



Field Guide: Best Practices for (Electronic) Communication

Be aware! Electronic communication is "Instantaneous/Everywhere/Forever"

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Many boards of retail food cooperatives rely heavily on electronic communication tools to handle logistic and administrative matters and to share and store board documents. For a board with strong communication skills, properly used electronic tools facilitate the administrative details of board service. For boards working to build trust and communication skills, email in particular can create or add to misunderstandings.



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Electronic Communication basics:

- Good communication takes awareness and practice!
- Take responsibility: assume every communication is made with good intention.
- Practice non-violence: observe before judging, respect feelings, identify needs (yours, others').
- Focus on tasks, not relationship issues.
- Be concise: the fewer words, the lower the probability of misunderstanding.

Electronic communication fundamentals:

- Make agreements about why and how you will use electronic communication.
- Accommodate board members who do not have access to a computer.
- Don't allow electronic communication to be divisive within the board.
- Discuss the use of the tools regularly, and always revisit at the seating of a new board.
- Be sure all board members know how to use the tools chosen.
- Assign a point person to maintain your communication tools.

Important Email Considerations:

- Do not use email for making board decisions except in unusual circumstances. Board decisions should generally be made during regularly scheduled board meetings where minutes are being taken. Electronic decision-making is not an option unless your state law and/or incorporating documents provide for it. Even if it is allowed, it should only be used when the board has specifically agreed to make a decision electronically in advance. If there is need for discussion prior to a decision, there is a need for an in-person meeting.
- Use email to share logistic information, documents, details, NOT for deliberation!

- Confidential conversations should not be held by email: despite all warnings and precautions it can readily be shared.
- Email does not work well for conveying emotion and humor.
- If your email is 3 paragraphs or more stop typing. You need to have a conversation.
- Try this: Each message in the chain should be shorter than the one that precedes it!
- Be courteous. If you wouldn't say it in person DON'T say it by email.
- Anger divides. Even if you would say it in person...count to 10 before you "flame"!

Email Practicalities:

- Be sure the board has agreements about the sharing of email outside the board.
- Use .pdf format to share final documents to prevent unauthorized or unintentional alteration.
- If the board has an email "inbox" be sure it is regularly maintained.
- Be transparent about who is receiving and responding to messages posted to the Board email list.

Technology Strategy:

- Technology is the tool, you are the craftsperson. Do not expect a new technology to "solve" any problem. Humans create solutions, technology helps us get there.
- Do not implement new systems/tools that other directors do not understand or have not been trained to use properly. This can alienate those less comfortable with technology.

Email Tips and Tricks: You can convey a lot in subject lines

- **OPT:** indicates that this is not directly related to board work, but maybe tangentially relevant, or just interesting/exciting. ALL personal/professional promotions are OPT:
 - Ex. Subject: "OPT: Come to my partner's art opening this Wed."
- **[Y/N]** at the end indicates that the sender is requesting a yes or no response from recipients.
 - Ex. Subject: "Decision on location for next mtg. [Y/N]"
- **[NRR]** alternatively you can use No Reply Required for updates.
 - Ex. Subject: "Meeting documentation attached [NRR]"
- **[EOM]** at the end of a subject line indicates that the Subject *is* the message and there is no body. Great for quick updates and FYIs
 - Ex. Subject: "I will be absent for then next cte. Mtg. [EOM]"

Resources and tools:

- Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life, by Marshall B. Rosenberg and Arun Gandhi
- Email Etiquette <http://www.101email etiquettetips.com/>

- Google Apps <http://www.google.com/a>
- Doodle www.doodle.com
- Survey Monkey www.surveymonkey.com

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