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Leveraging the Evolution of Online Communications to Manage Conflict

Back in the day – and by that, I mean 2019 – services like Zoom existed but were not used as routinely as they are today. Many people were not all that familiar or comfortable with the technology and, from a distance, it appeared cold when compared to in-person exchanges. There was also a general sentiment of perfection in using such technologies. I recall Professor Robert Kelly, better known as “BBC Dad.” A 2017 YouTube video featuring him went viral as his young children crashed his interview, appearing in the background with much hilarity. Early comments on the video, which has now received over 45,000,000 views, suggested that the unprofessional interruption would ruin Kelly’s career. Imagine if that sentiment applied today? If every time a child

or a pet crashed a video meeting, they would put one’s career on the line. That you would risk losing your job if your internet connection got choppy, that would be ludicrous, right?

I raise it because I think that a critical evolution has taken place when it comes to online communications. Obvious typos in regular communications don’t seem as big of a deal as they used to be. Shorter messages and abbreviations are appreciated over walls of text. You might say that we have embraced a level of informality in our interactions. I want to be clear; I am not stating that professionalism is no longer important. It is. I am trying to point out that certain etiquette associated with online communications has relaxed compared to just a few short

years ago. It is essential to recognize the benefits as they can be applied to better manage condominium conflict.

The Evolution of Communication

Online communications have long been considered lesser forms of communication over in-person exchanges. They were considered less of a human connection. I believe that the relaxation of online communication etiquette changes this. Reminding someone that they forgot to unmute is not informing them that they are incompetent. It serves instead as a reminder that they are human.

We connect with one another far more personally online now than ever before. It feels like I have seen more people’s offices, homes and cars in the past couple of years



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than in the prior eighteen I have been in the industry combined. Why does this matter? I am suggesting it can actually be quite substantial. Getting to know someone through little things like their choice of virtual background or the physical items they line up in view behind them during a Zoom call can contribute to establishing something significant – a better relationship. This offers a glimpse into someone's personality that you would not get if they physically came to you or you met in some neutral, shared space. One's online presence in a video chat goes beyond what they are wearing from the waist up.

Online Relationship Building

It may seem strange because people within a condominium community are typically in close proximity to one another; however, I have found that one of the most common reasons why people in condominiums find themselves in disputes is because they do not know one another. So many times, a conflict emerges, and assumptions are made about the other person. They are thought to have bad intentions, malice and a selfish outlook on life. These ill feelings continue to grow as the conflict escalates, often unchecked as they feel validated. Assumptions involving negative sentiments about lawyers, tenants, uninformed owners, power-hungry directors with nothing better to do and the incapable condominium manager are thrust into the mix, making the underlying problem worse. In the worst of these instances, where a conflict heads to court or arbitration, each person involved "digs in" concerning their beliefs about the other. Interactions become hostile as tensions boil over. The experience deteriorates for everyone involved as relationships sour.

I am not suggesting that the books that appear on your shelf during a Zoom call or a technological hiccup are all that is needed to save you the cost of a trial. I am saying that a degree of relaxation of online etiquette has made it more generally acceptable to be human and to have a personality. Again, this is not to suggest that professionalism should be neglected. A line should be drawn between which aspects of yourself are appropriate to share and keeping certain information about yourself private. I am suggesting that there is nothing wrong with those you interact with, knowing that condominium managers are not interchangeable; each is

a unique person. There is nothing wrong with offering others a little bit of insight into what you are all about and accepting the insights they offer you. The idea is that getting to know a little bit about those you communicate with can help avoid conflict escalating between strangers due to assumptions and misconceptions.

Most of the conflicts I resolve through mediation do not get resolved by one big swooping action. It is more often the case that momentum toward resolution is built through a series of small

steps. The same applies to relationship building in this context. Leveraging online communications to form better relationships can help address emerging conflict proactively and avoid hostilities escalating due to misconceptions. ■

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