

Conflict and Email

Problems and Possibilities

Jen Reynolds, Interim Ombudsperson

April 27, 2016

From: The President
To: You
Date: February 3, 2016
Subject: Re: Update on strategic plan

?

From: [faculty member]
To: [department team]
Date: March 15, 2016
Subject:

I request a meeting with team members at your earliest convenience. I will be out of town Saturday, Sunday and Monday.

- ▶ No visual or verbal cues
- ▶ No control over when email is read
- ▶ Little to no interactivity

- ▶ Increased contentiousness
- ▶ Diminished trust and cooperation
- ▶ Increased effects of negative attribution



- ▶ Provocative lettering or punctuation
 - ▶ *“What was the **point** of saying something like that?”*
- ▶ Insults; demeaning, mean-spirited comments
 - ▶ *“You’re an idiot, as your scholarship makes abundantly clear.”*
- ▶ Exaggeration or hyperbole
 - ▶ *“They’re deadweights who do nothing for our unit.”*
- ▶ Passive-aggressive language
 - ▶ *“At the end of the day it’s your decision, and to be honest, I’m indifferent.”*

- ▶ Asserting false emergencies and deadlines
- ▶ Expecting quick response, to get people “on the record”
- ▶ Looping additional parties into the conversation in the original exchange or later in the thread
- ▶ Forwarding emails to bloggers or other public sources
- ▶ Misrepresenting the other’s position, to bait the other into engaging or to wage reputational warfare

From: [faculty member A]
To: [department head B]
CC: [several colleagues]
Date: November 1, 2015
Subject: PRIORITY CONCERN

I don't like the way you made the decision on the program funding, B. Your fundamental opposition to collaboration is crystal clear. Might I ask some basic questions? Such as, where will the savings go? And how will we explain this change of direction to our donors? The department has been asking you for this information for months and you continue to absolutely refuse to engage. PLEASE educate yourself about these issues so we can discuss further. It may be too late to fix anything, but at least you would have the chance to finally show that you actually care about this place.

- ▶ **Don't use** email for difficult conversations, complicated situations, or conflict management
- ▶ But ...
 - ▶ Correcting misinformation
 - ▶ Personalities
 - ▶ Paper trail

- ▶ **Avoid using** email for difficult conversations, complicated situations, or conflict management
- ▶ Develop core email skills
 - ▶ Writing ability
 - ▶ Message management
 - ▶ Relationship management
 - ▶ Content management

- ▶ Writing ability
 - ▶ Be mindful of the audience
- ▶ Message management
 - ▶ 24-hour rule
- ▶ Relationship management
 - ▶ Soft on people, hard on the problem
- ▶ Content management
 - ▶ Important: What is your purpose in writing?

- ▶ **Avoid using** email for difficult conversations, complicated situations, or conflict management

- ▶ Develop core email skills
 - ▶ Writing ability
 - ▶ Message management
 - ▶ Relationship management
 - ▶ Content management

- ▶ Create guidance for self and office, if possible

Bad Email Responses

We don't know what caused this.

Nothing seems out of place.

It's not our team's problem.

Good Email Responses

We are debugging the script and will send you an updated progress report in 48 hours.

The error was ours, but we fixed it long ago and it won't happen again.

This error revealed a bug which we will fix in a deployment in 30 days. In the meantime we will add a warning message to the tool to help users avoid this bug.

From: [faculty member A]
To: [department head B]
CC: [several colleagues]
Date: November 1, 2015
Subject: PRIORITY CONCERN

I don't like the way you made the decision on the program funding, B. Your fundamental opposition to collaboration is crystal clear. Might I ask some basic questions? Such as, where will the savings go? And how will we explain this change of direction to our donors? The department has been asking you for this information for months and you continue to absolutely refuse to engage. PLEASE educate yourself about these issues so we can discuss further. It may be too late to fix anything, but at least you would have the chance to finally show that you actually care about this place.

From: [faculty member A]
To: [department head B]
Date: November 1, 2015
Subject: Following up on the program funding decision

Dear B:

I know that you are incredibly busy and I hate to add more to your plate, but I still have some questions and concerns about the program funding decision.

Would it be possible for us to meet and talk further? I can also provide my questions in advance over email, if that's helpful.

Thanks very much for your help -- A

- ▶ UO Ombuds Program
- ▶ “You’ve Got Agreement: Negoti@ting Via Email” (Ebner, Bhappu, Brown, Kovach, Schneider)
- ▶ Myriad of web resources on managing conflicts via email (we are collecting these on the Ombuds website)
- ▶ “Talking (Exclamation) Points” (Aimee Lee Ball, NYT)
- ▶ “What ‘XOXO’ Really Means” (Emma Rathbone, *The New Yorker*)