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Bad Writing is Destroying your Company’s Productivity.

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A hidden source of friction is slowing your company down. Your workers are complicit in it. So is your management. And it’s driving everybody nuts.

It’s bad business writing.

I surveyed 547 businesspeople in the first three months of this year. I looked specifically at people who write at least two hours per week in addition to email. They told me that they spend an average of 25.5 hours per week reading for work. (About a third of that is email.)

And 81% of them agree that poorly written material wastes a lot of their time. A majority say that what they read is frequently ineffective because it’s too long, poorly organized, unclear, filled with jargon, and imprecise.

Entry-level employees get little training in how to write in a brief, clear, and incisive way. Instead, they’re immersed in first-draft emails from their managers, poorly edited reports, and jargon-filled employee manuals. Their own flabby writing habits fit right in. And the whole organization drowns in productivity-draining blather.

**Consider:**

**Vague writing dilutes leadership.**Yahoo has suffered from dithering (wavering) management focus for a decade. Now CEO Marissa Mayer has agreed to sell it to Verizon. Here’s a passage from her recent email to staff on that occasion: “…our incredibly loyal and dedicated employee base has stepped up to every challenge along the way….The teams here have not only built incredible products and technologies, but have built Yahoo into one of the most iconic, and universally well-liked companies in the world….I’m incredibly proud of everything that we’ve achieved, and I’m incredibly proud of our team. I love Yahoo, and I believe in all of you.”

That’s four uses of “incredible” or “incredibly” in a single paragraph. All that cheerleading reads like misdirection. It’s going to be challenging for Yahoo to continue to succeed as part of Verizon, and happy, vacuous (empty) language certainly won’t inspire the workers who haven’t quit yet. (The rest of the email is similarly vague.)

Contrast this to how Apple’s Tim Cook communicates — as in his clear, jargon-free defense of the company’s decision not to crack the encryption on a terrorist’s iPhone. (see last page)

Clear leadership, expressed in writing, creates alignment and boosts productivity. For example, in writing email, managers from the CEO on down must set an example by communicating exactly what they want, clearly, in the subject line or title and the first two sentences of everything they write. The workers reading it will just skip to the key facts anyway, so lose the filler and don’t waste their time.

Do this right, and you’ll get a reputation for truth. Your workers won’t waste time on [the study and analysis] of reading your intentions; they’ll get to work on accomplishing the goals you set out for them.

**Clarity in marketing tells customers — and workers — that they can trust you.**How do your marketers and PR people communicate? Do they put out press releases filled with industry jargon and meaningless superlatives?

When clarity and truth are core values for marketers, they can spend time trumpeting what works, rather than concealing what doesn’t. For example, here’s what Google writes about how it treats customers:

Focus on the user and all else will follow.

Since the beginning, we’ve focused on providing the best user experience possible. Whether we’re designing a new internet browser or a new tweak to the look of the homepage, we take great care to ensure that they will ultimately serve you, rather than our own internal goal or bottom line.

Every customer can understand that, and it rings true. It inspires workers as well. So marketers and the rest of the company can move forward in a united and productive way.

**Fuzzy writing allows fuzzy thinking.**Clear writing uses well-organized, active-voice sentences to explain what is happening, what ought to happen, and what people need to do. Conversely, inexact and passive language reflects gaps in thinking.

Requiring clear, direct, active language has two benefits. It forces writers to think through what they really mean and the arguments they can use to support it. And it makes smart people stand out. If you prize clarity, the clear thinkers will rise to the top.

**A culture of clear writing makes managers more productive.**It means that the material that ends up on your desk will be clearer too. Senior managers can waste time rooting through their subordinates’ fuzzy writing, or they can spend effort changing the culture to one that prizes brevity, clarity, and directness. That’s worth the effort, because it means everyone in the organization — especially management — will end up more productive.

It’s time to clear all the crap out of your inboxes and make those 25.5 hours per week more efficient. It’s time to commit to a culture of clarity. It could make a big difference in how smoothly your business runs — and it could make your day a lot less annoying.

From: http://withoutbullshit.com/blog/apples-tim-cook-shows-how-to-communicate-in-a-crisis/

Apple’s in a bind. The FBI wants them to crack the encryption on a San Bernardino terrorist’s iPhone. Apple believes that’s a dangerous precedent. Apple CEO Tim Cook’s open letter is breathtakingly simple and clear. Learn from it.

Here’s Apple’s logic: Breaking encryption creates a “back door.” Any such back door would inevitably get out. Thieves and foreign governments could use it. And then none of our data would be safe. Financial flows and everyday privacy use similar encryption — this precedent would threaten the same problems in those domains.

This is an unpopular position. Gloss over the details and it seems like Apple is protecting a terrorist. As Donald Trump, as always articulating the simplistic view, said, “Who do they think they are?”

In this situation, a press release would be useless. Instead, Tim Cook published an 1,100-word, plain-language open letter explaining the company’s position. Below is the intro with my comments in brackets.

**A Message to Our Customers**[Apple starts with customers, rather than itself, reframing the issue starting with the opening heading]

The United States government has demanded that Apple take an unprecedented step which threatens the security of our customers. We oppose this order, which has implications far beyond the legal case at hand. [There’s no “soft warmup.” Cook clearly and directly states the conflict in the first 33 words. Both sentences are active voice — one states what the government wants, the other what Apple is doing. There is no jargon. Everything you write should start with this level of clarity, brevity, and directness,especiallywhen the issue is contentious.]

**The Need for Encryption**

Smartphones, led by iPhone, have become an essential part of our lives. People use them to store an incredible amount of personal information, from our private conversations to our photos, our music, our notes, our calendars and contacts, our financial information and health data, even where we have been and where we are going.

All that information needs to be protected from hackers and criminals who want to access it, steal it, and use it without our knowledge or permission. Customers expect Apple and other technology companies to do everything in our power to protect their personal information, and at Apple we are deeply committed to safeguarding their data.

[Apple starts not by talking about its position, but by talking about “our” data. This makes it personal. Note, as well, how this explains encryption in simple jargon-free terminology. I’m not crazy about “incredible” and “deeply committed,” but compared to the weaselly[*superlatives*](http://withoutbullshit.com/blog/strategic-jiggery-pokery-cleveland-browns-hire-paul-depodesta/)in most announcements, this is restrained.]