STYBEL PEABODY & ASSOCIATES, INC.

When Designing Corporate Culture, Don't Forget to Set Rules for the Management of Mobile devices.

The CEO across the table from us was furious. He was seeking to consummate a deal with the CEO of another company. Was the deal "on?" He had used his mobile device to send an email to the other CEO asking for a status report: no response. He sent a text message" no response.

In talking with our client, we asked the CEO to reframe the scene away from the other CEO's lack of responsiveness. Reframe the scene to focus on the client assumptions about mobile devices.

Our client responded:

If I send an electronic communication, it will be sent to the right address.

If my electronic communication is sent, it will be received.

My electronic communications is received, it will be read shortly after my having sent it.

My electronic communications will not be accidentally deleted.

Finally:

Electronic communications are the appropriate communications vehicle to discuss something that might require a conversation.

Who is in Control?

MIT Professor Sherry Turkle has written a provocative book on the control of mobile devices in **Reclaiming Conversation**. It is a well written, lucid, and research-oriented exploration about people's relationship with their mobile devices.

The fundamental premise of the book is about control. We imagine that we are in control of our mobile devices and the use of such devices increases our control over the world around us. Now reframe the scene: our mobile devices may control us and reduce our control over the world around us.

Is Communication a Conversation?

It is easier to send an electronic message than to arrange a face-to-face meeting or a telephone call. Most employees automatically go with the easier form of communication. Sending text and emails may indeed be an easier form of communication. But it is not conversation.

She finds employees who have grown up in a digital world think communication=conversation when the two are very different.

Communication is about sending information one way. Confirming a date for a meeting is a good use for emails. Communication, on the other hand, is to be "fully present to one another. It is there we develop the capacity for empathy where we experience the job of being heard, of being understood. And conversation advances self-reflection."

If you wish to send information in a one-way direction, then emails and texts are efficient tools. But if you need to communicate, then these tools defeat the very purpose behind communication.

Are employees sensitive to the distinction between communication and conversation? Professor Turkle warns leaders not to make assumptions!

Hiding While Connected.

The paradox of mobile device usage is is that it allows us to hide from each other even as we are constantly connected to each other.

People use the devices to have one-way communication with people who share similar values. It makes them feel part of a virtual community even while they isolate themselves from a real community where people with differing values need to share ideas and to compromise.

Team work involving different business disciplines requires collaboration and compromise. And the use of digital communication detracts from that requirement.

Professor Turkle calls this tendency the "flight from conversation."

Your Mobile Devices: Symbol of Non-Conversation.

A client sent us an email while she was in the playground with her daughter. For our client, this simple act is an example of good multitasking. How long would it take for the daughter to realize that her mother was not "with" her?

The same is true at work.

The sight of a silent mobile devices on a table sends a signal to others around that table that you are less connected to the real people around you. Turkle argues that if we think we might be interrupted by the mobile device, we tend to keep the conversations light.

One of the best communicators we know uses this technique:

> Sitting at the conference table, she takes out her mobile device and make an elaborate show of turning the device off. She then removes the device from the table and places it in her purse. This simple act conveys, "I am truly with you. What you have to say is important to me."

One of the worst communicators we know uses this technique:

> Every time he gets a call, there is a slight buzz coming from his digital watch. He thinks he is being discrete in his gazing at his left wrist to see who is calling. But the raised left elbow sends a chilling message to the others around the table regarding how important they are to him.

Crisis of Empathy.

Talking is not conversation. Using a team meeting as an opportunity to empty your email inbox is not conversation. Limiting your sources of information to news feeds that happen to provide only the information that agrees with you empowers intellectual isolation.

As we intellectually isolate our sources of information, we also begin to lose empathy for others do not agree with us.

Every day, we see the evidence of lack of empathy: people in accounting who sincerely fail to understand problems faced by manufacturing, underwriters who sincerely fail to appreciate the problems of sales professionals.

Face-to-face communication increases the chances of getting too close, too personal, or disrupting one's deeply held beliefs. Online communication avoids these things from happening.

Our client companies talk about the value of innovation. But new ideas require human relationships. And human relationships are information rich, emotionally messy, and intellectually demanding. Technology moves us away from meaningful conversation.

Bring People "Home" to Work:

Dr. Turkle describes the experience of Rador Partners, a high-tech consulting firm. Since the 1990's it had encouraged telecommuting as a method of reducing costs while improving employee morale.

The CEO, on the other hand, saw the extensive use of virtual meetings as people communicating without having conversations. Real conversation takes place in in company cafeterias, in parking lots, in hallways, in bathrooms, and by copy machines.

Radnor Partners did away with virtual commuting and requires office presence. Physical proximity sparked new conversations. When analysts, sales people, and consultants began working in the same space, Radnor began to grow at five times its former rate.

Do You Live in a Binary World?

The digital world is based on a technology involving splitting data into binary forms. Information is often presented in the digital world as a succession of binary decisions called Menus. Over time, this way of looking at the digital world influences the way we look at the real world. The middle ground disappears. We become blind to the gray spaces. There is polarization of options.

It is the job of leadership to assure that this binary perspective does not infect business decisions.

Encourage your team to focus on the gray spaces and the middle ground. This requires face-to-face conversation. It can't be done over a mobile device.

"Tools Down:"

We all have had the experience of being at team meetings where participants are monitoring their mobile devices. They might state that they are perfectly competent to multi-task despite the research evidence that the cerebral cortex is designed to be poor at multi-taking.

Dr. Turkle suggests "unitasking should be praised.

Next time you have a team meeting, focus on people who open their lap tops and conscientiously take notes.

What you are observing are employees who have moved from participation to transcription.

Do not ask participants turn their phones off. Ask them to deposit their computers, pad devices, and mobile phones on a table away from the desk. If they need to bring in notes, bring paper.

Your employees have years of learned habit to overcome. Their mobile devices control how they think. Leaders will have to create cultures that take this into account.

At the same time, do not put your employees in a situation that they are away from their phones for more than fifty minutes. Structure your meeting so that there is a ten-minute break every forty minutes.

Have Conversions with People You Don't Agree With:

The internet allows us to limit interaction to people we agree with and only hear information we wish to hear. That makes life emotionally cozy but it does limit effectiveness.

Encourage people on your team to reach out and have conversations with the people you disagree with and appreciate their perspective.

For example, when we give a seminar at a conference, we ask people to sit next to someone they do not know.

One of our clients is the Chief HR Officer of a major company. The HR function has office space on the same floor and works in adjacent spaces. The core business, however, exists in other buildings on campus and on other floors. Instead of communicating via email, we encourage HR people to leave their HR Ghetto and spend time with line management in other functions. Have more conversations and less communication.

Reach for the Gray Spaces Mobile Technology Cannot See:

Many of our clients are professional service firms that have a track to partnership. After proving technical competence, the next hurdle to partnership involves proving business development capability.

Usually in the third or fourth year after receipt of one's professional degree, associates have achieved this first hurdle.

We recommend that our client firms hold a small celebration and provide these associates with the new title, Senior Associate.

These Senior Associates have been connected to mobile devices since childhood. They may have developed a set of behavioral habits around communications that worked well for them as students and as associates. But as Senior Associates, these same behaviors may limit their abilities to generate client revenue. It is the responsibility of firm leadership to help Senior Associates manage mobile devices in a way that fosters effective communication with prospective clients.

Conclusions.

Common sense says that using the latest technology is a good thing. We are saying that the uses of technology need to be managed deliberately to enhance effective communications.

Communication is not conversation.

Examine your corporate culture from that perspective.

Reference:

Turkle, S. (2015). Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age. Penguin.

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