Communication

What a Compassionate Email Culture Looks Like

by Adaira Landry and Resa E. Lewiss

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We are all chasing the same elusive dream: an email inbox that is tidy, up-to-date, and empty. But let's face it, inbox zero is difficult — and at times even impossible — to achieve. No matter how many subfolders we create or newsletters to which we unsubscribe, the emails arrive, and the undertow pulls us beneath the current.

The instinct to manage only our personal inbox is insufficient. It's time to flip the script on how we handle email. The secret? Focus on protecting *other people's* inboxes rather than your own. The inversion may sound counterintuitive. But it's effective — and when everyone does it, it leads to

what we call a *compassionate email culture*, where teams work together to reduce the overall email traffic. Shift the focus: prioritize each other.

The Basics of Email Etiquette

Protecting your colleagues' inboxes starts with getting the basics right. Let's review:

- Curate and focus your recipient list before you hit send. Does everyone really need to be on the thread? Remove anyone unnecessary; they can always be added later.
- Write succinctly and in an organized fashion. The content of every message should be clear and specific: What's the question, the request you need approved, or the information you need to deliver?
- Apply situational awareness. Ask yourself: Does this conversation really need to happen over email? Could it be a phone or video call instead? Many messages can be deferred until the next casual conversation or routine scheduled meeting.

These basics remain essential as we add three strategic habits that will help your team move toward a compassionate email culture: the blind carbon copy (BCC); good timing; and plug-ins.

Consider BCC

Many of us overlook the BCC entirely — we know it's there but aren't entirely sure how or when to use it. The truth is that BCC can and should be used for frequent and group emails (two or more people). Use BCC for any email that doesn't require communication directly between recipients. This eliminates the possibility that conversations will expand unnecessarily or veer off topic. If a discussion is needed as a group, consider a meeting instead.

To understand how to use BCC, it's important to first understand how *not* to use it. Due to its functionality — all recipients on the BCC line are blind

to or invisible to everyone else on the email — BCC has a mixed reputation. It's often seen as a way to facilitate secret correspondence or allow someone to furtively monitor a line of communication. We do *not* recommend this practice; we consider this etiquette unprofessional, disrespectful, unfair, and it can quickly undermine trust on a team.

Therefore, it is essential to always clarify in the body who is receiving the email, even if they are in the BCC line. For example, write, "Dear David M. and Beverly J.," or, "Hello Management Team" in the opening of your email and put these parties in the BCC line. This transparency creates trust, clarity, and psychological safety. Additionally, it protects recipients who don't want their email addresses shared.

Further, use of BCC reduces the risk of reply-all responses that can quickly clutter everyone's inbox. Imagine an email going out to an entire department regarding a fundraising event or a potluck dinner. With all recipients addressed in the "To" line, that one email can spiral to scores of replies to the entire group. A more thoughtful approach? Drop everyone to the BCC line, write in the salutation who you are emailing, and send. If you need a reply from individuals, that is okay; they can reply directly to you. If required, you can summarize responses to the large group via BCC in a single, one-time follow-up email.

Be Conscientious About Timing

Business hours vary (especially in a hybrid work environment), but it's usually safe to assume they are 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday. Do your best to make sure your timing of email delivery matches the recipients work hours. Off-hour correspondence unfairly distracts the recipient, who might reflexively feel the need to reply in the moment. This domino effect then pulls the recipient out of deserved leisure and back into the workplace. Compassionate emailing can be used for "away from work" messages — if your colleague is on vacation or family leave, mind the rules and give them space by postponing the email. Respecting the clock means upholding your team's boundaries.

We get it. It is hard to restrain from responding to an email once it arrives. You are free to draft an email outside of business hours and schedule it to deploy whenever your recipient will be back online (more on this in a second). And if something is so urgent and absolutely cannot wait, email is probably the wrong way to communicate, anyway: pick up the phone and make a call.

Use Plug-ins

When it comes to scheduling messages in advance, email assistant applications, such as plug-ins like Boomerang and Hubspot, are your friends. Some email services (Gmail and Microsoft Outlook, for example) have integrated features to schedule email delivery. With these tools, you can draft an email after hours on a Friday and schedule it to be sent Monday morning. This practice is not inefficient; think of it as compassionate to others and their inbox.

The other major use case for plug-ins that protects your team's inbox: scheduling meetings. Emails that begin with, "Can we meet next week?," are not efficient: they easily lead to back and forth communication before finding a suitable time and date. Instead, trim the emails and schedule meetings by using the calendar plug-ins available in most email platforms. Third-party software, such as Calendly, can automatically schedule meetings based on team availability, populate calendars, and automatically include a virtual meeting link. And if you don't want to use additional software, you can still efficiently avoid unnecessary back-and-forths about meetings. State upfront the times you are free to meet and ask your colleague to confirm a final time slot in their response. Once confirmed, you don't have to reply — just send a calendar invite and meeting location (or video-conference link). Include links and relevant documents to reference within the invite to avoid another email.

Some email software programs, such as Microsoft Outlook, include a "like" feature, which sends a one-click notification that is both a message of receipt and supportive in nature. This is a simple but powerful tool that

helps boil would-be email replies down to a thumbs up. If your email platform includes this function, try using it by requesting a "like" from your recipients as a marker of agreement.

Conclusion

Leveraging these powerful concepts, along with practicing the basics of email etiquette, will help you protect your colleagues' inboxes and foster a compassionate email culture. As you undergo this change, start an ongoing discussion with your team to determine and agree upon best email practices, identify areas of improvement, and form realistic expectations as a team.

By considering the email inbox of your working group, everyone will check email less. We recognize that this shift may require a rewiring of your usual habits, which could be difficult. Mistakes and exceptions will be made, we make them too. But if the collective community starts to respect others' workload and schedule, there will be less email all around. In this model, everyone wins.

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