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Flaming - An impulsive expression of strong opinion or emotion in an email reply.

- The electronic equivalent of flying off the handle.

"The attribute of email that most distinguishes it from other forms of communication is its ability to evoke extreme emotion in the recipient instantaneously"

- Anderson and Shapiro, 1985

It is a familiar site these days, a normally busy professional, sitting quietly, hands loosely cupped, head bowed, wearing an intense expression – it's a position almost like that of a prayer. But wait, the thumbs move furiously. Could they possibly be . . . typing?

In the movie theater, you see the green glow of the keyboard illuminating its owner. In a restaurant, you see it tucked just under the edge of the table as glances are stolen at its flat face. At a reception, a buzz of the pocket compels the custodian to immediately read and answer email. Then, there is the soft click of moving track wheels is all around you in the restroom.

It's the Blackberry! It is one of the most useful and or annoying devices on the planet, depending upon your perspective. It is always connected, never has to be synchronized and serves as a data organizer, a telephone and an email interface.

In days gone by, it was considered an absolute business necessity to take in person meetings for even the most routine discussions. Similarly, it used to be that a live person was expected to answer the phone at your office, and you were expected to be available for a call, because obviously, it was very important, or they would not be calling!

Now, callers routinely get automated answering systems and voicemail. Cell phones, 1-800 numbers and pay phones allow messages to be retrieved remotely and responded to, day or night. However, reading and responding to email while on travel remained problematic. Whatever it was had to wait for your return, or until you could get to a hotel with your laptop or find a business center, or my personal favorite, have an assistant read your emails into your voicemail so that later you can dictate a response, possibly via a return voicemail, to be typed and sent on your behalf.

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The Blackberry changed that, slowly replacing the telephone, letter writing and meetings as a primary means of communicating with others. It has been credited with increased efficiency of up to 80% for attorneys in terms of managing cases and resources. Every break, delay, traffic jam or moment of down time can be used to handle issues, pass on information and monitor critical developments. It essentially lets its owner maintain a presence in numerous places at once.

However, researchers in a variety of disciplines are finding that the use of email makes it more likely that disagreements will escalate when compared to face to face or telephone communications. Come to think of it, they didn't have to tell me that, I have seen examples of it first hand and have heard many such stories from colleagues who have witnessed productive discussions degenerate into attacks or spin out of control in ways that never would have happened had everyone been sitting in a room together. This means that the expanded use of the Blackberry as a replacement for other types of communication methods may in and of itself operate to expand workplace conflict.

Of course, email does not turn all communications into escalated conflicts. But, email does have characteristics that make it highly susceptible to conflict escalation. For example: Because the nonverbal cues, feedback and vocal features are missing from the message; Because emails are usually typed and read in isolation and the technology somehow blocks our perception of the human being on the other end; Because people are multi-tasking and are not fully focused on choosing their words carefully; Because emails are often read out of sequence - latest to earliest - so context is lost; and, Because often someone joins into the discussion, responding to earlier messages without having read the later ones.

Thinking back to the days of in person meetings, all of the people were in the same place at the same time. Each person could 'feel' the surroundings; i.e. was the room crowded, hot or otherwise uncomfortable. The speaker could see people shifting in their chairs or nodding in agreement or perhaps becoming distracted and in need of a break. When comments were made by others, or questions asked, the pitch of the voice, the tone, and the pauses could be heard by everyone, as well as sighs and or um-humms from others in the room. Also, as the conversation evolved, it was experienced and understood as it was happening, so it was possible for anyone to speak up at any moment to get clarification or contribute to the conversation or steer it back to more fruitful areas.

None of these tools are available in email communication: there is no physically presence with each other, participants can not see the faces and hear the voices and read the body language of others. Participants can not give or get immediate responses, and it is often hard to understand the context of comments. Add to that, even if you are following the conversation, others may not be able to do so. Despite the down sides, email is here to stay, so using email effectively becomes an essential skill.

Following a few simple rules will go a long way toward avoiding flaming. For example: (1) Acknowledge that email might not be ideal, but is necessary under the circumstances. (2) Use positive words and a constructive, problem-solving approach, responding to a flame worthy opinion with relevant facts; (3) Resist the temptation to fire off a response to a flame, instead draft a response and let it sit a while before sending it, or break the conflict cycle with a phone call; (4) Assume the good intentions and competence of the sender; (5) Read the original message again for misinterpretation or an honest mistake, and (6) Be aware of the types of email messages that are likely to exacerbate conflict, such as: expressing dissatisfaction with someone else's work; sensitive or personal matters; complaining, and where a written record of the discussion could be misused in the future or where the boss is being blind copied on the communications. In these circumstances, if the option to have an in person meeting is available, that would most likely be the less risky approach.

On the other hand, if your goal is to start a flame war, here are some tips for that too: (1) Tell your opponent that the argument is over, because communicating with him is a waste of time . . . after you have had the last word. (2) Change the subject by pointing out all of your opponent's grammar and spelling mistakes. (3) Send a vicious comment, and several minutes later, apologize because you had intended to send the message only to coworkers. (4) Impress your opponent by discussing your professional credentials and experience, which clearly make your opinions better and more correct than his. (5) Accuse your opponent of being overly sensitive, and suggest that they "must be having a bad day". (6) Claim that "everything" is a matter of opinion. (7) Redefine a common word to mean whatever you need it to mean to bolster your argument. (8) Claim that if something works for you, it will always work for everyone . . . and if it doesn't, it's because they're not doing it right.