THE STAGE MANAGER’S TOOLKIT

TEMPLATES AND COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES TO GUIDE YOUR THEATRE PRODUCTION FROM FIRST MEETING TO FINAL PERFORMANCE

Laurie Kincman
The Stage Manager’s Toolkit, Third Edition provides a comprehensive account of the role of the stage manager for live theatre with a focus on both written and verbal communication best practices.

The book outlines the duties of the stage manager and assistant stage manager throughout a production, discussing not only what to do but why. It also identifies communication objectives for each phase of production, paperwork to be created, and the necessary questions to be answered in order to ensure success. This third edition includes:

- an updated look at digital stage management tools including script apps, cloud storage, and social media practices;
- a new discussion on creating a healthy and safe rehearsal space;
- updated paperwork examples;
- new information on Equity practices for the student and early career stage managers.

Written for the stage management student and early career stage manager, this book is a perfect addition to any university Stage Management course.

A companion website hosts customizable paperwork templates, instructional video, links to additional information, teacher tools for each individual chapter, and a bonus chapter on teaching stage management.

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The Stage Manager’s Toolkit

Templates and Communication Techniques to Guide Your Theatre Production from First Meeting to Final Performance

Third edition

Laurie Kincman
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All stage managers believe they are good communicators. Yet, every stage manager can recount at least one instance when failed personal communication had an impact upon his or her work. Communication is the cornerstone of a collaborative production, and the stage manager is the keystone holding the various parts of communication together.

As a professional stage manager, you must adapt and learn quickly not only how to communicate with cast, crew, and production team but also how to decipher the pertinent information from a myriad of communication styles these people present to you. This is a skill that many will argue is innate, and excellent stage managers simply hone their ability to discern information. But even those who have great communication skills are constantly striving to improve their ability to relay and exchange information.

As a university educator, it became my job to help young stage managers find these skills within themselves. There are a plethora of books about stage managing and forums that professional stage managers and educators can turn to for foundational support. Some of these books are considered seminal to the education of stage managers today. Yet none of them tackles in depth the materials you are about to read.

The Stage Manager’s Toolkit explores not only the information stage managers must discern and communicate but also the psychology behind its presentation. By considering not only what you are telling people but also the various audiences you tell, Laurie Kincman has filled a void in the education of managers in live performance.

This book, while aimed at stage managers, gives thought to presenting identical information to various people or departments in different manners that make the information clear to those people’s specific needs. Something as “simple” as a weekly schedule holds vast amounts of information, so much so that it may need to be distributed in multiple versions, ensuring information important to one department is not lost in other information, which, while important to some, is cacophony to others.

The positive and negative sides of technology are discussed as we become more and more an instant-information society. The desire to communicate quickly must be tempered by taking the time to consider what information you are sharing and how it will be received in the form you are choosing to communicate. The Stage Manager’s Toolkit discusses not only the types of communication but also the psychology of humans and how they respond to information. It also looks at the practical side of these choices. For example, while the brain responds well to color, theatre budgets and the cost of color printing do not always allow for such expense. These types of pro and con considerations give this text a practical approach in every way.
Perhaps the greatest aspect of what is contained in this book is that the author does not advocate a one-size-fits-all approach. While the information to be shared in a production life-span is generally similar from show to show, the manner in which it must be presented can vary from production to production and company to company. By sharing not only techniques but also the necessary questions to ensure the use of the technique is appropriate to the moment, Laurie Kincman has given us a truly useful and practical text that applies to the art of management across all live-performance disciplines.

David Grindle
Executive Director
USITT
The spirit of theatrical collaboration is alive and well in this book. I would first like to thank the theatre artists who shared their work and thoughts with me: stage managers Keith Michael, Heather Sopel, Alexis Wells, Quinn Masterson, Erica Bush, Cara Cook, Kristen Harris, and Nicole Smith; designers Megan Morey, Mandy Kolbe, and Sean Michael Smallman; production managers Al Franklin and Susan Threadgill; and musical directors Kathryn Skemp Moran and Gary Walth. I am also grateful to my “on-scene photographers,” David Hartig and Chris Anaya-Gorman and my newest “Mac Translator” Hannah Steele.

The support I received from the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse made the first edition of this book possible. I extend thanks to former deans of the College of Liberal Studies (now the College of Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities) Julia Johnson and Ruthann Benson, and Joe Anderson and Beth Cherne, current and past chairs of the Department of Theatre Arts.

This book would not have come together without the expertise of the team at Focal Press. I am grateful to the editorial and production teams, including please add Kris Lucia, Meagan, Meredith, and Emma. Amber Bielinski offered thoughtful feedback. And most importantly, I offer a very special thanks to Stacey Walker for her ongoing support of my work and for shepherding it once again to the finished product in your hands.

This book is designed for student and early-career stage managers and is an outgrowth of my love of teaching. That love has come from a number of wonderful young stage managers I have had the pleasure to mentor in my career. I celebrate your ongoing successes (and continue to put pins in the map). I also owe a debt of gratitude to those who have inspired me to be both a better stage manager and a better teacher—my parents; teachers Maggie Kline and Michael Van Dyke; colleagues Mary Leonard, Greg Parmeter, Michael McNamara, and Jerry Dickey; and stage managers Julie Haber, Mary Yankee Peters, and Peter Van Dyke.

I am grateful for all the opportunities I have had both to practice the art and craft of stage management and to share that love with many groups of students. I can express that gratitude no better than the inimitable Katharine Graham did, when featured in the October 1974 issue of Ms. magazine. “To love what you do and feel that it matters—how could anything be more fun?”
I have been truly honored by both the public and critical response to the first two editions of *The Stage Manager’s Toolkit*. This book was a project that sat in my head for several years, and to have the excitement I felt in putting my thoughts on the page met with warmth and enthusiasm made the effort that much more worthwhile. And as happened with the inquiry about a second edition, the email initiating this third incarnation of this book renewed my excitement to share ideas, experiences, and tips with stage managers newly entering the field.

This third edition of *The Stage Manager’s Toolkit* builds on my updates to the book in the second edition with new production examples, additional perspectives from young stage managers now making their way in the world, and the expanded exploration of the role of the Assistant Stage Manager. My passion for stage managing dance continues to be reflected in the book—both on its own and as a language useful for approaching either musical theatre or the movement-intensive play. I have also included new sections about safety in rehearsals and how to create a healthy rehearsal atmosphere.

I maintain my premise that successful communication is the most important responsibility of the stage manager, so the written and verbal communication techniques and examples in the book are complemented by an as-promised expansion of the computer-based tools available to stage managers today. I will forever be an “old school” SM who takes blocking with a pencil in a hard-copy prompt book and values the feel of a stopwatch in my hand, but the improvements in collaborative platforms such as Dropbox and Google Drive, digital approaches to line notes and other paperwork, and worthy updates to the concept of a digital prompt script can and should be part of the conversation. I have enjoyed exploring these tools and am happy to share them with you.

The third edition also tightens the focus of the book on student and early-career stage managers by providing an expanded look at Actors’ Equity Association and the guidelines which promote safety on our stages and dictate the conditions under which we work. In addition to the general stage management sidebars in the book, a new series of Equity Tips focuses on specific provisions relevant to each stage of the production process.
Although not found in these pages, the companion website for *The Stage Manager’s Toolkit* has also undergone some changes. The templates and sample forms, video examples of cue calling, and web links are joined by the second edition material on how to teach stage management—where I’ve been able to add additional project ideas and offer comments about how or why I take a specific approach in my classrooms.

During a very cold week in January 2014 I had the great honor of spending time with Tom Kelly, a legendary stage manager and stage management author, during a workshop in Chicago about stage combat. We had the chance to chat about the fact that I had also endeavored to capture the world of stage management on the page. And while I in no way attempt to promote myself to similar legend status—and fully admit to being too star-struck to remember his words exactly—what I cannot forget is our mutual love of the job and the gratitude we seemed to share for the chance to write it all down.

And with that, places please for the top of Edition Three!
One of the most important roles in any theatrical production is that of the stage manager. A clearinghouse for information, the stage manager is responsible for organizing rehearsals and running performances. The requirements for the job include confidence, strong organizational and management skills, understanding and compassion, a sense of humor, and the motivation to initiate tasks and follow them through to completion. The stage manager works as a team with the director, production manager, designers, technicians, and actors, facilitating a process in which creativity can flourish.

In less official terms, the stage manager might be thought of as the “air-traffic controller” of a theatrical production, coordinating the flow of information into and out of the theatre and guiding the participants to a finished product that reflects the artistic considerations of all.

Professionally, many theatrical stage managers belong to Actors’ Equity Association, the union of actors and stage managers first formed in 1913. Men and women can find themselves working under one of several contracts on Broadway, in regional theatres, or in a variety of other companies around the United States. The union seeks to promote successful productions of all scales, and therefore provides guidelines on topics ranging from pay to the number of hours in a work day to the incline of a stage floor and the date by which dancers must be provided the shoes which will be part of their costumes. Stage managers are armed with questions and tips addressing the use of firearms and special effects, the taping of rehearsals for promotional use, emergency information, and avenues for reporting concerns about a specific individual or a theatre as a whole. In order to make hiring Equity members possible for the broadest range of companies, AEA guidelines are formulated for over fifty different categories of production ranging from Broadway to university guest appearances. Some guidelines are identical from contract to contract and others are scaled to appropriately reflect the size of the company and the length of the project. The appendix of this book provides an overview of those categories and a sampling of the theatres whose employees it represents.
One of those largely identical components of Equity regulations is the definition of a stage manager. A look at just a portion of that definition makes clear the wide variety of skills and experiences necessary to execute the job.

*A Stage Manager:*

- **Shall be responsible for the calling of all rehearsals, whether before or after opening.**
- **Shall assemble and maintain the Prompt Book, which is defined as the accurate playing text and stage business, together with such cue sheets, plots, daily records, etc., as are necessary for the actual technical and artistic operation of the production.**
- **Shall work with the Director and the heads of all other departments, during rehearsal and after opening, schedule rehearsal, and outside calls, in accordance with Equity regulations.**
- **Assume active responsibility for the form and discipline of rehearsal and performance, and be the executive instrument on the technical running of each performance.**
- **Maintain the artistic intentions of the Director and the Producer after opening, to the best of his/her ability, including calling correctional rehearsals of the company when necessary and preparation of the Understudies, Replacements, Extras, and Supers.**
- **Keep such records as are necessary to advise the Producer on matters of attendance, time, health benefits, or other matters relating to the rights of Equity members.**
- **Maintain discipline as provided in the Equity Constitution, By-Laws, and Rules where required, appealable in every case to Equity.**

Actors’ Equity Association

In order to meet this set of requirements, perhaps the most important characteristic of a successful stage manager is their communication skills. In his book *Essentials of Stage Management*, author Peter Maccoy defines the creation of a theatrical production as a “dynamic and evolutionary process” and identifies the stage manager as the conduit through which information flows. The rehearsal room serves as a laboratory of sorts, and the results of the director’s experimentations need to be shared in a precise and timely manner with the other creative artists working on the project, so that the vision for the show develops collectively and respects both aesthetic considerations and practical safety and logistical issues.

The combination of the AEA definition and Maccoy’s explanation highlights several ways in which a stage manager communicates: in person, during meetings and rehearsals; in writing, through reports, lists, and other documents; and electronically, through emails and postings to show websites. Depending on the nature of the information and its intended audience, a stage manager will use one or more of these methods to share details on a daily basis. It is, therefore, very important to understand how to use a variety of communication techniques.
COMMUNICATION VERSUS SELF-EXPRESSION

It is easy to think that any time we are imparting information to another person we are communicating. In actuality, the term communication reflects a very specific relationship between you and the people with whom you are talking or writing.

In her book *It’s the Way You Say It*, Carol A. Fleming offers a terrific clarification of what communication is and is not. And although not written specifically about the stage manager or theatre artists at all, it reinforces the point of view through which the SM must interact with every director, actor, designer, and technician.

What is self-expression? *It means that you say what you want to say in the manner that comes to you naturally. It will be your take on the matter, in the words you normally use, perhaps with the narrative flow of your experience. It’s a solo performance in front of people with 100 percent of your attention on finding and speaking your thoughts, as opposed to communication where the listener is foremost in your mind as you speak. You speak their language, you speak to their concerns, and you get to the point insofar as it concerns them.*

A successful stage manager does not just deliver facts or ask questions; they communicate. Our concern is for the show as a whole. We avoid personal opinions and invite conversation. We invest time to learn the right terms, pay attention to how individual elements affect the big picture, and present information through paperwork and conversations that unite individual collaborators in a way that respects them as both artists and people.

FORMATT OF THIS BOOK

This book sets out to provide the stage manager with a road map to discovering and sharing show information with that perspective in mind. It is organized on the chronology of a typical theatrical production: pre-production work, rehearsals, the tech period, performances, and post-production duties. In each of these major sections, the book will outline the objectives for the stage manager and the communication techniques that can ensure success. We will take a look at what is to be done and how to approach the task—whether that is how to record character entrances and exits and prepare for your first meeting with the director, or how to organize the backstage tasks of your crew and prepare for understudy rehearsals.

Explanation of the process is combined with samples from several theatre productions, allowing the reader to see both what to do and why it works. Basic verbal communication strategies are discussed, paired with suggestions and checklists for meetings. And as a major element of the stage manager’s communication is paperwork, the book explores that in detail as well. Throughout the chapters you will find samples of many of the key documents to be created. The book includes variations for plays and musicals, shortcuts for shows on an abbreviated timetable, and strategies for maintaining consistency and legibility. The book notes
INTRODUCTION

differences which the stage manager may encounter when working on professional and academic productions, with key components of the Actors’ Equity Association rules highlighted throughout the book.

The paperwork showcased in this book and the related software references primarily address the Microsoft Office suite for PC—largely due to the author’s preference and available equipment. That is not, however, the only way to approach these documents. The Macintosh platform has word processing and spreadsheet programs that function virtually identically, and many additional software suites can be found both for free and for purchase. This book is also not intended to be a software tutorial. Tips are provided on occasion, but a quick trip to the Internet or the bookstore will provide readers with a host of how-to manuals for their preferred software, which will provide details on the intricacies of working with a specific program.

The final component of the book provides the reader with templates for his or her own production use. Located online in The Stage Manager’s Toolkit’s companion website, this will allow you to put the ideas presented in this book to work for you. Whether professional or academic, every theatre has specific needs. And even within a single company, shows can vary widely. A well-laid-out starting point allows the stage manager to insert theatre logos, make personal font choices, add and delete color, and meet other administrative requirements.

You can also adapt the template so that the principles can apply to both the four-character one-act and the multiset ensemble musical with relative ease. As stage managers, we all look for ways to make time spent doing paperwork more efficient. This book endeavors to provide you with just that.
Early in my teaching career, I asked a group of students to identify the images that to them best represented a stage manager. Responses included a headset, an unending pile of paper, a roll of spike tape, and a stopwatch. Each of these objects symbolizes information with which the stage manager interacts and items through which he or she communicates.

But this list also demonstrates a second truth: communication is not limited to a single method. The stage manager receives information through a variety of channels and employs multiple techniques to share those details. One of our most important jobs is to combine many facts into a single point of information—what the scenic design drawings tell you about the stairs to your set’s second floor, what the director asks an actor to do during scene three, and what the costume shop shares about the length of the skirt that actor is wearing at the time. Just as you rely on more than once source to formulate the big picture of that moment, you will use a combination of written and verbal communication strategies to ensure the cast and production team members not only understand all the facts but also how those facts impact one another. A rehearsal note is valuable but so is facilitating a conversation that allows designers to discuss and coordinate their efforts. As more people become involved, especially if compromise will be needed, the stage manager should consider whether the chart or the chat best serves the production as a whole.

In other instances, successful communication occurs by reframing the information for different audiences—what the production team needs to know versus the actors or the publicity office. The stage manager’s goal is to provide actionable information, which means it must be accessible. Facts should be consistent and accurate, but, as we will see in many instances throughout this book, the style of delivery and level of detail vary based both on the recipient and the method of exchange. Throughout this chapter, important points are presented in the context of the stage manager, but can apply to assistant stage managers on the team as well.
**TACTFUL, TIMELY, AND SPECIFIC**

The author offers these three words as the key elements of successful communication, whether it is in person or in writing. They demonstrate respect for both the production and its personnel, and will enable the stage manager to facilitate creativity and collaboration in a highly successful manner.

**FACE-TO-FACE COMMUNICATION**

The stage manager does a lot of talking. This includes everything from the job interview to the production meeting. Being able to choose your words carefully, convey details concisely, and maintain a spirit of collaboration is important. Our role in the process is a neutral one—we are not on the “side” of any one part of the team. As such, there are many things to consider.

Numerous books have been written about communication theory and techniques for successful interaction in the workplace. On the day I first began to revise this chapter, I typed the words *face-to-face communication* into the search engine on Amazon.com and received a list of nearly nine hundred books available for purchase on the subject (an increase from my inquiry for the second edition). Typing the same phrase into Google generated over five million links. If you are a stage manager who wants to devote time to in-depth study of the topic, the options seem endless. But here are a few basic points to get you started:

**Clarity.** Word choice, pronunciation, and grammar will get you far. You may not have all the information you need about a particular subject, but knowing how to ask questions and speak thoughtfully with others will generate much better answers.

**Precision.** A successful stage manager will gain at least a basic understanding of appropriate terminology in the production areas, as well as the common vocabulary around a particular show. This includes basics such as a director’s preferred method for noting acts and scenes (II-1 or Act Two, Scene 1), being able to note that a lighting instrument needs a new “lamp” and not a new “light bulb,” and referring to scenic units by the team’s adopted vernacular. More information about naming scenic units can be found in Chapter 5. Precision also includes personal information like preferred names and pronouns for your cast and production team. The thoughtful SM will collect this information when assembling other contact details like telephone numbers and email addresses and make it available to the rest of the company.

**Pace.** If it takes five minutes to explain a problem, you are unlikely to get a good solution. You have probably lost your conversation partners along the way. Similarly, meandering around a note because you perceive it might be received as bad news does not actually “soften the blow.”
**Tone.** If every sentence you utter ends with an upward inflection, it will sound like a question even if you are presenting confirmed facts, thereby undermining perceptions about your knowledge or authority. Because a stage manager is at their best when information is conveyed neutrally and professionally, it is also important not to sound confrontational or accusatory due to an unnecessarily loud voice or by always emphasizing words like “need” or “no.” Conversely, someone who is too soft-spoken or always mumbling might be categorized as weak and not up to the task at hand.

**Timing.** The companion to what you say is when you say it. Consider the environment in which you initiate the conversation. Are you delivering news from the director that they are dissatisfied with a sound cue? Team members will inevitably be less receptive to negative information if delivered in front of others. Despite your intentions, it can easily come across as an implication they have done poor work. Are you asking for help understanding how a scenic unit functions? Interrupting the Technical Director in the middle of a busy work call will at best earn you a truncated explanation, and at worst a brusk postponement to another time. You would be better served by simply asking when you might meet with the TD to pose your series of questions. This shows respect for them and the tasks at hand. You will also gain much more information when your questions can be the focus rather than the intrusion.

**Assertive or Aggressive?**

These are two similar words, but with quite different meanings. An assertive stage manager is self-confident and capable of communicating details with the right blend of urgency and diplomacy. An aggressive stage manager does so with an air of hostility, as if he or she has to fight the production team in order to achieve what is best for the show. This stage manager is not a successful collaborator. Especially if you are a young stage manager working with older or more experienced directors and designers, be sure that you do not allow fear or self-doubt to translate into aggressiveness.

**Nonverbal Communication**

Believe it or not, the actual words we use in conversation are only a small component of face-to-face communication. Our posture, gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact all contribute to the exchange of information. This collection of nonverbal cues is known as body language. According to a well-respected researcher of nonverbal communication, 55 percent of a message is delivered through facial and body expressions. The other 45 percent is composed of the words themselves and the tone in which they are conveyed.¹ If this seems implausible, consider the images found in Figures 1.1 through 1.6.
Some of the expressions and gestures in these images may feel exaggerated, but that is intentional for this exercise. Can you identify which girl is skeptical? Ashamed? Up to something sneaky? Think about how you arrived at your answers, and how quickly you did so.

Your demeanor will say as much as your words, if not more. Standing with your arms crossed over your chest may imply you are not open to help or information. Hands placed on your hips can signal hostility. An inability to make eye contact might suggest a lack of confidence or trust. Successful stage managers learn to be aware of their nonverbal cues and to read them in others. Figure 1.7 provides you with common interpretations of some additional gestures and postures.

Body language is not an exact science, however. When you turned to this page, it is likely that you began assigning meaning and emotion to the images above even before reading the corresponding text. Humans rely heavily on visual cues to process information. But those cues are not ironclad. In her book *The Silent Language of Leaders*, author Carol Kinsey Goman points out several mistakes people often make reading body language. As you consider how body language can help you to deliver and receive information as a stage manager, also consider some of her caveats.

**Context.** Location and even time of day can alter the meaning of a gesture. Are you yawning because you are bored in rehearsal? Because you had an early morning production
meeting and now find yourself still in rehearsal at 7.00 p.m.? Because you just took cold medicine? Others in the room may have difficulty telling the difference. Relying on a single verbal cue to provide an overall sense of someone’s mood or interest can be as inaccurate as a single word or the answer to a single question. Moreover, each person has a different baseline or default mode. Not knowing if someone is generally quite gregarious or painfully shy can make it difficult to discern meaning in the way he or she is standing. Do those crossed arms stem from an unconscious need for self-protection rather than one of disinterest?

Biases. Does that actor remind you of your best friend from college? Does the crew head have a vocal pattern nearly identical to that of the girl who broke your heart? Without even realizing it, you might be ascribing positive or negative traits to someone simply because of those past relationships, and unintentionally behaving according to those traits. Similarly, cultural biases can be found in our unconscious expectations of how a person will interact based on their status (your boss versus your peer) or even nationality. Consider the perception, albeit stereotypical, of Italians and their animated hand gestures as opposed to the more reserved and still physical presence of someone from Japan or China.
By keeping the above principles in mind, face-to-face communication can work in your favor: (1) The exchange is immediate. You can get a response right away. (2) Information comes through more than one channel. You can monitor how the information is received by reading body language while you are talking, and adjust your speed or tactic if necessary. (3) The process is flexible. You can clarify yourself to correct a misunderstanding instantly and can ask additional questions right away if an answer is unclear. (4) The scope of the exchange is specific. You can choose how public to make a comment, opting for a group discussion or a one-on-one conversation. (5) The tone of the exchange is personal. You can speak either formally or informally, based on the information and the people to whom you are speaking—and can make adjustments if the situation changes.

But face-to-face communication also comes with challenges. (1) The immediacy of the conversation brings constraints. You don’t have time to consider every word before you say it, and repeatedly going back to correct yourself can hamper your credibility. (2) The conversation is in real time. You can’t take it back. If this turns out to be the wrong moment to pose a question or make a comment, it may be impossible to ask someone to forget that you spoke. (3) The multichannel nature of the exchange works both ways. Just as you can read the body language of your colleagues, they can read yours. (4) People are subject to emotional influence, intentional or not. You can be drawn into the state of your conversation partners and inadvertently alter what you are saying or how you are saying it if you get caught up in their anger or excitement. (5) Even if you are not influenced, working in the “emotion zone” can be tricky. In the moment, it can be tough to recognize the difference between someone who is venting—yelling toward you—and someone actually yelling at you.

These constraints by no means undercut the value of a meeting or an in-person conversation. Rather, the stage manager must simply be aware of these factors when interacting with others. We are all prone to form impressions of others based on observations and short exchanges. The perception of you as someone who is approachable and engaged will be informed by all of the factors highlighted in this chapter—which can collectively be thought of as your “personal curb appeal,” to borrow another phrase from Goman and other sociologists.

**EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE**

Common sense and a solid understanding of theatrical terminology are important tools of the successful stage manager. But so is a different kind of knowledge—Emotional Intelligence. Often referred to as EQ, this term was first used by psychologists Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer in 1990 to describe the capacity to recognize and understand our feelings and those of others, and to manage those feelings to be empathetic, resilient in the face of
problems, and successful at relationship building. The term was further popularized by Daniel Goleman, whose published research on the subject remains one of the leaders in the field. He and other experts have identified five basic competencies of EQ: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill.

**Self-awareness** refers to your ability to recognize how feelings impact you and others around you. It can also include an awareness of how personal values shape our actions and decisions. A self-aware stage manager might understand that fast-approaching deadlines make them prone to frustration, leading to unnecessary outbursts or poor decisions as that deadline looms. He or she could look at the list of 300 light cues to be booked before the first day of tech and actively choose to start writing them into the prompt script early to avoid that situation.

**Self-regulation** determines how you react to others. If you trusted your ASM to finish and update the rehearsal call and the next day discovered that an actor had been inadvertently omitted without enough time to get her to the theatre before rehearsals were impacted, you might be tempted to yell or to forbid the assistant to take on that type of responsibility in the future. Self-regulation is the ability to “breathe through it,” working to solve the problem and prevent its recurrence while still maintaining a calm demeanor.

No stage manager can be successful without a team—including assistant stage managers and crew. A good leader is adept at **motivating** a team, and helping members to find value and reward in a job well done and their contribution to the larger effort. When the world premiere play on which you are working undergoes a major rewrite which leads to redoing nearly all of the props tracking and costume changes, it will be up to the stage manager to move beyond feeling aggravated by the extra work and help the team to recognize how beneficial these script changes will be for the cast and the audience. That does not mean that surprise chocolate is unwelcome, but action that only results from external motivation and some sort of “prize” is short-lived.

**Empathy** is also important. This refers to your ability to recognize the emotions of others and take them into account when making decisions. The ASM having a bad day may be better suited to stay at the table and take line notes rather than walking the role of an absent cast member, spending hours on their feet running around.

**Social skill** has been called “friendship with a purpose.” I am not suggesting that you need ulterior motives to strike up a conversation with others, but that you focus on creating relationships. Recognize the value in building rapport and finding common ground. This can be as simple as visiting the costume shop just to say hello and not because you need something. Invest in people—not just their work.
WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Just as some information is best shared in person, other details are more appropriately communicated in writing. It is quicker to post the change to next week’s rehearsal schedule on the callboard than to call each actor in your cast. It is more effective to share an update with the entire production team in an email rather than to wait a week and announce it during the next meeting, and certainly more practical if the production team is spread across the country—or even just across the city. It is more efficient to compile large amounts of detailed information in a chart or list rather than to explain each fact over the period of an hour. And if the idea of thinking about inflection and body language is daunting, it may seem safer to deliver news in writing. It inevitably feels easier to convey a director’s dislike of a new prop or the unavailability of an actor for a costume fitting when there is no chance of an immediate in-person negative response.

Written communication provides a level of personal control over the information. You can rewrite a rehearsal note several times before actually printing or emailing a report to make sure it is “just right.” You can use font and color to draw attention to updates on a document, whether posted or sent electronically.

Throughout this book you will discover the how and why for creating individual forms and reports. Once created, it is the method of distribution that becomes important. Each avenue that is available for sharing written communication comes with a set of considerations a successful stage manager should keep in mind.

EMAIL

It is almost impossible today to imagine a world without email. Whether for personal or professional communication, email provides us the opportunity to share information at any time—whether or not the recipient is available at that moment. It also makes communicating across distance easier. A stage manager can pose a question to an out-of-town designer, share a schedule update with the director after they have left for the day, or deliver a note simultaneously to the entire cast. The introduction of email was a major step forward in the process to streamline the flow of information.

Email also provides a targeted avenue for communication. Details can be specifically sent to individual personnel, lessening the chance important information will be missed because your coworker’s route out of the building at the end of the day did not include a trip past the callboard or your office. Email is timelier than distributing hard copies of reports, even for local personnel. If your costume designer is considering whether or not to go shopping before arriving at the theatre, receiving a rehearsal report at home and knowing the first fitting will take place at 1:00 p.m. rather than 10:00 a.m. will make a difference. And although it may be obvious in most situations, include the “a.m. or p.m.” If the company is working a long day during technical rehearsals, you might schedule fittings in an unusual time slot.

But despite the conveniences of email, in many ways it can be as public as a callboard. The stage manager cannot send out a report or an individual message and put a “do not forward”
blocker on it. This means that any message sent electronically can be subsequently sent to anyone else—even those for whom it was not intended. For these reasons it is best to anticipate that anything put into writing will become public information, and to approach email with a set of guidelines similar to those in place for face-to-face conversations.

**Clarity and precision revisited.** Word choice and grammar are back, and are even more important now than they were during our face-to-face encounters. Taking the time to write in complete sentences, with correctly spelled words, greatly improves the odds that your message will be understood. Most word-processing programs have proofreading tools built into them to check spelling and grammar. Take the time to use them! Not every theatrical term is catalogued in Microsoft Word’s library, but in general those red and green squiggly lines that appear under your typing are an indicator that something did not translate quite right from your head to the page. But don’t rely solely on software—it won’t catch content errors. Is that fitting at 1:00 or 1:30? Make sure to check your own work for accuracy with names, dates, or times.

**Formality and professionalism.** Written communication is generally considered to be a more formal method of communication than talking in person. This is again due to the distance factor and the reader’s lack of access to the context in which something was written. The stage manager does not need to write notes in paragraphs, but should take the time to be thorough and professional. “Text-speak” has no place in a work-related email.

**Tone.** Aggressive or accusatory tones can find their way into writing as well. Look for opportunities to phrase notes as questions that invite answers rather than as demands to be met. Avoid using words and phrases such as “forgot,” “wrong,” or “should have” whenever possible. If a new prop is not working successfully in the scene for which it was provided, clarify the specifics of its use in writing or ask for a chance to talk in person about it. These choices position everyone involved to make a satisfactory adjustment and clear up any previous misunderstandings.

**Context becomes fluid.** Email may facilitate the immediate delivery of information, but it doesn’t transport the stage manager along with the message to explain it. The SM loses control of a message as soon as the “Send” button is clicked. Not only should written communication be grammatically correct and professionally composed, it also should be neutral and objective. You may think your sarcastic sense of humor is worthy of a Mark Twain Prize, but not everyone does. The stage manager has no way to predict if the recipient of a report has just stubbed a toe on the corner of a desk, received bad news from a family member, or forgotten to pick up extra diapers and had to go back out in the rain. If your information is read as unclear or inappropriate, you may inadvertently alienate a key member of your team.

**SOCIAL MEDIA**

Email is no longer the only electronic method for sending a message. Facebook, Twitter, and other social media tools surround us constantly and can provide us with nearly instant ways to share information—sometimes even faster than email. These conveniences can be quite beneficial in our personal lives and are becoming a staple in theatrical marketing, but they are not always appropriate for professional communication from the stage manager.
Twitter is the easiest tool to evaluate. If all of the members of your cast or production team have accounts, then it might be an efficient way to send a meeting reminder or an announcement. The 280-character limit will preclude a detailed schedule update but could be a successful way to direct a large group to the same information all at the same time. Expect, though, to compromise a professional style to make the message fit. From a practical standpoint, a stage manager will need to have their own account and also know that everyone else in the group has one as well. Imagine that all but one of your cast members is on Twitter, and you decide that you can simply supplement each cast tweet with an email or text message to the person left out of the loop. But what happens if you forget? And do you really want an important schedule change buried in someone’s ever-expanding feed of celebrity updates or quotes of the day?

Instagram began as a photo sharing platform, but is now capable of hosting photos, videos, and live events, and has a direct messaging feature. Even if your library contains only cute puppies and gourmet dinners, separating your accounts is still advisable.

At first glance there might seem little downside to establishing a Facebook group for a production. It can provide the SM with a single message board accessible to an entire cast or production team, and it provides a method for posting files. But if you are most accustomed to using the site for sharing cat videos or the latest gossip with your friends, then switching into the appropriately professional tone as you click from a personal page to your work group may be more difficult than you expect. Another aspect to consider is personal boundaries. Are you positive that your settings are such that you are sharing that photo with only your friends and not your group members? Is everyone in your group that savvy? If the group is public, then it can be found by a search engine, and you may need to reevaluate what you post. (Sometimes even the basics of a private account can be found in a search. As you move into the professional world, be sure that keywords that might appear on photo tags or nicknames will not lead your cast members or potential employer to material that is embarrassing at best, disqualifying at worst.) Consider this related scenario. As a college professor I recognize that most of my students are devoted Facebook users, and each fall semester I find myself giving the same response to new friend requests: “As soon as you graduate I’m happy to expand our relationship to that more personal level, but until then I don’t want to know why your paper is actually late—and you probably don’t really want me to know that either!” Of course not all professors feel this way, and even I have made exceptions, but the blending of personal and work communication streams has the potential for regrettable overlaps. If this is the online method you choose, be sure to think through how to keep the page both useful and professional.

Facebook offers several options for creating groups. A “closed” group can be viewed by anyone on the platform, even if they cannot post or comment. A “private” group theoretically avoids search algorithms and is visible only to Facebook users specifically invited to join. A stage manager opting to use Facebook as an information hub should assess these differences.
As you will read below in the discussion of callboards, making rehearsal reports available to cast members is tricky because it can be easy to read notes out of context. If an entire production team and cast are members of the same group then everyone has access to everything posted, even if it is a private group hidden from the rest of the internet. The SM could opt to create two separate groups, double-posting information like costume fittings that would be of interest to both constituencies, or to maintain a single group and transmit reports and other similar documents only via email. That could eliminate the chance for a note to be misread, but it also eliminates the opportunity for storing reports in a backup location that a designer might want to check if they are seeking a note from a past report but cannot find the correct one within a giant email inbox.

Privacy is also a concern. Much has been written and broadcast in the past several years about privacy breaches on Facebook, where user information is inappropriately accessed by an outsider, or where it is inadvertently exposed by Facebook itself. It is entirely possible to have an actor or team member who prefers to avoid the platform entirely. Even if that company member is asked to join only for work, and the information associated with that account is limited to an email address, this could still open that user up to spam and phishing messages. A respectful SM cannot just dismiss those concerns and insist it is Facebook or nothing. The stage manager will again face that challenge of simultaneous communication so that Facebook and non-Facebook users are equally informed and up to date.

THE CALLBOARD

The theatre callboard is the most traditional and most public means of disseminating information. It is particularly useful for sharing details with a large group, especially if its members will not all be in the same place at the same time. It is also a recognizable location that can house permanent materials that may not be constantly needed.

Just as there are things that belong on a callboard, there are also things that do not. Actors’ Equity Association prohibits posting contact sheets containing personal information, and in an academic theatre department, this may even be a violation of federal student-privacy laws. Even when not facing these restrictions, such postings are still a poor choice for basic privacy reasons.

Some theatres have preferences about posting rehearsal reports or meeting minutes. Typically this has less to do with personal privacy and more to do with the location of the callboard and the opportunity for outsiders to read and misunderstand the notes. A theatre may also have more than one callboard, and the content of postings is related to location—rehearsal reports on the board outside the shops, daily schedules outside the rehearsal rooms, and so on. The theatre company or academic department in which you are working may have official guidelines or more informal traditions that can help you determine what should be posted.
Originally the callboard was solely a physical entity: a large corkboard mounted in the theatre or rehearsal hall. Actors and production team members can check it whenever they need to. It is an ideal location for the rehearsal schedule, announcements, and archival copies of some lists and breakdowns. When working on an Equity production, the union provides the theatre with specific information to be made publicly available to the cast. It is typically not time-sensitive, and sometimes not even specific to an individual show—perfect for posting. If the callboard is close enough to the rehearsal hall, it is also an efficient location for the sign-in sheet. The actors can report to a central location to note they have arrived for the day, and the SM team can look in a single place to determine if everyone is present.

**THE AEA CALLBOARD**

In addition to convenience items like sign-in sheets and schedules, Actors’ Equity Association specifies several pieces of information that must be posted for the actors. While the list varies slightly from contract to contract, several of the common items include:

- Procedures for handling work-sustained injuries;
- Worker’s Compensation carrier and carrier number;
- Names and contact details for doctors, dentists, and hospitals in the area;
- Member of the producer’s staff whom the actors can contact in case of emergency;
- The theatre’s policies on the safekeeping of valuables;
- Details about filming and taping rehearsals;
- The AEA form outlining the responsibilities of the actor;
- Production-specific casting or schedule concessions;
- Requirements related to stunts, fog and haze, or the rental terms for using an item from an actor’s personal wardrobe in the show.

When evaluating the best size and location for a callboard on an Equity show, the SM must ensure that all required notices are posted. Several of the items above are provided in the information packet the stage manager receives from Equity. Under AEA rules, actors must receive details about the next rehearsal day at least twelve hours in advance. So while posting a copy of Thursday’s schedule on your callboard will be convenient throughout that day, it will not qualify as notice if posted on Wednesday unless all of your cast members are still at rehearsal and can be directed to the document.

In today’s technological age, the callboard is not restricted to physical form. Many theatres have adopted electronic callboards—a website devoted to a single production or season of shows—on which similar information is posted and archived.

The electronic callboard provides several advantages over its hard-copy predecessor. An infinite number of documents can be uploaded and linked. When all that is required on the page is the name of the document, it is a cleaner way to post many more items than could successfully be pinned to a board. The callboard for a production at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre shown in Figure 1.8 makes good use of its available space, combining show-specific notices and folders for that Equity paperwork, and even finding a home for area menus for out-of-town actors unfamiliar with lunch or dinner options. But the space is nearly full, and could not easily accommodate many more items. An electronic callboard can hold more information and can be subdivided so that actors and production team members visit separate spots to find the details most pertinent to them.

The image in Figure 1.9 shows the electronic callboard for the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Department of Theatre Arts. The home page includes both written and graphic identifiers of each production in the season, either of which can be clicked to deliver personnel to the correct show pages. The overall template for the site is simple and neutral. But within this template, the content on individual pages is specific to each individual production.

As seen in Figures 1.10 through 1.12, clicking on the Proof icon will take actors and team members to a subset of pages devoted to this show. And following the next set of links will deliver users to the information specific to their needs. It is easy to see that this callboard...
**Figure 1.9** The home page of the UWL Theatre Callboard.

**Figure 1.10** The home page for the production of *Proof*.
Figures 1.11 and 1.12 The cast and production team subpages for *Proof*. 
contains more documents than the “old school” version and contains both items that may be needed on a daily basis and archival copies of paperwork that has previously been distributed. Actors or designers can obtain duplicates for themselves at any time should a piece of information be misplaced.

In instances where both the actors and designers require the same information, web programming allows the stage manager to type in one place but reference that information in multiple locations. The first two entries under the “Documents” heading on the production team page are the weekly schedule and the current costume fittings. But although these appear to be links to paperwork like the other items in this section, they are in fact bookmarks to the spot on the actor page where that information is typed out. This allows designers to quickly access the details if they need to, and allows the stage manager to update them only once.

The electronic callboard also makes possible the posting of information that is not specifically paperwork. For a production of *The Farnsworth Invention* in a previous season, the stage manager was asked to help collect a series of video resources for the show. An additional page was added to that show’s section of the website on which nine separate video files were catalogued and made available (Figure 1.13). No other show in the season required that type of information, but the electronic callboard allows for customization by show as required. It would also be impossible to post anything as useful on a traditional callboard. A typed page with web addresses of the various video sources would be the most feasible option, but hardly

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**Figure 1.13** The video resource page for *The Farnsworth Invention*.