Email communication is an integral part of our workplace and often has advantages over meetings, phone calls, and other forms of written communication. Few of us would like to return to the days when our only options were telephone tag, “snail mail,” and faxes.

Email allows:

- speedy and low cost messaging
- “asynchronous” interactions (i.e., a message can be sent at one time, and the sender can respond any time later)
- simultaneous interactions with an unlimited number of people
- a non-intrusive way to share information
- creation of a record of the communication.

However, if not used thoughtfully, e-mail can contribute to the initiation or escalation of conflict. Some of the features of e-mail that contribute to the potential for problems include:

- As with any written communication, e-mail lacks the elements of *tone of voice* and *body language*. Some experts say that these components of face-to-face verbal communication convey over half of the meaning the speaker intends. With email, the interpretation of tone and intent is largely up to the recipient.
- The ability to prepare and send email rapidly can contribute to the sending of messages that are not well thought-out, inaccurate, or sent in the heat of anger.
- The ease of including multiple people on a message (by copying, forwarding or blind copying) can lead to escalation of a problem if the recipient objects to any of the additions.

In addition, most of us have assumptions about what constitutes appropriate email etiquette. When others violate those assumptions, we often react with irritation (at best) and anger (at worst). Unfortunately, there is no consensus on best practices for email construction or etiquette – and it is not uncommon for diametrically opposed practices to be preferred by different individuals.

Examples of practices that many--but not all--people find irritating include:

- The use of email to convey time-urgent messages (e.g., “Come to my office in the next 20 minutes...”)
- Failure to specify what the recipient is to do in response (read only? answer a question? provide input?)
- Sending jokes, chain letters, etc., through work email.
- Excessive “copying”
- Specific formatting choices
  - Frequent use of the HIGH IMPORTANCE flag
  - Message or segments of messages written in ALL CAPS
  - Blank subject line or a meaningless subject (e.g., "Hi!")
  - Messages that are longer than one screen length.
Writing practices that can be perceived as unprofessional:
  o Informal language (e.g., starting an email with “Hey,“)
  o Lack of punctuation
  o Poor grammar
  o Spelling errors
  o Use of emoticons.

If the recipient perceives any of the following, the consequences can be more serious and can escalate a conflict:

  • Failure to respond to a message
  • The use of language seen as rude, hostile, threatening, involving name-calling, or even excessively formal.
  • The inclusion of additional recipients who are perceived to be uninvolved in the issue or who appear to be included in order to escalate the issue under discussion.
  • The inclusion of information that the recipient views as private.

There are some steps you can take to minimize email conflict:

1. If the information or message is urgent, go to the person’s office or use the phone to make the contact.

2. If the matter to be discussed is complex or is related to a conflict, don’t use email at all. A face-to-face meeting is ideal, but even a phone conversation is preferable to email.

3. If you must initiate such a conversation using email:
   • Choose your language carefully. Remember: A recipient of an email can only interpret the tone of a message based on the words in the message and any prior experience with you, the sender.
     o One common suggestion is to try removing the adverbs and adjectives from the message. (Instead of “I am very upset with your extremely bad decision...,” try, “I am upset with your decision...“)
   • Close the message with an offer to talk about the issue, either in person or by phone.
   • Don’t copy other people unless the recipient would expect those people to be included. If you must copy someone who does not fit this criterion, explain in the message why you are doing so.
   • Review your message before sending.
     o Re-read the message, paying attention to the organization and clarity of the message.
     o Read the message to yourself out loud. You may hear things you miss when reading silently.
     o Ask a trusted colleague--as long as there is no confidentiality issue--to read your message.
   • When responding to an email that you perceived as hostile, delay your response for at least 24 hours.
4. If you receive a message that you believe is hostile, rude, or otherwise inappropriate, you have several options depending on the seriousness of the matter.

- You can ignore the tone of the message; however, ignoring may not help and may escalate the situation.
- In most cases, you will be able to handle the matter on your own or with help from your colleagues or supervisor. Follow the advice in the section above about how to create a reply.
- In some cases, you may receive a message that seems so inappropriate that you need to seek more help.
  - If you don’t know what to do, you can consult with one of the confidential offices on campus (http://www.uiowa.edu/~confmgmt/ConfidentialResources-ConflictManagement-TheUniversityofIowa_000.shtml).
  - If you have a concern about the safety of yourself or others, you can call the police, if urgent, or contact the Threat Assessment Team (http://www.uiowa.edu/hr/tat/index.html).
  - If you are concerned that the sender may be in violation of a University policy (e.g. sexual harassment, violence, anti-retaliation, human rights), you can either consult with one of the confidential offices (see above), or you can take your concerns directly to a University office that is responsible for investigating complaints (for example, your supervisor or HR representative, an administrator or Senior HR person in your college or org, or a campus-wide office such as Equal Opportunity and Diversity, http://www.uiowa.edu/~eod/, or the Sexual Misconduct Response Coordinator, http://www.uiowa.edu/homepage/safety/sexual-misconduct.html).
Resources

