THE TROUBLE WITH E-MAIL

QUESTION: Our team at work has been working really hard to start a large project. At our last meeting, our team leader, Matt, told me that I raise too many doubts about things as they are being discussed by starting off with "but…." He said this on the heels of a comment I made about how I thought we were off to a good start on the numbers – "but" -- that we have to keep in mind that our strategy is not yet fully developed.

Matt was laughing as he said it, and I have to admit that I am usually the one to point out the hurdles to the rest of the work group, so I didn't take it personally. However, today, in response to more e-mails among the team regarding another concern I shared related to the project, I received this e-mail from Matt:

"Once again, your *butt* is slowing all of us down - please focus on the forest instead of the trees and we'll reevaluate your recommendation as we get closer to finishing up the project. Good work, BTW, on the Collins Consulting project!"

Matt may think it is funny, but this is clearly a personal attack on my physique. I had a baby just 5 months ago, and I'm not back to my pre-pregnancy skinniness, but Matt's gall astounds and offends me nevertheless!

What should I do?

ANSWER: The first thing you may want to do is discuss the e-mail with Matt, the team leader - in person. You should state why you are offended by his e-mails. Matt may not have intended to be disparaging at all, and might have simply misspelled the word.

Your e-mail dilemma highlights some of the issues related to e-mail since it has revolutionized the way most of us communicate in the workplace. Smart managers know e-mail communications are a quick and informal way to share ideas, delegate tasks, and follow up on the status of all kinds of workplace activities.

However, there is a big caveat that applies to the use of e-mail. Like all forms of communication, e-mailing must be practiced conscientiously, with thoughtful consideration for how the messages will be interpreted by recipients. This is especially true as it applies to e-mails between supervisors and subordinates. Employers' e-mails need to state things in as purely a factual manner as possible because communicating opinions, judgment or anything that could be interpreted as offensive or flippant in writing, without the benefit of the personal non-verbal interactions you can observe, are easily misunderstood.

Also, an investigation should be initiated to determine whether Matt is engaging in inappropriate workplace harassment by utilizing e-mail as a vehicle for improper comments. Given Matt's use of the word "butt" in his e-mail, which you interpreted to be a reference to your backside, you should share the e-mail with your supervisor so they might conduct the appropriate investigation to ensure that Matt is not engaging in harassing behavior. If Matt is your direct supervisor (you refer to him only as a team leader), you should report his e-mail comments to a different supervisor for appropriate action.

Electronic mail, as invaluable as it can sometimes be in the workplace, is not generally an effective substitute for direct communication in sensitive matters such as personnel issues. If circumstances allow you to have an old-fashioned, face-to-face meeting – do that. If time is an issue, make sure the response is limited to the factual information that needs to be delivered quickly and save the rest for a face-to-face meeting.

Moreover, as is likely in your situation, misspellings, omission of traditional punctuation (such as commas and periods), and confusion over meanings of popular electronic messaging abbreviations, combined with the absence of voice tone cues to assist the reader in interpreting an e-mail message correctly, may occasionally result in erroneous interpretations that damage work relationships.

The bottom line, so to speak, is that the e-mail is not always an effective substitute for exchanging words and ideas face-to-face in the workplace.

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