

Stop! Before you press send on that email – read this first!

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4 MIN READ



When you think of the amount of time and energy devoted to outrage at misinterpreted emails and texts, it's worth understanding a bit behind what the brain does to help (or not).

Ping. An email arrives, and you look down to see a note from your long term client. You scan it, and quickly, very quickly you can find yourself getting annoyed.

"That email is rude! How dare she talk to me like that!" You open up a new email, ready to fire off an equally abrupt response. And the spiral of doom commences, with each response becoming ever terser.

It's a common enough scenario of course. All over the world, people are opening text messages and emails and reacting with annoyance to the perceived intent, tone and content. The resulting misunderstandings and miscommunications can range from the humorous to the downright dangerous. And all this costs time, money, energy, and reduces trust and goodwill.

The Design Flaw

Daniel Goleman wrote in the [New York Times](#) that "new findings have uncovered a design flaw at the interface where the brain encounters a computer screen: there are no online channels for the multiple signals the brain uses to calibrate emotions."

He goes on to say that positive emails are read down to be interpreted as neutral and neutral emails read down to be negative. We've all experienced this; when we receive an email from someone, only to do a double take at the perceived tone.

Why is this?

Goleman says there are a number of reasons for this.

We can't read the cues

When we communicate in real life, we can read the situation – and we (hopefully) adjust our approach according to the cues that we are picking up. If we see that the other person is getting flustered or annoyed by what we're saying, we might choose to take another tack. Or perhaps pursue it again another day.

Unfortunately, there's no way of knowing when the recipient is going to open your text or email. There is no control over the mood the recipient is in or what else is going on in that person's life. The number of times that I have opened an email when I have been already annoyed by something else, and then THAT email just adds to my general annoyance. Of course, when you look back at it in the cold light of day, it's generally absolutely fine.

We're egocentric

Goleman tells us that egocentricity means that when we are writing a text or an email, we 'hear' the overtones that we're wishing to insert into the communicate. It's why there's often real confusion when the author is confronted by the recipient – "but it doesn't sound like that at all. See here, I even put a joke in." Apparently even jokes are less funny when rated by the recipients rather than the senders!

As the sender, you have no way of providing additional information for clarity and understanding. An email or text is static. Once sent, it can't be amended. The number of times misunderstandings have occurred over a missed word, or a vital sentence that wasn't included. Again, as you're writing it – you know what you want to say – and even if you re-read before you send it, you often see what you want to be there (which is why editing your own work is never a good idea).

Of course, this is why people are increasingly using emojis to communicate tone and intent. Although, even these have been known to backfire, particularly amongst those who aren't aware of the actual meaning behind the emoji!

Assuming goodwill is harder when you don't have much real-life interactions the person

These days when messaging software, email, and other forms of social media have replaced much day to day real life talking and interaction, there's another issue to be aware of. Professor Shirky of New York University, has found that the more email and other forms of electronic communication are used, the less general talking happens. That might be good for productivity, as there is less time spent at the water cooler, but it means that people feel increasingly disconnected from each other. This feeling of disconnectedness means that the goodwill we apply to a friend whose seemingly terse text we've just received, applies less and less in the workplace.

So, what to do?

As the sender..

- Ask yourself, SHOULD this content be communicated by text or email? Or, should I do it face to face or by phone?
- If it must be sent by electronic means, and the matter is in any way sensitive, ask someone else to read over it for their perspective on how it could be received.
- In any event – doublecheck it anyway.

As the recipient..

- If you're annoyed at something you've received, before you do anything, check in on yourself. Were you having a crappy day before you received it, and now you're reading everything through the lens of gloom?
- Ask someone else to read it to check whether they have the same reaction as you. This is particularly helpful if you can find a non-emotive, straight down the line sort of person.
- If after all that, you're still annoyed – pick up the phone or go and see the person. Check your understanding. Is that what they really meant?

When you think of the amount of time spent using electronic messaging these days, it really pays to pause just that moment or two before pressing send. Remember what your Nan used to say: send in haste, repent at leisure!

And for those on the receiving end, assume goodwill. Some people are annoying gits, but most aren't. Breathe. Breathe some more. Then read it again in the morning.

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Tammy Tansley

This can mean anything from getting the **people basics right**, to the **solving of a systemic or difficult people or team problem**, to the **introduction of complex organisational and cultural changes**. Why do I do this? Because I know that the bit that makes work unpleasant usually is when people interactions start to go wrong. I love working with clients to help them resolve issues or put in place approaches so that the issues don't arise in the first place, rather than for them to spend hours lying awake at night trying to work out how to move an issue (or person) forward.

There are lots of consultants out there; so how will you know if I am the right person to work with and your business? Clients have described me as part confidante, part strategist, part tactician. Clients say that they have a sense of relief that things are being dealt with, and that they are no longer alone in trying to deal with an issue (particularly complex or long standing issues). They say that it is not just the quality of the advice but the depth of the advice. That they feel that they have someone on their side. In answer to the question - what do you do?

I work with either individual clients (usually via a coaching relationship) or organisations either at the team or organisational level. Sometimes I am working with a CEO on people strategy, a team on high performance and coaching individual employees, all in the same organisation. I can work in organisations for a discrete period of time or a specific project. Other times, it is an ongoing and varied relationship that evolves as the organisation evolves. I work as a **human resources, culture & change** and **industrial relations consultancy** for businesses in **finance, manufacturing, resources, oil and gas, government, retail, services and not for profit sectors** - both in Western Australia and nationally.

These include both smaller 100-500 employee organisations and large global businesses. I am also the author of *Do What You Say You'll Do* (a book for new leaders and those reinventing their leadership styles). Check out the website here: www.dowhatyousay.com.au and Enterprise Agreements : Made Easy (a book on how to easily negotiate an enterprise agreement that meets the needs of all parties). Check out the website here: www.easmadeeasy.com.au

To find out more about the person behind the business, take a look at my [Flying Solo Spotlight profile](#).