Don't Hit Send Until You Read This

By John P. Fazee

As director of faculty relations at the University of Colorado, I work with faculty members and academic administrators to resolve workplace conflicts. Over the four-plus years I've served in this role, an unmistakable pattern has emerged. When a faculty member or administrator comes to me to discuss a conflict he or she is having with a colleague, I can be all but certain that the conflict will be documented in a series of e-mail exchanges between the parties.

Reviewing dozens of these exchanges, I'm convinced that e-mail is more than a record of conflict. In most cases, e-mail exacerbates conflict. In some cases, e-mail can itself be the source of conflict.

Recognizing this fact, I have been on a mission over the last couple of years. I have regularly advised faculty members and administrators not to use e-mail for substantive discussions of any kind. If what you need to say will be more than a couple of paragraphs in length, I have told them, use e-mail only to schedule a telephone call or (preferably) a face-to-face meeting. It's sound advice, but few are able to follow it.

Little wonder: e-mail is an undeniably powerful tool for communication, with many tempting features. You can deal with an issue promptly, either settling it or — almost as good — moving it to someone else's to-do list.

You can communicate with a large number of people with a minimum of effort. Simply add recipients to your list — the auto-complete function makes this quick and simple — and your message is ready to go to multiple readers.

You can write and send an e-mail at 3:00 a.m., knowing that its recipients will receive it whenever they access their e-mail accounts. And with the advent of smartphones, you can send and receive e-mails from just about anywhere.

Finally -- let's be honest -- with e-mail you can avoid having what might be a difficult face-to-face or telephone conversation with a colleague.

Unfortunately, each of e-mail's tempting features carries with it the potential for creating or escalating conflict. For example, the ability to respond promptly to e-mails at any time and from anywhere carries with it strong pressure to respond promptly. If the issue at hand is whether to buy this or that brand of copy paper, being able to respond promptly is good.

But when the issue is substantive, the felt urgency to respond immediately opens the door to all kinds of trouble. I suspect that none of us would sit down and bang out a memo in response to a printed memo we've just received. We would probably read it over a couple of times, make some notes in the margin, draft a response, set the draft aside for later review, perhaps even have someone else read it before printing it and putting it in the mail. With e-mail, however, we're likely to do few or none of the reflection-inducing activities that hard-copy communication requires.

It's worth noting that printed memos are typically exchanged at work and during working hours, a logistical necessity that acts as a useful restraint on hasty and ill-considered communication. But e-mail has all but eliminated the distinction between work life and home life and between

working hours and leisure hours. (How quaint the phrases "home life" and "leisure hours" now seem!)

But just because you can send a work e-mail from home late at night doesn't mean you should. E-mailing can wind you up even as your body -- and good judgment -- is winding down. Drink a glass or two of wine -- something few would do at work -- and the risk of writing something you'll regret rises substantially. I once had a colleague whose e-mail messages were offensive in direct relation to the time of night he sent them -- and, sadly, to his state of intoxication. Under the influence or not, sending work e-mails at night from home increases the risk of firing up a conflict.

The ease of reaching a wide audience instantaneously can be a major escalator of conflict. Copying an entire department in on a conversation that would otherwise be private -- including forwarding an e-mail message intended to be just between the sender and you -- virtually guarantees conflict. It's much harder to change your mind when your position has been broadcast to others. Tempers flare. Positions harden.

Finally, the notion that sending an e-mail will avoid conflict is an illusion. While you may be more comfortable communicating via e-mail than talking face to face, it is comfort purchased only temporarily — and at the steep price of setting in motion a round of response, counter-response, and escalating conflict.

And yet the temptations of using e-mail all too often overwhelm consideration of its risks. So lately I've been changing my advice. If you can't resist using e-mail for substantive and potentially difficult communication, at least pause long enough to take a couple of simple steps. First, assess your relationship with the person to whom you're sending a message. If you have a strong working and personal relationship with your recipient, he or she will be more likely to understand your words as you intend them. If you don't, be exceedingly careful in what you write. Treat your message as you would a formal memo. Draft. Revise. Have someone else read your draft. Above all, don't send a substantive e-mail at night. Sleep on it.

Second, before hitting send, consider how you'll feel if your message is forwarded to others, including not only your department colleagues but colleagues around the country, not to mention the press. There's no such thing as a confidential e-mail. If you think your addressee may misunderstand your intention and meaning, just wait until outsiders read your e-mail.

If, despite all your care, your e-mail prompts a negative response from its recipient — I warned you! — don't send another e-mail explaining what you meant or justifying yourself. Allow yourself only one round of e-mail. Thereafter, arrange to meet in person to clear things up.

As for me, I'm generally pretty good at taking my own advice. I have to admit, though, that I sometimes succumb to the temptation to use e-mail for a substantive exchange with a colleague — with predictable results. So I have great sympathy for my colleagues who turn to me for help to resolve conflicts that their e-mail exchanges have caused or escalated.

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