

Three Not So Surprising Truths about Business Writing

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2009, published in the *Houston Home Journal* on November 21, 2009

I finally read my copy of Joyce Wycoff's *Mindmapping: Your Personal Guide to Exploring Creativity and Problem-Solving*. I purchased the book because I'd heard it shows how to apply mindmapping to such activities as business writing, project management, and planning and facilitating meetings.

Mindmapping was developed by Tony Buzan in the early 1970's as a tool to help people take notes more effectively. Mindmapping has developed into a technique for stimulating and recording a more creative approach to brainstorming. The practice is easy to learn and use.

In reading the section where Wycoff applies the concepts to business writing, I was struck by three discouraging truths about business writing.

Many leaders use e-mails and memos to communicate with their organizations. I think leaders should meet more frequently in person with their teams. So much value is communicated by facial expression, body language, and tone of voice!

Let's look at the three "Maxims of Business Writing" that Joyce Wycoff shared in her book.

No one wants to read your memo. People are busy. Your memo is adding to their already overcrowded schedule. Your e-mail wants them to do something. Before they can do it, however, they have to read and understand your memo. Too many times, your memo winds up in the "to read" pile!

Almost no one will read your entire memo. Unless your written material is amazingly entertaining, most people will read until they think they understand the essence of what you desire. It's kind of like when you buy a swing set for your kid and the outside of the box reads, "Some assembly required." You actually start putting it together before you pick up the instruction sheet and study it in detail.

Almost everyone will misunderstand part of your memo. Try as you might to be clear, every phrase is a potential source of confusion. Remember, you are competing for the time of some very busy people. Words and phrases will be misinterpreted. People will push back on the concept because "we've never done it that way before." Immediately people will start thinking of how your proposal could be done better, faster, with fewer errors, or more reliably--without ever really understanding what you are suggesting or why.

So what do I suggest if you want to generate a record of the change in procedure or policy? Gather your team together for a very short meeting. Identify current reality, then identify your vision of what could and should be sometime in the future. At the end of the meeting, ask for two volunteers to collaborate in generating a clear written description of the communication that occurred in the meeting.

Explain that their objective is to describe what was covered clearly enough so someone who missed the meeting would understand. Then distribute the written document to everyone in the organization. (They may not read it, of course, but now it's "out there" for future reference.)

The first time you do this, you will likely catch everyone off guard. In order to have anyone at the end of the meeting volunteer to be the writers, you'll have to promise to help them a lot, since this is the first time the team is doing this. Then be prepared to nurture these two through the process.

The second time you do this, you'll probably catch the team off guard again. So, be prepared to nurture the volunteers through their writing, too. (You probably should discourage the same two people from volunteering again. Suggest that a variety of people on the team experience this "capturing" process. However, if one of the two individuals volunteers, that would be fine. The experience gained the first time will be helpful when applied the second time around.)

By the third time you do this, someone on the team is likely to ask, "At the end of this meeting, will you be asking for volunteers to write up what we covered?" The answer, of course, is "Yes." You'll be well on your way to now having instilled a very positive cultural enhancement in your organization!

In addition to building the listening and writing skills of team members, the written material that is shared will be more thoroughly read and understood than anything you might have generated on your own!

Dennis Hooper helps leaders strengthen their organizations through building future leaders. You may view his work at his website, www.buildingfutureleaders.com. Contact Dennis at dhooper2@juno.com.