



Trust Reduces E-Mail Miscommunication

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

Communication problems in e-mail are not hard to find. I often ask my students to cite an example of when they wrote something online that got an unexpected and unhappy reaction. I have yet to meet a student that cannot think of at least one major gaffe brought about by words online without being able to see the body language.

There are many antidotes to this problem. One that I find particularly effective is to have high trust. When people know each other and trust each other, the things that could set off hurt feelings, or e-grenade battles are often resolved quickly with little effort. The following story is a great example of how trust can prevent damaging misunderstandings.

Recently, an e-mail exchange between some Board members for a local professional organization got off track. Sally had been doing a wonderful job with her responsibilities as the VP of Membership. The roster had grown by about 25% in the previous year, and we were all praising her for a job well done. Sally took the opportunity to bring a prospective new BOD member named Sharon to the meeting. All of the existing BOD members were happy to welcome Sharon to the group since her expertise could fill a vacancy we had on the BOD.

After the meeting, Sally wrote an e-mail to the group thanking all of us for welcoming Sharon to the group so warmly. Sally's main message was "thank you." Tom, the VP of Technology wrote back to Sally the following message. "No...Thank You!"

When I read Tom's note, I thought how odd he would be saying "No Thank you" to a critical new resource that would actually help spell him from trying to cover for the vacant player. I looked at the message again, because knowing and trusting Tom, I knew he could not have really meant it. Then, I noticed the ellipsis mark (three periods) between "No" and "Thank you." The ellipsis mark indicates that some information was left out for brevity. It took only a few seconds to determine that Tom's real message to Sally was, "Not at all Sally...We should be thanking you!" He had just left out the extra words to be efficient.

When I asked Sally about the answer, she said that her reaction at first was also highly negative. Then, as with me, she quickly figured out Tom's true meaning.

The point of this story is that if any of us did not know and trust Tom, it would have been very easy to misconstrue his meaning. That could have resulted in a lot of damage control with Sally and especially with Sharon, the new person on the BOD. It was that level of trust that allowed us to get by a possible problem without a hiccup. Think about all the other less obvious communication issues that are prevented when trust exists within a group.

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