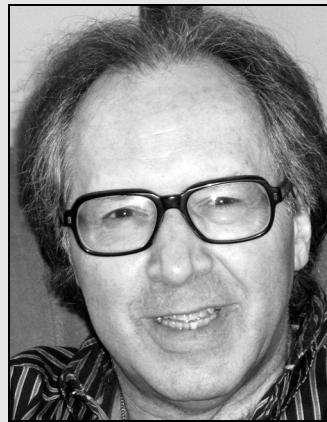


# Working With Online Colleagues

## The Good, the Bad, the Ugly!

**Errol Craig Sull**

In the online classroom environment our interactions with colleagues are far more limited than if in a face-to-face teaching environment. Yet, we do have opportunities to correspond, share, and collaborate with them, and these colleagues come in a variety of personalities, subject expertise, and teaching abilities.



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Just believing that every colleague will be the perfect teaching colleague is a wishful thought. Indeed, these colleagues are different in many ways, and can result in our really liking them, tolerating them, or disliking them. We need to know how to recognize each and what our reactions should be to each.

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What follows is a breakdown of colleagues in three categories: The Good, The Bad, The Ugly—The What and “How to respond.”

### **THE GOOD**

- The what: **Just really nice.** These are the overwhelming majority of colleagues: personable, give kudos to others in webinars, say a sincere “hello” (whether in a video or nonvideo meeting), keep promises to follow-up, offer solid and useful information (whether individually or in a group meeting), put in the extra effort to be a team player. How to respond: In kind! These are the colleagues that are a joy to be around; they make the isolated life of the online

educator just a bit nicer for being who they are. They are not sought out, but rather just appear. Certainly, giving and being the same to this group is likewise appreciated by them.

- The what: **Interested in a shared collaboration.** If reached out to by a colleague or making the first invite suggestion, this is a colleague who knows the worth of a collaborative project or presentation; will put in all the effort and time required; has no problem doing more of the load when it's required; will intently listen to other group members' suggestions; always offers good input; completes assigned tasks on time; is a cheerleader for others in the collaboration; has a positive outlook and responses and good "wrap-up" insight to all involved once the collaboration is completed. How to respond: Being an equal partner in the collaboration is all that is expected. If this colleague's approach to a collaborative project is duplicated by others in the team then the end result will always be a positive one, with good feelings all around.
- The what: **Eager to share information.** This colleague realizes that one person does not have all the answers, does not own all the info on a subject; there is an unbridled desire to share any additional owned information or suggestions relating to a course, the course subject, or school information. This could be as a follow-up from a group webinar; in response to a colleague's shared information; or just "out of the blue," that is, simply thinking a piece of info the person has might be of use to another, and reaches out. How to respond. Being happy to share information makes colleagues better as distance learning educators, thus nearly always this type of colleague will be given the same by other colleagues. In the event this does not happen there is a positive: a tepid response will not dampen the "sharing

vibe" of these types of colleagues, for it's in their teaching DNA.

- The what: **Willing to "go the extra mile."** This is a colleague who seldom needs be asked to do extra work; there is an almost immediate "Hey, I'll do it!" response. Also, the colleague has no problem in doing proactive reach-outs with suggestions for any aspect of a course, a project, the school that will also result in more time and effort for the colleague. There is a genuine interest in wanting to be a helpful team member, whether that team is just one other colleague or several. How to respond. Like seems to attract like, therefore an equal desire to reach out when it is not expected or dictated will be appreciated. And if the person receiving this unexpected input is not terribly responsive not to fret: this is one of a few lone wolves, and the majority of colleagues will be thankful for the appearance.

## THE BAD

- The what: **Riding on "coattails."** These colleagues are eager to become a part of someone else's efforts, good reputation, or group exposure. They are unwilling to do all or most of the work and time required, being more interested in getting recognized through someone else's solid standing or long-standing positive recognition. Too, they might ask for help in accomplishing something, believing it's easier to ask someone else for input rather than doing the research on their own. These colleagues usually have a "tell": initially giving the faculty member upfront praise or congratulations (when this has not previously occurred)—this is often a sign of "Now that I've given you candy I need you to give me candy in return." How to respond. Always be polite, but also understand information, accomplishments, and a good reputation are

not chits to be tossed to the crowd; these were earned, and thus others need do the earning as well. Either think of a plausible reason to turn down the request or offer a suggestion of how the colleague might get on the right road to achieving what is being requested for free. Do not give in: doing so can result in a reputation as an easy mark.

- The what: **Doesn't follow-up in emails.** This colleague gives the impression of being too busy or not interested in responding to email queries sent. The questions could be the result of a previous comment the colleague made, a "reach-out" interest a colleague has in a subject or small piece of info, or in response to an invite from the colleague, such as, "Let me know if you need more information!" The nonresponse is not only rude but also usually results in a second email request, thus extra time that would not have been necessary if there was a response to the first email. (NOTE: Don't ask for personal info, unless invited to do so; here is where is a nonresponse or a polite "none of your business" is warranted.) How to respond. It is legitimately possible the colleague overlooked the question, and thus a second email again asking might prove to be legitimate—and result in an apology for overlooking the first request, followed by an answer. Yet if the question again goes unanswered—either in the form of no response or a response with the question not answered—know this colleague is not the one to ask future queries.
- The what: **Just a "name on a door."** These are often referred to as "ghost colleagues," i.e., ones who show up for a meeting or are a part of a collaborative project, but do little or nothing. They want their name to be seen, but that's it: no interest in participating, no interest in being a true team member. Their message is usually "Don't contact me as I'm too busy with other things." The excep-

tion: if the colleague has previously been engaged this one reticent time might signal a problem; in this case sending a "Hey, just wanted to check in—you were pretty quiet in the meeting" email or call might be okay. How to respond. In general, these colleagues are not interested in shared collaborative projects, offering suggestions or information, going an extra inch. There are many colleagues like this, and it's admirable to try and pull them in, but too often little movement will be made. Their overt message: "Don't come to me for help."

## THE UGLY

- The what: **Takes credit for others' work.** Perhaps the worst example of a colleague, this one will gladly be a part of a group or work with another team member, but rather than share the credit or give fully deserved credit to someone else will instead try to solely own the credit. It is possible this person has previously tried or done this to another colleague, and thus one can be forewarned. How to respond. If knowledge of the sole credit is found after the fact it is important to reach out and explain the situation. (Note: This can be delicate if the steal is done by a supervisor; in this case ask the supervisor why proper credit was not given, and react accordingly.) In a case of a colleague not only be sure proper credit is explained to "the powers that be" but also the thief is called out. One works hard for earned credit; it is not to given to others who don't deserve it.
- The what: **Just plain nasty.** While this is not found too often it does exist: the colleague who has a less-than-pleasurable attitude, and might even go so far as to say or write disparaging remarks. The problem with this might not be limited to the one colleague on the receiving end, but rather if others see or hear

the remarks it might cause others to wonder if there is any truth to the words. Of course, if one has a stellar reputation to begin the “bad vibes” will mean nothing. How to respond. If not provoked it simply tells one of the colleague’s temperament; it could be the result of jealousy (reputation, kudos on a project, open praise from a supervisor, etc.), that person’s overall attitude, or something—uncalled for—the colleague does not like about another. Know to not respond (it might “fan the flames”) and stay away from this person. (Note. There have been occurrences when a colleague will have an ugly response because of a misinterpretation of something someone said or wrote. This is usually out of character for the colleague, and in the person’s remarks usually refers to what is believed to be insulting. In this case a quick explanation will almost always result in an apology.)

- The what: **The “Teacher’s Pet.”** There seem to be at least a few of these in every organization: the colleague who

gives effusive praise to a supervisor, who immediately and always has an “I’ll do it! I’ll do it!” hand up when a volunteer is called for, who cannot wait to brag about accomplishments or knowledge. To nearly all it is obvious—and it is sickening. Yet too often there are supervisors and some colleagues who buy into it, not realizing the end game is only to curry favor. How to respond. There is really not much to be done here, except to hope the person on the receiving end realizes the person’s ultimate goal. And it is important to be wary of too much praise coming one’s way; it might beg the question. “What is really going on here?” (Note: There is, of course, always the possibility the person is sincere in praise, but just has a way of presenting it that is “over the top.” In such an instance—if this can be proven—it does not hurt to reach out with a gentle “tone it down” message.)

*Remember!* The good, the bad, the ugly are in each person’s life—embrace the good, deal with the bad, dismiss the ugly.