

# **Remote Communication on Project Teams: When to be Face-to-Face**

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Remote communication, particularly email, while increasingly prevalent, is not always the best “channel” for dealing with conflict and building trusting working relationships. While “flaming” is easily recognizable as a conflictual response, the purpose of this paper is to discuss and recommend mitigating techniques for less extreme indicators of conflict in online interpersonal transactions. We believe that the need to be face-to-face in a conversation is directly related to the proportion of relational to task-oriented content in the transaction. And, noticing the “transitional moment” – that moment when an online conversation moves to conflict – is key to being successful in dealing with conflicts that surface online.

It is easy to acknowledge that email is a ripe breeding ground for conflict escalation. Most of our readers are likely to be very frequent users of email, likely have been for years, and may use email as their primary method of communicating, particularly at work. For most of the business world, however, email as a dominant form of workplace discourse is a relatively new phenomenon, occurring primarily within the last five to seven years. It’s taken thousands of years for human beings to develop the interpersonal

communication rules, norms, and a whole host of non-verbal cues to aid in interpersonal communication. In contrast, virtual communication has had barely enough time to develop shared meaning about this new form of human communication.

## **Non-verbal communication and the Social Construction of Virtual Communication and Communities**

The use of words is extremely important in the human communication process, but words are a small part of how people have learned to communicate. A large portion of our communication with one another involves using non-verbal cues, such as gestures, tone of voice, posture, the clothes we wear, and the ways in which we touch.

Most of us are not conscious of the non-verbal channels we use to communicate, even though they comprise the majority of the way we communicate in a face-to-face discussion or conversation. Albert Mehrabian found in his research in the 1970's that there are three ways we communicate.<sup>1</sup> Mehrabian found that only about 7 percent of the emotional meaning of a message is communicated through explicit verbal channels.

About 38 percent is communicated by paralanguage, which is basically the use of the voice. About 55 percent comes through nonverbal, which includes such things as gesture, posture, facial expression, etc. So it is behavior rather than spoken or written communication that creates or represents meaning. The richness of nonverbal communication cannot be adequately represented in text and punctuation is less precise than intonation.<sup>2, 3, 4</sup> This may be why we are seeing more misunderstandings as we increase our use of virtual communication.

Berger and Luchmann, in their classic communication text, *The Social Construction of Reality*, make the case that human beings create their own reality through constructing shared meaning about their communication and communities over a period of time.

*"Because they are historical products of human activity, all socially constructed universes change, and the change is brought about by the concrete actions of human beings." . . . "...concrete individuals and groups of individuals serve as definers of reality. To understand the state of the socially constructed universe at any given time, or its change over time, one must understand the social organization that permits the definers to do their defining."*<sup>5</sup>

*"In order to maintain subjective reality effectively, the conversational apparatus must be continual and consistent. Disruptions of continuity or consistency ipso facto posit a threat to the subjective reality in question."*<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, we are creating a new subjective reality with virtual communication in a very short amount of time. Most companies have no formal rules about virtual communication. Michael Hattersley, conducted a brief survey of major companies (for example, General Motors), and found that very few have formal e-mail guidelines and policies.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, all interpersonal realities are negotiated, but when our companies and communities don't create new rules for our virtual communication, there is no common basis for these negotiations. We, then, as individuals, construct our own relatively idiosyncratic realities, or rules. This can cause waves of misunderstandings if we do not share the same virtual communication rules and norms.

We also are creating new virtual communities, where virtual communication rules and norms are being developed at an accelerated pace. In “The Virtual Community,” Howard Rheingold describes his over 15 year experience of plugging into a virtual community – the WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link). First he defines a virtual community:

*“Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.”<sup>8</sup>*

He then goes on to describe his experience and how it has changed over time:

*“The idea of a community accessible only via my computer screen sounded cold to me at first, but I learned quickly that people can feel passionately about e-mail and computer conferences. I’ve become one of them. I care about the people I met through my computer, and I care deeply about the future of the medium that enables us to assemble.”<sup>9</sup>*

Rheingold also sees an increase in virtual communities, and therefore in virtual communication. He sees computer use as inevitably leading to the construction of online communities and questions whether this will lead to rebuilding what has been lost as a result of suburbanization or if it is just another life-denying “simulacrum of real passion and true commitment to one another”.<sup>10, 11</sup>

Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in her new book *Evolve: Succeeding in the Digital Culture of Tomorrow*, sees that there are both positive and negative aspects to these new Internet communities.

“This poses three challenges to everyone engaged with the Internet:

1. The Internet can greatly empower people and connect people, but it can also isolate and marginalize them.
2. The Internet can enable user communities to form and grow, but it can also use them to attack and deny.
3. The Internet can help build businesses and communities, but it can also destroy them.”<sup>12</sup>

Will virtual communication and communities replace face-to-face communication and live communities? One thing is for certain, we are losing face-to-face communication with our co-workers, and most of our investigations below lead us to the conclusion that virtual communication is appropriate for some types of communication, but there are certain contexts where face-to-face communication is critical.

### **Effects of Losing Face-to-Face Communication**

While there are distinct advantages to email communication and the experience of many avid e-mailers has demonstrated that a surprising depth of intimacy can be achieved in online relationships, for many people there is a sense of isolation, a loss of face-to-face

communication skills, and an increase in negative thoughts conveyed and a new language created.

Hallowell is a psychiatrist who has been treating patients with anxiety disorders for years. He finds that as electronic communication increases, the human moment decreases and changing the landscape of work for the worse. “Human beings are remarkably resilient. They can deal with almost anything as long as they do not become isolated. ... When human moments are few and far between, over-sensitivity, self-doubt, and even boorishness and abrasive curtness can be observed in the best of people. Productive employees will begin to feel lousy and that, in turn, will lead them to under-perform or to think of looking elsewhere for work. The irony is that this kind of alienation in the workplace derives not from lack of communication but from a surplus of the wrong kind. The remedy is not to get rid of electronic (communication) but to restore the human moment where it is needed.”<sup>13</sup>

He then describes the human moment: “an authentic psychological encounter that can happen only when two people share the same physical space. I believe that it has started to disappear from modern life – and I sense that we all may be about to discover the destructive power of its absence. The human moment has two prerequisites: people’s physical presence and their emotional and intellectual attention.”<sup>14</sup>

He then states why we may avoid picking up the phone or walking down the hall.

“Human moments require energy. Often, that’s what makes them easy to avoid.”<sup>15</sup>

Hallowell describes another phenomena when the human moment fades from or lives – toxic worry. “...electronic communications remove many of the cues that typically mitigate worry. Those (non-verbal) cues are especially important among sophisticated people who are prone to using subtle language, irony, and wit....Toxic worry is anxiety that has no basis in reality. It immobilizes the sufferer and leads to indecision or destructive action. It’s like being in the dark.”<sup>16</sup>

Apparently our brain chemistry may be altered over time when we lose the human moments. Hallowell notes that scientists don’t know the whole story yet, but they do know that... “positive human-to-human contact reduces the blood levels of the stress hormones epinephrine, norepinephrine, and cortisol....Furthermore, scientists hypothesize that in-person contact stimulates two important neurotransmitters: dopamine, which enhances attention and pleasure, and serotonin, which reduces fear and worry. Science, in other words, tells the same story as my patients. The human moment is neglected at the brain’s peril. <sup>17</sup>

*“...in the last ten years or so, technological changes have made a lot of face-to-face interaction unnecessary. I’m talking about voice mail and e-mail mainly – modes of communication that are one-way and electronic. Problems that develop when the human moment is lost cannot be ignored. People need human contact in order to survive. They need to maintain their mental acuity and their emotional well-being.”<sup>18</sup>*

Can virtual communication decrease our ability to actually communicate face-to-face?

In the two examples below, our answer is – yes. The brain is similar to a muscle. It needs exercise to thrive. When we don't practice our face-to-face communication skills, we either get "rusty" or lose them. Hallowell cites an example of a patient who came to him because she felt like she was going "brain dead:"

*"She consulted me because she actually thought she was losing her memory. In meetings, words were not coming to her as quickly, and decisions she had once made in a snap were now taking her hours or days...A few simple tests conducted in my office revealed that Lynn's brain itself was in fine shape. Her work habits (relying more on one-way electronic communication) were diminishing her brain's performance. Your psyche, just like your muscles, needs rest and variation to perform at its peak."*<sup>19</sup>

Individual team members can begin to feel isolated and under-stimulated, resulting in poor face-to-face communication when team members come together:

*"I work at my home exclusively on my computer...it's the main link to my office in Eugene. We talk on the phone maybe once a week, but we exchange e-mails 10, 15 times a day, at least. I can't remember the last time I went to a bank (or went out of the house)...I'll go out and get the dry cleaning and it's hard for me to make sentence...I sort of resort to 'Me.' 'That.' 'Give it to me.' Like cavewoman stuff."*<sup>20</sup>



When conflict is present, and particularly as it escalates, more, rather than less, complex communication skills are required.

Hallowell also cites several studies that indicate that depriving human beings from other human face-to-face contact produces sensory deprivation, an altered sense of reality, higher death rates, and an overall damage to a person's emotional health.<sup>21</sup>

Another negative effect that can occur when we increase virtual communication and decrease face-to-face communication is an increase in negative communication. For some reason, people are willing to voice more negative thoughts to another person using the electronic medium than we ever would face-to-face. Maybe we feel we are "protected" behind the computer screen, or maybe it's a way for people who normally avoid conflict to "get it off their chest." Take a look below at the comments on this phenomenon.<sup>22, 23</sup>

*"What it boils down to is: This is much more than writing. It's about human nature. Everything that is human has simply bubbled up and is in front of us now. So people think, 'Why are we having so many problems in this company with e-mail?' Because it's not about e-mail. It's about people. And they'll find a way to express their feelings, passive-aggressively or in other ways, in e-mail that perhaps they haven't been able to do face-to-face. A lot of people hide behind it and use it as weapon. It can be used as a tool or a weapon."*<sup>24</sup>

In an April 29<sup>th</sup> New York Times article, electronic message boards are likened to “The Electronic Water Cooler” – a public forum where employees hold conversations about other employees (often negative), with one major difference. Where the old water cooler conversations could be kept somewhat private, electronic message boards are very public and leave a formal, electronic trail that often puts the company at great liability.<sup>25</sup>

*“On message boards for particular companies, ...some employees are anonymously expressing thoughts they would not dare say out loud. They are freely showing their prejudices or denouncing other employees by name, sometimes accusing them of incompetence or misconduct or recounting salacious rumors about their sex lives”.*<sup>26</sup>

The following is an example of an online message board posting from a thread that Startec Global Communications cited in the article:

*“It’s time to go. You have been transferred from dept. to dept. Why? You continue to screw up and ...will not lay you off. You have become a worthless, ineffective manager without a cause. Everyone laughs behind your back. No one has any respect for you. Do yourself a favor and leave.”*<sup>27</sup>

Virtual communication is also influencing the negotiation process. The Harvard Business Review ran an interesting interview with Harvard Business School Professor Kathleen Valley on what happens when negotiations are conducted via e-mail.

*“The norm in face-to-face negotiation is something we call “openness script” – your instinct is to share. What we see as the norm in e-mail, by contrast, is something we call “haggling script” – you hold information much closer to the chest.*

*“With e-mail, negotiations are considerably more likely to degenerate into an unpleasant exchange... When the interaction is purely electronic, people are more willing to escalate conflict...*

*“In a recent study comparing e-mail, telephone, and face-to-face negotiations, we found that when people meet face-to-face, the most frequent outcome is a mutually beneficial agreement. When people talk over the phone, the most frequent outcome is that one party takes the greater share of the profits; it’s asymmetrical. With e-mail, the most common outcome is impasse. We found that 50% of e-mail negotiations end in impasse; only 19% end that way in face-to-face negotiations.”<sup>28</sup>*

With all these negative aspects of email communication, is there a positive side?

Certainly. Valley states that...“e-mail can be much more efficient. You avoid having to travel, organize meetings, play phone tag and all the attendant costs....you can communicate when you feel comfortable communicating; you don’t have to rush a response or a counteroffer....you just have to weigh the greater efficiency against the negative factors.”<sup>29</sup>

An informal survey of regular telecommuters on the STC-Telecommute<sup>1</sup> email mailing list surfaced the positive aspects of asynchronous communication for its ability to allow time for tempers to cool before responding to a potentially inflammatory message and to take one's time in crafting a thorough response. One respondent noted that side conversations, which can be very annoying in face-to-face meetings, could easily be "taken offline" in a secondary thread without interrupting the flow of an online conversation. Another respondent noted that she found it easier to deepen informal relationships online because the technology itself was a drastic improvement over the logistical impediments to frequent written correspondence via "snail mail" – specifically, printing or writing, enveloping, addressing, stamping, and mailing the communication. And email provides the potential for a much more immediate response time than does regular postal correspondence.

Dr. John Suler of Rider University in his paper *E-Mail Communication and Relationships* notes that email "creates a context and boundary in which human relationships can unfold . . . Avid e-mailers have developed all sorts of innovative strategies for expressing themselves through typed text. A skilled writer may be able to communicate considerable depth and subtlety in the deceptively simple written word. Despite the lack of face-to-face cues, conversing via e-mail has evolved into a sophisticated, expressive art form." Further, Suler notes that "an advantage of email conversations over face-to-face ones is

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<sup>1</sup> This list is sponsored by the Society for Technical Communication. For more information see [http://www.stcwvc.org/sigs/sigs\\_tele.htm](http://www.stcwvc.org/sigs/sigs_tele.htm).

that you have the ability to quote parts or all of what your partner said in his previous message.”

In *The Virtual Community* Rheingold notes, as did one respondent on the telecommuters' mailing list, that "Some people— many people— don't do well in spontaneous spoken interaction, but turn out to have valuable contributions to make in a conversation in which they have time to think about what they have to say. These people, who might constitute a significant proportion of the population, can find written communication more authentic than the face-to-face kind. Who is to say that this preference for one mode of communication— informal written text— is somehow less authentically human than audible human speech?"<sup>30</sup>

In his article “text talk,” Dr. Suler examines several environments where typed text is the norm for communication – primarily on-line chat rooms.

*“TextTalk on online chat environments has evolved into a fascinating style of communication. In some ways it is strikingly similar to face-to-face dialogue. In other ways, it is quite unique. Many of its unique qualities revolve around the fact that it is an austere mode of communication. There are no changes in voice, no facial expressions, no body language, no (or very little) visual/special environment as a context of meaning. There’s just typed words. Some people find this experience too sparse. They feel disoriented, disembodied, adrift in a screen of silently scrolling dialogue. Other people love the minimalist style of TextTalk. They love to see how people creatively express themselves despite the limitations.*

*They love to immerse themselves in the quiet flow of words that feels like a more direct, intimate connection between one's mind and the minds of others. Almost as if the other is inside one's head. Almost as if you are talking with a part of yourself. Without the distracting sights and sounds of the face-to-face world, TextTalk feels like a more pure communication of ideas and experiences.”<sup>31</sup>*

*“The terse style of talking in chat environments can result in either superficial chat, or a very honest and ‘to the point’ discussion of personal issues. One doesn’t have the verbose luxury of gradually leading the conversation to a serious topic, so self-disclosures sometimes are sudden and very revealing. The safe anonymity resulting from the lack of face-to-face contact – as well as people not knowing who you ‘really’ are – also contributes to this honest and open attitude.”<sup>32</sup>*

### **Are There People Who Are Not Suited to Virtual Communication?**

Some people may be better suited than others to communicate in virtual environments. Just who are those people? In *Managing Telework*, the author lists the following teleworker traits. “Aside from the characteristics of a person’s job, some people work out better than others as teleworkers.” The suggested traits include:<sup>33</sup>

- Self-motivation
- Self-discipline
- Job skills and experience

- Flexibility and innovativeness
- Socialization
- Life cycle stage
- Ability to balance family and work
- Ability to avoid compulsions, i.e., overeating, drug abuse and workaholism.

The author also notes that informal communication is often as important as the formal communication that takes place, for instance, in meetings.<sup>34</sup> He suggests that very extroverted employees are not likely to make good frequent telecommuters.<sup>35</sup>

Some companies are beginning to screen potential applicants for telecommuting positions.

*“Merrill Lynch runs a telecommuting lab to acclimate candidates for the alternative (virtual) workplace before they formally adopt the new style of working. After extensive prescreening, employees spend two weeks at work in a simulated home office. Installed in a large room equipped with workstations in their conventional office building, prospective telecommuters communicate with their managers, customers, and colleagues solely by phone and e-mail. If they don’t like this way of working, they can drop out and return to their usual workplace.”*<sup>36</sup>

**Trust: The Hallmark of Effective and Efficient Virtual Communication**

The fundamental ingredients of trust in any working relationship include reliability, consistency and integrity: I can count on you to follow through with what you have said you will do; I can predict a similar response given a similar situation; and I can count on you being honest. Trust, as described here doesn't happen overnight, and it may be particularly fragile in a virtual communication environment. This kind of trust builds slowly, through a series of shared experiences where expectations are met, belief in each other is validated, and individuals find they can depend on the predictability of each other's behavior.

The authors of this paper found many citations regarding the issue of trust in virtual communication. Overwhelmingly, all agree that face-to-face relationship building activities and actions must precede virtual communications and negotiations. Where that is not possible, if the relationship is to continue over an extended period of time or be subjected to periods of stress, a somewhat tentative and rather fragile relationship may develop. Face-to-face contact and conscious relationship building will likely be required to repair the relationship should it become damaged.

Consider the following statements:

*“Underlying every successful relationship is trust. Without it people become suspicious, noncommittal, uncaring, undermining and jaded – all of which leads to deteriorated and nonproductive relationships.....As a telecommuter,*



*establishing unwavering trust in relationships with colleagues and your boss is particularly vital, since distance and the absence of day-to-day interactions can create pressure on relationships that will erode trust.”<sup>37</sup>*

*“[E-mail negotiations work best] when you’ve already established rapport with the other person....when you have a utility for their outcome. There are a number of ways to build such rapport. Meet the other party face-to-face first; if possible, or at least have a phone conversation. Then continue the negotiation over e-mail.”<sup>38</sup>*

*“If you must use e-mail as your only medium, at least spend some time up front sharing social information....make a general introduction....find some common social ground that makes the ensuing negotiation proceed more smoothly....resist the tendency [to cut right to the chase]....”<sup>39</sup>*

*“Paradoxically, the more virtual an organization becomes, the more its people need to meet in person. The meetings, however are different. They are more about process than task, more concerned that people get to know each other than that they deliver.”<sup>40</sup>*

Duarte and Snyder acknowledge “without trust, building a true team is almost impossible.” However, they have identified what they refer to as three factors for building “instant” trust in a virtual environment. These three factors are:

- Performance and competence

This factor is composed of team members having a reputation for performance and results, follow-through, and obtaining resources to address the team's needs, a reputation that may have been built over time before the team members were assembled.

- Integrity

The authors define this as “the alignment of actions and stated values . . . The two primary behaviors that indicate integrity in a team are: (1) standing behind the team and all its members and (2) maintaining consistent and balanced communication.”

- Concern for the well-being of others

This factor is composed of intentionally and compassionately facilitating the transition of team members as they move on and off the team, as well as a concern and awareness of the team as a whole and its impact on the larger organization of which it is a part.

Duarte and Snyder also advocate for at least an initial face-to-face meeting even with virtual teams. “Currently, no technology can provide the give-and-take feeling of human interaction, and the understanding that develops from a face-to-face meeting. A virtual team leader should lobby diligently for the resources and time for a face-to-face meeting.”<sup>41</sup>

Overwhelmingly, people writing and expressing their views about virtual communication seem to agree that there is no replacement for face-to-face, human contact. This may change over time, as we all get better skilled at communicating virtually; however, there may be no replacement for the human moment.

## **Transitional moments: What are they and why manage them**

There are “transitional moments” we can recognize and that signal to us that it is time to move from one communication venue to a new one – from virtual communication along a continuum to face-to-face communication. These transitional moments are analogous to radio “sound bytes.” They transition us from one reality to another. The commonality behind all of these transitional moments is that we do not have shared meaning about the topic under discussion or the problem we are trying to solve.

While these moments may be fleeting, noticing them and acting on them are critical to our personal effectiveness at work. Poorly managed conflict sacrifices team synergy and productivity. And, as Hallowell states, not attending to the human moment can ultimately do emotional harm to ourselves and others. The most common harbingers of a transitional moment that we have been able to identify are:

1. Shifts in tone of response.
2. Response time changes.

3. Response seems out of alignment with what you've communicated.
4. Correspondent "shuts down".

In this section of this paper we offer the reader some specific skills to manage potential or real time communication difficulties when we identify a transitional moment and some insights about transitioning to other modes of communication to manage a conflict.

## **Developing a strategy for responding to conflict online**

When first joining a team or making a new contact with whom you will engage remotely in the future, it's helpful to find out what your communication partners' communication norms are. In other words, find out whether they prefer to define problems, gather information, provide status, and work toward solutions face-to-face, over the telephone, fax, in email, using online meetings, or in a chat room environment. Learn to gather this information as routinely as you would other contact information such as phone number, email address, URL, and physical address: it can often turn out to be every bit as important.

If you have the benefit of an organizational team meeting at the beginning of a project or regular status meetings, raise the issue of norming communication. Some people prefer periodic status reports in email only, others prefer them over the phone or in face-to-face one-on-ones. Some people are uncomfortable handling any form of conflict, or problem solving, in email. Some prefer to involve multiple team members in an online thread so

as to have a record of the discussion which may prove handy when writing a decision document, if your team formally documents significant decisions.

### **Walking a tightrope without a net**

It's not uncommon for teams not to have done the work of exploring and norming their communication at the beginning of a project. Teams are frequently quickly assembled to complete a short-term or deadline oriented project or solve a pressing business problem. Often the management focus is on the problem to be solved, not the way the team will communicate about the problem. When this happens, you can find yourself quickly in the throes of problem definition and resolution without much information on how to proceed when conflict begins to escalate. It can feel like walking a tightrope without the security of a net.

When you notice a transition in the interaction, pause and consider which of the following ways of proceeding would be the most effective:

- Querying carefully in email.
- Picking up the phone and calling your correspondent for clarification.
- Requesting an online meeting or teleconference.
- Requesting a face-to-face meeting.
- Enlisting the assistance of a third party intermediary.

### **Querying carefully in email**

Remember that since email lacks the nuances of tone, gesture, and facial expression, it's very possible to misunderstand your correspondent's, likely, most recent contribution to the discussion. For example, when an email correspondent sends you a potentially inflammatory message, the best way to respond may be to ask for clarification. Do not assume the writer was intending to be offensive. Instead, assume there is some sort of communication disconnect between you.

### **Picking up the phone**

Kathleen Valley offers some simple advice to manage these transitional moments:

*“If you ask a question and you get a response that seems defensive instead of one that offers more information, don't respond in kind. Don't get angry or personal. Stop typing and pick up the phone.”<sup>42</sup>*

Where making a phone call is an option – for instance, you are both in time zones that allow you at least *some* working hours in common – this can be the quickest and easiest way to address a conflict that is initiated online. Of course, you have to be comfortable calling your correspondent and feel that it is possible to effectively address the conflict over the phone.

The telephone offers the additional advantage of providing auditory information during the conversation that email does not. You can hear tone of voice, pacing, pauses, and so

on. A person who sounds angry in email may simply sound confused, or even frightened, in a telephone conversation. If you seem to be perceived by your correspondent as imposing or threatening, a telephone conversation is also a way to communicate a non-aggressive stance.

### **Requesting an online meeting or teleconference**

Sometimes it will be helpful to have more than two team members involved in a conversation that results from an emerging online conflict. Arranging for an online team meeting or teleconference can be a way to raise issues in a forum that isolates the factual content and depersonalizes the problem. Online meeting facilities can provide both voice and data so that an online whiteboard or other applications can be shared to document the problem definition and brainstorming around solutions. During a teleconference one or more people can volunteer to take notes and shared meaning can be crystallized for the group with a follow-up email message that describes the agreements reached in the meeting. Also, a facilitator can be assigned to ensure the meeting goes smoothly and that all people have an opportunity to participate.

### **Requesting a face-to-face meeting**

Sometimes the best approach is, finally, a face-to-face meeting. In some virtual environments this can be extremely difficult because team members may be spread across great distances and multiple time zones. (Note that, while videoconferencing is a step better than teleconferencing, even the best technologies are still not truly “real-time”

solutions and lack the essence of what a true face-to-face meeting provides. Face-to-face meetings, in the context of this paper, do not include videoconferences.)

Some personal styles, – and it is important to consider the other person’s style as well as your own – require a subtler use of the individual’s senses when a conflict arises or has progressed to a certain point, particularly if trust has been impaired. While a person whose first preference for dealing with conflict is to have a face-to-face meeting may not be suited to working on a virtual team, even the most experienced, adept remote worker may sometimes feel the need for “the human moment” in defining a problem and moving effectively toward resolution.

### **Enlisting the assistance of a third party intermediary**

You may find it helpful to drop out of the thread for a moment and query another member of the online discussion for feedback. Essentially you’re asking: This is my take on that last contribution. Am I reading this right, or did I miss something?

Often, another person’s perspective can shed light on the problem. You are sitting in front of your PC in your immediate reality and all it entails – concerns about other deadlines, the last sharp comment from your supervisor in the hallway, the dog barking next door, or that last interruption from a telephone solicitor – the fifth today. All of this can color your response, as can “unfinished business” with the contributor whose remark you found offensive or who seemed to be offended by your last contribution. Another person might read the situation differently – likely without the baggage you are currently



carrying. That person might even, as a result of your query, be able to make a contribution to the thread that clarifies the misunderstanding and provides you with the information you need.

This technique, however, is not best used to start another thread or to factionalize against someone who has offended you. It is only best used to actually gain clarification when you feel you may have misinterpreted a comment that need not necessarily be the initiation of an unproductive conflict.

### **The stop-drop-and-rotate of crisis conflict management**

Sometimes it seems like conflict is escalating like a wildfire, which may be why a hostile, rapidly escalating email-based conflict is called “flaming”. Just as in fighting wildfires, there are ways to address a rapidly escalating conflict online. This problem-solving model is used when two or more people have a problem and want to find a solution together and can be applied to online discussions as well as face-to-face discussions:

- Wait a minute
- Interact, don't react
- Negotiate a solution<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The WIN model of conflict management was devised by Lisa Burk.

When you feel yourself becoming emotionally involved, feeling defensive or like you want to attack, STOP. Calm yourself down. Ask yourself what you really want out of this interaction. Strategize about how to get the other person to talk to you. You might, for instance, draft a few questions to ask the person to help you clarify the facts and intentions in their statement. You will know you are ready to move on to the next step when you believe you can listen to the other person and suspend judgment.

Pose questions to gather information. Remember that most conflicts are based on misunderstandings and nearly as many are based on a too-hastily assumed belief that our positions are more important than our basic interests in the problem. During this phase of the conflict, make every effort to try to understand the other person's point of view by asking open-ended questions. While we all know that these are questions for which there is not a "yes" or "no" answer, it's also important to keep in mind that they are not the kind of question that Perry Mason made popular: "Isn't it true that . . ." This approach does not tend to inspire trust in your correspondent. Be willing to share your point of view in non-blaming ways. Assume that your correspondent is as interested in understanding your point of view as you are in understanding hers.

Finally, work with your correspondent on coming up with multiple solutions together and pick one that meets both of your needs. Agree to try out the solution you have chosen while remaining open to modifying it as needed without blame.

## Proactively addressing emerging conflict

When confusions or misunderstandings arise among people who communicate exclusively or almost exclusively through email, tensions can rise quickly because of elements like time delays and lack of a sense of ongoing interpersonal connection and, therefore, a lack of a sense of responsibility to treat the other as an equally valuable being. If your team's working environment has degraded to the point that a dispute has impacted team equilibrium, coaching team members on a proactive communication process can help head off feuds.

Proactive communication<sup>3</sup>, when practiced regularly, tends to build strong working relationships and provide a kind of social/emotional credit balance in those circumstances where tempers rise over data lines. This skill can be practiced on many levels from the fundamentally attitudinal to just-in-time crisis intervention. At the highest level, it is an orientation on the world and the individual's place in it. However, it can also be practiced as a set of learned skills, just like first aid and CPR can be practiced without a clear understanding of anatomy and physiology. A few guidelines are in order.

- First, be aware that confusion and even conflict **will** arise. Know that conflict is often based on lack of understanding between conflicting parties. Few people enjoy conflict, but avoiding it or allowing it to degrade to blame placing or

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<sup>3</sup> This protocol was developed by Jean Richardson.

escalate to name-calling will not solve the problem and allow you to move forward toward your goals.

- When you sense confusion or conflict arising, STOP. Adopt a position of eagerness to accept responsibility as necessary. This is not the same as placing or accepting blame. Neither placing nor accepting blame is productive in resolving conflict or confusion.
- Verbally indicate to the person you are speaking with that you are interested in partnering with them or cooperating to clarify the misunderstanding.
- As much as possible, focus on gathering information with that motive using the following three step process:
  - Describe the observable facts.
  - Interpret those facts and compassionately verify your interpretation with the other party.
  - Evaluate the facts and your understanding of them.

Based on your collection of observable facts, focus on the actions and agreements that will move both of you toward your goals. It is wisest not to try to negotiate this agreement in a context of blame placing or name-calling. Both parties must be aware of their intentions in order for this phase of the process to work, and those intentions must be in alignment with moving you both toward releasing a high quality product on time.

## **The technology is not the problem**

Remote work, telecommuting, virtual teams all require new communication skills. Old school managers who resist gaining these skills are losing ground in the new work environment – and losing valuable employees to teams where virtual communication skills are seen as part of the base skill set. Increasingly, as companies convert teams or whole divisions to home-based workers, it is necessary for individual contributors who may not have otherwise chosen to be teleworkers to develop these communication skills. In some parts of the country – in Oregon, for instance– sound and air pollution concerns have risen to an extent where ecological and quality of life concerns have resulted in legislation that encourages remote work.

Does this mean that we are doomed to seeing an increase in unproductive workplace conflict? No. The technology itself is not the problem. Rather, our lack of thoughtful use of the technology is the problem. Companies such as Mentor Graphics have learned that a well-managed virtual team spread across multiple time zones can have distinct advantages, both in terms of team member recruiting and retention and maximization of time spent on a project. But Mentor has also learned that lack of thoughtful management of this special kind of time or total disregard for the importance of “face time” can result in the disintegration or under-productivity of the team – and the loss of a valuable investment in critical human resources.

An important aspect of using email wisely as a dominant form of business communication is noticing the moment when an online conversation has gone awry and

doing what it takes to get the interpersonal interaction back on the right footing. That can mean:

- Querying carefully in email.
- Picking up the phone.
- Requesting a face-to-face meeting.
- Enlisting the assistance of a third party intermediary.

But **always** using email wisely means focusing on factual content, giving emotions their due, and moving forward with integrity and with the purposes of your role in the interaction in mind.

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