Eliminate Email Conflict

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Dear Kerry Ann,

This year is my second year in a tenure-track position at a small liberal arts college. I love my job, but I'm writing you because we just started the term and an ugly argument has already erupted over the department listserv. It's both sad and a reminder that last year I spent a lot of time in these types of exchanges. I lost too many hours reading aggressive emails, crafting written responses and talking about the emails with my friends at other colleges.

I don't want to spend my time this way anymore. What can I do to break the cycle?

Sincerely,

Tired of Email Conflict

Dear Tired,

Congratulations on recognizing the cost of participating in prolonged email fights and your determination that this year will be different. Many people struggle with conflict, which isn't unsurprising since as academics we imagine we'll have the greatest clarity in stating our positions in writing. However, engaging in conflict via email rarely results in an effective or healthy resolution. In fact, it often artificially exacerbates tensions, and, as you've correctly observed, it's a huge time-suck that's both ineffective and inefficient.

While I'm no longer a faculty member, I lead an organization that is run by professors from around the country. As such, most of our interactions as colleagues happen via email. Because we're a virtual organization, we have developed three rules of collegial engagement that have eliminated email conflict within our team. Experimenting with these three rules in your own professional life may be a great starting point for breaking the toxic cycle that has developed in your department.

Rule #1: Do not start or engage in conflict via email. I realize this sounds obvious, but it's a powerful strategy if you can put it into practice. It's even more powerful if you can agree to this rule as a group. In practice, it means that you control your own impulse to initiate a conflict by sending an email. If you're angry, frustrated or hurt by something, instead of spending time writing a caustic email and sending it out to a group of people (or talking about it on social media), just go directly to the person with whom you have a concern and start a conversation. I realize that can be scary, but once you get the hang of healthy conflict, it gets increasingly easier.

And if one of your colleagues sends a hostile or aggressive email, redirect it offline. For example, you might say: "I think we could resolve this quickly by having a conversation offline. Let's have coffee this week, or I can stop by your office." If the person initiating the conflict is off campus (e.g., they are on leave or on sabbatical) you might say: "Let's take this offline. I'll call you this afternoon." Or if someone wants to start a group conflict over a department-wide issue, you can suggest: "This sounds like an important conversation. Why don't we add this to the agenda for our next faculty meeting?"

When you recommend taking a conflict offline, you create a new boundary, and you only have to do it a few times before people get the message -- you don't do conflict over email. I think you'll discover that people who are bombastic and aggressive behind the protection of their computer are far less intense in person. And once you are looking them in the eye, seeing their body language, and feeling their energy, you will be able to resolve the issue in ways that strengthen your professional relationship.

Rule #2: Give your colleagues the benefit of the doubt. I know it can be hard to give others the benefit of the doubt, especially if you personally dislike a colleague or have a history of negative interactions with a particular person, but I encourage you to try it anyway! Assuming that your colleagues are good people and have positive intentions may be a shift for you. Even if you don't feel it, you can behave as if you do by approaching the person with questions instead of accusatory statements.

The reason for this rule is simple: your colleagues are going to be your colleagues for the foreseeable future. They had the wisdom to hire you, so go ahead and assume they are smart people who are deeply invested in your success, as well as the success of your department and your students. Good people working together every day can do great things, but they can also disagree, inadvertently hurt one another and make mistakes.

The way I shift into this energy is by reminding myself that while I am inherently a good person, I also have made mistakes, offended others and hurt people with my words in the past. I want others to grant me the grace of assuming good intentions -- even if the outcome was a disaster. If that's the case for me, then I'm most likely to create that pattern of grace by extending it to others.

Ultimately, the problem with online conflict is that the speed of electronic communications rarely leaves time for you to pause and consider your colleague's humanity, the possibility of their having positive intentions or the long-term impact of a hasty response to your professional relationships and departmental climate. Slowing yourself down by going offline and giving your colleagues the benefit of the doubt will increase the probability of healthy resolution.

Rule #3: Differentiate between the facts and your story. If you think about any professional conflict, there are typically two elements: 1) what happened (the actual facts) and 2) our interpretation of why something happened (the story we create to explain the facts). Because we are trained as researchers, faculty members in conflict rarely differ on the facts. Instead, conflicts typically revolve around the different stories they create to explain the same set of facts.

For example, one of my clients described a conflict where her department chair set a meeting time without consulting the members of the committee, and the meeting time conflicted with her child-care schedule. The facts were that a meeting was unilaterally scheduled and she had a time-conflict. She then created an elaborate story around it: "My department chair doesn't support me. I told you this isn't a family-friendly space. He knows I'm a single parent, and he's going out of his way to make my life more difficult."

My client was tempted to send an email to the entire committee saying, "Is it just me, or does anyone else find 4 p.m. meetings unfair to parents?" Of course, that strategy violates all three rules: 1) it's an email (and to a group instead of the individual who scheduled the meeting), 2) it doesn't give the benefit of the doubt to her department chair, and 3) the facts and her story were so intertwined that it was guaranteed to start a prolonged conflict.

When you can separate the facts from your story, you can start treating your story as a hypothesis to be tested. In other words, you could hypothesize that a meeting was set at 4 p.m. because "My department chair is going out of his way to make my life more difficult." But I can think of several other hypotheses:

- The chair was overwhelmed by tasks and just set the meeting arbitrarily.
- The chair thought he was being helpful by selecting a time that was available in everyone's shared calendar (and because my client hadn't blocked that time out, it appeared she was available).
- The chair believes that meetings between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. are fair game.
- The chair believes he has the right to set meeting times and faculty members should adjust their schedules accordingly.

I think you'll notice three things from this example: 1) our stories can lead us to the most negative attribution, 2) there are always many different possible hypotheses as to why a colleague has done something, and 3) there's only one way to confirm or disconfirm a hypothesis (ask the person directly why they did it).

Instead of sending the email, I encouraged her to stop by her chair's office and say: "I noticed that the meetings for the Curriculum Committee are at 4p.m., and that conflicts with my child-care arrangements. Can you help me understand why you chose that time? And I'd love to brainstorm some ways we could resolve the schedule conflict." This is likely to lead to a generative conversation, a better understanding of how decisions are made, a new way of scheduling meetings that is collaborative or the chair understanding the impact of late afternoon meetings on her (as a single parent).

When I approach a conflict with clarity between the facts and my story, I often learn a lot about my colleagues. Most of the time, the person I imagine has intentionally done something to me has a completely different story or had good intentions. Hearing their explanation helps me to better understand what's going on. But even more important, I'm able to gain an understanding of how I generate my own stories, particularly the ones that have deep roots in lifetime patterns that have nothing to do with the current conflict or a specific colleague. Even in a group, when we can separate out the facts from our various stories about the facts, new possibilities for resolution can occur.

These three rules for eliminating email conflict work for my team because they are designed to encourage us to slow down, respect one another as colleagues, and engage in some self-reflection. This way, nobody on our team ends up inadvertently turning a scheduling conflict into a moment to rectify all the ways they haven't been supported by others in their lifetime.

My invitation to you -- and anyone reading this column -- is to consider what it would look and feel like for you to experiment with these three simple rules of engagement with your colleagues. And if you're feeling ambitious, consider forwarding this column to your departmental listserv and inviting your colleagues to collectively consider what it would look like to experiment with these rules of engagement -- or create your own -- in order to eliminate email conflict once and for all.

Warmly,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore, PhD

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P.S. – I love to receive your questions at DearKerryAnn@FacultyDiversity.org