

A Management Lesson from Tony Soprano

The untimely passing of James Gandolfini, star of *The Sopranos*, brings to mind a powerful management lesson from that HBO program: the importance of the “the human moment.” As regular viewers know, when it came to the Soprano family business, there were no e-mails, texts, nor tweets. Word of mouth was always king, face-to-face human conversation the order of the day.

While Tony Soprano may not have attended Harvard Business School nor apprenticed at McKinsey – and we certainly are not endorsing his many on-screen failings, including bribery, extortion, and murder – his persona offered this lesson for the modern workplace: face-to-face dialogue still remains the best way to get the point across. Tony could communicate more in a raised eyebrow, than lesser managers via gigabytes of electronic communications.

Simply put: rather than enhancing clarity, e-mails, texts, and tweets all too often kill it. And yet, despite that the human moment is fast fading from corporate view.

At first glance, the open-space office, the hallmark of newly renovated tech companies, appears to promote collaboration – but take another look and you will realize that most employees are wearing ear buds and staring into screens cluttered with e-mails, texts, tweets, and instant messages. Soon, Google Glass will separate everyone into a world of one.

As a corporate trainer, with long waiting lists to get into my classes on management and “soft skills,” I often wonder: is my popularity simply a well-needed excuse for people to hang together, face-to-face? In fact, what is really going on is not merely an understandable longing for human contact; one-way communication without personal, one-on-one clarification takes a big toll in terms of time, energy and productivity.

Three brief case studies from my own experience highlight the growing problem:

It is Saturday afternoon. Amy looks up at the clock. She has been catching up on e-mail since 8:00 a.m. this morning. This isn't the way anyone would want to spend weekend; nonetheless, this is her usual schedule. Amy is the Director of People Strategy at a fast-growing tech start-up. A lawyer by training, and an exceptional mediator, she spends most of her workweek dealing with employee conflicts. The majority of these are due to miscommunication/misinterpretation of e-mail. Lacking context and those all-important “non-verbals” (Tony's raised eyebrow, for example), escalating misunderstandings continually occur. Amy's inevitable query to angry or befuddled employees: Have you had a face-to-face with the person on the other end of the communication? The answer is almost always “no.” The result: a waste of Amy's time – and most importantly, her productivity and therefore her value to her company.

It is that time of year when Bob, a talented, young executive heading up Strategy and Planning for a global, high-tech company, needs to present the three year plan to the C-

suite. His task: gather data across the organization from individual business units and then put those findings into a cohesive plan. This should only take a few weeks, right? WRONG. Thousands of e-mails later – inevitably involving missteps, arguments and apologies – the plan, now months in the making, is still not on track. Is it any wonder that Bob is stressed, anxious, disillusioned and thinking of finding another job? A few well-placed phone calls, or better yet face-to-face meetings, would have streamlined the process. The unfortunate result of this epidemic of miscommunication: his company may lose a terrific employee.

Joe, a young, up-and-coming creative genius at a wildly successful ad agency, has just submitted to his boss the marketing campaign for a highly valued client. Joe is really excited, as he had worked 24/7 for weeks and feels this is one of his most creative endeavors. After a week of silence, he finally receives a quick one-line e-mail response from his boss: “See me about this.” Joe spends several additional days ruminating over all the possible reactions that his superior might have. Joe practices explaining his thinking, defending his ideas, persuading his colleagues... on and on. Exhausted, he drags himself to meet his boss for their meeting. He stands there bewildered as his boss congratulates him for an incredible pitch. Unfortunately, this time Joe’s fertile imagination has cost him a great deal of wear and tear. Hmm, I wonder if a simple, timely in-person would have been more effective.

For managers to be effective, it is important to make time for – indeed, to initiate – the human moment. It will help reduce the confusion, anxiety, and conflict so often created by electronic communication. Admittedly, technology has opened the door to immense opportunities. But we need to harness it to our own use, rather than the other way around. The human moment strengthens us, nourishes us, and restores us. In the best of circumstances, it brings us together. Without it, the workplace will prove more challenging than it needs to be.

So, if you think that you can manage people primarily through digital communication, while failing to master the human moment, just remember Tony Soprano's raised eyebrow and *“Fuh-ged-about-it.”*