Guidelines for Managing Email Stress: Organization, Etiquette, & Expectations

Based on the work of the 2013 Business & Finance Leadership Academy

ORGANIZATION: Develop efficient systems to organize and process the flow of email.

- Keep your inbox tidy.
  - Use your email system tools to **create folders** to organize messages by category.
  - Use your email system tools to **create labels** to prioritize messages.
  - Use your email system tools to **set up filters** that will automatically route messages into folders and/or label them according to your criteria.

- **Reduce your email volume** (both sent and received).
  - **Unsubscribe** from unnecessary bulk email. You may be able to use other methods to get the same information, such as social media.
  - **Limit the use of “okay” or “thank you” messages.** As an alternative, use the phrase “Thank you in advance” when sending a request.
  - **Use the reply all option with discretion**, and only when all truly need to be included.
  - Instead of using email to collaborate on group tasks, **try using other collaboration tools** such as Google docs, M+Box, and Google hangout.
  - **Keep track of how many emails you receive and send** by using your email system tools (e.g., Gmail Meter or Outlook search folders). This will raise your email self-awareness and allow you to see the effect of any changes you make to your email habits.

ETIQUETTE: Practice good email etiquette which includes manners, courtesy, and respect.

- **Tone**
  - **Be polite.** Include a courteous greeting and closing. Remember to use good manners. A few additions of the words "please" and "thank you" go a long way.
  - **Read your email out loud to ensure the tone is what you intend.** Don’t rely on formatting for emphasis, rather choose words that reflect your meaning. If you find you are feeling emotionally charged when writing an email, take a break and calm down first.
  - **Email unto others as you would have them email unto you.**

- **Content**
  - **Write clear informative subject lines and stick to one email per topic** so messages can be easily organized and retrieved.
  - **Use the “to” and “cc” lines wisely.** Those in the “to” field are usually expected to respond, while those in the “cc” field are simply being informed.
  - **Be brief,** no more than two paragraphs.
• Clearly state the type of response you’d like to receive to your email, by using phrases such as No response needed (NRN), No need to reply (NNTR), Please do not reply all, Please respond by Friday.

• Always include your contact information (at least phone and fax numbers) in your signature block so people can easily follow up with you as needed.

EXPECTATIONS: Manage your own expectations and the expectations of others.

• Clarify expectations regarding email response time and after hours/weekend responses through discussions with your supervisor/manager and colleagues.

• Communicate with others about when you are generally available to read and respond to email. For example, you could include a message in your standard signature block that states, “I check email Mon –Fri between the hours of 8am – 4pm.”

• Decide when you will read and respond to email during your workday. Remember that you run your email; don’t let your email run you.
  • Limit multi-tasking. Plan two to three times a day to read and respond to email. Turn off email alerts so your work is not interrupted at other times.
  • Take email vacations. Consider disconnecting for a half-day (or longer) “email vacation” to allow you to focus deeply on a project.

• Thoughtfully choose the appropriate medium for your communications.
  • Avoid using email to resolve relationship conflicts.
  • Besides e-mail, other appropriate choices are face-to-face, phone, online chat/instant messenger, and text.
  • Some clues that it’s time to switch to another means of communication are:
    • When the number of emails has been excessive (more than three),
    • When the email would be too long (more than two paragraphs), or
    • When you need an immediate response.

• Advocate for better communication. Encourage each other to send less and talk more.