EMPATHIC CONNECTIONS
IN WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS

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The importance of our written electronic communication cannot be overstated: it is the defining mode for most of us in how we relate to our organization, co-workers, supervisors and supervisees.

Since the pandemic, the extent of how much we have had to depend on written electronic communication has increased even more. Instead of quickly being able to walk across the hall to convene with a co-worker we depend on text messages, instant messaging platforms (MI) and emails.

These types of communication pose many benefits. They give us the opportunity to communicate quickly, communicate with groups of people, can increase the efficiency of our work and allow us to collaborate with those who work in other clinics or at home.

Without purposeful focus, clear intentionality and agreed upon guidelines however, written electronic communication also has the potential to wear down, injure and otherwise harm us and individuals and our relationships, by decreasing feelings of belonging and connectivity.

The suggestions in this document are examples of what a team, department, clinic or organization might collaboratively develop and agree to. The process of discussing what is most important in our organizations, our goals for interpersonal communication and our agreements about electronic communications is as important as the agreements themselves.

Examples of
Aspirations and Intentions:

- We want written electronic communications to increase our efficiency and efficacy- not decrease these things.

- We want written electronic communications to bring us closer and enhance our connection to others that we might not be able to see often in person.

- We want to eliminate harm that could come from written electronic communications.

- We want to have agreed upon norms for when to use IM, text messages and email communications (and when not to).

- We want to have a culture where we can give feedback to each other about the impact of electronic communications, including if it has been adverse.

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Examples of
Shared Understandings:

- How well we know people makes a difference in how we use electronic communications. We understand that with those we know very well we will likely communicate differently.

- The level of goodwill we have 'in the bank' with others influences how we communicate with them. We understand when there is not an abundance of historical goodwill, electronic communication will likely need to be much more skillful and thoughtful.

- When there are authority, power, title, or influence differences between parties, we understand special attention is necessary to ensure written electronic communications do not exacerbate or widen this.

- Our organization is committed to the path of being trauma-informed. We understand this will inform our electronic communication agreements.

- We understand that all individuals and relationships are unique, and that we all have different ways of communicating. The strategies we agree to strive toward are not intended to constrict our personalities, or make us robotic, only to provide structure and support for kind communications in our busy work lives.

EXAMPLE AGREED UPON STRATEGIES
FOR WRITTEN ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION

CONNECT FIRST:

We can't go wrong with a greeting and the recipient's name. Humans love to hear (and see) their names and greetings are universally important in conveying goodwill, before launching into the 'business' of the email.

Examples: *"Hello Christine!", "Good morning everyone", "Hi Dr. Smith"*

Smiling and connecting statements come naturally to most of us when we are in person. Connecting statements are sometimes referred to dismissively as 'small talk': comments about the weather, asking how someone is doing, complimenting their clothing, noticing a book on their desk....this connecting talk is the moment when we are relating to each other as humans, before we begin a transaction around business, work, what we need or what our questions are. In written communication, without purposeful focus, this usually disappears.

Examples of connecting statements:

» "I hope you have the same beautiful weather we do right now!"

» "I'm guessing this hasn't been an easy time for many of us…"

» "It was so nice to see your son on the Zoom last week!"

STRIVE FOR APPRECIATION:

It's tempting to get right to the heart of the information which needs to be exchanged, answering the question, or asking our question. This is true in conversation as well. If we take a minute to add one sentence of appreciation, before we write more, we can significantly increase the goodwill in the relationship and set a helpful and supportive tone for the entire email.

Examples:

» "Thank you so much for your email."

» "I appreciate your efforts on this."

» "It's clear how much time and thought you have put into this."

» "This must be difficult for you."

» "Your IM reflected how complex this is."

EFFORT TO FOCUS ON STRENGTHS:

This may be one of the most fundamentally important communication strategies. Many leaders do this naturally, while many of us had to practice quite a bit. It takes focus to consistently have a "strengths-finder" lens on and to identify and articulate strengths in others when we are tired, they are irritable, and we are talking about what seems like an intractable problem.

Examples:

» "I so appreciate you being willing to think this through/discuss this with me. I know it isn't easy."

» "I appreciate your straightforwardness."

» "I can see how important your family is to you."

» "We are a resilient bunch.…"

» "We are nimble, and responsive.…"

Although **Connecting, Appreciating and Identifying Strengths** work best toward the beginning of the written communication, there is no firm rule on the order of these things; they are always welcome, at any point in written communication.

CONTENT:

This is the intended content of the communication. As all content will be different, it's a little harder to offer suggestions; some guiding principles might be:

» **Offer choices whenever possible.**

» **Ask clarifying, open ended questions.**

» **Avoid using the word 'why', or starting sentences with the word 'you' (these words tend to create defensiveness in others),**

» **Write about your own needs as opposed to what others 'should' do; avoid the telling people they 'need to, must, have to, should' (these words tend to create psychological resistance, as we feel our autonomy is threatened.**

 Examples:

» **"I am trying to get the scheduling done today and was hoping to get your days off this month by the end of the day."**

» **"I need to get a count of attendees for the meeting next Friday, so if you could RSVP to me by this Thursday, that would be great."**

EMPOWER:

Empowering in written communications is about keeping dialogue open, inviting the recipient feels free to reply with questions and move forward with confidence.

Examples:

» **"Let me know how I can help."**

» **"Please let me know your thoughts, questions or suggestions."**

PROCESS CHECK IN:

In our one-to-one work relationships, as well as with our team, department, clinic or organizations, we agree to check in periodically to talk about our electronic communications- what is working well and what could be better.

🚫 **AVOID** lack of autonomy words such as 'mandatory, should, must, need to', etc.

🚫 **AVOID**: At all costs, avoid using written communication to individuals for: emotional expression (anger) or criticism of any kind. Conversations that involve anger, upset, disappointment, or correction/criticism of any kind are best done on the phone or in-person.

🚫 **AVOID**: Avoid criticism of any kind in group emails or texts. 'Correcting' someone is the same as criticism in written communications.

🚫 Most importantly, **AVOID** responding to a sharp, critical, blaming, angry or otherwise prickly written communication, in written communication.   This takes enormous commitment and discipline for most of us, and is perhaps one of the single most important practices around electronic written communications.   We can pause, breath, pray, talk to a trusted person instead of responding. Then consider what and how to best respond (ideally in person or on the phone).

🚫 Avoid using primarily text and IM repeatedly for transactional asks or directives. This drains a bank account without depositing anything back in return.

SPECIFIC AGREEMENTS
FOR TEXT & IM:

ACKNOWLEDGE THE LIMITATIONS TEXT OR IM:

Just by acknowledging that these forms of electronic communication have particular limitations, we can increase tolerance for possible misunderstandings or missteps.

» **'I'm texting so won't write too much more, just that I appreciate you doing this and will fill you in more tomorrow!'**

Commit to taking the time to connect and appreciate when using text or IM. A good ratio is 1 appreciative, friendly, connecting text or IM statements for every 1 transactional ask. An even better ratio is 3 to 1.

NARRATE TONE

As goofy as it sounds, we can narrate tone. We know how to convey excitement, enthusiasm and passion!! Outside of those feelings, we have few tools in text and IM to identify tone. We can instead write it out.

Examples:

» **'I have a big smile on my face as I type this'**

» **'I'm feeling heavy hearted as I write…'**

EMOTICONS IN TEXT AND INSTANT MESSAGING:

Emoticons can be very useful as tone indicators. Tone is incredibly important- in fact, humans believe tone over content of words when we are in-person. While emoticons might seem juvenile or unprofessional, they are increasingly sophisticated and varied and will likely continue evolving (perhaps being able to eventually match and send our own facial expressions). Research has indicated use of emojis improves communication continuity and quality of relationships- powerful stuff and worth considering if you've been a sceptic 😉