

## **E-Mail and Conflict: Sending Non-Inflammatory E-Mails**



Microsoft founder, Bill Gates, was the first person I had ever heard accused of sending "flame mail." Apparently he was "flaming" his staff before I ever had an e-mail account. Of course, I've since been flamed myself, and I'm sure you have too. I have to admit that I've also sent flame mail. I'm certainly not proud of it though, and I have really avoided it in the last couple of years. Inflammatory e-mails exacerbate interpersonal conflict, and most people don't respect others who send inflammatory e-mails. They can be perceived as cowardly, and it's almost always viewed as unprofessional.

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### **Avoid Inflammatory E-Mails**

E-mails are inflammatory when (a) their wording is likely to put others on the defensive, or (b) their style or manner in which they are sent violates standards (formal or informal) for appropriate communication. Unfortunately, the rules for what constitutes "standards for appropriate communication" vary from organization-to-organization and situation-to-situation. However, following the rules below will go a long way toward avoiding defensive or angry reactions to your e-mails.

#### **1. Understand conflict, and be aware of the types of things that would be likely to generate defensiveness, frustration or anger.**

You can't be optimally effective at avoiding inflammatory e-mails if you're oblivious to the sorts of things that create and exacerbate conflict. Conflict is natural in any social system (business, team, family, etc.) and can be very healthy if handled well. Conflict arises from people having different information, preferences, opinions, values, goals, needs and so on. Constructive conflict management tactfully addresses such differences and searches for points of agreement, compromises, and "win-win" solutions. Here are examples of things you might send e-mails about that can create or exacerbate conflict:

- Expressing dissatisfaction with someone else's actions or inaction.
- Announcing a decision you made that you think might be unpopular.
- Any kind of complaining.

Be aware of the things that create or exacerbate conflict, and be aware of how they pertain to your e-mail communications. That's the first step in avoiding inflammatory e-mails.

#### **2. Avoid using e-mail to discuss conflict--discuss it in person if possible.**

Since face-to-face communication is just about the richest form of communication, and because it is essential that conflict be discussed effectively, face-to-face communication of conflict is usually better than e-mail. Face-to-face communication allows speakers to communicate through body language and to see other's

reactions to what has been said. Misinformation can be quickly corrected. The tone of the speaker's voice can convey the tone of the message.

It also seems that people are bolder and less considerate when they communicate conflict via e-mail. It seems that electronic communication allows people to say things that they wouldn't have the nerve to say in face-to-face communications.

People can also be suspicious of e-mail discussions of conflict, because it creates a written record of the communication that can potentially be used against the communicator in the future. You also have to wonder whether anyone is getting a blind copy of the flame mail that's sent to you. Consequently, e-mailing conflict can appear manipulative.

### **3. If you must use e-mail to discuss conflict, acknowledge that it's not the ideal form of communication.**

If you have to use e-mail to confront conflict, explain why you're using that method of communication, and offer to discuss the issue face-to-face. This shows that you're aware of the sensitivity of the issue, the limitations of e-mail, and that you're not hiding behind e-mail to say things that you lack the courage to say face-to-face.

### **4. Use wording that is constructive and a style that is appropriate.**

Whether having an e-mail or face-to-face discussion of conflict, use [wording that is constructive](#), not combative or inflammatory. It's also best not to use words in all upper-case letters, because that is e-mail's version of yelling. Use a style that would be just as appropriate for a hardcopy memo distributed to all mailboxes.

### **In Summary ...**

Despite all the advantages of e-mail, e-mail communication doesn't usually help with workplace conflict. In fact, e-mail often creates conflict due to miscommunication, or it makes existing conflict even worse. However, e-mail is "here to stay," so using e-mail effectively and thinking about the possible effects of e-mail communication on conflict are essential. One of the keys to using e-mail effectively is ensuring that the e-mails you send are non-inflammatory.

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### **About the Newsletter and Subscriptions**

*LeaderLetter* is written by Dr. Scott Williams, Department of Management, [Raj Sooin College of Business](#), Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. It is a supplement to my MBA 751 - Managing People in Organizations class. It is intended to reinforce the course concepts and maintain communication among my former MBA 751 students, but anyone is welcome to subscribe. In addition, subscribers are welcome to forward this newsletter to anyone who they believe would have an interest in it. To [subscribe](#), simply send an e-mail message to me requesting subscription. Of course, subscriptions to the newsletter are free. To [unsubscribe](#), e-mail a reply indicating that you would like to unsubscribe.

### **E-mail Your Comments**

Whether you are one of my former students or not, I invite you to share any insights or concerns you have regarding the topic of this newsletter or any other topic relating to management skills. Please [e-mail](#) them to me. Our interactions have been invaluable. **Every week, I learn something new from *LeaderLetter* subscribers!** Let's keep the conversation going.

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### **Good, Clean Joke**

#### The top ten signs that someone is using your e-mail account

10. "Honey, why is an 18-wheeler from Amazon.com backing into our driveway?"

9. One Secret Service agent is sitting on your head while another is slapping cuffs on you.

8. Apparently, your flame war with DonCorleone@mafia.com is about to turn ugly.
7. When you log on, your computer says "You've got lawsuits!"
6. You're suddenly getting more Spam than the Hormel outlet store.
5. Sotheby's says the Rembrandt is yours and that you now owe them \$71,000,000 and change.
4. You now have 130,000 ClubTop5 subscriptions and the list moderator is on the cover of Business Week.
3. Terse "Knock it off, Oedipus" e-mail from your Mom.
2. Your wife calls you at the office to report that Pogdi, your mail-order bride, has arrived.
1. "The resistance welcomes your involvement. Your contact information has been forwarded to a local insurgent who will bring supplies and reinforcements to you immediately."

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