

Winter Newsletter 2010



The Baobab Centre
Inspiring potential and growth



Dear friends and colleagues,

This issue comes to you in the midst of unusually difficult freezing conditions and in the middle of the ongoing economic freeze as well. It seems that anything we may have taken for granted is to be looked at again in a new light and perhaps cherished a little more - even if that is just the sight of the road or the pavement.

We would like to welcome people new to the newsletter and to thank them for signing up and also to recognise the support and participation of the many people with whom we have worked this year. We have been delighted to offer some new workshops including Managing Boundaries and Silence as a part of Reflective Practice. As ever the feedback we have from people helps us deliver support and work that is meaningful for you. We have some more workshops and themes coming on line in the new year, and look forward to introducing those to you.

The weather has forced more of us to work remotely, either from home, or from offices nearer home which is likely to mean our methods of communicating may have changed a little to accommodate this. That being the case we offer you some ideas on email etiquette and we are also delighted to introduce you to George and Grace, who take on a communication challenge on page 3. We hope both articles will cause you to stop and review your usual practice.

We genuinely welcome your thoughts, ideas and reflections upon our writings and encourage people to be in touch whatever they may wish to say. We hope this issue may offer some warmth, food for thought and nourishment and we look forward to our new and ongoing relationships with you in 2011.

Our best greetings to all of you from

The Baobab Centre Team

Email etiquette

Email is now one of the most popular methods of communication inside and outside of work. We send emails to family, friends, our bosses, our accountants, even our doctors' surgeries. Email is also responsible for considerable confusion, dispute, bad feeling between individuals and time wasted.

Email, e-mail, electronic mail, dates back to the early nineteen sixties and the evolution of computers and, of course, the internet - as the internet grew, so did people's use (and abuse) of email. Unlike other forms of communication, such as letters and presentations there has been little to help people consider their technique. Whilst the national curriculum might now include email etiquette there are some many millions of us who make it up as we go along.

We use the internet and email a lot! Something in the region of 13.9 million households had internet connection by 2006, with email use one of the two most common online activities noted. That's a lot of signing in, reading your mail and replying (or not).

We thought you might like a few ideas on things to consider when emailing at work and we would like to develop this as an online resource on our website, if you would like to add to the content (we will credit you as the source appropriately!) Please do feel free to email, post or call with your thoughts to us.

- Consider if it is the right medium? A phone call could take less time overall with both parties free to elucidate or clarify. An email might evoke negative responses, such as the recipient feeling devalued, silenced or conversely forced into responding – can you be sure not to evoke these responses?
- Match your language and salutation to the appropriate level of the personal or professional relationship; it should be similar to the way you would actually speak to that person face-to-face or in a typed letter.
- Notice if there is a difference between private and public conversations. Email is not private and most businesses now regard it as public as standing in any office and speaking out loud (WikiLeaks!). Emails could be read by anyone either in control of an IT system, privy to your passwords, sufficiently skilled in software hacking, or walking past your desk!
- Imagine how many emails your recipient may be receiving and chose a title identifying the importance and relevance of your communication.
- Do not over use the importance indicators and flags.

- Avoid smilies, icons, or fun images for professional communications.
- Avoid using lots of fonts as they can make it harder to read and not all email software packages will be able to reproduce decorative fonts, so your artistic flair might be wasted.
- Use italics, bold and underlining with restraint – try not to highlight too much in your communication – these forms of written emphasis can be interpreted as **shouting!**
- Use templates cautiously, especially set signatures which include a valediction. Whilst having your position and contact details as standard (as you might on printed headed stationery), some people may regard a standardised valediction as a lazy and remote way to complete your correspondence. Try to keep the format for contact details simple and offer the relevant information.
- Watch out for background colours, motifs or images. It may take longer for your email to be downloaded by the recipient.
- Do not assume the formatting you use will appear in the same way when opened by the recipient – try to keep it simple. Particularly, watch out for line, paragraph and page breaks. Sometimes they appear as > symbols in the middle of an email making it harder for the email to be read.
- Review grammar and avoid slang or text shortcuts. If possible compose your email, put it into draft and review it later, this helps you see mistakes. Or consider typing your correspondence in a word (or similar) document and copying into your email window – this may help you pick up spelling and grammatical errors (watch out for format changes). Ensure recipients will understand any jargon or abbreviations used.
- If you attach documents make sure they are of an appropriate size, format and are named informatively. Remember not everyone has the latest version of software and files saved in a new format cannot always be opened by older versions.
- Consider what virus screening you might need to account for at the bottom of your email.
- Increasingly organisations use disclaimers on their email correspondence – explore what (if any) disclaimer you should include.
- Avoid using read receipts – you have lived for this long not knowing if someone has opened an envelope. Don't assume a read receipt actually means a person has opened and read the contents of your email. Explore other ways to invite them to acknowledge your communication.
- Watch out for sending out many emails at once. We use our email sometimes like a to-do

list and if we are having a productive day, we can then send many emails with jobs done, reports of progress, material to be read and absorbed or responded to (I do this) and whilst it might feel great, recipients may feel a little under barrage – if you know you have many to send out, consider warning people and maybe grouping the emails together.

- Imagine someone else (someone who's opinion counts) reading your email – are you happy with what they may be reading, if not are you sure you should be sending it?
- You have to add tone and emotive language if you wish there to be emotional content. To check for this try reading your email in the most flat (or even angry) voice and decide what you might

need to add in to convey warmth and respect.

- Make sure you are clear about the point of your email – is it information giving, are you asking for a response?
- Use humour cautiously and appropriately.
- Be considerate when using the address fields, some people regard their personal email addresses as private as their phone numbers – if you wouldn't normally share their phone number then don't share their email address – use the BCC field and send the original message to your own email address.

National Office of Statistics <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?ID=6>

Nic Neath

Communication challenge?

George and Grace

George pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket and held it under the table. Grace had her back turned to him and was tossing salad dressing onto the crisp summer salad leaves. He was certain that she would not see what he was doing. He looked at the small screen on this latest model of mobile communication and scrolled down to find out the results of the football match. He became engrossed for a few moments and did not realise that Grace had finished tossing the salad and had come to sit down at the table.

"Can't you survive without that thing for two minutes, George?" Grace reprimanded.

"I was just checking the score. You don't begrudge me that, do you Grace? It only takes a moment." George did not like being caught out and he knew that he was wrong. He just could not help himself. What was the point of having on-tap access to information, if you did not take advantage of the opportunity?

"I'll bet that you can't do without your phone for a whole day." Grace was tired of sharing her husband with a mobile phone.

"I don't want to do without my phone for a day." George's face showed a tinge of fear at the thought of such a separation.

"Come on, try it." The thought of a whole day without George checking texts, emails and news flashes was starting to excite Grace.

"I don't want to try it. Suppose there's an emergency." George found it extremely irritating that he was suddenly having to justify using his phone.

"You know very well there are other ways of contacting you, George."

"OK, I'll tell you what." George had just had a

flash of inspiration and had a smug look on his face. "I won't use my phone for anything other than telephone calls and you don't speak to people on the phone. We'll do a swap."

Grace looked at George as if he had gone slightly mad. She twirled the pasta around her fork, put it into her mouth and chewed slowly, digesting both the food and the thought.

They negotiated back and forth amicably and came up with the deal that for a whole 24 hours George would only communicate by verbally talking on a land line telephone or face to face with other people, apart from one hour in the morning and one hour in the afternoon when he would deal with the most urgent issues by email. Grace would communicate only face to face or by text or email and like George she would have one hour in the morning and one hour in the afternoon when she could use the phone for urgent calls. They promised each other they would not cheat and George gave Grace his mobile phone to keep for the next day.

The following morning they were woken up by their home phone ringing. Grace jumped up and was about to get out of bed when George grabbed her arm and looked at her with a what-do-you-think-you-are-doing look.

"This is ridiculous, George. No-one would ring in the morning if it isn't an emergency."

"OK, I'll answer the phone and if it isn't an emergency, you'll have to find another way to communicate."

"Good morning, Faith. No, I'm afraid she can't come to the phone at the moment. Is it urgent? Why don't you text her? I'm sure she'll be in touch as soon as she can. Yes, you too."

"What did mum want?" asked Grace.

"All you need to know is that it wasn't urgent. 3

I'm going to switch the telly on to catch up on the news. Coffee?" George thought that he might actually enjoy the day after all.

"Sure, yes please. You never watch television in the morning." Grace was finding George's enjoyment very irritating.

"Well, as you said, there are means other than a mobile phone to get the information you need."

"Remember, you can only use your email at work for a set period of time," Grace reminded him.

"No, problem."

They left for work agreeing they would let their colleagues know what was going on. They would meet at the wine bar for a drink and a bite to eat at 6.30 pm.

As Grace walked into the wine bar later that day the first thing she noticed was that George was playing with the beer mat, doodling on it, flipping it over, sliding it back and forth on the table. Normally, he would have been completely engrossed with his mobile phone. Now he did not know what to do with himself. Grace smiled a huge smile, walked up to George and gave him a big hug.

Once they both had an ice-cold glass of white wine in front of them, they began to compare notes.

"To tell you the truth, Grace, I struggled for the first hour. I thought it best to keep the computer switched off and just did not know what to do, how to find out what was going on. I just sat looking at a blank computer screen. Then, I thought to myself, I'll just pop into the office next door, explain what is happening and ask for a verbal update. Well, I was in there for nearly half an hour and, as well as the work update, I learnt a lot more about Harry's personal life than I have in the two years I've known him. Did you know he keeps terrapins? Sort of explains him a bit and the way he approaches his work, don't you think? Anyway, I quite enjoyed myself, so I set myself the task of popping in to see everyone in my team before the end of the day and to mix the work conversation with a social one. What an eye opener! Fiona goes salsa dancing, Cesar is a karate black belt and little Georgie snowboards! I mean you'd expect her to ride horses or do ballet or something, but no, snowboarding. One thing about talking to people face to face, they seem to open up to you more, they're more willing to talk, they offer more ideas and the work conversation becomes more interesting too, more lively. Of course, I had to get a report written in the two hours I had the computer

switched on which I did and I realised that being forced to concentrate on the task at hand meant that I was not wasting time checking every email as it popped up. I actually think I wrote a better report as a result. I'll have to catch up with the emails tomorrow, but they're not the urgent ones. It was well worth the experience. How did you get on?"

Grace pulled a face, took a sip of wine and then responded.

"Well, I didn't enjoy myself as much as you did, George. I texted or emailed everyone I thought would ring me to let them know I could only take calls at certain times of the day. When the phone rang I let the answer machine pick up. I felt sort of cut off, isolated, you know? I mean, everyone rings me all the time. But then I thought to myself, I might as well take advantage of the quiet and get on with the work. Well, I have to admit that I got loads more done than usual. It was actually really nice not to be interrupted by a phone call every few minutes. And, another thing. I noticed that because people had to email me or wait before they spoke to me they actually thought more about what they were asking me. More often than not I get calls because people find it easier to pick up the phone than to think for themselves even for two seconds. The queries were more considered than usual. It made me realise that I make myself too accessible. I'm too often at everyone's beck and call. I definitely gained something from it."

"Yes, me too," said George nodding his head for emphasis. "Now, what shall we do for the rest of the evening? We've got to keep up the deal till the morning. What do you think about a movie, followed by dinner at our favourite restaurant and then home for afters?"

Grace smiled a conspiratorial smile and squeezed his hand.

Why don't you try the George and Grace challenge. If you are used to emailing and texting, try talking on the phone and meeting face to face a bit more for a day. If you are used to talking on the phone a lot try using other forms of communication for a day. Everyone has a different preference and different modes of communication are more suited to certain tasks. Do you know what the preference is of those around you? Could you match your communication styles to tasks more effectively?

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Any one can hold the helm when the sea is calm. Publilius Syrus 1st century BC