

## Face-work and Email Communication Strategies

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*Email is the medium of choice for communication in organizations. The medium offers powerful capabilities to send messages to one or many individuals simultaneously; in the background, i.e. without announcing the recipients to the publicly addressed individuals; and to forward any message to any number of people. Since all task processes interact with emotional processes for individuals and groups, this paper utilizes Erving Goffman's ideas on face work to propose a framework for email communication strategies at the workplace. A set of guiding principles is provided for using one-to-one and one-to-many messages.*

**Keywords:** Communication strategies, email, face work, organizational communication

### 1. Introduction

Erving Goffman is considered to be one of the original contributors to the field of Symbolic Interactionism. He brought the dramaturgical perspective to sociological analysis of face-to-face interactions. This perspective argues that human behavior is a function of time, place and audience. People adopt different social roles such as peace-maker, joker, task-master, etc., and establish and evolve their personal identity through successful performance of these roles. In developing his ideas on face-work, Goffman used the Chinese concept of face to describe the image of self displayed by an individual by adopting a line. A line is a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts through which the individual expresses who he / she is, including his /her evaluation of his/her own worth, as well as his / her evaluation of the other participants and the situation. Others in the situation assume that the person has adopted this line willingly. Individual and group interaction can then be observed to discover rules of interaction.

Globalization and technology have shifted much of the interaction between people to media other than face-to-face. Among all these media, such as paper documents, telephone, facsimile, and email, organizations have increasingly come to rely upon email as the medium of choice. Email is almost universally available and allows asynchronous communication. It is reasonably private for communication between individuals, yet allows many different patterns of communication for a group. The versatility of this medium has resulted in its adoption as a favorite means of communication.

Goffman's ideas of face work become highly relevant as a framework for analysis if we examine the implications of using email as a principal means of communication in organizations. An individual may compose a message when alone- yet the individual can be working in a group depending on how many recipients there are for a message. The message represents him or her to the group through words. Recipients of the message usually consider the sender's choice of words in the message as "intended". These words can also reveal his or her evaluation of himself / herself and the recipients. And all those involved in the email communication do form opinions about themselves and others, even if they may not "see" each other.

This paper utilizes Goffman's ideas to examine the conditions under which email communication may be effective or ineffective in helping an e-group work. The first part of the paper summarizes Goffman's ideas; the second part of the paper identifies the distinction between work issues, interpersonal issues, and how email communication can switch the central issue from work to interpersonal conflict; and the third part proposes strategies for effective communication.

### 2. Goffman on Face Work

Goffman's basic thesis in this seminal article may be summarized as follows. Whenever a person comes into contact with other people, he or she is assumed to have taken a particular line, and thereby acquires a face. A Line is a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which the person expresses his/her view of the situation and through this his/her evaluation of the participants, especially of himself / herself. One takes a line regardless of one's intentions to take that particular line; and others assume that he/she has more or less willingly taken the line.

A person acquires a “Face” based on the line he is assumed to have taken. Goffman equates Face to the “...positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact.” (Goffman’s use of the pronoun “he” makes us mindful of the gender bias that existed in those days.) Face is an image of oneself – not the full self – which usually displays approved social attributes that others may understand and even themselves possess. For example, individuals through their actions may project their image as a “professional.” Others in the group may also project this same attribute, and will have a common understanding of what a professional is expected to do under all circumstance. Possession of this attribute enhances the positive social value of that individual and gives him / her (more / better) face. However, if you place a “white collar professional” among “blue collar, rough, gruff and tough” group, the “professional” attribute may get drowned out in the differences between the white collar versus blue collar dynamic. Establishing a face, i.e., having one’s image accepted with “a positive social value” that can command some respect, becomes the primary activity upon contact.

A person tends to experience an immediate emotional response, such as satisfaction, pride, hurt, etc., to the face that a contact with others allows him. Face is something that is diffusely located “in the flow of events”. If events establish a face that is better than he/she expected, he/she “feels good” and respected. On the other hand, if a person is not shown the respect deserving of the face he / she expected to acquire, he / she will feel insulted and injured, which becomes a problem for him / her, and even for others. The reason is that due to the human characteristic of empathizing with others, people will have feelings about the face sustained for the other participants as well. Groups have norms, mostly unstated, about how much feeling one is to have for face. Too much feeling makes a person oversensitive in the eyes of the group. Oversensitivity itself can be an undesirable characteristic – thereby making that person lose face.

Goffman defines “having face, being in the right or wrong face, maintaining face, being out of face, and saving face” as follows. A person is said to have, be in, or maintain face when the line he/she effectively takes for himself/herself presents an image that is internally consistent, and that is supported by judgments and evidence conveyed by other participants and impersonal agencies. A person may be said to be in wrong face when information is brought forth in some way about his/her social worth, which cannot be integrated, even with effort, into the line that is being sustained for him. A person may be said to be “out of face” when he/she interacts with others without having ready a line of the kind participants in such situations are expected to take. When a person is in wrong face or out of face, it becomes difficult to maintain consistency between different pieces of information about that individual, their past line and their face. The phrase “to save one’s face” appears to refer to the process by which the person who has lost face sustains an impression for others that he/she has not lost face.

Groups have norms about self-respect. In most groups, once a person has taken a face, he / she is supposed to live up to the attributes that make up the face. This shows self-respect. The amount of self-respect itself is part of one’s face. Different groups require different levels of self-respect. Loss of face is expected to result in confident or indignant actions to restore face.

Groups also have norms about considerateness: A person is expected to have self-respect, but that is usually not enough. The person is also expected to sustain a standard of considerateness – again the standard is defined by the group. The rule of considerateness requires the person to go to certain lengths to save the feelings and the face of others present, and he/she is expected to do this willingly and spontaneously. The line maintained by and for a person tends to be of a legitimate institutionalized kind.

The combined effect of norms of self-respect and of considerateness is that the person tends to conduct himself/herself during an encounter so as to maintain both his/her own face and the face of the other participants. According to Goffman, this mutual maintenance of face is a condition of interaction, rather than the objective of interaction. In other words, any loss of face on the part of any individual creates an emotional disequilibrium in the group.

By “face-work” Goffman refers to actions taken by a person (or others) to make whatever he/she is doing consistent with face. According to Goffman, face-work proves useful in counteracting “incidents”. Incidents are events whose symbolic implications threaten an individual’s face. Members of any group are expected to have some knowledge of face-work and some experience in its use. This is known as *savoir-faire*, diplomacy or social skill.

## Basic Kinds of Face work

Goffman posited four kinds of face work – Avoidance Process, Protective measures, Corrective Process, and Escalating incidents. The first three attempt to sustain or regain the delicate and dynamic equilibrium of maintaining face. He also described the process of Making Points, which implies aggressive use of face work to gain face or insult someone without actually causing an incident.

**The Avoidance Process:** An excellent way of preventing threats to one's face is to avoid contacts where such threats are likely to occur. Some of the ways to avoid such contacts are (a) to use a go-between, (b) to voluntarily withdraw from such situations, (c) to steer clear of topics or activities that may lead to loss of face, and (d) to be modest or at least be realistic in making claims for oneself.

**Protective Measures:** These include (a) showing respect and politeness, (b) using discretion in what information is revealed, (c) leaving some facts unstated, (d) using careful ambiguity, and (e) not making demands on others that may belittle them. These strategies protect face.

**The Corrective Process:** When participants fail to prevent or cannot ignore an incident, they may give recognition to it as an incident - and engage in a corrective process to restore face. Goffman calls this process an "interchange" which involves at least two moves, simplest example being - "Excuse me", and "Certainly". Typically, there are four classic moves.

Step 1 - The Challenge: This is where one of the participants takes the responsibility to call attention to the misconduct. This public recognition suggests to the group that the threatening event and resulting emotional upheaval must be brought back in line.

Step 2 - The Offering: This is where a participant (typically the offender) is given a chance to correct the offense and re-establish the expressive order. For example, the offender may show how the incident was unintentional and/or an unavoidable part of another process, or provide compensations to the injured - such as an apology, penance, or self-punishment.

Step 3 - Acceptance: The injured person may decide to accept the offering as a satisfactory means of restoring the order.

Step 4 - Gratitude: The offending person conveys a sign of gratitude to those who have given him/her the indulgence of forgiveness.

**Escalating an Incident:** When participants refuse to engage in the corrective process, they may escalate the incident, so that either the interaction breaks down, or overt conflict begins. This can be intentional or unintentional.

**Making Points:** This is aggressive use of face work to benefit socially or to harm someone else. Every face-saving practice creates an opportunity for people to intentionally introduce a threat to face without being challenged, and / or to brag about oneself without being "put in one's place". The essential assumption underlying this strategy is that it is not the person (who creates the threat or brags about oneself) who needs to perform face-work; rather it is others who must perform face work. For example, one may fish for compliments or arrange for favorable events to occur to gain face for oneself. On the other hand, a person may offend others or arrange for a person to be in the wrong face or out of face, but not trigger off a corrective process. One of the most common ways to control the group dynamic is to arrange for others to offend one's feelings thus forcing them to feel remorse, guilt and sustained disequilibrium.

### 3. Characteristics of Email as Communication Medium

Email as a communication medium has many interesting characteristics. Some of the capabilities of this medium are (a) to send messages to one or many individuals simultaneously; (b) to send messages to one or many recipients in the background, i.e. without announcing these recipients to the others whether publicly or background addressed individuals; (c) and to forward any message to any number of people. Email servers have other capabilities such as a listserv which can automate some of these processes – particularly in handling replies.

Technology, however, behaves in strange ways compared to human expectations. Listservs often create a situation where person X sends a message to the list and the listserv sends out copies to everyone in the list. Depending on the settings used to process messages to that list, if person Y wants to reply to X, the listserv may

put in the name of the list rather than the name of the initiator of the message (i.e., person X). Thus the reply from person Y may go the entire list rather than just to X.

The capabilities and behavior of email unexpected by typical normal, inexperienced users are of interest because these often unintentionally create an incident depending on what information is contained in an email message. For example, if an email intended for one person gets distributed to the whole workgroup, it could cause an incident if part of that email raised questions about a decision or some other area of performance. Such questions always have the potential of being interpreted as someone having performed inadequately.

#### **4. Face work and Seven Rules of Email**

The connection between email and face work therefore is in relation to how email creates threat to face – whether one’s own or a coworker.

Rule 0: Never send an email unless absolutely needed.

Rule 1: The way a person uses email itself becomes part of the person’s face.

This rule is based on the basic thesis behind face work, that every message is a potential encounter where a person is assumed to have taken a line based on the patterns in the content and manner of the interaction. Individuals develop specific patterns in the way their messages composed, and how these messages are sent out – one-to-one, one-to-many (i.e. broadcast to all possible parties), etc. For example, some people use email for quick and dirty communication – these emails contain lot of abbreviations, may sometimes contain misspellings etc. These actions provide their evaluation of the email system itself, expresses their philosophy of what they expect others to do. They may gain face just because they express themselves in this fashion in a crowd of techies. On the other hand, if co-workers are fastidious about language, they may view the quick and dirty emails as an indication about lack of literacy.

Rule 2: Never write anything in an email that one would not ever want to become public knowledge.

This rule is based on the Avoidance Process. Emails provide a trail of evidence that is undeniable except when the evidence is falsified. Thus, if a message has the potential to reveal a hidden side of the person that they do not wish to become known ever, it should not be sent. One should employ other means of communication that could be deniable.

Rule 3: If the contents of the message imply inadequate performance by an individual or individuals, it is best to communicate in a one-to-one email only with that individual or only with those individuals whose performance (and thereby perhaps qualifications) is in question.

This rule is based on the Protective Measures face work process. One-to-one emails keep any threat to face restricted to the minimal number of individuals – thus providing an opportunity for exchange of information without any threat to face “in front of” others.

Rule 4: If the goal of an individual is to “explode” issues, the best strategy is to send an email to the widest audience possible.

This rule is based on “escalation” principle from Erving Goffman. The more people receive messages about an issue and how it is some particular person’s fault, the greater the chance that someone is likely to challenge the Sender of the message. At this point, the sender has the choice of not offering an apology, but rather become more vociferous in threatening face. It can result in breakdown of interaction, and escalation of the conflict.

Rule 5: Use CC:, not BCC; never send a BCC (Background Carbon Copy) except to oneself as a reminder or when sent to a large group of people who are most likely not to ever meet one another.

It is human nature to view any “hidden” activity as suspicious. There is always the possibility that the BCC will be revealed to others by the person who received the BCC message. Thus, a BCC violates Rule 2.

Rule 6: When replying to an email, give sufficient time, and check the Recipients of one’s message.

When one receives an email, it is better to let one's emotions subside before responding to an email. When replying, it is necessary to check the recipients, lest one sends out the message to people who do not need to get it.

Rule 7: If an email contains appreciation for or celebration of an individual's actions / decisions, always select the largest relevant group of people to send an email to.

Appreciation and celebration of an individual "gives face" to that individual. This begins a positive discourse in the group, and makes the individual proud.

### **5. Conclusion**

The use of email is becoming ubiquitous. Face work offers a good way to observe and control the dynamics of a group that may have to be kept glued together via the internet and particularly through email. Technology enhanced communication networks will continue to improve the flexibility of organizations in working asynchronously. The question is whether the advantages of technology will be lost due to the human processes. This paper identified some of the parallels between face work, and what is controllable / observable out of all that takes place through the communication vehicle called email.

### **5. References**

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