

## Think Twice, Send Once

We all receive unclear, confusing email messages that leave us feeling frustrated. Though we can rarely change other people's habits, we can change our own by making sure our email responses are well thought out, contain all the necessary information, and convey an appropriate tone.

When we demonstrate these habits consistently, we end up setting a standard for those around us, which over time can reduce the total number of messages exchanged.

Here are a few pointers to help you construct meaningful email responses:

**Make sure you've thoughtfully considered the intent of the message before you respond.**

For example, take the time to understand the scope of a project and the actions it requires before handing it off through email. Also, evaluate whether email is the right medium or the best way to delegate the work. Would a phone call or face-to-face meeting be more appropriate?

**Reread the original email message before sending you respond.** Have you addressed all of the questions and/or action items that were requested of you?

**Watch out for "flame mail."** Read (and reread) email responses to identify and remove emotion before you hit "Send." Your impatience or irritation can affect the tone of the message. Note: It's OK to write a "flame email" as long as you don't send a "flame email," e.g. write and then delete! This can be a useful strategy when you follow it with a phone call or in person conversation (and see next point.)

**Work out disagreements one-to-one, either in-person or by phone.** Using email to handle emotionally charged situations or to communicate a strong difference of opinion can often escalate the conflict. When in doubt, pick up the phone or schedule an in-person discussion.

**Stop runaway email threads.** Once an email thread reaches four iterations, consider the benefits of ending the thread and instead scheduling a meeting. If you initiated the thread, you can easily stop it. For closure, you may choose to provide a summary of the discussion or solution. If you didn't initiate the communication, consider contacting the party responsible to request a different approach.

**Leave useful out-of-office messages.** Whether you're off-site or on vacation, it's important that out-of-office messages provide emergency contact and/or coverage information; this will support others in making decisions during your absence.

Email responses that are well written and thought out will help to ensure a professional, focused, and successful communication. When used routinely, the benefit is often a reduction in the amount of email you send and receive, which, in the long run, benefits both you and those around you.