

Ready, Fire, Aim Over the Internet

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AS in businesses everywhere, e-mail is becoming the communications medium-of-choice for many participants in family companies. The Internet is an especially fast and convenient way for larger sibling- and cousin-led companies to stay in touch and convey vital information on a regular basis to widely dispersed shareholders and managers. The new medium is so appealing, however, that many families embrace it without thinking about its drawbacks as a way of dealing with sensitive family issues.

Just in the past month I've come across a number of families who have told me about email exchanges among either siblings or cousins that escalated into real arguments. In one company, the chairman and an in-law exchanged a nasty series of messages about a hiring policy that rapidly blew up a storm between branches of the family. It took a special meeting of the family council to resolve the dispute.

In another family, members of a governance committee charged with proposing a design for a new family council disagreed over the ideal composition of the council. After a heated and frustrating round of e-mails, the seven cousins on the committee concluded that it was hopeless to sort out these issues over the electronic medium. Instead, they scheduled a meeting to hammer out their differences.

In a third case, the CEO of a family company was angry with his sister-in-law, the head of the firm's employee safety project, after she suggested at a meeting—in jest—that even the CEO has to leave the building during a fire

alarm. Later, the CEO shot off an email to the sister-in-law: "I really resented you telling me off in front of everyone yesterday. I am the CEO of this business, and you ought to show me proper respect—at least in public. You should try to be more professional in the future."

The e-mail was copied and sent around the family. Once again it generated an interbranch argument: The CEO's immediate family sided with him against his brother's branch, who sided with the sister-in-law. Charges of "arrogance" and "blatant unprofessionalism" flew back and forth until the family matriarch stepped in to calm tempers.

E-mail is a hybrid form of communication. It has the spontaneity and informality of a face-to-face conversation, but the permanence of a written document. An impulsive exchange between family members can be stored, retrieved, and passed around. It can even be used as evidence in a lawsuit, as Bill Gates recently learned when e-mail records were introduced at the Microsoft antitrust trial as evidence of alleged anti-competitive tactics.

When writing e-mails, most of us do not invest the thoughtfulness and sensitivity (nor the care with grammar and punctuation) that we typically apply to more formal forms of communication such as a letter. We are also less likely to anticipate the reactions a given communication may evoke.

In face-to-face communication, we get instant visual and auditory feedback about how our listeners are reacting to our words. Such feedback turns out to be a very significant por-

tion of interpersonal communication. For one thing, it serves as a way of testing the sincerity underlying a given message, and it can help to identify inconsistencies or hidden motives built into it. For example, if someone greets us by saying, "I'm very happy to see you," but does so in a barely audible voice and with a hangdog look, we may be instantly aware of the contradiction between the person's body language and his or her words. We give more credence to the message conveyed through the speaker's gestures, perhaps concluding that he or she is either being sarcastic or, in fact, is not happy to see us at all.

The here-and-now nature of face-to-face communication permits us to attend to the impact of our words on others, and, in effect, to edit the message as we go along. If I say something to a family member and it seems evident he or she is not understanding (or liking!) the message, I can take corrective action. I can cut the conversation short, or apologize and move on. Visual and auditory clues often provide additional information on the meaning of our words. Indeed, this contextual data may determine whether the message that was intended is the message that is received.

In telephone conversations we rely on auditory cues to smooth communication and assess the emotional reactions of our listeners. Shifts in tone of voice, pauses, sighs, breathing patterns—all are essential to assessing speaker intent on the phone. Helpful as these are, however, they don't make up completely for the loss of visual cues.

The planning that preceded the 1986 launch of the space shuttle Challenger, which exploded less than two minutes into flight, illustrates the risks of the telephone as a communications medium. One of the many analyses of the disaster found that some engineers had had concerns about the safety of the rocket to be used to lift the spacecraft. But their colleagues did not detect their ambivalence because the decision to launch was made during a conference call. The implication is that being able to see everyone's facial expressions would have given the engineers a fuller picture of their feelings and may have led to postponement of the launch.

In e-mail, emotion symbols formed with punctuation and read on their side, such as a happy face :-) or a surprised face :- o, have been developed to help make up for the loss of contextual information. Nevertheless, the medium remains a relatively poor vehicle for communicating emotionally loaded issues. This may, in fact, be one reason that some families find e-mail so appealing. As one client told me recently, "I often find it a lot easier to deal with my mother through e-mail than in person."

The problem, of course, is that relying on e-mail for such a purpose can undermine rather than advance harmonious family relationships. Indeed, closeness and intimacy in families depend on the members being able to communicate their feelings fully and interpret the reactions of others accurately. It is part of the individuation process that makes for more mature and constructive family interaction.

I am not suggesting that e-mail should not be used by families in business. Quite the contrary, I have witnessed the many advantages that the Internet provides for families trying to convey information rapidly and accurately. Many of the families I'm in touch with have done a wonderful job of using Web pages and e-mail to communicate internally and enhance their relationships. This is especially true for families whose members live far apart. The point is that families taking full advantage of this technology need to be aware that it also has inherent limitations. Using e-mail as a substitute for face-to-face (or even phone) discussion of delicate family issues may create more problems than it solves.

Many companies have already learned that e-mail is no substitute for strong interpersonal ties that allow family members to trust those they work with every day. As I board yet another plane for a journey to meet another client, I sometimes wonder whether all the talk about a global village isn't just hype. People still prefer to discuss meaningful issues in person rather than on the phone or over the Internet. Ultimately, "virtual" will never replace "actual" in family governance. The key is to keep the new technology in perspective. ■

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