

Control E-Conflict

Observe rules of engagement.



by Howard M. Guttman

LAST YEAR, ABOUT 57 billion e-mails were exchanged daily. E-mail is a great tool for speedy, efficient communication, but it can also foster disengagement, non-accountability, subterfuge, and triangulation. Emboldened by the faceless, voiceless nature of e-communication, people often vent unscreened emotions, opinions, and thoughts. E-mail is a potential breeding ground for conflict.

Leaders need to provide clear direction by putting in place—and role-modeling—10 protocols:

1. Use the right medium for the message. E-mail is effective for one-way communication, not interactive communication. Nor is it a decision-making vehicle. One organization has a rule that all team decisions must be made interactively: in person, on the phone, or during videoconferences. Team members are not to

use email to solicit input, engage in discussions about alternatives, express views, raise a concern, address a conflict, or engage in negotiations. Conflict is more easily resolved by face time.

2. Test your understanding of e-mail messages on two levels. Decode both the content of a message and the emotion behind it. First, ask, “Is the content of this message clear?” Next, ask: “What are the underlying feelings being conveyed or implied? Do I detect frustration, anger, confusion? If so, are these feelings directed at me?” Now you are better positioned to respond.

3. Practice the Golden Rule. Put yourself mentally in front of the recipient. Ask yourself, “How would I react to the message? Would I know what action to take? What feeling would the message engender in me?” As you read your draft, ask, “What’s the tone? Could any phrasing be misinterpreted?”

4. Respect confidentiality. Never send a confidential e-mail to anyone not authorized to read it. There is no pri-



vacy: Anything and everything can be discovered with the right tools in the wrong hands. Deliver all sensitive and confidential information face to face.

5. Know when—and when not—to “cc.” Team members need to agree on ground rules for keeping outsiders in the “cc” loop. Agree with those involved before you “cc” and hit “send.” Likewise, “cc” people on your own e-mails only when they need to be informed. Use the “reply to all” feature sparingly.

6. Don’t retain a rescuer. Don’t circulate to a third party an e-mail that you have received and then have that individual join in the response. Deal one on one. Otherwise, you will fall into the deadly triangulation trap. The one exception: if you get permission from the e-mail sender to broaden involvement.

7. Stroke the recipient. Make sure your voice has a smile, and your e-mails stroke the recipient. Look for ways to congratulate or thank someone or to bury the hatchet. Once the conflict has eased, send an e-mail, thanking or congratulating your former adversary—and copy other members of the department or unit.

8. Get to know your e-mail correspondents. If you correspond with outside vendors, people on other shifts, or employees in other departments, introduce yourself in person.

Being able to match a face with a name makes it easier to infuse your e-mail with a friendly, personal tone.

9. Think before you send. Once an e-mail has been sent, there’s no getting it back. You can’t retrieve it. So, suspend your response, especially when you are angry or upset. Write the message and save it in your “drafts” folder. Wait 24 hours, then open and reread it. If it passes the content-and-feelings litmus test, go ahead and send it.

10. Pack a parachute. Don’t be afraid to bail out of e-mail when you sense the undertow of strong emotion. Before the situation deteriorates—before misunderstandings escalate and harsh messages are exchanged—get together by telephone or in person.

Keep everyone focused on winning where it counts—against competitors. **LE**

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ACTION: Observe these guidelines.