

EMAIL: HANDLE WITH CARE

In spite of how easily we do it, communicating may be the hardest thing we do. We have only to consult our own experiences—or the headlines—to know that what we say and write is understood differently by others. If we are careful, face-to-face communication and talking on the phone help us sense our differences and weave common understanding. Email often does not.

Compare face-to-face and phone conversation with email exchange. When I speak, you hear my tone, my hesitations and self-editing. If you are in the room, you see my expressions, gestures and body language; you even have information from what is going on around us. While a phone conversation lessens this “broad band” of verbal and non-verbal signals, we still give more signals in a phone conversation than through email. If you are unclear, you can ask questions and test your understanding on the spot.

When I send email—including the email version of this newsletter—you cannot hear my tone of voice, my first and second tries; nor can you see my facial cues and gestures. Thinking that we are writing almost as fast as we speak, we may be fooled into thinking that our messages are a conversation. Not so. Although email exchanges are quick, they are neither “live” nor “real time.”

So here are guidelines and tips for using email carefully.

Over 50 percent of meaning is conveyed through non-verbal cues. If you are angry or frustrated, or you suspect your message is the least bit sensitive, do not give the message by email. If you receive an email whose tone creates a rise in you, do not reply by email. Go directly to the person, call, or wait and think what to do. As in the stories at the right, the efficiency of email disappears when we spark anger or confusion.

If you find yourself laboring over wording, your difficulty may signal that you should not be emailing. Call or go directly to the person. Consider letting a little time pass before responding. Or write your email response, park it in your “drafts” box, and return to it later. This email should still probably not be sent, but reading it over later may reveal how you were feeling when you wrote it, how you are feeling now, and how the other person is likely to react. Your aborted written message may help you decide how to start a conversation.

When you are initiating an email, enter the recipient’s name in the address box *after* writing your message. If you realize that you should not send the message, you cannot mistakenly or too quickly send it.

Read over every email before sending it.

“CC” people judiciously, and be especially sparing about copying the whole department or organization. Ask, whom are you really addressing? Who, if anyone, should “overhear?” Be direct, both in the people you write to and in your choice of medium (email, memo, letter, phone or in-person communication.)

By prizing the efficiency of email, are we making time into an idol, when we know that relationships are really the essence?

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Stories from the field

Email misunderstandings often occur in the course of my work. Compare these with your experiences.

- By the time the production engineer and quality manager start talking, both are already angry because of an email exchange. Frustrated by a technical problem, the QA manager had written an email in which this frustration came across to the engineer as criticism of her work. They should have talked in the first place.
- An employee, protesting changes in database entry procedures, sends his email to the whole organization. Only three other people do data entry, and they get upset about the broadcast message. It would have been more direct to call the person in charge of database management, or ask for a small meeting.
- A busy volunteer board president, writing late at night and anxious to dispense with business, makes a unilateral decision by email—without first consulting with the Executive Director. Two long phone calls ensue—both to undo the damage.