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Don't Type at Me Like That! Email and Emotions

Emails have feelings too.

Email, especially in the workplace, has become the default mode of communication for many people. It's quick, efficient, and one doesn't have to engage in live, real-time emotional responses to the message.

While the splendid isolation from immediate emotional reactions may be a comfort for some, it eliminates the most valuable information of any conversation. In face-to-face communication, we rely heavily on non-verbal information like facial expression, body posture, gestures, and voice tone to interpret and predict other people's behavior.

Without these important non-verbal cues, our imaginations fill in the blanks of what the person sending the message sender intended, and how they felt about the communication. We rarely fill in the blanks with positive intentions. This can lead to misunderstandings, damaged relationships, and poor business decisions.

Given that many of us must communicate via email and text, we should be aware of the fact that emails can have a "tone." People will remember the emotional tone of an email more vividly and longer than the content.

Email tone is conveyed through word choice, syntax, punctuation, letter case, sentence length, opening, closing, and other graphic indicators like emoticons and emoji.

Insight #1: Just because you write in a certain way doesn't mean it's received the same way.

In a conversation, there is a physical climate as well as a psychological climate.

When you are co-located with the person with whom you are speaking, you are sharing the same physical climate. You are in the same physical space pretty much experiencing the same environment. However, you can share the same physical climate with a person and be in very different psychological climates.

Your life may be fairly stress-free at the moment, while the person with whom you are communicating may be operating with tight deadlines and a host of personal problems. When you are co-located, you are more likely to recognize and respond to the psychological climate of the person as compared to when you can't see or hear them.

Consider this: Compose your email recognizing that the receiver may not be in the same mood or emotional state as you. Try to imagine how the person receiving the email could interpret it.

Insight #2: When we read an email, we attempt to read intention and tone into the words.

If the message is ambiguous, many people will automatically read the most negative emotions and intentions into it.

Have you ever made inferences about a person not responding to an email that you sent them? Is your first thought that the person doesn't think your message was important, or they are trying to avoid the issue in the email?

Check out the possible email tone interpretations in the following messages:

1. "If you don't get that to me by 1:00 p.m. today, we're going to miss our deadline."

Tone Interpretation: "Hey dummy, we're going to miss the deadline and it's your fault."

What could have been written: "Today's 1:00 p.m. deadline is particularly critical. It's very important that I get your feedback today, so we can deliver to you on schedule. Thanks for your help!"

2. "That's not what we agreed to in our meeting."

*Tone Interpretation: "*I know you weren't paying <u>attention</u> and you're trying to pull something over on me, so let me set you straight."

What could have been written: "In taking a look at my notes, I've come to a different conclusion. Would you have a few minutes for us to talk on the phone and figure this out today? Thanks!"

3. "yep"

Tone Interpretation: "I'm really busy. I don't have time for you, and by the way, you're not worthy of a capital Y."

What could have written: "Yes."

To convey your intended email emotional tone, use these tips:

- Assess your relationship with the receiver. Adjust your level of writing formality to match the relationship.

- Email is more than just the transmission of information. It is about managing a relationship remotely. Consider leading with a social comment like you would if you were talking face to face. For example, "I hope you enjoyed the long weekend," or "I'm looking forward to working with you on this project."

- If you think there is room for misinterpretation of your message, take the time to craft the email to make sure your message is more likely to be received with your true intention. This might make the email longer.

- Do not use text speak like "lol" or "BTW" unless you know the person really well. The same goes for using emoticons.

- Be careful with cc's and bcc's, as different interpretations can be made about what copying people on the email implies. Realize that a person who is blind copied may reply, forgetting that they were a blind copy.

- Most people know by now that typing in ALL CAPS is the same as screaming at someone.

- Don't overuse punctuation!!!!

- If you are not sure about the tone of an email you are sending, have someone else read it and give you feedback before you send it. If no one else is available for a tone check, park the email in your draft folder and come back and re-read it a couple of hours later before sending it.

- Most importantly, know when to pick up the phone or meet face-to-face to discuss an issue.

   For tips for dealing with conflict via email check out my article, ["Managing Conflict With Email: Why It's So Tempting."](#)