downsizing our software engineering department and your services will no longer be necessary...outplacement services will be available..."*

These stories illustrate what is the beginning of a new management craze—MBE (Management By Email), the over-reliance on email when other channels (methods) would be more appropriate. Complex and highly personal information, as illustrated above, is not well-suited for email. There's too much room for error, hurt feelings, guess-work and misunderstanding.

### **Choosing The Best Channel**

Email is a wonderful channel for impersonal and simple information. It works well for disseminating data and organizing large groups of people to come together for a common cause. For example, Jody Williams won the 1997 Nobel Peace prize for her contribution to the international ban on land mines. She achieved that ban not only without much government help, but in the face of opposition from all the major powers. And what did she say was her secret weapon for organizing 1,000 different human rights and arms control groups on six continents? "Email." (*Lexus & Olive Tree*, p. 14)

Politicians have mobilized millions to donate money to their campaigns using email while people have scheduled meetings and planned social events by using it. Email allows you to quickly send and receive simple, impersonal information in a way that streamlines the process.

For following-up, email is fabulous. I spoke at a convention recently and offered to email a bibliography to interested participants. Over 150 people dropped off their cards. In the "old days," I would have had to address and stamp 150 envelopes then stuff them with the three-page, photocopied bibliography. Now, it took just a few minutes to input the email addresses into a card file in my address book, attach the document and hit send. This was a fast, easy, and cost-effective way to follow-up with simple, impersonal information. Email was the best channel for this task. There are also numerous other benefits to using email.

But, on the flip side, I have heard many stories where email was the channel of choice and misunderstandings were the norm.

(continued on page 3)

*"Technological progress has merely provided us with more efficient means for going backwards."*

**-Aldous Huxley**

## Email Your Questions to Nancy@nancystern.com

Q

When I'm on the phone with co-workers or bosses, I can often hear them typing on the computer keyboard while they are talking to me. I find this to be very rude. What can I do to prevent this from happening?

A

Unfortunately, you can't do anything to prevent another person from doing anything. What you can do is take responsibility for your own behavior. Be sure you don't fall into this easy form of multi-tasking. You are absolutely right that it is rude. The message it sends is that what they are typing is more important than what you are saying. The next time you hear this happening, you could ask

the person when would be a better time to talk. You might say something like, "It sounds like this might not be a good time for us to talk. When should I call back?" Or, "I just need a couple of minutes of your undivided attention; is this a good time?"

Remember to pay close attention to your non-verbal messages like your tone of voice and pitch level. You could say the same words and wind up sounding condescending or sarcastic. The meaning of what you say is in how you say it. Be sure to keep emotions out of it and use a simple "state the facts" tone of voice.

*How You Say What You Say, Matters™*

*"Technology is just a tool. In terms of getting kids working together and motivating them, the teacher is the most important."*

**-Bill Gates**

### (continued from page 2) Think Before You Choose Channels

So, if the message you are sending is anything other than *simple and impersonal*, **email is not** the very best channel to use. Face-to-face interaction or a telephone conversation would be much better. If you are communicating something simple and personal like a dinner date or quick message to your friends/significant other, then email is okay. Start thinking about how you can get back in touch in this high tech world.

	<b>Simple</b>		
	Email Some- times OK Here	Email Best Here	
<b>Personal</b>			<b>Impersonal</b>
	<b>Complex</b>		

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Whether you're experiencing change, managing people, connecting with customers and co-workers, or making presentations, getting your message across effectively is vital to your success.

Nancy Stern custom designs keynotes, breakouts and educational programs to enhance communication effectiveness; to help increase productivity, profitability and peace of mind; and to impact the bottom line where it matters most—with results.

#### Programs & Topics Include:

- How You Say What You Say Matters™
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### Why Nancy Stern?

Nancy Stern, MA is the president/owner and senior consultant of Communication Plus, a consulting firm in San Diego specializing in leadership and employee development. Since 1972, she has taught thousands the art and science of effective communication. She is a former columnist with the *San Diego Daily Transcript* and has taught at the University of California San Diego and San Diego State University Management Development Center.

She inspires managers, employees and individuals of all ages through the

simple, yet powerful, lesson that *how you say what you say, matters™*. Personal experiences form the foundation of her programs, creating presentations that are personal, professional and practical. The result: Improvement of the "whole person" and therefore, the "whole organization."

She is an EMMY award-winner, who produced and appeared in the national PBS television series *Communicating With Nancy Stern* (1990-95) and she is the coauthor of *101 Stupid Things Trainers Do To Sabotage Success*.

Nancy holds a Master of Arts degree in Communication Education from Michigan State University and is a member of the American Society for Training and Development and the National Speakers Association.



Nancy Stern