

Three Steps Towards Creating a Culture of Writing Excellence at Your Workplace



By Morag MacTaggart

*Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the shadow.*

T.S. Elliot 1925

So you've decided to tackle the frustrating and inefficient writing practices at your workplace. Well done! You already understand that poor writing costs. But as T.S. Elliot tells us, desiring a new state of being is only the first step. To achieve our desired state we must act. Read on for three practices you can start to implement today to make a lasting writing culture change at your workplace.

Step 1

Show the way. Lead the change you want to see every day - mentor, reinforce, and evaluate. Provide explicit direction, your writers need to know exactly what you want. Can they provide you with the answers to the following questions?

1. Who is my target audience? What do they need to know? What might they already know? What information will they respond to best?
2. What are my goals? Am I informing? Persuading? Directing?

Provide constructive feedback; "I lost meaning in this section because your sentences do not have a clear subject and an active verb pattern." Or, "the final summary of your report has been written in the passive voice, please change to the active." Or, "paragraph X is unnecessary for this particular audience." Provide quality exemplars and regularly share examples of good writing. Make it clear that writing and reading is relationship driven. Challenge your writers to improve and sustain the relationships they have with their readers by creating respectful, supportive text. Make it clear that readers use strategies to decipher text and make meaning, therefore writers must use strategies to infuse their text with meaning for readers.

Step 2

Take your time. Building a new skill happens slowly, your writers will need space to review, evaluate, and reflect. Create communities of practice; pair weaker writers with stronger writers. Give weaker writers opportunities to observe the thinking and actions of stronger writers. Encourage weaker writers to emulate their stronger colleagues. Make time for writers to peer review each other's writing. Opportunities that allow for reflection and evaluation will deepen a writer's understanding of effective writing and reinforce their use of effective writing strategies. If you feel you are hitting a brick wall with a particular writer on your team, ask yourself - is it will or skill? For very poor writers, there may be literacy and/or learning disabilities. Try to put in place scaffolds of support. You could provide non-judgemental writing buddies to help with revising and proofreading. Provide editing services or one on one coaching, or invest in I.T. solutions; there are many excellent speech to text apps available online.

Step 3

Create opportunities for change; our actions will always speak louder than our words.

Provide training opportunities but make sure you know your writers' needs first. Ensure any instruction will meet the specific needs of your writers, one size does not fit all. After a block of training you will need to follow up with mini clinics, one on one coaching opportunities and team peer review sessions. Your writers will need multiple opportunities to reinforce their new skills and behaviours before they become automatic. Keep in mind that learning a new skill is risky, there's always the chance we might fail.

Give your writers opportunities to embed, trial, and take risks without fear of ridicule. You could provide fortnightly, monthly or quarterly writing clinics. Highlight for your team that all effective writers have strategies that support them through their writing process. They: define their audience, organise their ideas, gather information, research, analyse, draft, revise and edit. You could create a quarterly newsletter or email that shares examples of quality writing at your workplace. Be sure to include writing tips and strategies and circulate online links to teaching and coaching websites.

Finally, remember that all of us love to be acknowledged when we get something right. Find ways to highlight those writers who have moved significantly along their path to better writing. Make sure you celebrate your writers' successes.