

How to reply to a stroppy and demanding email

We have had some thoughtful discussions with one client on how to respond to a demanding email written in a direct and slightly rude manner.

The context: We imagined a scenario in which students were asked to reply to a demand to send a report by 5 pm the next day. In this scenario existing priorities meant that the 5pm deadline was not realistic. Please note that if it is the CEO making the request you might want to drop everything else and try your best!

Please find the output of our discussions below:

Top 10 Principles (+1 final reflection)

1) Don't fight fire with fire: Even though the style of the original email was overly direct - reply back in a calm and measured way.

2) Use but don't overplay the email sandwich. If you receive a very direct and demanding email you don't need to be OTT (over the top) in your politeness, but we still recommend using a balanced, professional tone in your email.

Example: Dear XXX

Thank you for your email (rather than) I hope you are having a good week.

If you have any questions, please do let me know (rather than) I look forward to seeing you at the next xxx.

3) The modal verb 'would'. A little point to remember - if you are communicating to a stressed-out person, phrases using 'would' maintain a strong level of politeness.

Example: Would it be possible to confirm whether/would you mind changing...

4) Communicate empathy. It is important to highlight you understand their priorities even though in this instance it is not possible to deliver within their timeline. It can be hard to do this without coming across as a little mechanical. The reader might sense a 'however' is about to follow.

Example: I appreciate this is a priority for you, however given our current workload, I will not be able to send the report by 5pm tomorrow.

5) Don't be excessive or tell a long story in making excuses.

You don't need to go into a detailed justification as to why you can not deliver the report.

6) Provide options. We discussed the idea of highlighting different options and timescales as to what is possible in sending the report.

Example: I would be able to send you an outline of the key points/a first draft/an overview by Friday 5pm, would this be acceptable for you?

7) Empowering the sender.

Even if you are not able to meet the deadline, asking the question as to whether the revised timeframe would be acceptable to the sender helps give them a feeling of control.

Example: Would next Tuesday be acceptable for you?

8) Politely stating your next step.

If you genuinely don't want the deadline for your report to be open for negotiation, the phrase below can be used.

Example: I hope that next Tuesday would be acceptable for you.

9) What not to do! We had a great chat about what to avoid in this type of email:

- Don't overpromise!
- Don't be vague and leave the option open that you might be able to send the report if you have enough time.
- Don't be overly apologetic.

10) Sense checking: We highlighted that sometimes it can be difficult to balance your priorities with those of others in your organisation. It might be a good idea to talk to your manager about how to respond to the email. It might also be prudent to copy that manager into your reply but avoid the tendency to copy too many colleagues into the mail.

And finally - the tips above refer to how best to respond by email. This can be important if you need an audit trail. However, a key outcome of our discussion was that the phone can be a much better way of communicating a 'No' than email. So our final point of advice (which in one way invalidates all of the above!) is to simply pick up the phone.
