



INBOX MANAGEMENT:

10 SENIOR CHURCH LEADERS
PROVIDE ADVICE ON EMAIL

BY RICH BIRCH



If half of your leaders were doing the same thing every day, would you provide them with training to do that thing efficiently?

In our recent national survey of church leaders on attitudes towards work, [51% of surveyed leaders said that they started their workday by checking their emails.](#)

While several other communication and collaboration tools have attempted to depose email, it would appear that, for good or bad, email continues its stronghold on leaders across the country. **This is important to note because we need to train our people on how best to manage their email.** Consider that, every morning, 50% of your leaders sit down and check their email before doing anything else. We want email to be an efficient tool – something that drives ministry collaboration moving forward rather than slow it down.

We reached out to a series of leaders concerning their church’s coaching regarding the use of email and compiled the following information below to assist you in this regard.

DEFINE THE RESPONSE TIME

A clear issue related to email concerns being very clear with your team about how quickly they are expected to respond to emails. This includes being responsive to those who sent the email while also establishing boundaries in terms of time spent answering emails.

“We ask staff to respond to emails within 24 hours unless they are on vacation. Other than that, each person is autonomous in terms of managing their email however they choose.” – [Jeannette Cochran](#), Executive Pastor, [Seneca Creek Community Church](#)

“I view email as a primary means of communication and thus aim to respond to emails within 48 hours. Email can be a significant distraction so we limit our interaction with our email apps. This is easier said than done!” – [John Finkelde](#), CEO/Founder, [Grow a Healthy Church](#)

“We allow each individual employee to set up their own [email] management...from a user perspective. From a turnaround standpoint, we ask for a 24-hour turnaround for external emails and 48 hours for internal.” – [Rachel Long](#), Executive Pastor, [Emmanuel Church](#)

I have found it helpful to define response times for the following series of communication channels for my team. I framed this discussion by asking them to consider how quickly they needed a response on an issue. I personally follow these guidelines and also attempt to have my team follow the same timelines using the channels noted below.

■ 24 HOURS – EMAIL

Respond to emails within a day of receiving them, even if it is only to let the sender know that it may take several days before we get back to them.

■ ONE HOUR – TEXT

A text demands a more immediate response than an email. It is not worth leaving a meeting to reply to a text but it should be flagged as needing a response following the end of the current engagement.

■ IMMEDIATE – PHONE

If one of my team members phones me, I assume that an aspect of immediate importance is involved. I will always answer a phone call unless I am already engaged in another call or in a conversation that I cannot remove myself from.

CONSIDER OTHER CHANNELS

While [our study found that email is still a primary communication channel](#), many churches are leveraging a series of other collaborative tools to help their teams stay connected and get work done. These include but are not limited to those noted below.

■ MESSAGING APPLICATIONS

Slack, Teams, Wrike, etc.

■ PROJECT MANAGEMENT TOOLS

Asana, Basecamp, Monday, etc.

■ CHURCH MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Church Community Building, Planning Center, Breeze, etc.

At best, the above tools can effectively help your team to complete their work. At worst, they become another “inbox” that has to be managed.

For these tools to be helpful, you need your team to be in them as much as they engage with email.

Consider your expectations as they relate to the interplay between how these technologies work together. Many church leaders stated that they have adopted these solutions but have not experienced a rise in productivity. Adopting these tools may even give rise to a new sense of chaos within work teams. Rachel Long from Emmanuel Church stated: “With the advent of Teams, we are actually experiencing confusion about what should be conducted via email vs. Teams vs. Wrike vs. Text Messaging.”

Ensuring clarity about how these various tools work together is paramount for having an effective work team.

“Email is our central tool for communicating at TPCC, however, we have used Rock (ChMS), Jira/Agile (work management), Teams (collaboration software and digital meetings), and Excel sheets/meeting cadences for strategic planning. All of these tools help us to get our work done. Church leaders must talk about not only the tool but address the question of ‘How do we as an organization get work done?’” – [Allie Bryant](#), *Strategic Alignment Executive, Traders Point Christian Church*

“We use Slack for internal communication and email for external communication.” – [Aaron Graham](#), *Lead Pastor, The District Church*

GET PERSONAL ABOUT THE IMPACT OF EMAIL

Email is an incredibly intimate part of our work life. The fact that such a high percentage of leaders start their workdays by reviewing their inbox gives us an idea of how important it is. Few parts of the modern working life are as intimate as our relationship with our inbox.

Talking about how people personally manage their inboxes can be incredibly helpful to your team as a whole. Communicating clearly about how to efficiently manage emails will help to inspire and equip your team in this regard.

Example questions that relate to your personal email management rhythms may include the following.

- When is the best time for you to process your inbox?
- Where is the best place for you to do this work?
- How do you keep your inbox from taking over your work priorities?
- What do you do when you feel overwhelmed by your inbox?

“Personally, I’ve found that setting aside two one-hour blocks a day (11:00 and 16:00) and only answering emails then has helped me. I *never* do this first thing in the [morning] or at home. I even took the ‘notification’ [function] off my email app icon.” – *Rusty George, Lead Pastor, Real Life Church*

“Some are in it too much, some are in it too little. It is always a struggle to keep it rightly framed for our staff team depending on [individual] roles.” - *Scott Ancarrow, Lead Pastor, The Foundry*

“If an email can be answered in under a minute, respond quickly. If [not], flag it and respond during a designated email block in your schedule.” – *Zach Lambert, Lead Pastor, Restore Austin*

TRAIN IT, TRACK IT, AND TALK ABOUT IT

Email is an important part of your team’s ability to connect with and care for people. People matter and, accordingly, managing email well must also matter.

I love the sentiment behind what Kurt commented when considering this:

“The church is in the people business...therefore, we believe communication should be one of the top priorities of our workday. It's important to plan, prep, and hold internal meetings, but when we are trying to connect people with people and people with God, then our connection to each person is vital. So we have this expectation shared in our employee handbook, it has been added to some of our team's scoreboards and is shared often at our staff huddles or during church calls. The general rule is that all emails and phone messages should be responded to within 24 hours of being ‘in the office’ (whether working remote or at the physical office).”
– *Kurt Brodbeck, Family Pastor, Northview Church*

Email is such an important part of what we do and, as such, training related to it should be prioritized. The following represent several environments in which staff can be trained about best practices related to email management.

■ ONBOARDING

Multiple leading churches we spoke to talked about how they worked through their expectations and best practices for email management during the onboarding process with new staff. This is a perfect opportunity to do so because some team members may come into the organization with bad habits from other establishments.

■ REGULAR TEAM MEETINGS

Set aside time during your regular team meetings to discuss the details of how to manage your inbox. Provide training on having the correct mindset towards this task. Expose a feature of your preferred email tool that will help your team.

■ VIDEO TRAINING

This approach is ideally suited to a series of videos that can be presented to your team. Simple screen-capture videos that clearly explain the practical aspects of email management can be extremely helpful for improving your team's email management.

"We train during onboarding and then [provide] ongoing [training] through what we call 'staff drills'." – [Filipe Santos](#), Executive Pastor, [Echo.Church](#). Filipe generously provided a PDF of the email training that he conducts. His approach can serve as a great starting point for team training and includes the following.

■ EMAIL HABITS AND TIPS

So much good information packed into two pages! This covers both inclusive approaches for how people should "think" about email and also delivers some great strategies for taming the inbox monster!

■ EMAIL PLAYBOOK

This presentation is designed to help church leaders send emails that will be read and acted on.

WANT MORE HELP WITH HOW YOUR TEAM WILL "DO" WORK

NEXT? DOWNLOAD THIS REPORT.

We recently completed a national survey on attitudes towards work styles in the next normal. We reviewed how church offices will work including in-person, remote, and hybrid arrangements. The full report can be downloaded to learn more about topics that include the following.

- Information about how people collaborate within their teams. This information provides a deeper sense of what collaboration currently entails within local churches.
- A review of the tools that church leaders currently employ to connect and collaborate.
- What aspects of your church's "work culture" are successful? Where are improvements required? In this part of the report, we consider aspects that are reportedly working for church leaders in their pursuit to create healthy work environments. We also consider areas that appear problematic and distracting as it concerns ideal work environments.
- Gain a better understanding of church leaders' concerns and what they will miss if they will have to work remotely. In this part of the report, we consider the potential issues related to a remote work environment. This information can help you craft your communication plans if you are looking to increase how much you and your team may have to work remotely in the coming weeks and months.

You will have the opportunity to observe how we compiled the report and receive a breakdown of the types of churches that we selected for inclusion. The best part is that this report is entirely free! All you need to do is provide your email address. Using the link below, we would love for you to share this with other church leaders. Feel free to pass it on to others who may consider this as a helpful leadership tool!

The full report also includes expert commentary from leaders who offer their perspectives and considerations about the research. Even more helpful insights to guide your team as we navigate this season!

- Kenny Jahng – Chief Innovation Officer at Big Click Syndicate and Church Communications
- Kadi Cole – Best-selling author, speaker, and consultant
- Tim Stevens – Executive Pastor at Willow Creek Church
- Christine Kreisher – Chief Executive Officer at Irresistible Teams/author, speaker, and coach
- David Fletcher – Dean of XPs, XPastor.com

[Click here to download this report.](#)