

You've got mail

Exhale and think before hitting 'send' button

Question:

I'm having a hard time with a thin-skinned employee who always seems to have a complaint. The reason I'm writing is because not only does he share his complaints verbally, he likes to compose lengthy e-mails in which he carefully documents what people are supposedly doing to him. When he finds the time to write these things, I don't know. I wonder if he works this hard on his job-related correspondence.

Last week, in response to another perceived slight, he fired off an e-mail to me (I'm the HR Manager) and cc'd a number of other managers in the chain of command, including his boss. Subsequently, his boss crafted a very sarcastic reply. Unfortunately, she hit "reply to all" and sent her message to everyone that he had sent the original e-mail to, including the unhappy employee himself, who is now indicating that he's going to file a formal grievance because his boss is harassing and publicly embarrassing him. What do you think I should do?

Answer:

As we all know all too well, e-mail has become a pervasive forum for documenting conversations, advancing agendas, defending perspectives, etc. Any employee who relishes in saying, "I told you so," has a most powerful tool at his/her fingertips for doing so.

Space does not permit me to recount all of the stories I've been told over the years having to do with e-mails and the tangled webs that the writers have woven. In brief, though, my advice regarding this part of your situation is to encourage all members of your organization to seek the higher ground when it comes to e-mail. Why must we clutter one another's mailboxes with messages that didn't need to be sent in the first place? Why not make a commitment to becoming more proficient users of this important communication tool?

How to go about doing this? "*Send: The Essential Guide to E-Mail for Office and Home*," by David Shipley and Will Schwalbe, is a wonderful book that provides practical tips and pointers for crafting more effective electronic messages. The authors make a strong case that when using e-mail, communicators must be mindful of their messages and their audiences. This is, of course, the basis for effective communication, in general, whether it is speaking, writing, or active listening. The authors make the point that poor communication is poor communication. E-mail doesn't necessarily cover that up. Rather, in

many ways it only highlights communication deficiencies.

In their book, Shipley and Schwalbe highlight that the savvy e-mail communicator knows when to send an e-mail and what to include in the message. To emphasize this point, they offer the following eight reasons not to send a message via e-mail and associated rules for effective messaging:

1. The ease of e-mail encourages unnecessary exchanges.

Rule: Constant e-mails, like constant chit-chats, can be invasive and time wasters.

2. E-mail has largely replaced the phone call, but not every phone call should be replaced.

Rule: When emotion or subtle nuances need to be conveyed, avoid e-mail as the communication mode.

3. You can reach everyone.

Rule: When sending a message, don't assume instant familiarity. Maintain a sense of decorum.

4. The fact that e-mail defies time zones also means it can defy propriety.

Rule: Don't forget that every e-mail is an interruption, if the matter isn't important, a letter can be less intrusive.

5. The fact that e-mail always provides a searchable record means that employees can be held for their electronic correspondence.

Rule: Be careful what you and your employees commit to the e-mail record.

6. The ease with which e-mail can be forwarded poses a danger.

Rule: Never forward anything without permission and assume everything you write will be forwarded.

7. With e-mail, your words can be changed.

Rule: If you need to send a sensitive document via e-mail, send your message in a hard to alter attachment (i.e., a .pdf file).

8. E-mail attachments don't just travel with baggage – they are baggage.

Rule: Before you send an e-mail laden with attachments, keep in mind the following: pack carefully and travel light.

In your example, it appears that each of the eight rules has been violated, perhaps with the exception of numbers seven and eight, I simply can't tell from the information that you offer.

The point in all of this is to avoid becoming one-

dimensional when it comes to your communications. E-mail, by definition is a "flat medium." Words are conveyed but the verbal and non-verbal cues that accompany the spoken word are absent. The receiver is left to discern what the sender intended. This moves in the direction of asking the receiver to be a mind reader regarding the sender's true intentions and underlying motives.

This last issue is at the core of many problems with trying to communicate effectively. When we craft and deliver a spoken message, about 7 percent of understanding derives from the words we use. About 38 percent derives from our voice characteristics (e.g., volume, tone, pitch, etc.). More than half of our understanding, 55 percent to be precise, derives from nonverbal cues like facial expressions and body language.

When we craft a written message all we have are the words. If the written message is a memo or letter that is the basis for subsequent discussion, ambiguities and uncertainties can be clarified. Of course, e-mail messages can also be clarified in subsequent conversation, as well. But, clarification might not happen if we get into rapid-fire exchanges (i.e., Rule No. 1, above) or if we don't heed the other rules cited above. Smart e-mail communicators understand this. In essence, they know when to say to themselves, "No, e-mail is not the right communication mode for this message. I'm going to pick up the telephone and see if I can talk directly with him/her."

To use e-mail more effectively, then, you can go a long way by simply helping your employees understand that the varying communication methods are tools to be used at appropriate times. I encourage you, therefore, to develop some simple guidelines of when and how to communicate effectively. Cover the basic communication modes (i.e., in-person meeting, telephone call, fax, letter, text and instant messages).

By the way, make sure to include "silence" as a communication alternative. Not every message warrants a reply. You might start with the boss of the complaining employee. Had she not replied to the employee's e-mail in the first place, you probably wouldn't have a grievance on your hands.



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