



The Devil and E-mail

How often have you written an e-mail and when you clicked "Send" immediately wished for an "undo" button? How often have you received an e-mail and spent minutes, hours, or days steaming with frustration?

The good news about e-mail is that it is a quick way to communicate at a distance without interrupting someone's schedule. The bad news about e-mail is that since it's not face-to-face, it can – and often does – produce unintended results.

When we meet people face-to-face, communication is primarily nonverbal: 53% face, 38% voice, 7% words (Mehrabian). Nonverbal cues include social context, facial expressions, tone of voice, body posture, and gestures. We use these cues to send and receive information. When we e-mail, we're starting with only 7% of what is needed for effective communication. But danger lurks beyond the lack of nonverbal communication.

"When the brain receives insufficient data about others' feelings, it just makes stuff up (Meng)." Our brain fills in the blanks, making assumptions about emotions and context. And not only do our brains make up the missing pieces, our brains automatically assume those made-up "facts" are reality. The problem grows larger when we recall that our brains are more likely to feel threatened rather than assuming the best.

If your boss comes into your office, sits down, relaxes by leaning back in the chair, and with twinkling eyes and a smile says, "Well, that could have gone better" You know that your boss isn't anxious or upset by the nonverbal cues offered. However, if you received an e-mail with the same words in the subject line, your brain would immediately try to choose from fight, flight, or freeze. Even if your boss had no intention of attacking, your e-mailed response has the potential to increase the miscommunication. And the cycle escalates. Meng says, "I am not sure if the devil invented e-mail, but I am sure it made his job easier."

Remember that the e-mail needs to contain information including context and emotional state, along with facts and beliefs.

Remember that if you are unclear, leaving room for questions about what you wish to communicate, the recipient's brain will fill in the blanks.

To increase the likelihood that your e-mail will communicate effectively, keep the brain in mind:

1. Choose a subject line carefully. Be concise and specific.
2. Include language that clarifies the facts, your feelings, and what you believe about the subject.
3. Use the SCARF model for social brain-behavior (The brain treats these five domains as essential to personal survival.):
 - a. Status – Acknowledge actions and behaviors that are already supporting the desired actions and results.
 - b. Certainty – Be clear about your expectations and needs including: who, when, what, where, and how.
 - c. Autonomy – Allow the recipient to exert as much control as possible over required action items or requests; ask for their opinions and feelings on the subject matter.
 - d. Relatedness – Be gracious; create a connection.
 - e. Fairness – Be consistent and transparent.

Finally, as you review the e-mail, put yourself in the shoes of the recipient. Imagine that you don't know the situation, that you don't know the emotional context, that your brain will fill-in-the-blanks negatively. Then revise as needed.

Using e-mail effectively allows recipients to increase their connection with you and align with your goals. The impacts of increasing status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness include building connections, more easily resolving technical issues, and willing engagement. Hopefully these tips will make the devil's job a little more difficult.

Further reading:

Mehrabian, A. (1972). *Nonverbal communication*. Aldine-Atherton, Chicago, IL.

Meng, C. (2012). *Search inside yourself*. HarperCollins, New York, NY.

Rock, D. 2010. *Your Brain at Work*. Harper. New York, NY.

Siegel, D. (2010) *Mindsight: The Science of Personal Transformation*. Random House, New York, NY

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First published in the *Kansas EMS Chronicle*.