

Episode 340: Effortlessly Boost Your Writing Skills with This Simple Framework with Davina Stanley

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Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:00

You probably spend a lot of time writing every day, writing emails, writing memos, writing proposals, writing presentations, writing chat messages, and yet you also probably spend just as much time reading things that other folks have written. So given the importance of email documents and chat to our daily work, it is high time we learn the ins and outs of how to be effective written communicators. Joining me today is Davina Stanley. Davina is the founder of ClaritY First Program which helps C-suite executives and their teams to better engage senior leaders and boards in complex ideas.

If you don't want to take notes when listening to this podcast, consider joining Podcast+. Each week, you'll receive my one page of takeaways which captures the highlights of the conversation in bite-size nuggets with actionable insights. That way you can refresh your memory on what you've learned anytime without doing any extra work. For less than \$4 per episode, you can become a member of Podcast+ go to themodernmanager.com/more. In the extended episode available to members of Podcast+, Davina shares how to stop rewriting materials for your team and empower them to improve their writing, as well as how to use AI to help us communicate better in writing. Now, here's the conversation.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:12

Are you a manager, boss, or team leader who aspires to level up and unleash your team's full potential? You're listening to The Modern Manager podcast, and I'm your host, Mamie Kanfer Stewart. Each week, I explore effective strategies and provide actionable insights that supercharge your management abilities, optimize team performance, and foster a healthy workplace culture. Become a rock star manager and help your team thrive at themodernmanager.com/more.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:38

Thank you so much for joining me today, Davina, I am really excited to talk with you. I talk a lot about meetings, that's why my one of my favorite topics, but I sometimes I think maybe I don't

talk enough or overlook the importance of written communication. So I'm glad that you're here and we're going to talk through all the skills needed for effective written communications. So yeah, thanks for coming on.

Davina Stanley 02:01

My pleasure, Mamie, looking forward to talking with you. And you know what, when we're talking about meetings, I think so much of the prep work before the meeting, you know, there's often a pre paper or a deck or something that often is what's required to set up a really great meeting. So maybe we can think about it like that too.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 02:21

So, so, so true. I mean, that's one of the key strategies I teach my clients, is around giving people something to review and reflect on before the meeting, so that when you come in, stuff has already been percolating. So this is actually a great place to start. What are some of the things that we just we just do wrong, or we just don't think about, I mean, like, I never really thought about the way that I'm writing those materials. Like, what are some of the things that we're just like missing the boat on.

Davina Stanley 02:49

The thing that's missed most is thinking about what you want to achieve with the communication before you start writing, people dive in and maybe they've got a template that they always use for an update, or maybe they just start and, you know, they just hop straight in rather than thinking, what do I really need from this? What would be really helpful as an outcome from this pre read for a meeting, from this presentation, from this report, what do we really strategically need to deliver. And that's where it gets really fun when you start to say, well, am I really just updating my cohort or my leaders, or, you know, if I'm doing that, is it just about making sure they trust that everything's in good shape? Is that the outcome that I want, or is it actually, when I think about it, hmm, it's actually that I need more resources, or I need them to think very differently about this project. They're thinking procedurally about what we're doing, about the normal change management process or something. And it's just, well, it's the next step. We always do it this way, rather than huh. Why do we really need to do this this way? Because that's going to change the way we actually behave. So when you start to think, what outcome do I want here, strategically, it changes the way you communicate. Whereas what I think people often do is they dive in, they start writing or preparing their charts or whatever, and they get caught up in clarifying the message for themselves inside the communication. You know that beautiful feeling when you've written and you've written and then you go, Oh, that's it. You know, the light bulb goes on and it clicks. The problem is that once you get to that place, you need to

junk everything you did before then and start again, right? Because up till then, you are writing for yourself. You're not writing for your audience. This ain't the speaking, you know, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, oh, that's it. Whereas everyone else is just lost before that moment, aren't they?

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 05:10

We often write to think and that it is exactly what you're saying. It is our process of getting the ideas, giving them shape, putting words to the kind of big concepts that are floating around in our head. And yeah, I never really had thought about that until now, and when you just said, once you get to your like, Oh, this is it, you have to get rid of everything ahead of it. That's that little anxiety producing all of that. So wait, if that's really the case, I'm like, it sounds like even our process of writing. Thing has to be really different, because it's not a sit down, bang it out, turn it in, kind of mentality. I think maybe some of us have, you know, been doing for many, many, many years. Yeah, just say more about that.

Davina Stanley 05:55

I think the thing is to first, you know, think strategically, absolutely first about what is the outcome you want, and spend some time doing that, because even though it feels harder because you're not writing the thing, writing the thing feels like you're doing something to actually allow yourself what might feel like a luxury, but I think is actually a necessity. Let's imagine it's something simple. Let's imagine it's an email. Then you're just getting a pen out and getting a bit of scrap paper and saying, Well, what outcome do I need when I email made me about this thing we're about to do. What do I need for her to know think or do? Is that an easy thing or a hard thing, is she going to think that's straightforward, or is that complicated? Just get that sense before you begin. If it's a much bigger communication, then I've got a framework that I encourage people to use, that talks about very specifically, how do you analyze your audience and who really matters in the group, and really unpacking that and where is their head. So think about all of that first, and once that clicks, once you get the light bulb around that, then I think you're well placed to start preparing the communication, whatever it is. And it feels like it might take longer, because it feels like this might be an extra thing to do, but actually it's faster. So instead of diving into right, stop think what's the outcome, I need get that sorted first, and then, if it's something big, structure your messaging in a one pager. And I come from the management consulting world, so I use structured communication techniques to organize ideas, and I think they're a wonderful thinking tool, because, you know, the method that people use a lot, which is to write first, and we write for ourselves to clarify thinking. It's actually very slow, and it feels fast because we're doing and we're typing quickly. It feels fast, but actually, the time between starting to write and getting an outcome is longer, usually, than it should be, but we think about it as starting to write, just sending the draft to our boss to review, or starting to write, and maybe attending the meeting, as opposed to or starting to write, sending the email, so changing the dynamic from thinking and then drafting in a really structured way, and using that structure as a Thinking tool in itself to

build on to that idea of what outcome I need, and then how do I draft that? It's really powerful and really fast, and it means that you condense the time it takes to start to outcome rather than start to hit send, right. So to play that out a little bit more, if you imagine an email, I'll think of an example of a client that I worked with recently. He emailed me after we'd worked together, and he said, Oh my gosh. Who knew we spend an extra 15 minutes thinking about that email. I hit send, and I send it to Mary. And Mary came back within minutes and said, Thanks, Dave. He said, Huh. Normally that would be 2 30 minute conversations to elaborate, to explain, to clarify, and then I'd persuade her. She just said, Thanks, Dave. And it was done

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 09:34

That's incredibly impressive. And I think everyone wants to spend less time in meetings, explaining things and building buy in, and if you can do it in an email or a single document, that's powerful.

Davina Stanley 09:47

Well, we want less meetings so we can actually do things. And we want better meetings that are much more, perhaps collaborative or exploratory, or, you know, planning together or doing things together, rather than just, oh, that document I sent you. Okay, let me answer your question so you understand what I wrote. And that feels, I think people think that's normal, and leaders think it's normal too that they need to spend their nights and weekends reworking their team's significant communication, they feel like they're playing triage all the time, and that's, well, painful.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 10:30

I want to go back to something you said earlier, because I want to make sure I understand you talked about structured communications. Can you unpack that for us?

Davina Stanley 10:38

So at the simplest level, what it means is that every communication should have a really short introduction, a single main message, and then a small number of supporting points. So in 30 seconds, you sort of get that idea. It's easy, but what's really interesting about it is when you understand the mechanics, if you like, around the structuring of a message, it becomes a little bit technical, but it becomes like a thinking machine that helps you work out what ideas go where. So that introduction is, imagine opening the email that you've just received from

somebody, and that, you know, the subject line was interesting enough to you to make you open it. And when you do open it, your head is coming from somewhere different into this place, or maybe somebody's presenting in a meeting. And so the very beginning, you just need a heartbeat to get your head into their world. So you begin with something that's known, something that they know about. You just remind them about a topic and perhaps explain why you're talking about it today. So, really short. You know, often people have a big build, big rant, ramble at the beginning. We don't, we don't do that. So really, really short. And then the idea is that you give the game away in that single main message, and it's 25 words or less, whether you're speaking it or writing, it doesn't matter 25 words or less, and it encapsulates absolutely everything. So, you know, it's a bit of an effort to summarize and synthesize everything in your communication, particularly when it's really technical. You know, it's an engineering issue for some really complex technical thing, or it is something complex that's germane to your own discipline that the other people don't are not in your area. You're a remuneration specialist, and they're talent management, they're not remuneration and it's all numbers, and they don't do numbers, so you've got to really encapsulate it all in that message. That makes sense. And then you back it up, and you'd have, you know, three is the magic number, but two to five points, and we would organize those points one of two ways. The simple way is what I call a grouping. So it's like a list you might imagine if I was saying to you, you know, maybe the big idea is we should go camping this weekend. You live in Manhattan. I don't know if you like camping. You might be more of an urban you do like camping? Okay, there we go. So I know that you like camping. So I might be saying, hey, Mamie, next weekend, there's going to be beautiful weather up in the cat skills, let's go camping. And so that's my main, main thought. And then you say, Great, how can we pull it off? And then underneath that, you've got a list of actions. That's the logical thing to include. Now, if you didn't like camping, and I knew that, then I would say, Okay, well, here's why, here's why we should do that. Let me persuade you. So I make some decisions about where the audience is up to, and then I think very carefully about how I organize that list if I'm grouping my ideas. Now, if I need to do two things at once, if I need to make a recommendation and I need to persuade you, and also give you the action plan. Let's use camping as the example. Again, the main message might be the same, you know, hey, Mamie, let's go camping at the Catskills this weekend. It's the best thing we should do this weekend. And Mamie is going really not sure about that. I'd love to do something, but why camping? You know? And so I might begin. I might have a fairly neutral structure, but it's deductive, which is our other term. So we use logic and we combine it with synthesis, where we're connecting dots. For people, it has three parts. First one says, Well, we have a range of ways we could begin, but I'll use an options one. So you know, there are a number of things we could do this weekend. We could go camping, we could go to Broadway, we could go out, and maybe we could go to the spa and have a lovely ladies weekend. Three things we could do. But you know what, I think camping is the best thing for us this weekend, and here's why, let me, let me explain why I think it's the best, because the cat skills are stunning at this time of year. So I think we should go because I've got all the gear, and I'm just going to make it really easy. You know, it's going to be such an easy thing to do. And, you know, I've got such a great group of campers who really want to do this. You know, you've got to come. It's going to be so fun. We're such a great group of people. And so by the end of you know, understanding that we've got some options, and understanding that this is really the best of those options, you might say, Yeah, I see where

you're coming from. Okay, all right. How are we going to make this happen? So then I'll say, Okay, now that you're ready to hear my plan, I'll give you my. Plan, and you know, I'll pick you up at five o'clock on Friday morning or Saturday morning. I'll, you know, we'll take my car for a few hours. We'll stop here and, you know, get some breakfast at this place, and then we'll, you know, spend the weekend reading books and talking and sitting by the campfire a set of steps. So it's about a build where you persuade. And there are a number of ways you can do that, but I've just given you know one within that structural frame. So the technicalities around it are useful to understand, because how do you know whether that is a convincing argument? How do you know if that main message is insightful and captures everything? How do you know whether it's the best way to persuade Mamie to come camping this weekend, or that the plan's complete, you know.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 16:37

I love this, like very logical approach and really putting the audience at the center to say, like, what do they need to hear and in what order? Like that. It just makes a lot of sense. Does it just become more complex when you're writing an email to a group of people who might be coming from different places? Like, are there things that we need to do differently if we're writing to our entire team versus just a one on one message?

Davina Stanley 17:01

I think it becomes a little more complicated in that you've got more people just to think about in that strategic thinking phase at the very beginning, but you're still going to be landing on a single message or outcome. And I think the question then really becomes, and this is something I think about a lot, when working with my clients, is okay, so you want to send this to 10 people, 100 people. Why? Why do you really need to send this to all of those people right now? Do you really need to do that? Or is it actually that this is for just three of them? And so when you go through that structured sort of process at the very beginning to get very detailed about, okay, what do we really need to achieve here? You don't want to drown people's inboxes. And I think a lot of the time when I do work with people, you know, sometimes at the comedic end, it's, oh, I don't need a PowerPoint and I don't need a three hour meeting. Oh, I can just pick up the phone and have a conversation. I really know what I need to do here. I'm not going to work all of that out in the meeting. I'm just going to make a call. I mean, that's the extreme end. But oh, okay, so it's really only Mary and Fred that are actually material to this issue. I can catch the others up in the team meeting and say, Hey, Mary and Fred and I talked about this. This is where we got to, just so they know, and you know, across things, but they don't need to come through the whole gazillion messages on Slack. They just don't need that. So yes and no, I think the process is a little the same, but I think what often happens is we narrow down our audience just because we actually know what we want to achieve, rather than talking, talking, talking, emailing, emailing, email. Yeah.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 18:55

Okay. How is this different if you are messaging on Slack or some other form versus a long form document or email?

Davina Stanley 19:03

I think you still need to be very conscious about the outcome you want, and if anything, more conscious, because I think these slack or teams threads become very useful, but also a bit of a runaway train. So there are different genre, aren't they? They're much more conversational. They're much more casual, because it's a proxy for picking up the phone and, hey, Fred, how's this? What do you do? You know, it's sort of more conversational in tone. The messages are a lot shorter, so there's less structuring of a big pitch or something like that. But I still think you need to be very mindful of being succinct and frankly, sending less messages to get to the heart of it. And I think people can get very lazy in that sort of medium, where things do become that runaway train simply because you don't think before you send. You know, it's like, oh, but you actually wanted that. Now I understand. Now I can help you. After 15 ping pongs, you know, okay,

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 20:08

I want to shift gears a little bit and go from kind of the email slack space into the like I am putting together a report on the last quarter and like the summary of that, or I'm writing a proposal for this next project, or strategic document for where our project is headed. Do we use the same techniques for those kinds of materials? Or is that is there something different about those?

Davina Stanley 20:32

Yeah, no, absolutely, because ultimately, the thing that matters is the outcome you're going to achieve and the messaging you need to achieve that. And so when you're going into those routine reports or presentations, pictures or what have you, you've just got a different medium, and you've got possibly a more complex message too, so you need to invest more time in it. That's natural. The outcome is bigger. It's more valuable to the organization. So you've got to invest more. So I think the thing that I really work with people on is to up level their collaboration on this, so that, because very rarely these sorts of communication developed in isolation, very rarely does somebody just think, okay, I need to write to the board. So I'm writing to the board, and then I'm done. And I said, it's not like that, if there's an operating rhythm around it, which can be very, very messy and very time consuming. And this is where I think there's leaders have

a greater role here that, ironically, can save them time, although it doesn't feel like it at first. And so if we think of the classic situation where a leader asks a team to prepare a paper, a report, you know, let's update the leaders on our progress for our program, let's say, and so that's a routine thing that happens every few weeks or months. So they just say, hey, Mary, can you do that update? And Mary says, sure. What happens is, Mary prepares it, sends it back to the leader for review, and the leader says, oh, there's a lot of great, good, you know, really great stuff here, but it's not due just yet. Mary's been great. She's got it to me early. I want to do it justice, but it's going to take me a while, so I need some time. And they leave it until it becomes urgent, because other priorities, back to back meetings, all of these things, and the draft that Mary sent isn't easy to get into. So what happens is, the leader wedges themselves, and just before it has to be submitted, they think, oh gosh, Mary's paper. It's nine o'clock at night. The kids are in bed. I'd better have a go at this. And they sit down and they go, Huh, too late to call Mary. I can't send it back to her. I actually have to rewrite this myself. So that's a dynamic that happens a lot, so we want to fix that. And so step one is for, let's say the leader says, Oh, Mary, it's time to do that update again. And Mary says, Okay, great. And then Mary sits down and thinks, Okay, I'm not going to skate on this and just on assumptions. We just got to think for a minute, what outcome do we really need this time? And Mary realizes that this isn't just a Green Project. This has got a little bit of red on the inside. You know, there's some problems looming, some challenges looming here that if she just says, Here's what we've done, it's not going to do the deal justice, and it's not going to make the most of the leadership's time. Because actually, they could be really helpful. So what she does is says instead, okay, as a result of this meeting, actually, I think we really need the steering committee, let's say, or the board, to approve maybe a delay or maybe, and let's go a different way. Maybe they need to support us so we can unblock something. I can see we need more support to unblock this issue so we can maintain our program. So then she might go back to the boss and say, Hey, boss, I've been thinking about this a bit. I think we need to get approval. This needs to be the number one thing in this meeting. We need to get approval for this them to support us. I think we really need to engage them or to get support. You know, they can leverage their peers and and just say, hey, you know, the engineering team, we need more time so we can deliver something. And you know, they have that quick chat about that, and you know that the manager is very happy and says, Yeah, I think you're right. Okay, so Mary's persuaded, probably, you know, in a separate, this is a separate communication, then to the leader, say, okay, yes, I agree, right? So then the strategy is agreed, and say, Okay, now Mary can draft that. So I have patterns in the way to help people structure their message. So if Mary's gone through my process, she'll then pick a pattern, and it might say something like maybe a deductive structure, in this case with the three parts, which might say something like, Hey, leaders, we've done some really great things. Over the last month. We've achieved all of these things. And so the leadership goes, Oh, great, excellent. You know, good news. And then Mary says, however, to maintain momentum, we need to ask you to lean in and support us some more with the engineering team. Here's why. And then they've got a list of reasons why that help is really required. And so then. Mary would say, Okay, so you've got agreement about that, so therefore, you know, please support us. And here are the things I think that would be really helpful for you to do to make sure that we maintain progress. And so in laying it out like that, you've got a very different structure for your story than just going to your classic update template where you say you're looking at the past.

Here's what we did, which is the classic whereas, you know, in those templates, there's always a section which has room for an executive summary, and that's where the opportunity comes in to add the real value and say, yes, all these things in the template we're proving to you, we've done all the things that we said we do. You know, things are good, but this is what really matters. This is where I really need you to pay attention, where you, as leaders, can add value.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 26:35

It's so similar to exactly what you just said about like writing an email like it actually is like, a very similar structure of conveying the information in an organized way that brings your reader along with you. So that's really nice, that we can be consistent in that way.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 26:50

Some folks, I feel like writing in and thinking in this way probably comes a little bit more naturally, and maybe for other folks, like, writing is more challenging. Are there things that we can do to help ourselves or our team members if we find writing to be a little bit more of a complicated process?

Davina Stanley 27:09

Absolutely. So I think there are two problems people have with writing. One is that they stick at the high level and don't back up their positions. They get the high level very quickly, but can't explain why and get into the detail. And the other problem is the reverse. They have trouble getting out of the detail and connecting the dots, right? So both of those things need to come together. And so I think working visually helps a lot, and having the one page to, let's say, negotiate or discuss, it seems to me that it helps all the different ways of thinking. You know, your visual thinkers can say, oh, I can see where that belongs, because it's a picture. Your verbal communicators, who like to talk things through and in expressive sorts of people can have a conversation and fill it in together with somebody. You're very, very analytical. People can focus on, let's call fill it, you know, filling in, mapping out the thinking. But really resonate. I think what really resonates with them is the logical structuring. Those messages really belong together, and the ability to start at the bottom of the details and then work up. So long as it's all filled in, it doesn't matter. You can tell the story from the top down, regardless of where you start crafting the message. So I think for those who don't like communicating, it gives great comfort to know that there is a structure that you can use every single time you know, very simply, short introduction, main message, small points, but then within that, there's some really good basis in logic that all the ideas that you worry about do have a home. It's just where is home.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 29:01

This reminds me of like the graphic organizers that my children use in school for writing out papers and how they've gotten progressively more complex as they've gone up in grades, but that this kind of tool continues to be a useful framing. So I love this.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 29:18

But all right, we have to start to wrap up, though. So can you talk about a great manager that you worked for, and what made this person such a fabulous boss?

Davina Stanley 29:28

Look, I really enjoyed working with a manager, and this is a very long time ago, nearly 30 years ago even, but, you know, I really remember him because what he was so good at doing, and it was the first time I'd ever seen this was helping the team understand something conceptually and put it in a place that he would just get the whiteboard marker, go to the whiteboard and sketch out the landscape, if you like that we were working in, which felt like a really complicated thing, but he could crystallize it so clearly. And by doing that. I thought he was a magician in his ability to do that, but it just helped us all go, Oh, I see I get it now I get where you want us to go. And so now that we can see that we can do it. And so I just think that was such a very helpful strategy. And of course, you know, he was a great guy, and he was very organic and easy to relate to. So they had all those good things, but that ability to crystallize visually a strategy and align us around it was really, really powerful.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 30:33

So important for all of us as managers to help our teams understand where we're headed. Love this.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 30:39

Okay, and where can people learn more about you? A copy of your book and all that jazz.

Davina Stanley 30:42

Wonderful. So my website is clarityfirstprogram.com and I have two recent books that I'd love people to explore. One, if you're a leader, it's called Elevate, and it helps you set your team up to flourish in their communication. And then one is called Engage, and that is your team when they're preparing papers or presentations, it gives them a compatible process so that you can work together and save a whole lot more time while you are preparing those complicated papers and presentations.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 31:14

Where can we find those books? On your website, on Amazon, anywhere else?

Davina Stanley 31:17

Come to my website for sure. You can know more about them, but they're both on Amazon. Absolutely Fabulous.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 31:23

Well, thank you so much, Davina. Really a pleasure to talk with you, and I already I am thinking about how this is going to completely change how I prepare for meetings and write documents and write emails and all of those good things.

Davina Stanley 31:34

Wonderful. No, it's been great speaking to you.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 31:36

Davina is getting members of Podcast+ 20% off all her resources, which includes her online courses and other tools to help managers and their teams clarify and convey complex ideas. To get this guest bonus and many more, become a member at themodernmanager.com/more. All the links are in the show notes, and they can be delivered to your inbox when you subscribe to my newsletter. Find that at themodernmanager.com. Thanks again for listening. Until next time.