

Keeping the Peace - Writing E-mail that will not Stir up Conflict

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by Carolyn McCulley

Since it's so difficult to read between the lines, it's critical to be crystal clear in your e-communications.

"Can you tell me the thinking behind this?"

The sentence resonated ominously across cyberspace. To the recipient, it dripped of condescending sarcasm. To the sender—me—it was a simple request for information. But there I was, not long into a new job, staring red-faced at the computer screen, fighting hot tears of embarrassment.

I had received an e-mail from an esteemed colleague who was displeased with my previous e-mail correspondence, and was questioning my "tone."

Tone?! With no vocal cues or body language to set the "tone," I wondered how I'd managed to communicate one. Should I have added a smiling emoticon, or would that have looked too much like a smirk?

My mind raced back to other similar situations where e-mail had thrown a wrench into even simple communication. For a fleeting moment, I was tempted to announce a full-scale retreat from the online world. Instead, I wiped my tears and pursued no-tech, face-to-face biblical reconciliation.

Unfortunately, my experience with misconstrued e-mail is not unique.

Ken Sande, founder of Peacemaker Ministries and author of *The Peacemaker*, says e-mail has added an extra wrinkle in business and personal communications.

As a former attorney and now a professional Christian mediator and lecturer, Sande increasingly has had to guide ministry and church staffs, as well as other groups, through friction that originated in e-mail or other online communications.

"People are much more careful in how they write a letter on paper than they are in how they communicate through e-mail," he says. "The further you get away from a face-to-face communication, the more you lose your message-sending capabilities. It's not good enough to communicate so that you can be understood, you must communicate so clearly that you cannot be misunderstood. There's a huge difference."

So how do we avoid problems? Here are ten practical tips for being a peacemaker online:

1. Start with an affirmative greeting. Sande points to Paul's Epistles as a prime example of this practice. "These letters begin with statements like, 'My brothers, I always rejoice when I think of you.' When Paul has to do some stern correction, he spends virtually the first chapter just encouraging them, affirming his love, and the goodness of God toward these people. Those are tremendous illustrations of how to communicate—online or in real life."

2. Look carefully at the first few sentences of your letter. They generally set the tone for how the rest of the letter will be received. "A little bit of a personal touch up front can cast other words in a very positive light," Sande says.

3. Requote sections of letters you've received. That helps keep the thread of the conversation, and shows your recipient that you're really "listening."

- 4. Re-read your words.** Can they be understood in any other way than what you intend? Is it obvious to the recipient that you have a spirit of inquiry, and not of assumption?
- 5. Don't rely on gimmicky "emoticons."** Though emoticons [like the overused :)] can help establish your tone, don't rely on them to soften phrases that could be misinterpreted. Rewrite your sentence, instead, with the goal of precise communication.
- 6. Honor the biblical standards about gossip,** especially because e-mail can be forwarded without your consultation. A good barometer of when you're gossiping is whether you'd be embarrassed to have the object of your letter receive it accidentally. The same applies to forwarding e-mail you have received.
- 7. Keep it as brief as possible.** If you're having problems with someone, don't dump an entire "case history" of your concerns in your first letter. A brief summary of the problem and an invitation to converse further will give the recipient time to respond, and give you the ability to choose your words in light of that response. Sande suggests using words like, "Could we talk about this?" and "I heard you did this, and it doesn't seem to be consistent with what I've heard from you before. I'd sure like to hear your side of the story."
- 8. Don't assume people know your mind.** If you're sending potentially negative correspondence, "Don't assume the recipient knows you still think they're a good or competent person," says Sande. "Be explicit about it. Say, 'Even though I'm disappointed in this particular thing, I know this is not your normal style.' Give them the benefit of the doubt and clearly communicate your attitude toward them."
- 9. Don't send difficult letters right away.** Save them as a draft and read them again the next day with fresh eyes.
- 10. Use questions wisely—not to make accusations.** "Saying, 'Didn't I tell you to keep your bike out of the driveway?' is not a question, it's an accusation," Sande says. "I regularly get copies of people's letters in conflicts, and I'm almost embarrassed at the way some Christian people use questions in, frankly, a way attorneys do—it's cross-examination."

Carolyn McCulley is a freelance writer who lives in Germantown, Maryland. She writes for both the Christian media, including *CHRISTIANITY TODAY* and *Christian Single*, and the mainstream media, including *The Washington Post*.