Grinnell College

Office of the Ombudsperson

Electronic Communication and Conflict Escalation: Tips for Productive Exchanges

Electronic communications such as email, chat features embedded in shared platforms, and texting hold significant appeal in our busy day-to-day realities. The convenience of composing our words privately, unhurriedly, and on our own timetable – rather than in direct conversation where we risk interruptions, fumbling for the right language, feeling intimidated, or overwhelmed by emotion – is certainly one.

Yet despite the ease, even presuming all good intentions, electronic communication can escalate conflict and exacerbate any existing interpersonal tensions. I would recommend against using a chat function or texting when the discussion is of a sensitive nature, or a more professional exchange is in order. Using email to constructively conduct difficult conversations is possible, when messages are composed with a good deal of thoughtfulness. Handled with care, conflict can lead to personal and professional growth.

1. Consider all relevant factors to wisely choose your means of communicating.

We work and learn in an increasingly global environment and the ability to hold phone or video calls without incurring additional charges is becoming more prevalent. Phone and video often enable us to pick up on non-verbal cues lost in email exchanges and allow for addressing miscommunications, misunderstanding, and minor disagreements in real-time, before a matter escalates. Do check time zones when arranging a phone or video call.

2. The "reply all" button is not always necessary.

Think about the intention of the distribution of a sent message. Was it simply an FYI or does it require a response *to all of the recipients*. A "thank you" to the sender need not go to the entire group. A question for the sender to clarify content, especially when there is an unsettled issue between you, could easily be misinterpreted as a public shaming if sent to all. A reply to sender with a carefully composed question will likely be received more positively.

3. Be cautious of involving others by copying them in.

When either an unresolved conflict or fraught relationship exists, preserving – if not improving – the relationship, may mean refraining from indiscriminately copying others into your communications. Despite temptation to create a record of the conversation for others or demonstrate to them the rightness of your position, avoid escalating conflict by unnecessarily copying others in. Bcc'ing violates norms of transparency and tends to undermine trust. Ask yourself the following questions before adding others:

- What is my objective here? Will cc'ing help or hinder its attainment?
- Will this create difficulties for the recipient? How would I feel in similar circumstances?
- Am I sending the message only to those directly involved or to those who need the message content? If so, could the content be shared differently.

4. Be mindful of security, privacy, and confidentiality.

Anything put in the digital realm can easily be made public or otherwise distributed. Avoid sharing sensitive or confidential information by email. When you must, consider sending encrypted or locked documents. If you are hesitant because you are uncertain of how to do this, instructions are available online or you could contact ITS for assistance.

5. Review your message for clarity and intentions before sending.

You cannot predict or know with certainty how readers might interpret your message. If it is one that may elicit a defensive reaction, try leading with a message that communicates your good intentions. You could choose to send it as a lead-in to an invitation to further converse, without addressing the specifics in writing.

Example: *I would like to share a couple of concerns regarding our monthly meetings and do not want you to be surprised by my bringing them to your attention, without notice. I am hopeful that this brief email will allow you time to consider how, when, and where we might best discuss them. My goal is for us to continue to have productive meetings and a healthy work relationship.*