

## **Maintaining Confidentiality**

If you are a leader, a counselor, or a member care giver you may find yourself in the position of using email for some rather sensitive communication. In that case it is especially important to consider how you can protect the confidentiality of your communication. If you are reporting on a sensitive issue to someone, either another leader or someone who needs to know, you should be aware that no email is completely secure because email could be inadvertently intercepted or read by another person. It is preferable to have a meeting with the person to whom you are reporting or to speak by telephone. If at all possible avoid passing on seriously sensitive information via email. If email seems to be the only option however, you should follow these guidelines

**Apply normal rules of confidentiality to email.** As much as possible, keep confidential the information that is given to you in order to protect individuals and build trust. However, the following situations must be reported to appropriate organizational leaders: legally required reporting issues; when a person is a danger to himself or others; financial embezzlement or theft; reported cases of sexual immorality; hidden addictions such as pornography, pills, or alcohol; and abusive leadership. (Tissingh & Rhoades) Even in such situations it is advisable to tell the person reporting that you will be sharing this information with the appropriate people.

Part of keeping confidentiality is communicating only to those who “need to know,” such as organizational leaders, or people who have been involved in the matter (Peter). It is vital that you know your organization’s policies for “must report issues” and which leaders must be informed. Additionally, Peter advises “I would prefer to try and obtain the person’s permission and if need be copy him in what I have said.” Such an approach honors both confidentiality and the need to report.

### **Sending sensitive information**

It is best to identify confidential email using the word “CONFIDENTIAL” in your subject line to alert the recipient to use caution in reading the email (Tissingh) and alert shared computer users to honor privacy. In addition, be very careful to check who you are sending your email to. Hitting “reply” can actually send your private email to a group if you are on an email forum. Before sending the email, double check your “To” box to make sure it is being sent only to the individual you intend.

You should also consider the recipient’s conditions for receiving your email. Does he/she have a private email account or does he share an email account with other missionaries or family members? Will he be reading his email at an internet cafe? Will your communication be appropriate for him to read under those conditions? You may need to send a text message to alert him of incoming confidential information.

Within the email, only mention the person’s name if you have to and try to omit the surname (Tissingh). Peter advises, “If I mention the name then I would try and urge the base or other location to minimize identification of the possible person.” Also, Tissingh suggests that “if you must forward a message then you only forward the parts relevant to the recipient” in an effort to honor a person’s dignity and privacy.

### **Receiving sensitive information**

If you are in an office which is accessed by other people you may need to be careful when reading sensitive email since people passing through the office could inadvertently see sensitive information on your screen. If you know an email is sensitive, read it when you know you are alone and file it appropriately. If you share a computer with another staff member or your spouse, it is wise to discuss confidentiality and agree together on how you will honor that necessity. Tissingh suggests that couples may need separate email accounts or separate computers if they are “doing counseling or problem solving that requires confidentiality.” Peter protects confidentiality by not allowing others to use his laptop or his desktop. Additionally, Tissingh advises that “secretaries or staff members who assist you should be briefed on guidelines for confidentiality.”

While email is a wonderful tool for communication, use wisdom in sharing information, guard other’s privacy, and honor their trust. Ideally you will make some confidentiality guidelines for yourself and inspire your staff to do the same so email communication represents godly communication.

Tissingh, Anke, Email interview 8 Jan, 08.

Tissingh, Anke , Randy Rhoades, & Jane Rhoades. 2006. Guidelines for Itinerant Ministries in YWAM Africa.

Peter, Dave. Email interview 7 Jan, 08.