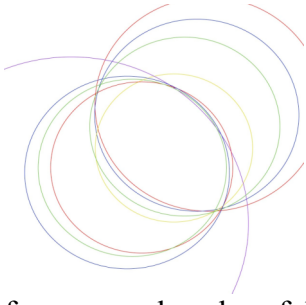


Executive Coaching Notes: Negative Asset Return From a Simple E-mail
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The following vignette focuses on an organizational disruption caused by a simple e-mail. Received unexpectedly by a client, the reverberations of the e-mail required considerable damage control. By the time the incident passed into history, many hours of valuable managerial team effort had been expended in controlling the immediate effects both upon team cohesion and upon public perception of the Firm. Minimally, the action precipitated a human asset cost -- both in repairing team dysfunction and in working-through the incident's wider implications. The Firm would discover only through time, the cumulative effect of its representative member's behavior within the local business community.

The "executive summary" is that the impact of a single individual's unconsidered or partially considered e-mail action, may affect multiple individuals, teams, and levels of the business enterprise. The range and effect are uniquely attuned: (1) to the e-mail message; (2) to the enterprise; (3) to recipients' interpretation of the e-mail's details; and (4) to recipients' actions based upon their subjective sense-making of the e-mail communication. The focus of the coaching sessions from which this vignette is drawn, was to make sense of these details, as well as protagonists' intentions, relative to the client's organizational understanding. Because the interpretive constructions emerged

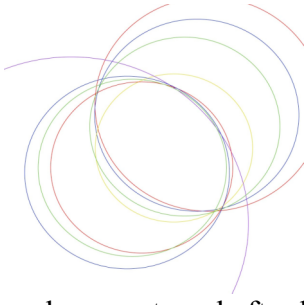


from several cycles of discussion, reflection, and hypothesis testing, they were useful to the client in negotiating a difficult and uncertain moment within his organization.

Ted, a team-member of a finance unit managing millions of asset dollars, was confused about his involvement in a situation that had recently presented itself in his mailbox. He, together with 6 other team-members, had been copied on an email sent to his team-leader, Maureen, from a major service provider, Sam. The team had recently decided to change service providers —and seeing the addresses to which the email was sent, Ted had originally thought this correspondence was related to the change.

In a way, it was. Sam’s correspondence read cryptically, “I haven’t told Jeff yet. What you’ve done in copying Peter is completely inappropriate and unprofessional.” It took a moment for Ted to realize that he’d been copied on a “flame” to Maureen. Seemingly out of nowhere, Ted had been dragooned into the passive role of audience member to Maureen’s public humiliation.

Of course, beyond Ted’s realization that he’d been “used” somehow, he was curious about how this new role had developed. He scrolled down and found Maureen’s first correspondence to Sam. It appeared to be a standard list of orders. However, it had been emailed not only to Sam, but also cc’d to Sam’s subordinate, Jeff, whose work function had been exclusively dedicated to servicing the taskforce. Additionally, Maureen had cc’d Peter, the new service provider. Maureen had long pressed for Sam’s

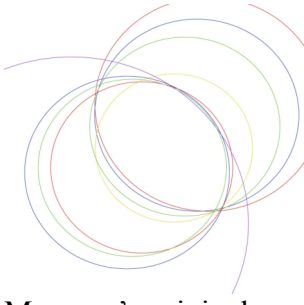


replacement; and after long and charged discussion, the team had agreed to the change.

Piecing together the puzzle presented by the e-mail, an unfortunate communication sequence emerged. While formally correct in alerting everyone to the policy change, Maureen had offended Sam, the taskforce's major service provider, for many years. Through the parsimonious act of sending one email with two cc's, she had: 1) undercut Sam's relation with his subordinate, Jeff, who'd not been prepared for the news of the transition; and 2) made public the as-yet unannounced transition to the new provider. Maureen had created a mess. Given her role as a taskforce team leader, the unconsidered effects of Maureen's letter sent multiple shockwaves into three organizations: Sam's; Peter's; and her own taskforce, via the lost confidence and dismay of her team members.

The email received by Ted was Sam's counter-move. Not only had his long-standing relationship with Ted's firm been summarily discontinued, but also, announcement of this vital communication had been sent in the form of an afterthought to Sam's subordinate en route to his competitor, Peter. Maureen had treated Sam shabbily; and Sam had enlisted Maureen's team-members in retributive parallel. Sam enlisted Maureen's team as witnesses to his angry judgment on her incompetence. Ted recognized that the team would have its hands full, negotiating this difficulty for the next few weeks. It would sorely affect their productivity.

Sam's action was radically different than his subordinate's. Jeff's response was a simple e-mail to Maureen, with copies to the team. It simply confirmed receipt of



Maureen's original e-mail. Were the written record to contain only Jeff's communication, it might seem as if the entire incident had been a placid business-as-usual communication. However, Sam's e-mail had found its mark; and team morale had been shaken severely.

Because email transmission is instantaneous, quick, and the preferred communication form of busy 21st century professionals, it is often related to as a benignly informative Post-It note. Minimally, if considered at all, it is seen as a lesser form of telephone call: when relatively cool distance is good enough. Yet, two dimensions of e-mail combine in a potent and potentially toxic way. First is that e-mail only masquerades as a speech act. That's how we use it. In fact, it is a recorded action: that's how our government sees it too. It is a statement implying the sender's intent relative to the recipient. And because it exists devoid of gesture, body language, or humorous nuance discernable in face to face communication, its undefined quality invites readers' various, personalized interpretations of its meanings and their underlying intents. Was Maureen thinking about how Sam would take the email? Even if she were somewhat vindictive, did she consider that her communication would cause her to lose her leadership position and to atone for her interpersonal insensitivity in a summertime workshop for ineffective leaders? Ted and I considered the problem: probably not. We considered that her forward-looking perspective might benefit from finer calibration, hopefully provided by an executive coach, recommended to her by the Firm. Yet, dismissal from the Firm was



also plausible.

Certainly, Ted had not envisioned his capability in stabilizing the team throughout a difficult period as a career opportunity, before Sam's incoming missive. While Maureen's e-mail had presented the team with a costly interpersonal process to work through, it also brought managerial attention to the pitfalls of e-mail transmission; and the Firm is considering a protocol for e-mail etiquette, suggested by Ted.

The vignette's narrative unfolded in Ted's executive consultation, focused upon negotiation of a sticky situation. Ted's use of the hypotheses, generated through executive coaching, was practical. What appears clear in retrospect often emerges in a lack of clarity; and must be drawn from confusion. The specific value of such knowledge relates to the moment. The more generalized takeaway emerged only with time, and in comparison with other situations. Our vignette, then, returns as an example: a concrete representative of unconsidered or partially considered action upon others involved at different and interactive enterprise levels. Once the e-mail is sent, it is out of the sender's control, and demands recipients' interpretation and response. The simple e-mail may put the sender, recipient, and organizational structures at risk for disruption and difficulty.