

CASE STUDY

WHEN THE TONE OF AN EMAIL WENT WRONG

Source: Kumar et al., 2016

“Even if you are not a student, you should not use such filthy language with a teacher,” an infuriated Manish Kumar wrote to Meeta Singh.

On April 1, 2015, the Premier School of Management in New Delhi, India, was abuzz with issues related to inappropriate tone and lack of etiquette in an email they had all received. Professor Pradeep Sharma had mistakenly sent a confidential email to a group email address. On receiving the professor’s email, Singh, an alumna of the school, responded to Sharma, advising him to refrain from using the group email to circulate his test paper.

Because professors held revered positions in Indian society, etiquette dictated that students should not confront them. Thus, the school’s students were shocked that the alumna had used what many believed to be offensive words in addressing Sharma, their professor. Many students reacted. One commented, “Singh knew little of Indian culture and lacked decorum in communicating with the academic.”

After a few email exchanges on the group email, Singh felt that she was being vilified by the students even though she had not intended to offend the professor and had quickly apologized after Sharma had reprimanded her. Hurt by the words of several members on the group email, the alumna decided to sever her connection with the school.

The E-mail Episode

In the Premier School of Management, email was the preferred mode of communication between the faculty and office staff. Faculty members even sent evaluation and assessment documents, such as question papers, sample answer sheets, and grade sheets, as email attachments. On March 31, 2015, Sharma had inadvertently sent the question paper for the postgraduate program’s end-of-term examination to the wrong email address — one that was intended for interaction among students, alumni, and professors. Sharma did not realize that he had sent the paper to the wrong email address until the office called, asking him to send the question paper, which the office had not yet received. Sharma was a little annoyed when he received this call; however, after logging in to his email account, he found that he had emailed the question paper to the wrong email address.

Fortunately, he had another question paper ready, which he immediately emailed to the office.

Singh, an alumna and a recipient on the group email, responded to Sharma on April 1, 2015, asking the professor not to send the question paper to the group email. Everyone, including alumni, had received the question paper. Upon receiving Singh’s reply, Sharma had written back, informing her that he had heard from several other recipients about the delivery of this confidential message to the group. He clarified that he had not intended to use the group email for sharing the question paper.

Also, he wrote that her choice of expression was impolite for an interaction with a faculty member (see Exhibit 1, Email 3).

Both Singh’s message to Sharma and Sharma’s response to Singh were sent to all members of the email group. Because Indian society regarded professors with extreme respect, the message from the alumna had astonished everyone, including many present students, who were also listed on the group email. They were critical of the alumna’s conduct and felt that Singh should not have responded publicly to the professor in that manner. Enraged by her behavior, Kumar, a student at the school, wrote Singh a private email, condemning her actions and describing her conduct as ill-mannered. Singh took Kumar’s message as poor treatment from someone who was her junior and asked to be removed from the group email.

Professor Pradeep Sharma

Sharma, about 55 years old, was a student-friendly, polite, and approachable professor at the Premier School of Management. With a pleasant smile, he always received students affectionately. Students reciprocated with deep respect for him; for many, Sharma was both a guardian and a mentor. Students often visited Sharma and his family at their residence. Many students who could not visit their own homes during festivals were invited to celebrate with Sharma’s family. Many students were also friends with Sharma’s son and daughter. Because of heart disease, Sharma had been admitted to hospital several times in the past. The students at the school were aware of Sharma’s medical condition, which sometimes led to his absence for many days at a stretch. Also, the students were aware of his fading memory. He sometimes called them by the wrong name or asked about projects that had never been assigned. Sharma was aware of his forgetfulness and would himself joke about his behaviour.

Meeta Singh

Singh had been a student at the school a year earlier. She was known as being sincere, ambitious — and outspoken. Being extroverted and intelligent, she was well known among the students’ communities. With little inclination for higher education, Singh had enrolled at the school with her pre-determined career goals in mind. She devoted most of her time to preparing for the examinations for a government administrative job. Singh did not spend much time with her classmates. Most of her neighbours in the student accommodation where she lived admitted that Singh was rarely seen outside of her room interacting with the residents. Her roommate described her as direct and straightforward. She recalled that when she first met her, Singh said that she would not interfere in her roommate’s personal life and, in return, would expect the same conduct from roommate. Although the roommate had initially felt that it would be difficult to share a room with Singh, they resided amicably together for a year.

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Manish Kumar

Kumar enrolled at the Premier School of Management two years earlier after completing his postgraduate work in journalism at another university. Kumar was a research scholar and had recently been awarded two scholarships from the Government of India. Kumar was perceived as being traditional, conservative — and at times, unreasonable. Many at the school maintained a distance from him. For them, Kumar often appeared to be abrupt and irrational. Undiscouraged by their evident dislike of him, Kumar persistently made efforts to be involved and interact with other students. Still, despite having attended the Premier School of Management for two years, Kumar had more friends where he studied journalism, and would often hang around with them.

Closing

After reading the email from Singh to Sharma, many students at the school discussed Singh's behavior during her tenure as a student one year earlier. According to many, Singh had always been a rude student and such students should not be allowed to pursue higher education. However, a small group sided with Singh, suggesting that she had not done anything wrong. According to them, Sharma's reply to Singh's email had been rather sarcastic. These students felt that the professor should not have publicly reacted to Singh's email. Although students held different views on this episode, they were all worried that this situation might spiral into a verbal duel on the group email, resulting in both the alienation of the school's alumni and a rift between the current students and alumni. Because Singh insisted on leaving the group, many students blamed Kumar for his abrupt response. Some of these students wanted to resolve the differences and encourage Singh not to leave the group email.

Annexes

Exhibit 1: E-mail exchange on the premier school of management's group email

Email 1: Professor Sharma's Email to the Google Group, sent March 31, 2015

From: Pradeep Sharma
Date: tuesday, 31/03/2015 at 9:00 a.m.
Subject: Test Paper Copies
To: Google Group

Dear Nitin,
Please get 20 copies of the attached test paper for the test today at 11 a.m., and give them to Bushra Khan, who will be conductive the test.

Pradeep Sharma

Professor, Organizational Behaviour Premier School of Management, New Delhi
Tel.: +91 11 262 534

Email 2: Response from Singh (Reply to All), sent April 1, 2015

From: Meeta Singh
Date: wednesday, 01/04/2015 at 8:00 a.m.
Subject: Test Paper Copies
To: All

Dear Sir,
I would suggest that you refrain from using Google groups to circulate test papers. I am an alum and I have received the Test paper as well.
Regards,
Meeta

Email 3: Reply from Professor Sharma (Reply to All), sent April 1, 2015

From: Pradeep Sharma
Date: wednesday, 01/04/2015 at 8:46 a.m.
Subject: Test Paper Copies
To: Google Group

Dear Mita,
The test paper was sent on the googlegroup.com by mistake. We use a similar email id for correspondence with the office. This was an exception and not a regular thing. I have been told about the goof by other people as well. Incidentally, the expression "I would suggest that you refrain from using. . ." is not polite for a student to teacher communication.

Thanks, anyway.

Pradeep Sharma

Professor, Organizational Behaviour Premier School of Management, New Delhi
Tel.: +91 11 262 534

Email 4: Second Response from Singh (Reply to All), sent April 1, 2015

From: Meeta Singh
Date: wednesday, 01/04/2015 at 9:04 a.m.
Subject: Test Paper Copies
To: All

Dear Sir,
As I had mentioned before, I am an alum and not a student. If I have insulted you in any manner, my profound apologies.
Regards,
Meeta

Email 5: Professor Sharma's Second Reply (Reply to All), sent April 3, 2015

From: Pradeep Sharma
Date: friday, 03/04/2015 at 11:21 a.m.
Subject: Test Paper Copies
To: All

Dear Mita,
I know that you would not "insult" me. I recall your pleasant presence in class sometime ago. It is just that I thought that I should let you know that the expression is impolite.

Incidentally again, there is no word like alum that is related to being a student in the past. What you meant I guess was alumnus.

Take care. Best wishes,

Pradeep Sharma

Professor, Organizational Behaviour Premier School of Management, New Delhi
Tel.: +91 11 262 534

Email 6: Third Response from Singh (Reply to All), sent April 6, 2015

From: Meeta Singh
Date: tuesday, 06/04/2015 at 12:22 a.m.
Subject: Test Paper Copies
To: All

Dear Sir, Again my profound apologies! But it seems that a particular student from the department has taken up the cause and wrote back to me. However, I have answered his mail and have promptly asked him to take me off the Google group. I am, however, copy pasting the mail below. I rest my case.

Response from Kumar, a current student at the school, to Singh (Reply to Singh only), sent April 2, 2015

From: Manish Kumar
Date: tuesday, 06/04/2015 at 8:23 a.m.
Subject: Test Paper Copies
To: All

Dear Meeta, Even if you are not a student, you should not use such filthy language with a teacher. Everyone here questions your being an alum of our department. This is not your business to give suggestions to teachers.

Manish

Regards, Meeta