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Does e-mail escalate conflict? The idiosyncratic aspects of electronic mail can obviate resolution. (Behavior).

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Millions of businesspeople worldwide rely on e-mail as a fundamental communication tool. Managers use it to organize meetings, coordinate virtual work teams, make announcements -- and communicate about disputes. But according to the authors of a recent paper, using e-mail to resolve conflicts carries a major risk: that disputes will escalate to irresolvable levels and even damage senders' and receivers' relationships.

The paper is "E-Mail Escalation: Dispute Exacerbating Elements of Electronic Communication." The authors are Raymond A. Friedman, an associate professor of management at Vanderbilt University's Owen Graduate School of Management, and Steven C. Currall, the William and Stephanie Sick Professor of Entrepreneurship and an associate professor of management, psychology and statistics at Rice University's Jones Graduate School of Management.

Building on previous research, Friedman and Currall propose a new conceptual framework articulating the unique structural properties of e-mail communication and suggesting their impact on the escalation or resolution of conflict. On the basis of their review of sociological literature -- such as H. Clark and S. Brennan's analysis of different communication media ("Grounding in Communication," in L. Resnick, J. Levine and S. Teasley, eds., "Perspectives on Socially Shared Cognition," Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1991, pp. 127-149) and J.Z. Rubin, D.G. Pruitt and S.H. Kim's exploration of conflict escalation ("Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement," New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994) -- the authors suggest that escalation of disputes is more likely during electronic communication than during face-to-face conversation. They also recommend a number of ways to ameliorate the risk of escalation, and they conclude with a call for additional empirical research into e-mail's impact on conflict management.



 The paper begins with a review of the properties inherent to face-to-face conversation that e-mail lacks: copresence (parties are in the same surroundings), visibility (parties see one another), audibility (parties hear speech timing and intonation), cotemporality (parties receive utterances as they are produced), simultaneity (parties send and receive messages at once) and sequentiality (parties take turns). These properties enable communicators to "ground" the interaction -- that is, to achieve a shared understanding about the encounter and a shared sense of participation. They also allow participants to time and adjust their actions and reactions so as to move toward agreement. Grounding, timing and adjusting are all critically important tools in successful conflict resolution.

The authors then contrast the properties of face-to-face communication with those of electronic communication. Specifically, e-mail exchanges take place in an antisocial context (participants are isolated at their computers), allow new tactics (such as lengthy messages or communications that bundle multiple arguments together) and are characterized by reviewability and revisability (communicators are able to reread received messages and extensively shape their responses).

These properties as well as the lack of those that are unique to face-to-face conversation engender the following effects, which Friedman and Currall maintain increase the risk of escalation during conflict processing:

Low feedback. Electronic communication generates little feedback -- for instance, clues about how a recipient is reacting to one's message. As a result, participants cannot fluidly adjust their comments to repair missteps or clarify misunderstandings. Inadvertent insults and loss of face become more likely, and misunderstandings accumulate. Also, recipients can often perceive communication tactics as "heavier" than intended. This causes social bonds to weaken and the involved parties find it more difficult to resolve conflicts.

Reduced social cues. E-mail communication lacks the emotional expression found in face-to-face conversations; thus the parties rely more on messages' cognitive content to manage conflict. In addition, although e-mail participants often include greetings and other forms of "social lubrication" in their messages, the power of such rituals to remind people of social norms and rules declines significantly the longer the delay between message exchanges. When long delays exist, message recipients may respond in socially inappropriate ways -- aggressively or not empathetically.

Length of messages. When a sender bundles multiple arguments in a lengthy e-mail message, the recipient may forget to respond to one or more arguments in the reply. Moreover, in crafting a response, the recipient may focus only on those arguments that he or she found most upsetting. When a sender believes that the recipient has ignored parts of

the message, the sender may suspect a violation of interaction norms. Misunderstandings can accumulate, and inadvertent insults can become more likely.

Excess attention. Thanks to the properties of reviewability and revisability, online communicators can ruminate at length about received messages. Research suggests that rumination increases both angry mood and perceptions of a problem's magnitude. Reviewability and revisability also permit elaborate editing of messages, which increases composers' commitment to their arguments. The parties become less willing to compromise, begin depersonalizing one another and view the conflict as unresolvable.

Friedman and Currall provide several recommendations for easing the impact of these effects while managing conflicts. Though they consider e-mail vital for communicating with numerous people over great distances, they advise managers to first try face-to-face conversations or phone calls to discuss disputes. If circumstances are such that managers cannot avoid using e-mail to handle contentious issues, the authors provide several suggestions, such as recognizing that a perceived insult may have been unintentional, deliberately checking the desire to respond angrily and thinking through the meanings a manager may have attached to a statement and then mentally adjusting the statement accordingly. Though escalation may be more likely during electronic communication, say the authors, participants can -- and should -- manage that risk to resolve conflicts more productively.

To access the complete paper, go to
www.mba.vanderbilt.edu/ray.friedman.

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