



One Letter Can Make a Huge Difference

by Bob Whipple: MBA, CPLP

I have been studying the difference between online and face to face communication for several years. I still run into people who believe the two modes of communication are equivalent. NOT SO! There are numerous differences in these methods. The obvious one is the absence of physical body language in electronic notes.

When communicating with a person face to face, we normally keep out of trouble because we are getting feedback all the time. We modify the words, cadence, tone, and our own body language moment by moment based on the feedback we can see. In e-mail or when texting, we have no ability to see the reaction of the receiver, so we continue to push out the words with no ability to correct in real time. Many an e-grenade battle was started by people misinterpreting the intent of the writer.

Another difference is that e-mail is permanent, while face to face communication is temporal. What we said in a conversation will be forgotten, downplayed, muddled, or morphed by the passage of time and other events. Anything written online can be pulled up, even years later, and the person cannot deny what was written. The evidence is there. This is often a good thing because we can prove what we wrote and when, but it can also be confounding when words are written in anger or haste. You can always apologize for something you wrote, but you can never actually take it back and erase it.

I came across another example of the differences where inaccuracies in how things are spelled can change the meaning of a note, and it would never happen in verbal communication. What if you received the following e-mail, "What have you been up to lately, dud?" I think most of us would be put off by such a note. Obviously the writer has little respect for the reader. But what if the writer really meant to type, "What have you been up to lately, dude?" Now the question has a tone of chummy camaraderie. A single missing letter changed the entire meaning in the original note. The mistake would never have occurred in verbal communication. You would not inadvertently substitute the word "dud" for "dude" verbally.

Thinking of e-mail or texting as similar to verbal communication is dangerous, yet we do it all the time. Be aware when sending electronic notes of these differences, and treat this mode of communication with extreme care. As the volume of notes becomes larger for most of us every year, it is easy to get sloppy. Try to avoid that because it can lead to dangerous misunderstandings.

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