

# The peculiar cadence of executive mail messages

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When there's a piece of mail sent from a senior executive to the entire product team, it tends to follow a set pattern. It starts out with a history of *Group X* and commends them on what a great job they have been doing. Congratulating *Group X* is not the actual purpose of the message; it's just part of the template. Once you've seen enough of these executive mail messages, reading one that starts out congratulating some group sets your spidey-sense a-tingling. Eventually, the penny drops about halfway down the message: Some major reorganization is going on in *Group X*, usually in the form of its head leaving the group, although sometimes it's something even more substantial, like the group being absorbed into another group or even being disbanded. Here's an example message I just made up. The real-life messages are usually much, much longer.

**From:** Important Person

**Subject:** Advancing Project Nosebleed to the next generation

The Nosebleed team has been developing orange crayons for industrial stick-figure drawings since it was formed in 2003 as a small team of just two people. Since then, its orange crayons have emerged as the leader in industrial stick-figure drawing, and under the leadership of Bob Smith, its recent release of *Orange 3.1* sets a new standard for orangeness, one that will set the direction of the industry for years.

With the release of Orange 3.1, Bob has decided to step down as head of the Nosebleed team in order to pursue his lifelong dream of circumnavigating the globe on a Big Wheel, leaving the Nosebleed team in the capable hands of Alice Jones.

Alice has been an important part of the Nosebleed team since its inception. It was she who observed that the color orange was under-represented in the industrial stick figure crayon space and has led the technical design team in targeting that market opportunity. Alice's background in both technical design and color analysis will prove an enormous asset as the Nosebleed team moves forward into the next decade.

Please join me in personally congratulating Bob for his years of service and welcoming Alice to her new position. If you wish to discuss this change in leadership, feel free to come by my office at any time.

The standard cadence, as you can see, goes like this:

- First, give the message a vague but ominous title.
- In the message itself, describe what the team has been doing up until now. The longer and more detailed the description, the greater the suspense. It's like the opening scene of an action movie that consists of the hero at home doing something completely ordinary. The longer he just sits there reading the newspaper and eating his breakfast, the greater the suspense that something is going to explode.
- Next, state the major upheaval. In action movie terms, this is where a car crashes through the wall without warning.
- Describe the aftermath of the major upheaval.
- Conclude with a round of congratulations and follow-ups.

A disturbingly high percentage of executive messages follow this pattern, and once you learn it, you start to get more and more nervous the longer the opening section gets. Back in the days when people actually used Word's Autosummarize feature, one of the games you could play was to Autosummarize a document and laugh at what Word decided was the most important part. (For best effect, tell Autosummarize to try to summarize lengthy works of creative writing in one hundred words.) I played that game with one of those executive mail messages. When I fed the message into Autosummarize and asked it to rank the sentences in order of most important to least important, it decided that the least important sentence was

the “Bob has decided to step down” one. You might say that this is more proof that Autosummarize is a joke, but my take-away was somewhat different: It led me to realize that this style of executive message is specifically designed to hide the most important information.

**Bonus:** ObDilbert.

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