AE Department Chair Online Resource Center

You've Got Conflict: E-mail and Conflict Management

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E-mail has changed everything—including the way we manage conflict. Take, for example, the following exchange:

Date: Mon, 21 April 2005 12:44:04
To: Grants Committee
From: MaryAlice@aol.com
Subject: meeting

On the way back from the meeting yesterday, I thought about what we accomplished, and about the way we worked together. I thought that we got a lot done. But I think that we ought to talk about the commitment level of each committee member. It seems to me that some people take this role as a member of the committee very seriously and do a lot of work between meetings. Others do not seem to be doing a lot for the committee from one meeting to the next.

I just think that we should talk about it.

Mary Alice

From: Fmello@aol.com
Date: Mon, 21 April 2005 15:00
To: Grants Committee
Subject: meeting

Interesting observation, Mary Alice. I agree with you. It does seem that a few of us do all of the work. What do you think we can do about it?

Frank

Date: Mon, 21 April 2005 15:20
To: Grants Committee
From: CKBarr@aol.com
Subject: meeting

What are you two talking about? I didn't notice any problem at the meeting. What am I missing?

Cynthia

Date: Mon, 21 April 2005 15:43
To: Grants Committee
From: ELLorry@aol.com
Subject: meeting

Cynthia, perhaps part of the reason you don't see a problem is that you were only at half of the meeting. You came in on Thursday morning, even though we all agreed to be there on Wednesday night. And you left early on Sunday even though we all had made a commitment to be there until 3 p.m.

There is a problem, I agree. We need to figure out what do so that some of us aren't doing all of the work!

Edwin

Date: Mon, 21 April 2005 17:15
To: Grants Committee
From: CKBarr@aol.com
Subject: meeting

Ed, you know that I had to teach a class on Wednesday night and couldn't leave until the class was over! I can't lose my job to volunteer for this committee! And I had to leave because I wanted to be home Sunday evening.

Are you saying that I don't pull my weight on this committee? I work just as hard as anyone!

Cynthia

Date: Mon, 21 April 2005 21:24
To: Grants Committee
From: JoseB@aol.com
Subject: meeting

What's going on here? What exactly happened that concerned you, Mary Alice? And Cynthia, I hate to say it, but we all did agree in June that we would come to this meeting and stay the whole time. It is unfair to the group to have you come and go at will!

Jose

Date: Mon, 21 April 2005 22:17
To: Grants Committee
From: CKBarr@aol.com
Subject: meeting

Would you all be happier if I left the committee? I don't need this! If you don't like my work, then I'm sure I can use my skills somewhere else!

Just say the word and I'm gone!

Cynthia

E-MAIL'S EFFECT ON CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The dynamics of conflict and conflict management within interpersonal relationships is significantly altered by computer-mediated communication in general, and e-mail in particular.

Within hours of the original inquiry in this based-on-actual-experience exchange, flames were thrown and conflict escalated. And while the specifics of these e-mails are fictional, the rapidity of the conflict's emergence and the tone of the correspondence are quite typical of e-mail exchanges within groups.

What might have happened if the people in the scenario were face to face? Would the interchange have been different? The conflict probably would not have escalated as rapidly, or at all, if each person could have seen, heard, and sensed the other's intended meaning.

Computer-mediated communication is both a blessing and a curse to conflict management. On the one hand, the use of e-mail allows you to think about what you are going to say, and to review and rewrite messages until you have it "just right." On the other hand, it also enables you to write a quick "shoot from the hip" response to a message, and hit "send" before your brain engages.

How exactly does e-mail impact conflict and how can you effectively manage it?

While researchers vary in their estimates of the percentage of information that comes from nonverbal signals in a conversation, most estimates range from 80 to 94 percent. But with e-mail, there aren't any nonverbal clues to the meaning; therefore, the opportunity for misinterpretation is significant.

Even with emoticons—for example, ;)—it is difficult to tell the meaning behind the message. In addition, e-mail lacks the auditory clues of volume, tone of voice, or pitch, which modify the message.

You are left with only the words. And we all know that words can be interpreted very differently, based on your perception and understanding of the context and the people.

Perception is an important part of all communication interactions, and especially important in conflict situations. My perception of you, your motives, your mood, and your thoughts influences my interpretation of the e-mail message. And I will answer your e-mail based on those perceptions. If our previous interactions were contentious, I am going to read that into your e-mail.

The feedback that is normally given and received in face-to-face interaction is missing in e-mail. When we are sitting across the table from each other, the puzzled look on your face will tell me that I didn't make my message clear. Your immediate question will give me a chance to clarify my statement before you can solidify your perceptions of my remarks.

This doesn't happen with e-mail. The feedback I receive is delayed, perhaps by seconds if we are IMing (instant messaging), and longer if I send a message and await your reply. The time between my e-mail and your reply also may give me time to increase my anger and inappropriate perceptions of what you said.

HOW TO MANAGE

What can you do?

Undoubtedly, the most important thing is to **think before you hit send**. You may even need to put a note on the computer to remind you to do so. One of the principles of communication is that it is irreversible: You can't take back what you say—or send. However, in face-to-face communication, there isn't a transcript of the message. With e-mail, there is a clear transcript of your exact words.

One advantage of e-mail is that you can compose a message "off line" and then later cut and paste it into your e-mail. This gives you the opportunity to fine-tune a message. For an especially contentious situation, you may want to write a response, literally sleep on it, and then look at the message again in the morning before you send it. You may decide that you overreacted, or you may decide that you didn't react strongly enough. Either way, you still have the chance to rework you message.

If possible, make face-to-face contact. Often e-mail is not the right vehicle for a response. If you can meet with the other person face to face, then do so. Make an appointment, go to person's office, or invite the person to yours. If it is an especially contentious situation, go to a neutral setting. Sit down face to face to explore the issues. Then you have the advantage of visual and auditory clues. When that isn't possible, pick up the phone and discuss the problem. While you won't get the visual clues, you will have

the auditory ones and the ability to respond immediately. When meeting in person or talking on the phone isn't possible, be sure that the words of your e-mail convey the exact message you want.

E-mail, used well, will help you communicate with colleagues. E-mail used poorly can instantly escalate conflict.

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