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The ADR Bulletin

ADR and new technologies

# Emerging cultural norms for electronic communication

*John Helie and John Ford*

William Ury starts the first chapter of his book, *The Third Side*, with an old Irish saying: 'Is this a private fight or can anyone get in?' This question is important because conflict seldom limits itself to the direct participants, and typically affects others. Whether this justifies getting involved is often a difficult decision.

In the workplace, these and other questions about 'appropriate behaviour' are being faced anew as the use of electronic communication permeates organisational culture. Email, list servers, discussion forums, voicemail, audio and video file transfers, phone calls, conference calls, video conference calls, and even faxes and hardcopy are all part of a complex communication system.

While electronic communication can be inclusive and foster dialogue, the question of when and how to involve others or to get involved is challenging. Since these are the early days of electronic communication, cultural norms about acceptable behaviour have yet to develop fully.

Take this scenario as an example:

*Two project managers in a department have 'baggage'. For the most part they are able to avoid dealing with one another. As a gesture of goodwill one agrees to take on a task for the other that does not fall within her strict lines of responsibility. As a result it is not prioritised. The other sends an email complaining that the work has not been done, and ends with a sarcastic comment. He copies everyone on his project team. Furious over this public humiliation, an email is immediately sent back, and this time both teams are included.*

As this scenario shows, electronic communication is potentially dangerous. It is very easy to include others or forward an email. We are left to our own sensibilities about who to include and who to leave out. There are no social norms and most ➢



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➢ organisational protocols do not address such things. It is a new medium and not uniformly understood.

As we learn the efficiencies and advanced functions of electronic communication, it can be much like a snowball rolling down the slope. It is easy to get it rolling, it begins small and by the time it hits mid slope it is gaining size, speed and destructive potential.

In this example was the inclusion of the other team members appropriate? One view is that having the conflict out in the open is positive. Email can become a 'back channel' where conflict can escalate under the radar of anyone else in the workplace. Another view is that the attempted shaming, defensive reaction, and the involvement of others outweighed any positives.

Email has distinct differences from other means of communication. Take for example the difference between 'reply' and 'reply all'. Many people are unaware of the 'reply all' feature. They know enough to 'reply' and have not explored beyond that functionality. In many organisations, employees are expected to know these functional differences and to make appropriate use of each. Leaving someone out of an interaction can be as problematic as including someone who should have been left out.

The use of nicknames and distribution lists within 'address books' makes it very easy to invite other people into the dispute. The additional time and work it takes to send or forward a paper message or even a voice-mail message to multiple recipients will often be enough to allow for reconsideration. Face to face confrontation will also give pause for second thoughts.

If you are annoyed by the amount of electronic communication you receive, you may be inclined to leave people out of communication, hoping that the norms you create will reduce the amount of email you receive. On the other hand, if you scan quickly and delete ruthlessly or do not get much email, you may wish to be included on more communication and tend to include others in your messages. Others may simply not notice all the addresses on the list and be unaware of the consequences of either including or leaving off addresses.

Email provides an easy way to deal with conflict without the discomfort that arises in a face to face conversation. It is easier than leaving a difficult voicemail message. Employees are often not certain whether the use of electronic communication to deal with conflict is appropriate or not. However, employees create the organisational culture which dictates appropriate usage through the actual use of electronic communication on a daily basis.

Workplace communities have people who can 'join the fray' to help create a situation where everyone can benefit. Being a witness is one way to engage as a member of the 'third side'. Ury defines the third side as people using peer power to create a triple win through dialogue and non-violent means. Workplace disputes are never confined to the parties directly involved.

Careful use of electronic communication can allow employees access to the workplace third side. Protocols can be established which describe how to include a witness, for example this person is being included to represent a willingness to work something out and not to decide, take sides or report. Sometimes, the inclusion of Ury's third side to read the correspondence can be beneficial. If handled correctly it can foster a dialogue without threats, blaming and other power plays. In the workplace, the best practice may be an ombuds that is included in the communication.

Organisations are developing formal electronic communication policies and cultural norms, but few are consciously integrating the policies and norms into their overall approach to communication and conflict management. Policies provide guidance on what is expected and consequences for non-compliance, but policies and expectations are only part of the answer.

Creating a communication culture that fosters effective, efficient and satisfactory means of dealing with conflict requires conscious planning. Systems can be designed to foster the development of norms and best practices. As Ury's discussion on the role of the witness suggests, norms that clarify when and how to get involved in disputes are still emerging. This is equally true for electronic communication in the workplace. Systems can be designed to involve a third side and integrate factors inherent to electronic communication to encourage the emergence of an optimal communication culture. ●

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*29 November-1 December 2001, Adelaide, South Australia*

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