Ten Points for Smarter Email

By Ann Latham

Email is just WAY too easy. That "reply-all" button in particular should require a license to operate. Here are 10 tips to save all of us time. Pass this newsletter around your company and community and maybe together we can reduce some of the unnecessary volume that is clogging inboxes, increasing stress, and destroying productivity.

1. If you don't know what you are trying to accomplish, don't try to accomplish it via email.

2. If your email is going to lead to an email, which is going to lead to another email, which is going to lead ... you get the idea, don't use email. Get on the phone or out of your chair and have a real conversation. Only use email when you believe you can accomplish your purpose in one round trip - one message and one response.

3. Keep email short and to the point. What specifically do you need from the other person? If detail or background information is necessary, use the first few sentences to clarify the question, assignment, decision, or other purpose. Don't assume people will read more than the first paragraph unless you give them good reason. If you bury important information below, it may never see the light of day.

4. Distinguish between requests for action and information (FYI). If you are simply keeping people informed, include an FYI at the top. You might want to let them know why you think they might be interested. Simply put, help people process your email quickly.

5. If you read an email that was just sent and requires a response, you are usually better off picking up the phone than replying by email. A quick phone conversation can often prevent several email rounds. To make this fast and easy, always include your phone number after your name - your signature file can do this for you.

6. Providing options can speed results. This is particularly true if you are trying to schedule a meeting. "I can meet at these three times. Do any of these work for you?" This works for other situations too. "I can send you a draft or we can arrange a time to talk on the phone first or we can meet. Which makes sense to you?"

7. Don't send a vague request to anyone, but especially not to multiple people. If multiple people receive a request, it is easy for them to assume the others will and should act while they do nothing.

8. Don't use email for emotional or sensitive issues. You will spend more time later trying to undo the damage done by the misunderstandings.

9. If you write an email when you are mad, wait 24 hours before sending it. Presumably by then you will realize that while writing it helped you out, sending it will help no one out!

10. Don't reply-all unless you absolutely believe everyone needs to know.

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