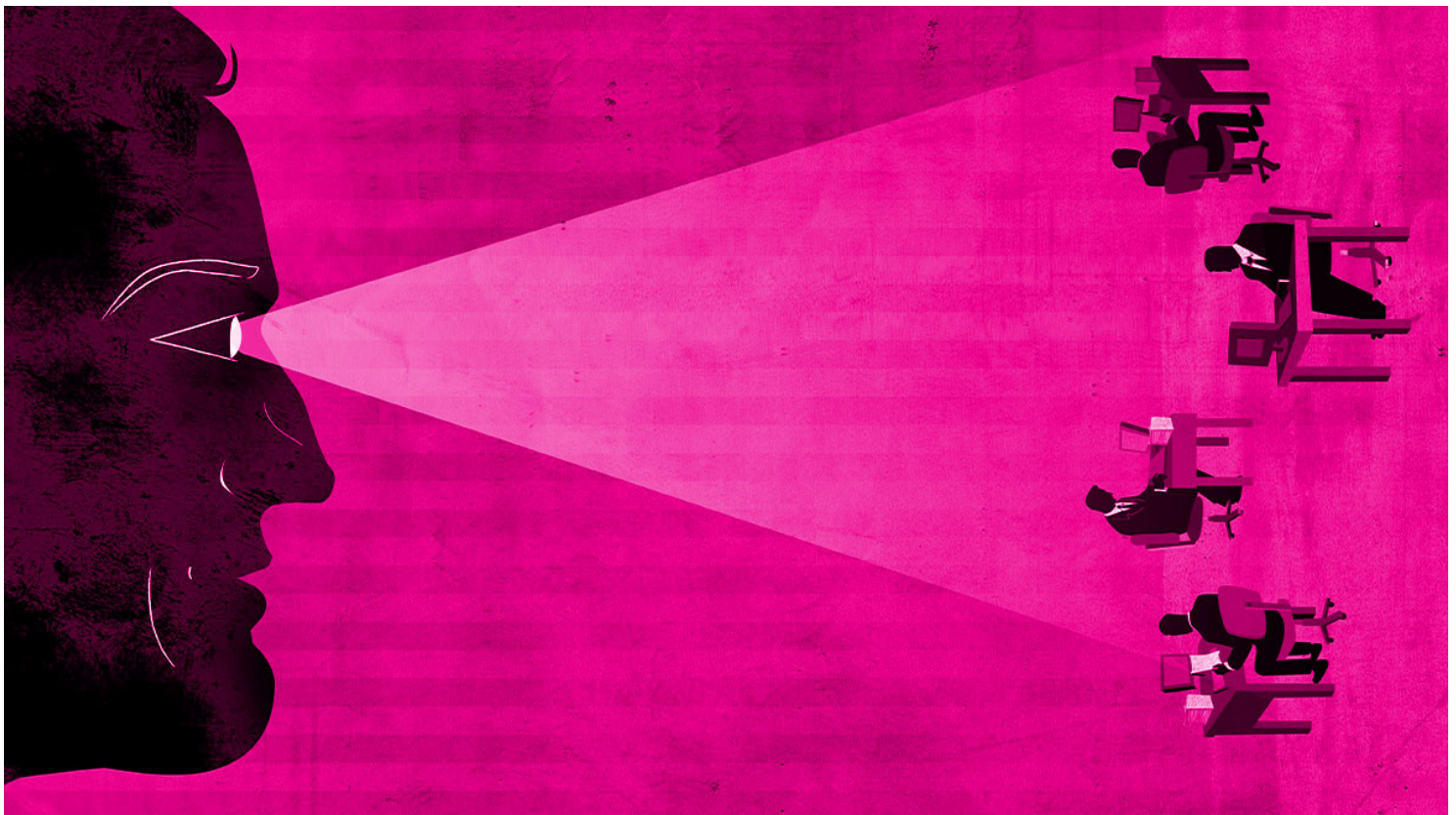


TRANSPARENCY

CC'ing the Boss on Email Makes Employees Feel Less Trusted

by David De Cremer

APRIL 20, 2017



Ali is sitting at his desk, clearing out his email inbox. Tamika, a colleague, has sent him a question about a client they share, and Ali isn't entirely sure of the answer. So when he replies, he figures he'll cc their team leader, so that she can chime in if he's gotten anything wrong. Ali thinks nothing of it – it's a collaborative work environment, and transparency is a good thing, right? But Tamika sees it differently. Five minutes later, she's at Ali's desk: "Why did you loop our boss in on that email? She's going to think I can't handle clients on my own!"

Rampant cc'ing leads workers and managers to squander precious time sorting through unnecessary messages. My research shows it can have another cost: reduced trust. This is ironic, because some people, like Ali, do it in good faith. They believe the benefits of transparency and

collaboration outweigh the costs of excess emails. What they may not realize is how all this surplus communication is eroding the very goals they seek to support through their excess collaboration.

My collaborators and I conducted a series of six studies (a combination of experiments and surveys) to see how cc'ing influences organizational trust. While our findings are preliminary and our academic paper is still under review, a first important finding was that the more often you include a supervisor on emails to coworkers, the less trusted those coworkers feel. In our experimental studies, in which 594 working adults participated, people read a scenario where they had to imagine that their coworker always, sometimes, or almost never copied the supervisor when emailing them. Participants were then required to respond to items assessing how trusted they would feel by their colleague. (“In this work situation, I would feel that my colleague would trust my ‘competence,’ ‘integrity,’ and ‘benevolence.’”) It was consistently shown that the condition in which the supervisor was “always” included by cc made the recipient of the email feel trusted significantly less than recipients who were randomly allocated to the “sometimes” or “almost never” condition.

Organizational surveys of 345 employees replicated this effect by demonstrating that the more often employees perceived that a coworker copied their supervisor, the less they felt trusted by that coworker. To make matters worse, my findings indicated that when the supervisor was copied in often, employees felt less trusted, and this feeling automatically led them to infer that the organizational culture must be low in trust overall, fostering a culture of fear and low psychological safety.

We found these effects in studies using both Western and Chinese samples of employees, which suggests that even in very different cultures, copying the supervisor can be seen as a potentially threatening move. Our findings in the virtual world of electronic communication are congruent with research conducted in “real-world” settings, such as Ethan Bernstein’s studies on Chinese factories. He found that increased transparency led workers to conceal information, even when that information was beneficial, such as process improvements they’d discovered.

We also found that clueless, well-meaning people, like Ali, might be in the minority. In our experiments, when employees imagined sending emails that always copied the supervisor, they indicated they would be aware that this would reduce the level of trust felt by the recipient much more than when the supervisor was copied in sometimes or almost never. This finding suggests

that when your coworkers copy your supervisor very often, they may be doing so strategically, as they consciously know what the effect will be on you. From that point of view, our finding that employees receiving emails with the supervisor always cc'd reported feeling trusted less by their coworker may very well carry some truth in it.

What are the implications of these findings for organizations and supervisors?

First of all, these findings clearly show that complete transparency in electronic communications is not the “Holy Grail” that every organization has been waiting for to promote efficiency and collaboration. Too often, organizations in their pursuit of making information exchanges transparent consider the goal of achieving transparency as an end in itself. Such a perception makes employees suspicious that what they say or do can be used against them, especially when supervisors and higher authorities are included. It is only in organizational cultures where transparency is clearly defined and interpreted as a means to achieve other higher-order goals and values that employees will be more trusting toward the organizations and its authorities.

Second, my findings suggest that supervisors should consider how often they're included on communication between coworkers as not just a time management issue but also a cultural issue. If they want to prevent the erosion of trust within their team, they might have to actively intervene when a team member displays the habit of always including them on emails. A manager might also choose to be more proactive. For example, supervisors can clearly articulate at what stage of a project it's appropriate to include them in email communication.

Finally, my findings serve as a warning for companies that are increasingly making use of team collaboration software like Confluence, Office 365, Slack, and Yammer to promote productivity. This type of software is specifically designed to promote the quality of work relationships by increasing the level of transparency, in particular by including all stakeholders. While it's possible that these platforms carry less expectation of privacy than email does, and thus employees might react differently to them, my findings illustrate that electronic transparency can backfire. Organizations will have to explain the purpose of including everyone involved in a project in the communications around it, so that the transparency is not perceived as a way to assess and monitor the performance and behaviors of the people on the team.



David De Cremer is the KPMG professor of management studies at the Judge Business School, University of Cambridge, where he is the head of the department of Organisational Leadership and Decision-Making. He's also a fellow of the Ruihua Innovative Management Research Institute at Zhejiang University, China. He is the author of the book *Pro-active Leadership: How to overcome procrastination and be a bold decision-maker* and the forthcoming *Huawei: Leadership, culture and connectivity*.

This article is about **TRANSPARENCY**

+ FOLLOW THIS TOPIC

Related Topics: **BUSINESS WRITING**

Comments

Leave a Comment

POST

0 COMMENTS

✓ JOIN THE CONVERSATION

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.