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Root Causes of Poor Corporate Communication

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Summary: The Inclination to Lie

Much poor corporate writing and speaking stems from the desire to package and present information in a more favorable light than it deserves, nowadays often called “spin.” This inclination is learned from our earliest days at school and reinforced on the job. While only the very unsophisticated student or business professional will tell an outright lie, nearly all learn the techniques of mendacity: recondite vocabulary; euphemism; overblown sentences; passive, oblique sentence forms; gratuitous “filler phrases” and constructions that swell empty passages... Today’s communicators must be taught that any deliberate wording of a statement so as to mislead the audience—even though such a statement is “technically correct” or even “legally acceptable”—should be construed as a lie. And, more important, even though we make allowances for managers and sales professionals in their pursuit of business goals, no professional writers should lend their skills to the suppression of truth for the sake of “effectiveness.”

The Odor of Mendacity

At the base of much bad writing is the intention to deceive. From the time we first begin to write our little school reports, what we are mainly trying to do is make ourselves look good, that is, *to look better than we are*. A principal objective of nearly everything we write—from grade-school essays through the 40 years of correspondence, reports, and studies that comprise a career—is to create the impression that we worked harder and better than we actually did.

Young people who are good with words learn quickly the rewards of their gift. Not only do the various tests of intelligence favor those with the best vocabularies, but even teachers who should know better can be taken in by a child who says *myriad* instead of *many*. The facile student, unprepared for an exam, hopes for an “essay test.”

The idea takes hold in us at an early age that facility, the ability to cover pages with little effort, is almost a magic ring of invisibility that allows one to escape punishment for chapters unread and research not finished.

Most of the bad writing we see every day, I now believe, derives from a deliberate or a habitual attempt to impress, to ameliorate the unpleasant facts of a situation, or to lead us to unwarranted conclusions. In short, to deceive.

The people who try to mislead us like this are nearly always acting in a manner considered professional or businesslike. They have been *taught* to communicate this way, typically by people they admire, often by their

professors. Moreover, most attempts to disabuse them of these habits count for nothing when compared to the apparent awards offered by their superiors for more of the same. In fact, many students of business “communication” wish they could be *more facile at impressing and misleading, not less*.

Consequently, there is a vague aroma about much corporate writing, a sickly sweet smell noticeable only when one reads or listens closely. I call it the “odor of mendacity,” borrowing Big Daddy’s phrase from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. “Didn’t you notice,” he asks his son in Act III, “a powerful and obnoxious odor of mendacity in this room?” In part he is reacting to outright lies being told him about his failing health; the lies are meant to comfort, but they are still lies. But he is also talking about the unceasing chorus of praise and affection he hears, much of it aimed at influencing his will. (His son, Brick, like Lear’s daughter Cordelia will not tell him the flattering lies; unlike Cordelia, though, Brick is rewarded.)

And I call the “context of mendacity” that set of impulses and objectives that Big Daddy’s family (and Lear’s older daughters) pursue which such ardor that it affects every phrase: self-promotion, self-indemnification, unearned reward, amelioration of embarrassing or unpleasant truth.

The Techniques of Mendacity

Bad writing is normal but unnatural. We learn it from our first days at school, and, more important, we are usually rewarded for mastering it.

A powerful motivator is the pervasiveness of vocabulary tests as measures of general intelligence. The influence of this construct, “verbal aptitude,” can only be appreciated when we realize that, in America at least, IQ is actually an index of middle-classness. Someone who understands that mordant:dulcet as bitter:sweet will not only score well on ITBSs and CATs and SATs; he or she will have access to better education, which, where we live, usually means access to the professions.

This is not to object to the teaching of vocabulary. Even I cannot help feeling indignant when I meet adults with advanced degrees who cannot define words like incontinent (in either sense) or distinguish *perversion* from *perversity*. (This last confusion is so widespread that Hollywood was forced to rename the film version of David Mamet’s “Sexual Perversity in Chicago.”) Quite the contrary. Few things are more pleasing than a robust vocabulary in the command of a writer or speaker who makes intelligent choices and uses just the right words.

The problem is with “official” vocabulary, the notion that people who say *prioritize* are smarter than people who say *rank*, or that people who write

utilize are better than people who write *use*. Although it is surely innocent enough to encourage students to use the words they have just learned in writing and speaking as soon and as often as possible, it is only a small step to convincing these students that good writers use *implement* in place of *begin* . . . all the time.

The best students—usually those young people best at deducing what their teachers expect and delivering it to them—learn a myriad of words, use them profligately, and are rewarded with praise and good grades. In fact, they have acquired one of the deadliest habits of all: writing to impress. At every point they will choose words and construct sentences in a way that makes them seem pompous, evasive, inauthentic, distant, and dull. Even though what they have written would have scored well at school.

Then, beginning in high school, gaining momentum in what Sidney Hook called the "tertiary" schools, is a second main force for bad writing: the premium on length.

From about puberty onward, the first requirement in nearly every written assignment is minimum length, expressed in number of words or number of pages. Whatever other virtue a paper may have, if it is too short it fails. The understandable equation of length with substance or hard work affects students through to graduate school, where, except for certain hard sciences, no one receives a Ph.D. without delivering a dissertation with heft. (And the "softer" the science, the more paper is expected: social psychologists must write more than chemists; doctors of education must write more than even economists.)

Schools teach, reward, and inculcate the habit of writing long...at every level and in nearly every discipline. In contrast, few students are ever punished or scolded for prolixity. So that the good students (remember the earlier definition) learn quickly to write *make a selection with respect to* instead of *select* or *should it prove to be the case that* in place of *if*. Unconsciously, our students learn a short list of rules that double or triple the lengths of sentences, without affecting their substance. This new skill, applied to the habit of impressive vocabulary, creates the style of writing that is usually called "professional" or "official." Eventually, it will be harnessed to the goals of business and government. Before that though, it can be used to undermine all of undergraduate education.

For most university students, even including the best ones, the goal is to finish, to get on with whatever benefits accrue to the matriculated. The hard way to finish is to read, study, remember, assimilate, evaluate, and report. The easier way is to develop a certain facility in writing and use that as a substitute for honest work in any course that will allow it. The temptation is nearly irresistible.

Interestingly, the professors who teach reluctant students to write these days are frequently from separate and independent Department of Communications. What is best about this arrangement is that today, far more often than in my youth, the person teaching Basic Composition is genuinely interested in the topic and may even know something about it. This contrasts with the harried, somewhat disaffected graduate students of literature who were forced to teach it in my youth.

But what is worst is that this discipline called Communications is not always an entirely trustworthy one. Unlike its ancestor, Journalism, Communications appeals not only to those who wish to learn the craft of truthful, understandable reporting, but also to those mountebanks and casuists that Plato warned us about in the *Gorgias* dialogue, those who consider truthfulness and integrity relatively unimportant in the pursuit of advantage and rhetorical “effectiveness”—winning, prevailing, looking good.

Corporate Mendacity

At first, mendacity is deliberate, a learned technique for presenting one's self and one's company favorably. We master it on the job by imitating the speech of our bosses; we acquire flamboyant methods of deception from the advertising department, subtler ones from our attorneys, who teach us the craft of "avoiding exposure." In time, we internalize these techniques and language; they become second nature.

This culture is built on three, questionably moral, propositions:

First, short of outright lies, one should always put the most favorable interpretation on one's self and one's employer. (***The Precept of Spin***)

Second, it is always more cost-effective to reduce one's liabilities through legal contrivances than through more honorable actions. (***The Precept of Exposure***)

Third, it is better to win an argument than to learn the truth. (***The Precept of Campaign***)

The Precept of Spin teaches us that it is always possible to put things in a better light without actually lying. And for many, the main goal of business communication is to make themselves (and often their superiors) look as good as possible—typically, better than they are. The underlying argument is that errors can be turned into innocent mistakes, false promises into misunderstandings, sloppy performances into

tolerably good work, larcenous prices into standard fees . . . all by writing about them effectively.

“Spin Doctors,” the people Plato most dreaded, are people who think they can turn bad news into good news. For example, recently, a major American communications company announced that it will lay off 15,000 employees, but that these layoffs will include generous severance packages and other compensations. In the broadcast words of a company representative: *We decided with our heads but we’re implementing with our hearts.* This sentence is a pure example of professional spin: it is the clear work of professional “communicators” who toiled for hours or days to find the right bromide. What is astonishing is that its authors expect that the widespread agony and desperation brought on by their profit-motivated action will somehow be ameliorated with this bit of greeting-card sentimentality.

Most of the spin in corporate writing is not so slick or smarmy as this example. Indeed, most of it is artless and inconspicuous. “Unfortunately, the plan was rejected . . .” or “Because of budgetary constraints . . .” or “Hopefully, there will be a minimal impact . . .” or “there is insufficient knowledge with respect to this option . . .”

Much of it is an elaborate vocabulary for saying the unpleasant things that are inevitable in government and business:

- We don’t want you or your plan.
- We don’t know how or when.
- We performed incompetently. (We were late.)
- We broke our promise. (We never meant it, anyway.)
- We were mistaken.
- We forgot.
- We changed our mind.

The Precept of Spin encourages us to think that with a few passive verbs (to obscure agency), a sprinkling of *hopefullys* and *regretablys*—even the use of *we* or *The Company* in place of the more accurate *I*—the lapses and larcenies will go away.

The Precept of Exposure teaches us that it is just as good to be “not guilty” as to be “innocent.” That is, “deniability” is at least as worthwhile as never having done something wrong.

This attitude is a product of **not** of law—which has always prized truth and justice—but of certain lawyers, who, even from Biblical times, have earned their largest fees from defeating both. It is not just legal jargon that is at issue; new students of writing often think mistakenly that

replacing technical vocabulary with familiar vocabulary will make matters clear. On the contrary, effective lawyers, far from being the chronically bad writers that the public thinks them, know how to be clear or unclear at will. And their usual tactic is to be as unclear as they can be in defining their clients' obligations.

The lawyer's way of reviewing a business document is to "soften," that is, obscure the commitments of the client while sharpening the promises of the other party. Ironically, lawyers are the only large group in North America who understands the distinction between shall and will (at least in the third person) and attorneys use this knowledge to differentiate the elements in a contract into commandments (theirs) and remarks about the future (ours).

Responsible, well-paid lawyers want to keep their clients safe. "Reducing exposure" is the term-of-art. But this term-of-art is a euphemism for protecting people from the proper consequences of their misdeeds. Corporate attorneys try to do it before-the-fact, hedging all their clients' promises, building in smokescreens to obscure future problems that are already known. And they earn even bigger fees after-the-fact, putting absurd "interpretations" on their clients' nonfeasance, misfeasance, and malfeasance.

And this strategy is so often effective that executives and managers try to imitate it in their ordinary business and even technical communications. The chronic abuse of *hopefully* is not just a problem of grammar; the term usually means nothing more than "don't hold me to this, but . . ." Such ideas as the "flexible specification" and the "guideline" are little more than a habitual, mendacious way of appearing to state predictions and requirements in a way that is not binding!

Too many business professionals believe that it is generally cheaper and easier to write one's way out of trouble than to do things honorably the first time. Ironically, one of the incentives for this deceitful vagueness is a fear of being wrong or missing a target. One cannot appreciate fully the business professionals' distrust of clear, simple assertions and predictions unless one realizes how terrified many are of ever admitting a mistake. During the 1990 Presidential debates, for example, Clinton chided Bush not for raising taxes but for having been so reckless as to make the famous "read my lips" pledge in the first place.

Unlike scientists and scholars, business and government people believe that consistency and persistence are greater virtues than truthfulness and humility. Ours is a society in which candidates for leadership must NEVER admit to having been wrong and certainly never to having changed their mind. We are even hard on people who complain that they were deceived, implying that folks of good character are never misled about anything.

The *Precept of Campaign* holds that anything can be proved through an aggressive program of assertion and promotion, and, more important, that the ability to wage such a winning campaign is far more useful than the ability to establish what is true. The corporate professional's attitude is put nicely by Michael Gilbert in *How to Win An Argument* (McGraw-Hill 1979) who says that the first rule of arguing is "Never admit defeat unless you are absolutely convinced, and even then keep your mouth shut and wait till Monday." Viewed calmly, this is good advice; too often, in the heat of debate, we feel overwhelmed by an argument that is not as good as it seems at first. But viewed more cynically, it is one of the core causes of corporate mendacity.

Often, the purpose of corporate discourse is to determine controversial matters of fact or assign praise and blame. When the driving force is to have one's way, the whole range of tainted language, specious arguments, and material fallacies parade themselves as analysis and research. The typical feasibility study, for example, is a politically motivated proof that a *forgone* conclusion was reached *after* objective evaluation of risks and benefits. Indeed, most of the "scientific" documents produced during the life (or "life cycle") of a new plan or system are after-the-fact rationalizations of decisions reached through suspect means.

In recent years, the most mendacious form of campaigning has been the endless prattle about "quality" from executives and managers who have read nothing more substantial on the subject than an article in an in-flight magazine. Many would be surprised to learn that W. Edwards Deming, the expert whose name they intone with such reverence, disavows the use of all targets and production goals and considers employee appraisals counterproductive! But this would not deter them from claiming to have a "total quality" program. If they say it often enough, they expect, people will think it is true.

Airlines, for Example

The closest most corporate speakers and writers come to outright lies are their schedules, deadlines, and promised delivery dates. Because so much depends on low costs and quick schedules, people whose work entails budgeting and scheduling are quickly drawn into patterns of self-serving estimates and "acceptable" deceit. This deceitfulness eventually affects nearly everyone whose job is to meet tight deadlines, stay under budget, or keep fixed schedules. It is an attitude that eventually corrupts those who must promise more than they can deliver or who must compete in arenas where they are unqualified.

And because it is nearly impossible to make airplanes take-off and land exactly when we want them to, the writing and speech of airlines tends to be the most noxious with mendacity.

Experienced air travelers have learned to dread messages from the airlines. When travelers peer up at the departure monitors, what they want to see is a lack of information: no curious discrepancies between the scheduled and estimated times; no untoward words like *Delayed* or, God help us, *See Agent*. They also like silence in the waiting area. The first time they want to hear the ambient hiss that signals the opening of a microphone is when the children and privileged are invited aboard.

Airport announcements are nearly always bad news: big delays or cancellations. "Due to late arriving equipment..." the agent begins. Our bowels constrict in anticipation of missed connections, forfeited income, bootless nights in airport hotels...

Moreover, when things are going wrong, airline personnel are elevated to new heights of surrealistic mendacity. During open-ended delays, travelers are told to "remain comfortably seated," as though saying it would cause comfortable seating to appear in airports. When travelers ask for a revised departure time, they hear something like "I'm showing a 10:30 departure." The Rules of Spin, Exposure, and Campaign conspire to make it impossible for anyone to say: I don't know.

(Travelers also suspect that much of the evasiveness and mendacity of airline speakers has the effect of preventing us from switching to other airlines while there is still time.)

Airline speakers have been taught to talk in this irritating way. (Surely it cannot be natural to them.) The remarks are from a library of spoken routines that include such utterances as "This plane is equipped for a water landing." Nearly every official sentence spoken by representatives of airlines or printed on an airline placard, in the airport or on the plane, is from this library, even though some speakers interpolate a bit of regional slang. And, moreover, nearly every such sentence is badly written.

To a student of language or teacher of writing, a sentence that begins with "due to late arriving equipment" is unbearably repugnant. First there is that incessant but misguided substitution of "due to" for "because of." (Yes, the world is still full of half-educated people who believe, unaccountably, that there is a rule against starting sentences with "because.") Then, there is the muddled syntax of "late arriving equipment"; in writing, a hyphen somewhere would help. And, finally, the painfully pseudotechnical use of the word "equipment" for "airplane." All this and we have not yet even reached the independent clause.

To a somewhat older student of language, though, the problem in this clause seems less syntactical than ethical. To understand why intelligent people would write or talk this way, we need only contrast the alternatives:

- Due to late arriving equipment...
- Because our plane is late...

Put simply, the peculiar grammar and usage of the airlines is the direct result of their continuing embarrassment. And of the belief—held throughout government and industry—that a certain tone of voice or style of speech can ameliorate the problem, even when the problem is an Act of God.

But, if this practice is widespread, why pick on the airlines? Simply because they are an instructive example of an industry whose main goal is to provide the impossible: errorless, frictionless, trouble free service to millions of people—under conditions that make this impossible. And, moreover, because the airlines, more than any other organizations in the private sector, believe that a resilient smile and the right string of sentences can distract us from what actually happens when we do business with them.

In 1988, for example, several organizations began to publish accounts of how often various airlines reached their destinations “on time.” (That is, within 15 minutes of the scheduled arrival, not counting delays caused by bad weather.) Inevitably, the airlines that fared best in these comparisons began publishing the results in huge newspaper ads. How did the airline I use most frequently respond to its chronically poor showing? **By lengthening the estimated time for all its flights.** A 55-minute flight was scheduled as an 85-minute flight, and the company's "on-time performance" has improved dramatically.

(A representative of that particular airline told me that I should applaud their new policy of more honest estimates!)

A company that would embrace such a policy cares little for what the term *on-time* really means. Indeed, they care little for the meaning of most terms. They distort and coin words (*deplane!*) to suit themselves, but, unlike Humpty Dumpty, they do it not for power but for profit. Or so they believe.

Why would any decent-thinking person say "We have lost our connection capability." when he or she could just as easily say "We cannot make our

connection."? Why "Due to a crew unavailability situation..." instead of "Because we lack a crew..."?

An Agenda for the Truthful

Writing clearly and directly is relatively easy. It is easier than solving a partial integral equation; easier than removing a spleen; much easier than landing an airplane on an aircraft carrier. How is it, then, that people who can do these quite difficult things cannot write a readable letter of transmittal or announce a delay in departure? Those of us who teach writing to people in the learned professions are forever mystified by this paradox?

But perhaps I am naive. Perhaps most learned people *could be clearer*, but choose not to be. These writers want to be impressive; they want, more than anything else, to cover their inadequacies and obscure their shortcomings. And their style of writing—difficult, oblique, puffed-up, smarmy, hackneyed, saccharine—is the product of choice, not just ineptness.

Good writing, unfortunately, is **ethical** writing. Just as good writers understand that one style of writing is better than another when it reduces the burden on the readers, so good writers should also understand that nothing worthwhile can come of deception, even when the deception has been sanctioned by the legal department.

Of course, everyone knows that there are a thousand shades of gray; and, of course, there are no self-sacrificing Socrates-types in the boardroom.

Moreover, nowadays there are clever apologists for all this self-serving deceit. In 1993 David Nyberg published a sustained attack on the virtue of truth-telling (*The Varnished Truth*, The University of Chicago Press, 1993). This witty and provocative work argues that clever lying is an advanced technique of biological adaptation:

. . . a healthy, livable human lifetime of relationships with others is to me inconceivable without deception; furthermore, I hold the prescription that life should be lived without aid of self-deception to be a distinctly unfriendly idea. I think deception is in our nature, and it is there for some reason: the mind does not evolve in ways harmful to itself. (p.2)

It's the artfulness we have evolved for avoiding both truth telling and lying at the same time that interests me most—the varnishing, the adding and subtracting, the partial display and concealment of what one person takes to be the truth while communicating with another. As a communicative strategy, deception is so often rewarded that it

would seem to have become unavoidable and indispensable. It may actually serve to promote and preserve emotional equilibrium on a personal level, and a civilized climate for communicating with each other and living our lives together on a social level.(p.53)

But I still believe that most people know when they are mendacious; they know when they've omitted a fact, inverted a verb, stuffed a phrase, or otherwise decorated their mistakes and embarrassment with words meant to reduce their exposure. In a recent interview, for example, the actor Michael Moriarity spoke of NBC executives this way: "They don't lie, but they don't tell the truth."

And I also believe that, Nyberg's arguments notwithstanding, any conscious communication act meant to mislead the reader or hearer is best called a lie. In particular, I believe it is especially pernicious when persons trained to write and speak well lend their skills to such an enterprise. Why? Because it is unreasonable to expect most business professionals, people who are driven to succeed, to sell, to win, to prevail, to manage, to control . . . to be overly concerned with the truth. In contrast, who else but the professional communicator, someone who recognizes all the subtle techniques of deception and sophistry, is in a better position to expose and refute them. And this, rather than some ambitious program of indoctrination for business people, is my only solution: conscious resistance to all forms of deceit by those who claim to be communication professionals.

Otherwise, we are all forced to succumb to the conclusion expressed by Big Daddy's son, Brick:

Mendacity is a system that we live in. Liquor is one way out an' death's the other.

Seminars, Courses & Speeches

Business/Professional Communication

How to Sell in Writing (Proposals & Business Cases)

The most important business writing is the *advocacy document*, the pitch for funds or approval.

- Analyzing your audience and Win Strategy
- Presenting the “case” with logic and persuasiveness
- Using business graphics to demonstrate and prove

How to Write *Globally*

International business requires sensitivity to the language, culture, and expectations of the international business partner.

- Editing for clarity and readability
- Screening for figurative and idiomatic confusion
- Designing accessible layouts and appropriate feedback paths

Final Draft: The *Especially* Clear Sentence

Good writing is *rewriting*; only revision can assure clarity, correct tone, freedom from errors, and readability.

- Emphasis and making your point
- Twenty flaws in first-draft sentences
- Style-checking software: Can you trust it?

The Art of the Pitch

A well-made presentation is a small five-act play, where each element contributes to effectiveness.

- Strategic planning and design
- Managing stage fright
- Using PowerPoint™ and other presentation tools
- Handling questions and objections
- Creating useful handouts

The Art of Effective E-Mail

To use e-mail well, the writer must exploit its strengths and adapt to its limitations.

- Attention-getting subject lines
- E-mail style and grammar
- Discipline and etiquette for e-mailers
- To attach or to embed ...

Technical Communication

A Writing System for Technical Professionals

Technical professionals cannot achieve their professional goals unless they write their correspondence, reports, and documentation with power and precision.

- Creating documents as engineered information products
- Eliminating common errors and time-wasters
- Writing for *nontechnical* readers

Preparing English Tech Documents for International Readers

Although customers and clients around the world read English quite well, it is still necessary to edit international technical information for the E2 reader.

- Making documents *culture-free* and *culture-fair*
- Correcting problems of style, idiom, and syntax
- Using controlled English
- Adapting to local sensitivities and cultures

Effective Quality Manuals/ Usable Procedure & User's Manuals

A manual is a device that supports people in their work; when well designed, it teaches procedures, enforces standards, and saves money.

- Documenting ISO 9000 and other quality standards
- Replacing unreadable and unmaintainable prose with scripts, tables, and diagrams
- Testing for usability and enforceability
- Designing modular, maintainable publications
- Storyboarding and project management

The Craft of User Requirements & Functional Specs

Those who use information technology and those who create or acquire it must communicate their needs and expectations clearly, especially at the beginning of the design cycle.

- How **User:Developer** communication fails
- Beyond the Waterfall Model
- Tools and processes for functional specification

Organizational Communication

Meetings that Work

Meetings should be energizing and productive—never boring or a perceived waste of time.

- Objectives and agendas: staying on message
- Two warring cultures: ratification vs. exploration
- Roles and games played by participants
- Secrets of master facilitators
- Cultural variables in international meetings

There's Only Now: Managing the Professional's Time

Despite the array of electronic time management tools, too many professionals feel overworked, stressed, and never quite on top of their work.

- Attitudes about time
- Five immutable rules of time management
- Time management traps and how to avoid them
- Products and tools and how to choose/adapt them
- Getting long-term goals and projects into your short-term calendar

Raising Culture Consciousness

An urgent need for international business professionals is to learn, and adapt to, the culture of the communities or countries where they wish to do business.

- Dimensions of difference
- Context and communication
- Individualism versus collectivism
- Timing and pacing (the hidden dimension)

Turning Words into Money: Business Plans & Cases

Projects need funding, capital; even the best ideas can fail for lack of a convincing business plan/case.

- What impresses funding sources
- Missions, visions, and goals
- The logic of the 'business case'
- Clear, persuasive language and graphics
- Presentations for executives and sponsors

Speeches/Short Programs for Professional Gatherings and Meetings

How to Sell an Idea

Why won't people follow your advice? There are eight barriers that keep us from accepting new plans and approaches... and specific techniques to overcome them.

The Secret of Professional Fulfillment

The key to mental health and productivity—on the job or at home—is *equilibrium*: keeping all of life's eight competing values in balance. The tendency is to neglect some while pursuing others, a practice that leads to anxiety and alienation.

Re-Inventing the Memo

Do you have trouble getting your point across to co-workers? A memo is NOT a work of literature, but, rather, an engineered product, designed for clarity, power, and speed. Twelve tactics increase the chance that a memo (or an e-mail) will be read.

The Odor of Mendacity—Why People Don't Believe You Anymore...

In school, we learn ways to "improve" the truth by puffing up our writing with words that inflate, obscure, and disguise. Business and professional speech and writing are filled with these bad language habits, which make us sound as though we are hedging and evading—even when we have nothing to hide.

Does Grammar Count in the Era of E-Mail?

Is e-mail the end of 'correct' communication? Do spelling, punctuation, and grammar matter anymore? Only as much as the recipient of the message matters. All professionals should care about the image they communicate, even in their informal messages.

Business Basics for Technical Professionals

The most important technical question is "How's Business?" Technical professionals must learn to pitch improvements and changes in their departments through business-savvy business cases: proposals aimed at one's own management. Business cases must show how the new procedures or technology will either make or save money, and within an acceptable number of months.