Flame Warfare

Four steps to guaranteeing a *cease fire*!

Imagine that you're sitting at your desk. So far the day has been okay; not marvelous, not terrible; just okay. Next thing, you receive a new email message waiting for your attention. You open it when you see that it is from a colleague and see he is responding to your request.

You are not at all ready for what you are about to read.

The message is an overt verbal attack on your ability, ethics and even your personality! Believe it or not, there is even mention of your mother (who he has never met) and your mental capacity.

You can't imagine what provoked such a response to what you thought was a professional, albeit quite formal request email.

**You have been *flamed*.
And perhaps, you have also *flamed*.**

Flaming is the expression of extreme emotion or opinion in an email message. It's a verbal attack in electronic form (and never forget, it's all in writing).

When you flame, you alienate your reader, possibly generate ill feelings and ultimately negatively impact work productivity.

Sometimes the reason for a flame is quite obvious, but in other cases (such as in the situation above) you don't even know what has caused it.

Remember that everyone sees the world differently.

What is a *trigger* or *emotion-laden* word or sentence for one person could have absolutely no impact on another person.

You might send what you think is a harmless request to five people. Four people respond in a rational tone with the requested information, while one sends you a flame.

At this point, you are at a cross road.

Your heart is pumping, you have begun to sweat; you are shaking with emotion. How *dare* he say those awful things to you; you don't deserve to be treated in this way; how unprofessional! You'll *never* give him the time of day – ever again…

You click on the *Reply to sender* button and get ready to give your colleague a "piece of your mind". If he thinks he can get away with this, he's got another thing coming!

You are now on the verge of a *flame war*. And there are no winners in flame warfare.

After beginning a flame war, it's very difficult to go back to being a rational and logical human being and business associate.

The best road to choose is one that avoids flame warfare.

The way to avoid a flame war, where you respond to the flame with a flame and the cycle continues for a period of time, always comes down to how you choose to react to the message (or your attitude) and the effectiveness of your writing.

Consider the following tips to avoiding flame warfare.

2. SHIFT YOUR PARADIGM

- Resist the temptation to fire off a response to a flame.
- Break the cycle of message and response. A telephone call or personal conversation can do wonders to resolve difficulties.

- Assume the good intentions and competence of the sender. Begin from the paradigm that what you perceive to be the message couldn't possibly be. Don't automatically think the worst.
- Read the original message again. You might be misinterpreting or misreading the sender's message.

1. BASE YOUR MESSAGE ON FACT, NOT FICTION

Separate opinion from facts while reading a request or complaint and respond only to the facts. When responding, ensure your document's details are based on fact and not bad assumptions or emotion. Two useful techniques to remember are as follows.

- Reword some sentences to show opinion rather than fact (especially when delivering a negative or bad news message, or when conclusions appear to be based on insufficient or incomplete details). Use words such as *it appears* or *in my opinion*.
- Use specific references rather than abstract assumptions and vague or general descriptors.

Ensuring your message is grounded in fact will help avoid the message having a blaming tone.

3. WORD YOUR DOCUMENT IN A POSITIVE WAY

Concentrate on ensuring the document is worded in a positive way. Negatives can confuse the eye, so concentrate on what can be done rather than what can't, and how you're able to progress rather than how you are unable to.

Instead of saying, "I'm so sorry that we can't meet your special request for delivery on Thursday", say, "As originally discussed, you will receive your order first thing Friday morning."

Edit your document carefully to delete sweeping statements and to ensure the words you choose don't trigger a negative feeling or response. Change the wording of any possible trigger or offensive remarks. And, most importantly, be honest with yourself about what could be *trigger* words.

4. AVOID HAVING REGRETS

Never send a response as soon as you've written it. Draft it, but don't send it. Always wait at least an hour, then re-read and edit the document before sending it. You can also have another person read your response before you hit the *Send* button.

Finally, be careful with your punctuation. Never use exclamation marks, all capitals or bold typeface. Doing so can add to an already harsh tone.