Excessive Email Use & Misunderstood Emails: Have They Given You Multiple Personalities?

I bet you didn't realize that you may have another personality. Or maybe two or three. But don't worry; you can make them go away by recognizing this possibility and following some simple guidelines. The "disease" that you may have is *Multiple Email Personality Disorder (MEPD)* -- you take on another personality in your organization based on how some people perceive you through your email communications. Many people today end up with MEPD without realizing it, and it often shows up as a side effect of email overuse.

Here's an example of how this can happen. You receive an email from someone in your organization that describes a proposal for a new project. The person asks if you agree with the proposal and if you'd be willing to participate in the project. You think the project is a great idea and want to support it. So you'd like to get additional details on the overall plan and more specifics on what is being requested of you. Plus, you'd like to inform the person that you'll need to submit a budget request and get it approved before you can proceed.

Sounds straightforward, right? You'll just send a reply back just stating these points.

Well, it turns out that you were out of the office yesterday and are behind on your email. So you've resorted to going through email on your PDA during one of your many meetings during the day and responding to as many as you can. There's so many in your Inbox that you want to get through your responses as quickly as possible.

You notice that the distribution list on this particular email has twelve people on it. Since you're just getting clarification on the request, you'd like to respond only to just the original sender plus three members of your staff that may help with the project. But since you're using your PDA, it's time consuming to reduce the distribution list. So you decide to hit the REPLY ALL button assuming that the eight people who really don't need the information in your response will just delete it. You want to get your response out quickly to get to your other remaining emails, so you type the following in on your PDA:

Wow! What r u asking 4? Give me a plan - no resources or $$ w/out this.

The problem is that the person receiving your message (and some of the 8 of the other 11 on the distribution list) interprets your response as:

"Wow! How can you ask me for something like this? And you're asking me without any detailed plan? You think I'm going to give you people or funding without a plan?!?"

So instead of the interested, supportive, willing-to-help person that you really are, you are seen as a rude, terse, resistive, and judgmental person.

This is a pretty extreme example, but I bet you've seen cases where something like this has happened in your organization. You've probably seen poorly written emails that were misinterpreted and received incorrect responses or emotional reactions. You've also probably seen emails like this with excessively long distribution lists. This multiplies the negative impact of the poorly written message since more people read it.

What are the causes of MEPD? They are generally associated with excessive email use. Sending an email for something that should be handled with a conversation can often lead to misunderstanding. Not reading your email from the perspective of the recipients can make the message sound insensitive. Writing an email that is overly terse or cryptic can lead to significant misinterpretation. Even something as simple as not phrasing a request as a question or not including the word "please" can make people feel like you are demanding, not asking.

If you're sending a message to someone you know well, a cryptic email may be o.k. since the person will likely know how to "read you". But be careful, people tend to read emails from a negative as opposed to a positive perspective. Also, as demonstrated in the example, the risk of getting MEPD is higher when PDAs are involved since they make composing effective emails more difficult. You can think of it this way: If excessive email use is to MEPD as smoking cigarettes is to lung cancer, then excessive email use *via PDA* is like smoking cigarettes without filters. It increases the risk.

> **WARNING: Excessive use of email, especially with PDAs, can be hazardous to your productivity!**

Below are some tips to help minimize the risk of emails being misinterpreted. For more information on this or other subjects related to effective communication, please visit http://www.emailless.com/ .

__Read your message from the perspective of the recipients before you hit the SEND button. Rewrite if necessary.__

With written communication, the verbal and visual elements used to help explain a point are missing, and immediate two-way clarification does not exist. Therefore, the ways the words can be interpreted are much broader.

Assume the 'worst case' perspective from the reader of the email and avoid any ambiguous language. Make sure requests are not misinterpreted as commands by writing them in the form of questions and using words like "please".

Due to the increased difficulty of composing messages on PDAs, be extra careful when using those devices. If you are not careful, the messages will end up short and excessively terse. These are often interpreted negatively in ways such as being demanding, uncooperative, critical, etc.

__If you receive a "cryptic" message, contact the person for clarification before responding or jumping to conclusions.__

Rather than interpreting incorrectly, take the time to understand what is really being said. Responding or assuming the wrong interpretation can cause even more problems.

Due to the difficulty of typing with PDAs, messages sent from these devices run the risk of being overly terse.

Please visit http://www.emailless.com/ for more articles and information on communicating consistently and effectively as an organization.