In most workplaces, including my own, digital communication is used daily to achieve organizational workflow activities, goals, and outcomes. Without a doubt, it is the most convenient communication method. However, recently I observed that digital technology convenience is impacting organizational messaging and leadership communication effectiveness. Why meet in-person when you can send an email? The answer is simple; it depends on the nature and seriousness of the message. However, there are times when the message is better said first in face-to-face communication.

As a chief academic officer and editor of this journal, I know that face-to-face communication is still by far the most powerful interaction to achieve strategic vision and tactical strategies. It provides for a personal connection, builds trust, and minimizes misinterpretation and misunderstanding between individuals or groups. Without physical cues, facial expressions/gestures, or the ability to respond immediately, the risk for miscommunication and disconnection is huge, allowing conflict to escalate quickly. Physical presence empowers communication toward greater collaboration and imagination, causing ideas to flow more freely. As nurses, we recognize that communication is more than just words. Much of our daily interactions with patients, families, communities, and other healthcare providers is through our sixth sense or intuition. Verbal and nonverbal communications are foundational to our professional workflow, and yet, digital technology may be impacting our leadership communication effectiveness.

Technology Is Necessary, But May Not Always Be Better

As chief nursing officers, academic deans, and directors, we are responsible for allocating, directing, and supporting human and fiscal resources. Our effectiveness often depends on our communication competencies; detecting body language, feelings, tone, and reactions. These nonverbal cues underline the importance that our words matter but when words are spoken in-person they matter more. We know that face-to-face communication is the preferred option over technology. We often default to technology out of necessity. The digital age has changed and transformed the way we communicate and interact with one another at work. Digital methods themselves are not detrimental as many of our smart devices help us improve productivity, increase performance, and inspire creativity. Personally, my relationship with this digital environment not only distracts me from the “immediate moment,” but also may negatively impact my communication effectiveness. It disrupts, blurs, and may even create boundaries, hampering others to connect with me and me with them. Digital communication is instantaneous, convenient, and allows for quick dissemination of information but it may hurt how work gets done. Fewer words “online” may not be best practice for building leadership capacity for the organization. The bottom line is that face-to-face is still the most productive and powerful communication method for leaders.

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Leadership Effectiveness and Communication

The most challenging and yet most exciting work of today’s nurse executive is the ability to connect to others. Leadership effectiveness is the ability to engage others with empathy and be impactful. Only face-to-face communication can build and support positive professional connections. We cannot replicate high-level leadership effectiveness in a virtual environment alone. According to recent research, face-to-face requests were 34 times more likely to garner positive responses than emails (cited by Kellerer in Kinsey Gorman, 2018). Face-to face communication is different. It requires astute listening skills that are not possible on digital platforms. While sending emails is efficient and fast, face-to-face communication drives both performance and productivity.

Stop the Emails

We all have innate capabilities to send and interpret nonverbal signals to one another. Our brains expect and respond to these channels of information and communication. Interpersonal cues and communication are vital and feed our brains. Scientists tell us we remember much more of what we see than what we hear, which is one reason why face-to-face communication is more persuasive. Communication is better when we are up-front and personal; when we are seen and heard. Eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, and body postures are powerful nonverbal components of face-to-face communication. The ability to apply nonverbal cues and messages for building trust and professional intimacy during face-to-face encounters is sufficient rationale to stop the emails and require others to do so as well. First-face communication fosters a climate and culture of respect and civility. It sends a message that people matter and their words matter more.

As I reflect upon face-to-face communication and struggle over the number of daily emails, I accept that digital communication is often the most convenient method. However, the reality of face-to-face interaction is still by far the most powerful way to assess my workflow processes and goals. So for now, I pledge to use fewer emails and to engage in more first-face communication for building trust and minimizing misinterpretation and misunderstanding with the goal of a healthier work environment. Perhaps it is time for us to hit the pause button on digital technology and process the instantaneous nonverbal responses of others to help gauge how well our ideas are being accepted. Digital technology impacts our leadership communication effectiveness when it drives and aligns our values, purpose, and human connectivity, not divides it.

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