

Writing Tip: In the Heat of the Moment--If It Feels Good, Don't Do It

Adapted from *Writing to Get Things Done (WGTD)* seminar

The Hidden Cost of Negative Emotion

When we're frustrated, irritated, or overwhelmed, we're often tempted to respond in the heat of the moment. Though satisfying, that initial good feeling can quickly give way to one of deep regret. Many a relationship has been strained, opportunity lost, or career damaged, due to a single off-the-cuff business email. That's not the way to get things done.



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The impersonal nature of email makes it easy for our readers to misinterpret our thoughts, for years to come. This is especially true in the digital age where hectic work environments heighten frustration, and our well-intentioned business writing can circle the globe in an instant-leaving an enduring testimony of our thoughts and actions. Even within corporate firewalls, our written messages become a permanent part of the (internal) historical record.

The Hidden Risk of Rationality

When immersed in a difficult situation, a common-sense solution is to strive to be more rational and less emotional. Though easier said than done, it's important to remember that the opposite of rational is *irrational*. When viewed this way, few people advocate less rationality.

Yet well-intentioned rationality can easily hurt feelings. For example, when a co-worker asks for your opinion about his or her appearance, they may not want your honest rational opinion. Our ability to empathize helps us to moderate our thoughts before they become written or spoken words. This emotional connection lies at the heart of good email etiquette.

Maintaining a Delicate Balance

Effective business writing requires a delicate balance between our emotional and rational capacities. Here are three tactics that can help you to consistently communicate in a positive helpful manner:

- *When negative emotions are running high, initially focus inward* to determine how you can become more balanced. This will reduce your risk of making regrettable statements that feel good in the moment.
- *When you feel balanced, focus on your readers.* When projecting a logical mindset, a little emotional empathy may be needed to avoid hurting delicate egos. This is especially true when your readers are experiencing negative emotions of their own.



- *When in doubt-sleep on it.* Writing a scathing business email in response to a frustrating situation can be highly therapeutic-it helps us to process our thoughts and creates a sense of satisfaction. Hitting the Send button can be social suicide. Try this instead.
 1. Write your message
 2. Set it aside for the rest of the day, or longer
 3. Read your message again before going to bed. Our brains remain active while we sleep, processing our thoughts and actions from the preceding day. This activity often produces a more balanced perspective the next morning.
 4. Edit your message
 5. Repeat as necessary

Tomorrow is Another Day

Negative emotions and a lack of empathy can limit our ability to get things done. To minimize their influence, pay attention to your mindset and err on the side of caution.

An easy fail-safe solution is to give your brain something useful to do while you enjoy a well-deserved rest. You might be surprised at how different you feel in the morning. If so, you'll appreciate the opportunity to make a final revision and avoid what could have been a deeply regrettable mistake.



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