E-mail Etiquette: Improving Communication

The use of e-mail in organizations is pervasive; letters and phone calls are less and less common. We all receive scores of e-mail messages every day, yet it is surprising how people often misuse this medium. Here are some suggestions to improve e-mail communication and etiquette to make our e-mail a more civilized, effective tool for communication:

Understand the difference between "To" and "CC." As a rule, the more people you send an e-mail to, the less likely any single person will respond to it, much less perform any action that you request. The people you include in the "To" field should be the people you expect to read and respond to the message. The "CC" field should be used sparingly. You should only "CC" people who have a need to stay in the know. The "BCC" field should be used even more sparingly. People you include in the "BCC" field will not visible to others.

Keep messages brief and to the point. Make your most important point first, and then provide detail, if necessary. Make it clear at the beginning of the message why you are writing. There is nothing worse for the recipient than having to wade through a long message to get to the point. Worse, if you send long messages, it is much less likely that the person will act on or respond to what you have sent. It's just too much work, often gets set aside, and, unfortunately, forgotten.

Don't discuss multiple subjects in a single message. If you need to discuss more than one subject, send multiple e-mails. This makes it easy to scan subject lines later to find the message you need. It also contributes to briefer e-mail messages and a greater likelihood of a response. The more specific you can be about your subject heading, the better.

Reply in a timely manner. E-mail demands an instantaneous response. Responding once or twice a day is sufficient, unless you are in customer service, tech support, or some other are where a faster response is expected. Regardless, you must reply in a timely manner, otherwise you will incrementally decrease your effectiveness.

Be mindful of your tone. Unlike face-to-face meetings or phone calls, those who read your e-mail messages don't have the benefit of your pitch, tone, inflection, or other nonverbal cues. As a result, you need to be careful about your tone. Sarcasm is especially dangerous. If something gets "lost in translation," you risk offending the other party. The more matter-of-fact you can be the better.

Don't use e-mail to criticize others. E-mail is a terrific way to commend someone or praise them. It is not an appropriate medium for criticism because it's likely you will simply offend the other person and they will miss your point. Such conversations are usually better handled face-to-face or over the phone. Especially, don't use e-mail to criticize a third party. E-mail messages live forever. They are easily forwarded. You can create conflict if you are not careful.

Don't overuse "reply to all." This can just add more clutter to everyone's already unwieldy inbox. Your default response should be to reply only to the sender. Before you reply to everyone, make sure that everyone needs to know.

Don't reply in anger. In the heat of the moment, be careful when writing your replies. Don't say things in writing that you would never say face-to-face. This is precisely why you should never send an e-mail in anger, because they usually do not serve their purpose or your long-term interests. They can burn up relationships faster than just about anything you can do.

Don't forward chain letters. These can be forgiven when they are from your mother, but they only add clutter in the workplace. Nine times out of ten, the information is bogus. It is often urban legend. If you feel you absolutely must pass it on, please make sure that it is valid information.

Don't "copy up" as a means of coercion. It's one thing to copy someone's boss as a courtesy. But it is not a good idea to do this as a subtle - or not-so subtle -form of coercion. You may be tempted to do this when you don't get a response to an earlier request. You may be better served to pick up the phone and call the person. If they are not responding, try a different communication strategy.

Don't overuse the "high priority" flag. Most e-mail programs allow you to set the priority of the message. "High priority" should be reserved for messages that are truly urgent. If you use it for every message, you will simply be ignored. It's like the boy who cried "wolf" one too many times.

Don't write in ALL CAPS. This is the digital equivalent of shouting. Besides ALL CAPS are harder to read.

Don't send or forward e-mails containing libelous, defamatory, offensive, racist, or obscene remarks. If you do, you can put yourself and the organization at risk.

Remember that company e-mail isn't private. You have no legal protection.

Use a signature with your contact information. This is a courtesy for those receiving your messages. It also cuts down on e-mail messages, since people don't have to send a second or third e-mail asking for your phone number or mailing address.

Provide "if-then" options. Avoid the back and forth of single option messages. For example, "If you have completed the assignment, please confirm via e-mail. If not, please estimate when you expect to finish."

Use your spell check. Your correspondence reflects on you. If you misspell words or use bad grammar or punctuation, it reflects negatively on you. Lapses in grammar or punctuation can be forgiven. But misspelled words are just too easy to correct through spell-checkers (although it has some errors, too). Make sure that spell check is turned on.

Reread your e-mail before you send it. Do this with every single message. Since fingers have difficulty keeping up with the brain, it is not unusual to drop a word or two when you're racing to transcribe a thought. Reread your messages and make sure that you are communicating clearly and observing good e-mail etiquette.