



Group Decision Tip

E-mailed every two weeks to help groups make good decisions

E-Mail

In principle, e-mail is an efficient way to communicate in groups, but it is a relatively new way of communicating that we are still getting used to. E-mail is instant like conversation, enduring like a written document, and able to be copied and distributed like nothing we have ever known. The combination of these three attributes makes it rather like a chainsaw; very effective when used properly, very dangerous when used on impulse or in anger.

E-mail is most effective when used to convey facts quickly. E-mail is most destructive when used to convey a negative reaction to something, like a previous e-mail. It's so quick and easy that we are apt to forget that what we write may be distributed far and wide and for long after our feelings have subsided. It's so impersonal that we are apt to underestimate its effect on other people's emotions.

And then there is the problem of interpretation. Very few of us are skilled enough to convey exactly what we mean with written words, or discern exactly what written words were meant to convey. E-mail messages are easily misunderstood and misunderstanding is usually at the root of bad decisions.

Practical Tip: 1. Beware of using e-mail to convey negative emotions, arguments, or sarcasm. If you don't have something nice to say, don't say it by e-mail. 2. Be thoughtful and deliberate about who you send to, if you send at all, and about forwarding e-mails. 3. If you don't fully understand something you read in e-mail, don't fill in the blanks with assumptions. If you don't understand what the sender meant, ask the sender (perhaps by phone or in-person).

E-mail is an easy way to say something *not* to someone's face. That can be efficient and/or hurtful. It cuts both ways.

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[Site Index](#)