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inside:

THE WORKPLACE

What is Your Problem?

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The Advanced Computing Systems Association &
The System Administrators Guild

what is your problem? that email was fine!

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An Exploration into How Not to Write Flame Mail

Most people in the technology industries read and send email every day. A significant number of these people read and send hundreds of such communications on a daily basis. Email has become a significant and powerful tool which has become critical in nearly every part of our society. It enables users to communicate a broad range of complex ideas, quickly, easily, and regardless of schedule or geography. It is immediate yet queued. It is also, however, arguably the most dangerous communications tool we have invented to date.

Most people have discovered that they have an extremely difficult time controlling how others perceive what they write. Where verbally we rely upon facial expressions, body language, and tone to express our feelings on a subject, in email we have none of these things. Therefore, personal catch phrases like “I don’t think I like your attitude” (with a big smile and a playful glare) quickly turn into a personal offense and a gauntlet on the field.

Unfortunately, many other people have found that email can be a kind of shield. Since they don’t actually have to look you in the face, they have the opportunity to write things that they would never dare say to any human being in a conversation. Where verbally this person might actually say nothing or possibly mumble a bit while walking away, they might actually say, “I don’t think I like your attitude,” and actually mean it. Worse, they might say, “It’s not my fault that you don’t know what you’re doing,” and it would be hard to say that and not mean anything other than what one would assume they meant.

There is a final group of people who simply feel that email is a tool and believe that the tool has a proper solitary and simple use. For example, what is a hammer, but an implement that is used to drive a nail into a piece of wood? This group often feels that people “need to relax” or should “stop reading between the lines.” They feel that the words they place in their emails are factual and to the point, and there is little or no use for wasting countless hours putting flowery, soft words and phrases to coddle people; these people need to deal in the facts, not how the writer’s statements “make them feel.” The primary difference between this person and the shield person in the previous group is that these people might actually say everything they say in email to your face, and in fact will probably state with pride that they will do just that.

In writing this article, I don’t intend to change you. What you do, who you are, and how you choose to write your emails to people is your business. What I do propose to do is educate; to give insight as to how emails function at the level beyond the presentation layer. Regardless of how you decide to write emails after this article, in better understanding how they work you may at least be able to deal more effectively with how people react to them. If you choose to embrace all, or even some, of the ideas presented here, I can guarantee that with practice and patience you will have positive results.

To begin, let's talk a bit about perception. All human beings function by taking what data they have available to them and filling in areas that they don't have in order to complete the picture. For example, if someone (let's call her Carol) is approaching me rapidly, she could be doing this for any number of reasons. While certainly I could not hope to mention all the possibilities of why Carol is racing towards me, let's propose that she could be doing this for one of the following reasons: she could be attacking me, rushing to me in alarm to tell me the building is on fire, happy and excited about something, or excited and mad about something.

How do I know which one it is? Well, first I might look at Carol's facial expression. Is she smiling or frowning? Is she, perhaps, crying? What does her body language say to me? Are her fists clenched? Perhaps she is reaching out to me? Does she look tense? What is she carrying? A fire extinguisher might be a clue, but then so might a knife. What kind of knife is that? Is it a birthday cake-cutting implement, or is it something you might see in the hands of a Dungeons & Dragons assassin? Finally, what is she saying? Or screaming?

In interacting with humans in person, we have a great many clues to indicate what a person may be thinking or feeling; in the example above, the clues that Carol is presenting us with are the same clues that we automatically use in our own lives to communicate our own feelings, whether we are trying to or not.

Consider a dog for a moment. If you have ever had or interacted with one, you may have realized that they seem to understand what your feelings are when you are talking to them. Regardless of whether you are happy, sad, or angry, they appear to understand and respond appropriately. Now, in the dog-mind-twisting spirit of Pavlov, have you ever tried opening your arms wide, looking really happy and excited and telling your dog at great length in a really excited tone how bad he was? Try it if you have not. The dog responds to that which he has available to him, and since by and large he does not understand a word you say, he will respond very happily because he perceives that you are happy and pleased with him. What do you think would happen if you deliberately made yourself look very angry and threatening and said in a gruff and loud tone how much you love the dog and think he's the most wonderful thing in the world?

Now pretend the dog is your coworker.

Seriously, think about that for a moment. How does the reaction of your coworker reading your email differ from your dog's reaction in this situation? Both your dog and your coworker are missing at least one key piece of your communication.

In the same way that your dog cannot understand the words you are saying, your coworker cannot see you or hear the tone of your voice. In fact, in most cases where you are not deliberately playing with the mind of Rover, the dog is clearly at a distinct advantage over your coworker. Because, regardless of the fact that Rover can't see or speak a word of English, he has a very strong understanding of what you are feeling because he is usually right that you're happy when you act happy, sad when you act sad, and angry when you act like a lunatic.

A coworker reading your email is denied the pleasure of your smiling face as you tell him what a waste of carbon he really is. If you were with him, you might have smiled and given him a playful shot in the arm, but you aren't . . . and you didn't. Since he knows that he is being severely insulted and has no other information to go on, he becomes insulted and proceeds to flame you back and carbon copy your boss.

A coworker reading your email is denied the pleasure of your smiling face as you tell him what a waste of carbon he really is.

Keep in mind that emoticons are really very unprofessional.

What is the key to irritating the heck out of everyone around us? The following sections illustrate some key areas that you can focus on to make your emails less offensive, or at least to understand why you're so good at making people so terribly angry with you.

Understand that Email Is a Written Medium

Anyone can print your email or forward it to anyone. You should consider refraining from writing anything that you don't want printed in the *New York Times*. Of course, sometimes you'll be referencing company confidential information or trade secrets, but the point is that you don't want to be the brunt of criticism if your written note is disclosed for any reason (i.e., security, anger, or something unanticipated).

Pick Up the Phone, Walk Down the Hall

Absolutely the simplest and best way to avoid e-flaming anyone is to avoid emails altogether. This may sound silly, but it's true. A large number of problems with bad email wars come out of the simple fact that the problem is way too hot to easily deal with "face-to-face," so people hide behind their electronic shield.

In these tough times, it is best to work with the person directly. Yes, it is harder, but at least each of you will be in the same room, see each other's facial expressions, and be less likely to lob insults and demands all over the place.

The more difficult the situation, the harder this will be, but this is clearly the most natural method of handling conflict aside from beating someone with a Tyrannosaur bone . . . which I do not personally recommend.

Consider Instant Messages

While still potentially dangerous, using "instant messages" can be helpful because they are more dialog oriented. In an email, you simply get up on your soap box and wax on about how badly people perform their job. In an instant messenger you go back and forth, often one line at a time. Frequently this type of "discussion" results in your getting a key piece of information that you were unaware of that diffuses the situation entirely.

Emoticons

It is a good idea to use an occasional emoticon ":-)" to show that you are happy and smiling as you write. A simple sentence like "I demand quality, and I won't stand for this infraction!" sounds pretty hostile. Add a simple ";-)" to the end, and suddenly you're just kidding around.

Certainly, don't add emoticons where they are inappropriate. If you are really trying to be serious and drive home a point, a happy emoticon is going to undermine that effort.

Also be certain not to use too many. If you find that you have to pepper your email with emoticons, then you're probably so angry that you should cool off and write this later, or possibly not at all.

Keep in mind that emoticons are really also very unprofessional. I shudder to even insert one in this article. In fact, I even loathe having to write the word "emoticon" itself. If you are writing a formal letter, something for a broad audience or your boss, avoid emoticons entirely. Sometimes using one in these situations would be a "bold

move, admired by all,” but not usually. That’s more of an advanced emoticon usage tactic. (I’ll refrain from putting one more smiley face here, just picture me grinning.)

Be Self-Effacing

Oftentimes, half of the battle is keeping the person reading your email from taking a defensive posture. If you can do that, you can give yourself a margin of error with the person because they will simply disregard minor transgressions.

A really great way to do this is to make a self-effacing statement. This, however, is a dangerous art because you run the risk of (1) making yourself, and possibly even your team or group, look idiotic or (2) looking insincere or phony.

Some examples of self-effacing statements:

“I could be wrong, but . . .”

“I’m sorry, I’m a bit new to this process . . .”

“I think I’m confused . . .”

“You’re far better at this kind of thing than I am . . .”

“If I’ve made any misstatements, please do let me know.”

Statements such as these have a disarming effect because you are immediately saying to the reader that you are not necessarily certain, and especially that you are open to dialog and possibly even acknowledging that the reader may be more informed or capable than you.

Statements like these can turn a potentially hostile sentence like “You made a mistake and used the wrong template” into something much more approachable like “I’m sorry, I’m a bit new to this process, but it looks like you may have used the wrong template.”

Ask for Help

This is another great method of putting yourself in a less authoritative position and ensuring the reader is not in a defensive one. The simple method of asking for help immediately says to the reader, “Hey, I need you and I acknowledge that you may have an understanding, information, or resources which I do not.”

Some examples of asking for help:

“I was wondering if you could help . . .”

“I was wondering if you knew . . .”

“Thanks! I really appreciate your help!”

Employing this method can turn a single-sentence email of “Put those papers away” into something much less commanding like “I was wondering if you could help me out by putting those papers away? Thanks!”

Offer to Help

Just as powerful as asking for help is offering to help. Initially, one might think that this would put people on the defensive since you are clearly indicating that they might need assistance. However, what usually winds up happening is that the person feels that regardless of their power position, you are extending your hand in an effort to do

Just as powerful as asking for help is offering to help.

A great way to defuse a hostile situation is to simply throw in a couple of complimentary statements.

whatever you can to try to make things better for them. When offering help, you may even find that your assistance may actually aid in fixing that which was irritating you so much to begin with.

Needless to say, it's important that you follow through on these offers, as not doing so will eventually make you look insincere and predispose people to not trusting you.

Be Complimentary

A great way to defuse a hostile situation is to simply throw in a couple of complimentary statements.

Like many of the tactics described in this article, you need to be careful not to come across as fake or phony, for if you do you are likely to anger the person all the more. An easy way to avoid this pitfall is to simply compliment people on things that are genuinely true and relevant to the situation.

In other words, if you are discussing the next big project you are working on with the addressee, don't compliment them on their shoes, but certainly a statement of how great they were on the last project, or how you "couldn't have done it without them," will be appreciated and worth a lot in your efforts to keep them happy and calm.

Pretend it's Face-to-Face

When writing your email, make sure anything that you write is actually something you would be willing to say to the addressee if you were speaking to them face-to-face.

For example, do you really think you would say "I don't like your attitude" directly to someone if you were talking to them? Probably not, unless you were looking to get punched in the face. However, you might say something more along the lines of "I'm not really very comfortable with the way this is going. Maybe we should talk about this later."

Put it Aside; Let it Cool

If and when you write something that you are not entirely sure is going to come across the right way, it's often a good idea to put the email aside for now and come back to review it later. It's often best to wait a full 24 hours.

If, when you return, you read the mail and still feel that it is okay to send, then go ahead. Usually, people find that a day later they are not nearly as angry as they were when they first began writing the email, and are less inclined to send it the way they wrote it, or even send it at all.

Don't Write While Angry

If you're angry when you are writing an email, it will almost invariably show up in the way your mail reads to the recipient. You could even be angry about something completely unrelated to the content of the communication or the addressee, and it will still seem to the person reading it that you are angry at them.

For some people, this can be true even if you are mildly irritated. Basically, if you are in a bad mood, overly tired, angry, bitter, or any other negative emotion, it's best to avoid sending people email if you can.

Needless to say, the better you are at mastering some of the other more active email softening techniques, this becomes less of a problem as you are more aware of what it is that you are putting down on "paper."

Beware Brevity

Brevity in an email can be very dangerous. You will notice that in most of the examples shown in this article that we add something to the sentences to soften or defuse them, rather than just commanding someone to “Put those papers away.”

Telling someone to put those papers away is clearly to the point, but it comes across as a very rude and abrupt command. The longer, “I was wondering if you could help me out by putting those papers away? Thanks!” clearly gets your thoughts across but avoids making you look like you’re trying to be Lord Jerk, King of the Office.

Keep in mind that there is an unfortunate flip-side to this. Sometimes if your email is too long, you will come across as phony or just plain irritating. Some people simply cannot stand verbose email. In time, as you learn some of the other methods, you will actually be able to write fairly brief emails and get away with it.

Ask Someone Else to Review

It’s always a good idea to let another, preferably impartial, person check your email before you send it. I like to pick a person who I know is not associated in any way with the situation, because they are far less likely to be upset about the same thing I am.

Keep in mind the mannerisms of the person you are picking, however. If you choose someone famous for flaming everyone within his or her reach, you are not likely to get a very useful review.

I also recommend having your boss review such emails. This allows your boss to know you are frustrated over something, while at the same time ensuring that she knows you are trying to do the right thing. Finally, if she says it’s a good message and you get attacked for flaming someone after all, your boss is really the one responsible for giving you her approval prior to it being sent. It’s certainly not their fault for the flame, but at least you won’t be alone when the heat comes back in your direction.

Know Your Audience

In all cases, in all things, it’s important to know your audience. Who will be reading this email? What kind of person are they? Are they sensitive? Or perhaps they have bark skin and a stone heart? Even if they are less sensitive, would they be particularly sensitive to this issue which you are raising?

The point is that no one method works for every person, every time. Carefully monitoring your audience and thinking of how they are likely to react to a given situation will be an enormous aid to you in writing email messages.

For example, I presently work as a manager in the Engineering Department of my company. In Engineering, things are a bit on the formal side, and people tend to be fairly sensitive to the content and delivery of email. However, we also work very closely with the Operations group. They, too, can be sensitive to email, but usually only on certain subjects. What’s more, their email is frequently offensive and derogatory, though usually through indirect means.

Since I know these things, I try very hard to ignore the seemingly nasty remarks in emails from Operations, but also don’t work too hard to keep my email flame-free, unless I know I’ll be hitting on something that is a sore spot for that group.

What’s more interesting is that if I write an email to Operations that is more formal and filled with extra softening, as I often need to do when writing to Engineering, they

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It is always important to understand that any word can have multiple meanings or implications.

actually get more angry at me than they would if I had just rattled off a quick two-line message.

This type of scenario is common and makes the art of sending email infuriatingly complicated, because it means that while you can and will need to use many of the ideas contained within this article to keep people from showing up at your door with pitchforks and torches, sometimes using them with the wrong people will yield exactly the result you are trying to avoid.

Watch Big Lists

As part of knowing your audience, understand that big lists of addressees can be particularly dangerous. The more people you have on your list, the more likely any one of them is going to be annoyed by your email.

What's worse is that if someone is annoyed, there is a very good chance that when they flame you, they will flame the whole list, which is likely to make you pretty angry, like you have been publicly attacked.

I could easily write a whole article on list etiquette alone, but here are some basic tips:

First and foremost, do your best to keep the number of recipients to a minimum. Simply stated, the smaller the audience, the fewer the unexpected personality traits that are going to react negatively to your message. Sending an email to 100 people is like tossing a 20-pound block of sodium into the public pool during adult swim on Labor Day.

Remember that a good portion of avoiding a flame war is to keep the person on the receiving end of your email from being on the defensive. Carbon copying your boss, their boss, or anyone else of authority is likely to immediately make everyone uneasy. Don't include people like this, unless you absolutely need to.

When attacked, don't respond. Most of the time the person who lashes out at you looks far sillier to the people on the list. Let him hold his title and move on. If you must respond, deal only with the issues the person raised, not with their attack.

Consider sending blind carbon copies ("bcc") to people who you would like to see the message, but you don't want "on the list." Understand that bccs are dangerous because the act of using them is inherently deceitful, because you are hiding the list of true recipients. The people who receive the mail may then not realize that they were only blind copied and respond to all. When they do this, someone may realize your deception and become very angry. Sometimes you can send an email to the intended bcc recipients prior to sending the actual mail, warning them of the message they are about to get and not to do this. Sometimes, it's easier just to forward them a copy after you have already sent it.

Watch Implications

It is always important to understand that any word can have multiple meanings or implications. There are a great many words that can be used to say essentially the same thing; but some, depending on the context, have additional meanings which can be quite destructive in your efforts to communicate peacefully.

For example, I could refer to someone who does not react strongly to emotional stimuli as "insensitive." Insensitive certainly says this person can take some abuse without breaking down, but it also implies that the person is somehow unkind, uncaring, or callous. I could soften this up a bit and say that the person is, perhaps, "less sensitive."

This is pretty reasonable as it seems neither complimentary nor derogatory. However, if I called the person “stout” or “stalwart,” this might assign the person a characteristic which most people find to be complimentary. Suddenly I’ve run the gamut from being offensive to complimentary, and I’ve been essentially saying the same thing.

It is obviously important to choose words that best fit what you truly mean, what you want to get across, or at least that will say roughly what you want without upsetting people.

Large Words and Formal Tone

The use of large words and formal tone can often come across as authoritarian and sometimes even patronizing. This immediately puts the person in a defensive posture and is likely to cause some pretty serious emotions to come up.

For example, phrases such as . . .

“It has come to my attention . . .”

“I would like to discuss the matter at hand . . .”

“Calibration of the units in question may cause significant problems with our schedule . . .”

These phrases are quite formal indeed. However, you can easily soften these up. For example:

“I just noticed something . . .”

“Hey, do you have a few minutes for us to talk today?”

“If we calibrate those, we may have some problems with our schedule.”

The trick with this is to write to your email recipient in the same way you would talk to them face-to-face. If you happen to be the kind of person who says things like “It has come to my attention . . .” in everyday conversations, then you may have deeper issues to which the solutions are far outside of the scope of this article.

Capital Letters

Astoundingly enough, some people still do write email in all capital letters. It is pretty rare, but it does happen. For that reason, I feel I must take the time to issue this very rudimentary warning:

DO NOT USE CAPITAL LETTERS. CAPITAL LETTERS MEAN YOU ARE YELLING!

Whoops. Well, I assume you get the point.

Low-Grade Hostility

Low-grade hostility is a very difficult thing to describe. In essence, it is putting yourself in a position of authority by using certain key words and phrases in your sentences. Interestingly enough, this is almost as frequently a problem in verbal communications as it is in written ones.

The best bet is to avoid telling people what you think they “need” to do or be. Do your best to avoid direction and attempts to subtly point out their failings. If you feel the need to go after these areas, it’s often best to ask leading questions that will allow the person to highlight their own issues.

The best bet is to avoid telling people what you think they “need” to do or be.

For example:

“Did you really want to put that there?”

“Hey, did you notice that you were standing under the bridge that you are planning to blow up?”

“I’m not sure if you know, but that’s my arm under that knife.”

Be careful when using questions as alternatives. As shown in the last example, they can quickly and easily become rather sarcastic.

Direct Hostility

Needless to say, tearing a person to pieces and saying all sorts of uncomplimentary things about his or her mother is not going to win you any friends. One would assume that this is pretty obvious, but the piece would not be complete without it.

Now, let’s try an example. I happen to be fairly annoyed at a coworker of mine, so I will write an email that I would really enjoy writing to her, and I will follow that with a much more reasonable replacement that is less likely to get me fired . . . or beaten.

FLAME MAIL EXAMPLE

Lucy-

You know, despite the fact that we’ve worked together for two years, you still insist upon assuming that my team is incapable and completely forgetting that I and my team have completely revamped a mess of a development process. This is clearly indicated by your attempting to micromanage my team, instead of dealing with your own...which, by the way, is falling apart.

I would really appreciate it if you would deal with your own issues, and if you feel compelled to bring up issues that you think my team is somehow falling down on, that you either tell your own staff so that they can bring them to my attention, or that you address them to me directly.

I would ask that you no longer engage my staff members directly. If I hear of this happening again, I will speak with your management.

-Chris

FIXED FLAME MAIL EXAMPLE

Hi Lucy, how are you doing?

Hey, I was a little confused and was wondering if you could help me out with something. As you know, I’ve taken on a new team and have been given the responsibility of revamping it in a manner similar to what I’ve done with my existing team.

You and your team were a great help to me in my early days with that Engineering team, by the way. I know I’ve said this before, but I feel I can’t really say it enough.

Anyway... some of my newer team members have been telling me that you’ve been stopping by and asking them to do things that are outside of our standards, asking them to set up meetings that they feel I need to be conducting, etc. They have pretty much all said that they would really like to do whatever we need to in order to do the job properly, but are confused as to why you and I seem to be out of alignment.

Short of making a visit to the chiropractor ;-), I was wondering if we could possibly work out a better way to get you what you need. I thought that maybe we could have a weekly or semi-weekly meeting between us to discuss your issues and make sure we are addressing them. I think this would be great, as it would give us a chance to work more closely on these issues and possibly also reduce any confusion between our two teams.

What do you think?

Thanks, Lucy- I really appreciate your time and help!

-Chris

Exercise

Now that you've read all the way through this article and studied the examples above, here are a few exercises that should help you to practice some of these techniques.

1. Go over the example flame mail above and write down a list of every bad thing that you think I may have done. Attempt to cross-reference them with some of the behaviors mentioned in the article. Consider for a moment how obvious these things are to you, and think about whether or not they would be so obvious if you were writing them yourself, when angry.
2. Go over the example fixed flame mail above and write down a list of every good thing that you think I may have done. Attempt to cross-reference them with some of the behaviors and tactics mentioned in this article. Now attempt to cross reference the points made from the flame to the fixed flame. Notice the differences in the wording and how it affected the tone. Is there anything that was missed?
3. Try to find some emails that you have written in the past that have been perceived as being harsh or abusive. Spend some time trying to rewrite these in a manner that is less offensive or hostile. Consider why the message was so hostile when you wrote it. Were there any simple behavioral things you could have done that would have toned it down a bit?
4. Lastly, create a quick checklist of things that you should consider when writing any email. Print this and post it on the wall next to where you are likely to spend time writing mail. Refer to this each and every time before you press send on a message that could come across as nasty.

There are a lot of lessons to learn, many subtleties and nuances to master and, for many people, many years of practice to get it right. If you truly want to accomplish this, you certainly can. Just be patient and keep practicing. In time, you will be able to write inoffensive email in the harshest of conditions without even trying. Good luck!