



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

Showdown at the E-mail Corral

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meetings. Truth be told, I periodically find myself with iPhone in hand, sneaking a peek at my e-mail during meetings.

But a situation occurred recently that took this issue to a whole new level. When a fellow board member at a nonprofit organization and I were meeting with a prospective board member, the new recruit informed us that she worked on her e-mail on her laptop computer during meetings. She was a terrific addition to the board, and we figured that as the principal in her company she might have urgent matters to which she would need to tend. So we were not deterred by her disclosure and asked her to join the board.

And true to her honest admission, at the first board meeting she attended, out came the laptop, up went the screen, and she focused on her e-mail except when she looked up to make a contribution to the discussion. It was a bit distracting, and to my chagrin, with the barrier broken down, I found myself at one point during our three-day meeting pulling out my own laptop and delving into my e-mail. At a certain point, I snapped it shut, frustrated by my lack of focus.

By virtue of her strong financial credentials, our e-mailing board member was appointed to the organization's finance and investment committee, chaired by our treasurer, an older gentleman whose preferred form of communication is not e-mail. And then the big brouhaha ensued.

Suddenly, the treasurer announced his resignation. Complaints flew back and forth between him and the new board member. He said she asked questions in meetings that had already been answered, probably, he pointed out, because she was distracted by reading her e-mail. He complained that her questions challenged his honesty and skills as an investor. She said she was asking proper questions for due diligence about the organization's investments, especially since she needed to inform herself as a new board member. She said he was being too defensive, talking down to her. And on it went.

Serving on more than a few boards and committees, I've become accustomed to those who scroll through their e-mails on their PDAs and type on their Blackberries under the table during

A savvy investor, our treasurer had built modest funds into a multi-million dollar endowment for the organization, and losing him as chair of the finance committee was as undesirable as it would be to offend our new board member. Seeking to calm the waters, our perplexed chair asked if I would try to sort out this misunderstanding.

So I spoke individually to the elder gentleman and the new board member. As suggested by our CEO, I offered longer breaks during the meetings, to check e-mail, to the e-mailing board member as a substitute for staying online during the meeting. I asked the treasurer to remain as chair of the finance committee and to try this out for awhile.

Both parties agreed, and a truce has been forged, for now.

While the showdown on this board over whether or not to e-mail during meetings may be extreme, the situation is not unique. Almost all groups who work together are experiencing this phenomenon. And it is true that multi-tasking, with group members web-surfing, replying to e-mails and who knows what else – maybe trading their stock portfolios or bidding on eBay – is creating distraction and lack of focus on the work of their meetings.

Maybe it's OK if one or two board members are e-mailing, because the group's work can move forward. But it is a slippery slope. What happens when a half-dozen members or even the whole board is doing this? Pretty soon there will be no meeting.

It seems to me that the dividing line between what is functional in using wireless access and what is not for groups working together is whether the online capability is used to advance the work of the meeting. In another meeting recently, the chair of a grant selection panel asked at the outset that we refrain from using our wireless devices. But it turned out later in the meeting that web-searching was the only way to find out some necessary information about a grant applicant. That's an appropriate use of wireless technology, because it enriches and assists the ability of the group to meet its goals.

The times are such that we need all of our ability to focus on pulling our institutions and economy out of the doldrums, and that includes teamwork in groups. So, one of my New Year's resolutions is to avoid unrelated use of my PDA and laptop during meetings. Ω

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