

# Four Tips for Avoiding Online Misunderstanding

By Michele Paradis and Nancy White

There are five key attributes of online communication to take into consideration when thinking about avoiding conflict and misunderstanding online:



- **Lack of physical communication cues** - We cannot see or hear the huge range of non-verbal cues we normally use in face to face conversation to discern if our listener is understanding, agreeing, disagreeing, getting uncomfortable or opening up. In cyberspace, we must explicitly ask for this information.
- **Potential impersonality of the medium (distance)** - Sometimes when communicating online people may lose some of their inhibitions and say things they would not say offline. Social norms are less clear and more open to individual interpretation. Setting norms that we agree to use together can balance against this loss of inhibition.
- **Asynchronicity affects the way we feel about messages** - When you have time to think about your response, you may be more thoughtful, or you may let issues build up and get blown out of proportion. In online interactions, each of us may interpret periods of silence very differently. These subtle, unspoken issues can cloud communication.
- **Public vs. private spaces and perceptions** - People have different tolerances of what they think should be "public" or "private." These differences need to be taken into account when choosing to deal with issues in public and/or private spaces.
- **Limitations of writing and reading** - We are not all poets and most of us lead busy lives. Our inattention to detail in writing and our speed reading through topics can lead to misinterpretations. Be thorough. Be explicit.

## 1) Making "I" statements, not "You" statements

'I' statements are used when we feel strongly about something and we want the other person to be aware of how we feel. Use these statements instead of telling the other person what you would like them to do or not do. *"I would be more comfortable if you*

*first stated your personal goals about the plan." vs. "You didn't state your agenda and confused the rest of us."*

'I' statements present our case without causing defensiveness in the other person. The effective 'I' statement includes three parts. 'When I see/hear (behavior), I feel (feeling). What I would really like is (what is wanted)''.

Example: *'When I see that my posts are not being acknowledged, I feel ignored. What I would really like is to have feedback on my input'.*

## **2) Checking assumptions**

Assumptions are our interpretations of what we hear or read. They are the result of our trying to fill in information that is missing. Assumptions are almost always present. They are based on our own personal attitudes and beliefs. Checking assumptions is very important. Ask. 'In reading your statement, I am assuming that... Is that so?'

## **3) Actively "listening"/Reading**

Building rapport with another depends on the quality of our attention during the act of communicating. Remember that the writer cannot see us nodding our heads or hear us saying "umm... hmmm."

Communication occurs at different levels. For messages to be accurately received every level needs to be acknowledged and understood.

- **Information**

As a speaker or writer, be as informative as possible. Provide background and details. As a listener or reader, ask open questions that help the other expand on the subject. Ask specific questions to get more details. Reflect back what you heard to check for accuracy.

- **Feelings**

Feelings are an integral part of our being. In some cultures, expression of feelings is discouraged, especially negative feelings. It is easier in face-to-face situations to listen to and pick up feelings. Visual clues and voice tones tend to give away signs that may be more easily suppressed when communicating in writing. As a speaker, or writer, make sure to express your feelings when you sense that they are 'nudging' you, using the 'I' statements.

As a listener, or reader, make sure to acknowledge those feelings when they are expressed. If feelings are not openly expressed but you sense something may be present, check it out, remembering that this is an assumption on your part. *'I am sensing that you may be feeling upset. Is that so?'* This may give you more information, but remember some people may not admit to negative feelings even if you ask.

## **4) Acknowledging perspectives**

People's perceptions of reality can be very different and individualistic. We need to recognize that the other person believes as strongly as we do about the history of the

events even when our views of what may have happened are quite different. These different personal perspectives are equally valid. We need to start by respecting the other person's perspective, discuss our views and come to a useful agreement.

When describing an event, say "From my perspective ..." This describes what was real for you without devaluing someone else's point of view. Everyone can contribute from his/her own perspective, adding to the richness of the interaction.

### **Conflicts Happen**

Conflicts are great opportunities for learning and growth. The stronger the emotion, the tighter the impasse, the larger the opportunity for learning about ourselves. Questions to ask yourself: what causes me to have strong reactions (usually hurt or anger)? When / where and with whom does it frequently happen?

For resolution to occur there needs to be a sincere desire by both parties to reach a win-win solution, without needing to prove right or wrong. This is the time to drop judgment, blame and defensiveness and open up the possibility of being creative, of finding new ways to respond, instead of reacting. This is the time to be adventurous, inquisitive, curious, playful, and courageous.

### **Some Questions**

- As facilitators, what do we have to do to help the energy behind negative behaviors emerge more in support of the group, rather than detracting from the group?
- How do we enable the emergence of potentially important insights and issues from behind what we experience as the negative behaviors?
- How do we balance that tightrope between control and emergence, where conflict stimulates participation, insight and creativity, but may also be chasing away some participants who do not choose or know how to operate in that environment?
- How do we form group competency at conflict resolution?
- How do we tell people something they are doing is really bothering us?
- How do we know when to simply act in an authoritarian role to stop what has become "destructive" behavior?

These are questions with no single right answer, but many paths for exploration. Take time to think and talk about them.

### **Resources:**

- \* [Online Interaction: Social Argument](#) compiled by M C Morgan, Dept. of English, Bemidji State University. (link doesn't always work)
- \* [Dispute Resolution And The Global Management Of Customers' Complaints](#): How Can ODR Techniques Be Responsive To Different Social And Cultural Environments?
- \* John Suler's great article [The Online Disinhibition Effect](#)

- \* [Conflict in Cyberspace: How to Resolve Conflict Online](#), by Kali Munro, M.Ed., 2002
- \* [A Netizen's Guide to Flame Warriors](#) - Mike Reed - a little humor to help the situation.