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Don't let the package distract
you from the message



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My wife Eleanor and I came home from dinner the other night, and found our babysitter, Leslie*, in tears.

"Is everything OK with the kids?" I asked.

"Yes. They've been sleeping the whole time. It's not that."

"Do you want to talk about whatever it is?" I asked her.

"He broke up with me in a text message," she said, holding her phone. She had been dating Ned for a few weeks and they had grown close quickly. The break-up text was a complete surprise to her.

"A text?" I said. I had never met Ned but I was already angry at him for such a cruel move.

"He broke up with you?" Eleanor said, wanting to learn more.

As soon as I heard Eleanor I realized my mistake; a mistake many of us make when we communicate about anything sensitive. Which includes just about everything.

We confuse the package with the message. We get so distracted by the awkward, sometimes inappropriate way in which someone is communicating that we miss what the person is communicating.

It's not just the mode of communication. Sometimes it might be a tone of voice. A yell, sarcasm, or particular words that are used. A simple question like, "How did you come to that conclusion?" could be taken as a challenge, an accusation, a support, a query of curiosity, or something else.

With Ned's break-up text message, I was focused on the *package* — how uncool it is to break up with someone in a text message (By the way, just for the record, I think it *is* uncool to break up with someone in a text message). But Eleanor looked beyond that. She was focused on the message itself — what Ned was trying to say in his text.

This package-message thing plagues organizational life and decimates productivity. I was talking to a friend of mine, Malcolm, who is a few months into a new job, and he is already afraid to write emails:

"It seems like everything is politics," Malcolm told me. Then he mimicked some of his colleagues, "Why did you cc that person? Why didn't you cc me? Why did you bring up that budget issue?" He paused and looked into space as he mused, "I spend half my time trying to craft my communications just right. What a waste! Frankly, it's easier and smarter to just not communicate."

Here's the real issue: we are all clumsy communicators — both in what we say and in what we hear.

Add to that cultural, religious, geographic, gender, age, language, and socio-economic diversity and it's a miracle we understand each other at all.

Which is why we spend so much of our time confused, upset, disappointed, suspicious, or angry at many of the people around us.

The solution? Try this:

Notice. Anytime you feel a negative emotion about something said or written to you, it's a warning sign that you might get distracted by the package. Anger, sadness, frustration, disgust, and disbelief are all good prompts to go to step 2.

Pause. Take a deep breath. Then recognize you're vulnerable to reacting emotionally to *how* something was communicated. And remind yourself that communication is hard and often done poorly. Cut yourself, and everyone else, some slack. Don't assume malicious intent. Don't take it personally. Resist the urge to be offended.

Interpret. Now reread what was written, or think about what was said, and unscramble it. Think about what the person was *trying* to convey. Search for value. Strive for understanding.

Respond. A good rule of thumb is to use a different medium than elicited your emotional response. If a text upset you, don't text back. If an email set you off, pick up the phone. And when you do reply, ignore the package and focus on the message.

As a general rule, assume clumsiness. Picture someone who is moving fast, trying to get a lot done, and not skilled at communicating perfectly. Assume they're not a jerk. Overlook their inelegance.

Then, when it's your turn to speak, address the real issue not the clumsiness.

As soon as I realized I had gotten distracted by Ned's use of a text message, I switched gears, took Eleanor's lead, and asked Leslie to read us Ned's text.

As we unpacked the text, as we read between the lines, it became clear that Ned was overwhelmed by his feelings. He needed to slow down. But it was also clear that he really liked Leslie.

After the three of us discussed it, Leslie decided to ignore that Ned had used a text message and call him to talk about what he was experiencing. Ned's text message turned out to be a present. A present Leslie almost discarded because the wrapping was so ugly.

But she took the time to unwrap it. Which led to their conversation. Then a walk. Then dinner. And then...well, that's a package only time will unwrap.

*Names and some details changed

Peter Bregman- Bio

Peter Bregman is the CEO of Bregman Partners and is a strategic advisor to CEOs and their leadership teams. He is the author of Point B: A Short Guide To Leading a Big Change and 18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done. Peter is a regular contributor to Harvard Business Review, Fast Company, and Forbes.

Peter has used his approach to improve performance at some of the world's premier organizations, including Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley, NASDAQ, JP Morgan Chase, Allianz, Victoria's Secret, Converse, Katz Media Group, and FEI, among others. He has worked with companies throughout the U.S., Canada, Europe, Asia, and Australia.

He has based his work on the notion that an organization, at its core, is a platform for talent. By unleashing that talent, focusing it on business results, and aligning it with a compelling vision, both the individual and the organization thrive. Since 1989, Peter has trained and coached all levels of management and individuals to recognize their leadership, exhibit leadership behaviors, model and stimulate change, and foster their own development and growth as well as that of their teams and colleagues. Peter earned his B.A. from Princeton University and his M.B.A. from Columbia University.



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