

FINDING THE TOUCH IN AN INTERNET WORLD:

The Little Things Are The Big Things

By David Irvine, Best-Selling Author and Leader's Navigator

While preparing for a two-day retreat with a group of senior managers on *Authentic Leadership: Building Cultures That Attract, Retain, and Unleash Greatness*, I met with a focus group from the organization to help me design the event. We decided to send an email to each participant, inviting their input about their unique challenges and ways I might create value for them in the two days together.

About half of the fifty participants took the time to write me. All of the responses were reflective, candid and carefully thought-out, and each one contributed immensely to customizing my design for this group.

I felt it was good to respond to each person, but to save time, I cut and pasted a two sentence standard "thank you", expressing my "best wishes" and anticipation of a fulfilling two days together. It took about ten minutes of my time to send an acknowledgement to everyone.

And then I started to think, "What would have happened if I made these acknowledgements a little more personal? What would have been the result of taking a few extra minutes to respond uniquely to each email?" What would it have taken, an extra 30 minutes? There was an opportunity here to build a stronger bridge, a connection, something personal in our increasingly impersonal world.

Sure, it's a little thing one could argue, but it was a missed opportunity, especially given the topic of our retreat: building more human cultures.

I know we're all busy, busier than we've probably ever been, but what happens to our cultures - our organizations, our neighborhoods, our communities, our families - when efficiency takes priority over connection?

Here are some ways to renew our connections to people in the midst of the frantic and demanding places where we work and live.

1. Don't rely on emails to build relationships.

Regardless of your title, if culture is truly important to you, there is no technology that will ever compensate for failure to make time for face-to-face contact. The purpose of emails is to disseminate information. And they are a great tool to do that. They were never intended to be used to foster trust, resolve differences, complain, or attack people. By circulating information in a positive way, the internet can open the doors to relationships. But it will never replace real conversations.

2. Whenever emotions are involved, resist the impulse to push the "send" button. It's far too easy to interpret - and usually misinterpret - messages with any kind of emotional tonality - on an email when emotions are involved. Have the courage to pick up the phone, or, even better, if at all possible, to sit down and resolve differences in an old-

fashioned face-to-face conversation. Not only are we losing the art of communicating in a letter, we are forgetting how to talk to each other.

3. Follow up emails with an invitation for conversation.

Even though you may think that you are simply disseminating information, you never know when recipients of your message will interpret something you never intended. If in doubt, always invite a real conversation. We are all short of time these days, but you'll probably find, as I have, that in most relationships, if you don't devote time to it, you'll pay the price later. It's naïve - and irresponsible - to expect to harvest when you haven't planted and cultivated the right environment.

When it comes to building this kind of environment, direction is more important than velocity. Recognizing the mistake I made with these executives, I took a little time to correct my error. When we met in the workshop, I shared this story with them. I was honest about replacing connection with efficiency, and my level of discomfort with this. I made an apology and acknowledged my mistake. While respect was gained by my willingness to admit a wrong and amend it, and a new bridge of trust was built through my humanness and vulnerability, the real importance came from the mutual learning. My honesty invited honesty from the group. We discussed the mistake we all make, in this busy, demanding world, when we think that information transfer is actually communication. Our need for speed overrides precision, quality, and impact.

I was also reminded in the discussion with this group of wise organizational leaders, that while emails can never replace real communication, technology can also be used as a tool to encourage people. Regardless of the form of communication at any given moment, whether it's email, voice mail, text messages, an old fashioned thank you note or face-to-face conversation, the purpose of leadership goes well beyond merely transferring information. The ultimate focus of leadership is to inspire positive action. Regardless of your position, when you take a little time to acknowledge, support, and thank people, you are exercising leadership at it's finest. It's all part of the little things that are the big things in finding the touch in an internet world. And maybe, in the process, we can bring a small bit of balance and perspective into a demanding workplace.

What have you done lately to pay attention to the little things? How have you found some touch in your internet world?

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David Irvine is sought after internationally as a speaker, author, and mentor. His work has contributed to the building of accountable, vital, and engaged organizations across North America. David is the best selling author of five books. His most recent book is *Bridges Of Trust: Making Accountability Authentic*. These are available in bookstores or can be ordered at www.davidirvine.com

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