

# Technology, tactics and tension

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Have you ever emailed a carefully crafted message over the weekend to your boss touting your accomplishments on a project?

Niclas Erhardt, assistant professor of human resources in the Maine Business School at the University of Maine, researched this employee self-promotion tactic, as well as ensuing responses from [managers](#).

Whereas office impressions used to be predominantly determined by face-to-face interaction, Erhardt says they're increasingly shaped by communication technologies—including email. He studied the interplay of impression management, communication technologies and opposing tensions between managers and their subordinates.

Bosses and subordinates can have competing goals, he says, which results in office friction in knowledge-based work, such as that done in

consumer health, insurance and engineering firms. This results in managers and employees engaging in an interactive tug of war to manage impressions.

Erhardt says the push-and-pull tactics can help maintain balance in workplaces and allow for opposing goals to be met, which supports the idea that tension can be productive for a business. Managers, he says, should recognize that competing and legitimate goals exist and find creative ways for themselves and subordinates to achieve their differing goals, as well as the common ones.

Erhardt found three related sets of communication tactics and countertactics that signify fundamental tensions in manager-subordinate relationships: dodging response versus exerting social pressure; multicommuting versus singular communicating; and promoting oneself versus giving credit to all.

In the promoting oneself versus giving credit to all dialectic, Erhardt found that subordinates used email to enhance their personal reputation and visibility. They might send emails late on a weeknight, on a weekend or when on vacation to demonstrate their dedication and commitment and gain "face time" with the boss.

Bosses also used email as a countertactic. Some responded to an employee's self-promoting email by forwarding the original email from the employee after they had added their kudos for the contributions of other project members (giving credit to all).

Erhardt says managers use a tactic—a dodging response—to save time and face. Bosses inundated with multiple employee emails asking questions and requesting input may not immediately respond to the emails or selectively choose certain questions to answer. This tactic allows them to avoid being accountable or pinned down on a particular

stance or topic while still maintaining a solid working relationship with subordinates.

As a countertactic, Erhardt says subordinates apply added pressure to get a timely response. They might go directly to the manager's office to get an answer face-to-face, or send follow-up emails, texts and phone calls to push for a reply. They also might recruit co-workers to exert similar pressure on the boss.

Another tension in organizations arises when managers want employees' undivided attention at meetings but employees wish to multitask. Erhardt refers to the ensuing impression management tactic as "multicommunicating versus singular communicating."

Due to pressures on subordinates' time, Erhardt says some attend meetings by teleconference and simultaneously use smartphones and laptops to complete other work-related tasks and personal chores. All the while they still strive to create the impression of being an involved team player to stay in good standing with the manager.

Managers who prefer to have employees' undivided attention during meetings may respond by encouraging subordinates to attend meetings in person and by noting their frustration when communication devices interfere with and interrupt the productivity of the meeting.

**More information:** Niclas Erhardt and Jennifer L. Gibbs. "The Dialectical Nature of Impression. Management in Knowledge Work: Unpacking Tensions in Media Use Between Managers and Subordinates." *Management Communication Quarterly* 0893318913520508, first published on February 3, 2014 [DOI: 10.1177/0893318913520508](https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318913520508)

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