

Dealing with Online Conflict

Seventy percent of person-to-person communication is said to be non-verbal and without these verbal cues, the online environment is sometimes prone to conflict. Words on a screen do not express qualities like voice tone or facial expressions and are often open to misinterpretation. The following are tips for avoiding and addressing online conflict: -

- ◆ Most importantly always give participants the benefit of the doubt, assume that their posting was made with the best of intentions. Don't be too sensitive.
- ◆ Empathy, empathy and more empathy.
- ◆ Address online conflicts before they become online wars.
- ◆ Don't underestimate the impact negative interaction might have on participants.
- ◆ When addressing online conflicts consider all options of communication, email, discussion boards, instant messaging, telephone, etc. Some communication tools are more personal than others.
- ◆ Consider the issues surrounding public and private communication issues when addressing conflicts. Be mindful of the type and quantity of information, individuals and the class as a whole require to resolve the conflict and find closure.
- ◆ There are no hard and fast rules and no one way to deal with online conflicts. As a face-to-face environment conflict resolutions are different in each case.

Case Study

Both Joel and Mary are enrolled in an online course. Mary has been actively participating in all online discussions. The group has been discussing the importance of online communication. Joel has been continuously reading all discussions but has made limited postings.

Joel>> I think that community is a very important part of online learning, but it is something which everyone must feel a part of. It has taken some time for this to happen. It is something we all need to work towards.

Mary>> Joel you are right! Online community is something that is very important in an online course and yes we all need to work towards it. But I ask, where were you when WE were creating the community? You did not

help; all you did was lurk. It is very frustrating for those of us who are working hard to make things happen, to see people who do nothing, but free load. If this community is too much work for you why don't you go back to your lurking?

Dealing with the conflict

Dealing with online conflict is extremely difficult. Although there is no right or wrong way to address the issues in the case study here is suggested solution.

Joel

I would send an email to Joel. I would use Joel's direct email address and not the online learning platform. The reason for this is that Joel is more likely to read his personal email before log in back into the course.

Hi Joel

I just want to send you a short message in relation to Mary's reply to your posting. I would image that you might feel upset and possibly angry about the way Mary has worded her response. I want you to know that I am concerned about how Mary's posting might have made you feel and I have notice that you have not made any postings recently.

If it is OK with you I would like to give a ring to discuss how you are feeling and what we might be able to do from here. If you could send me an email letting me know of a suitable time to call you I would be extremely grateful.

Many thanks

Brad :-)

The reason for send this message to Joel is to firstly let Joel know that I am concerned about what is happening for him. Normalising these possible feelings is extremely important. Although my first reaction would be to ring Joel, I want to empower Joel to have some decision making power in regards to this issue. By sending Joel an email asking for a time to ring him, it gives Joel the power to decide when and where he would be happy to discuss this issue. This also allows Joel time to think about what he would like to do about the problem, while also having an opportunity to think about his feelings. In other words Joel has the control without being pressured, and knows I am concerned about him and that he is not alone.

Mary

I would also send an email to Mary's personal email address. For, the same reasons as per Joel's message.

Hi Mary

I just wanted to send you a quick email about the course and your reply posting to Joel.

I can understand that you might feel angry about Joel's comments and that it might appear that Joel has not been contributing the course appropriately.

I was hoping that we might have a chance to talk about how you are feeling on the phone. If you could send me an email letting me know when would be an appropriate time to give you a call that would be great.

Many thanks

Brad :-)

As per Joel's message I am trying to empower Mary to have some control of this situation. Given the nature of this conflict, I do not want to ring Mary without giving her the opportunity to prepare for the conversation.

The Group as a whole.

Although this conflict appears to be between Joel and Mary the fact that this conflict occurred in public it will impact on the group as a whole and therefore needs to be addressed in public.

Hi Everyone

As many of you will have noticed there has been some discussion about the role of individuals in the building of community online. It is important to acknowledge that some participants will feel more comfortable interacting online and are therefore more likely to make postings, thus helping to create community. However there are some people who are not able to make as many postings as others. The reasons for these people not making as many postings could be varied. These participants might not have the confidence to make the postings, or might have technical issues, or might have an issue of lack of time, or might even have personal issues that prevent them from being active in the community.

The important thing is that each one of us, is considerate towards our fellow class members.

Thanks

Brad :-)

This posting is extremely important as it show leadership to the group. Also the tone the message is very important, as it needs to be written in a way that will not create further conflict.

As for the original messages posted by Joel and Mary, I would not delete them unless asked by Joel and Mary. Given that they appeared in public if they disappear without being addressed then the impact on the group as whole could be negative and could set off a gossip grape vine.

Please feel free to make any postings to this discussion. Nita and I would love to hear any comments or questions you might like to make.