**In Email Negotiations, When They’re Happy, Do You Know it?**

**In email negotiations, negotiators lack helpful visual, verbal, and other sensory cues -- but can you rely on text alone?**

Negotiators’ expressions of emotion offer critical feedback about their preferences, offers, fears, and other information, yet emotions can be [notoriously difficult](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/batna/batna-negotiation-allowed-european-union-to-handle-putin/) to interpret accurately. One study by Hillary Anger Elfenbein (Washington University, St. Louis) found that negotiators detected emotions accurately only 58% of the time. That accuracy rate may be even lower in email negotiations, where negotiators lack helpful visual, verbal, and other sensory cues and must rely on text alone to interpret how their counterpart is feeling. Indeed, research shows that people are less adept at [conveying their emotions](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/negotiation-skills-daily/how-emotions-affect-your-talks/) in email negotiations than they think they are.

**Clash of the coders**

In four experiments on email negotiations, researchers Christoph Laubert (Freie Universität Berlin) and Jennifer Parlamis (University of San Francisco) studied how effective negotiators are at detecting specific emotions conveyed via email, such as empathy, embarrassment, anger, interest, and contempt. In one experiment, two trained data coders who independently studied the same transcripts of email negotiations agreed on which emotions study participants expressed only about 22% of the time. Often, the coders’ judgments clashed, as when one thought a participant was expressing anger and the other thought the same person was expressing interest.

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In two other experiments, different pairs of data coders also had very different opinions on which emotions participants were conveying in their email negotiations. In a fourth experiment, participants in a negotiation simulation also coded the emotions in the email messages they received, and they, too, interpreted their counterparts’ emotions very differently than a trained coder did. Interestingly enough, across all the experiments, a computerized text-analysis program appeared to be just as bad as—or even worse than—humans at reading [negotiators’ emotions](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/dispute-resolution/dealing-with-difficult-people-the-right-way-to-regulate-emotion/) accurately.

“If consistent and accurate emotion decoding is required to reliably know the thoughts and feelings of others and then to regulate behavior,” Laubert and Parlamis write, “our research suggests that email has quite a long way to go before it can be used in a way where emotions function as an extra channel for solving problems.”

**Bring feelings to the forefront in email negotiations**

Given that email remains a convenient tool for negotiators located far apart, how can we improve our ability to read one another’s emotions? First, rather than assuming a counterpart will read between the lines (“Is this the best you can do?”), strive to state your emotions explicitly (“I’m feeling a little impatient with our progress”). Second, check in with counterparts regularly to see how they’re feeling: “I got a sense that my last proposal upset you. Is that right?” You may not always like the answer you receive, but clearing the air is much more likely to end in a happy outcome. Third, if possible, meet in person or pick up the phone occasionally for an emotional check-in.