

# Assume positive intent

---

 christinsmithmyers.com/single-post/Assume-positive-intent

“You screwed up.”

Ouch. That’s a rough way to start an email.

I wasn’t the recipient, yet I was feeling defensive. I didn't even know the recipient, yet I wanted to fight back on her behalf.

It was an email from a customer to a service provider, who I'm sure couldn't wait to do everything she could to take care of the problem as soon as she started reading.

Ha!

It turned out the customer was completely wrong. There was no mistake. Except his. (Not that he would admit it.)

It's easy for me to judge. But I've done the same thing. Maybe not with those words in that way. But I certainly have been quick to assume it was the other person's fault and then had to apologize after the fact.

These days I'm trying to assume positive intent. As explained in an article on [The Collaborative Way website](#), "When you look for positive intent, you give people the benefit of the doubt and you give yourself the chance to learn the details of the situation. You may be surprised how often you learn something that you hadn't expected. Once you learn the details, you may get to see that the [person] was indeed committed, competent, and on top of the situation." Also, "When you follow this advice, your whole approach to a person or problem becomes very different. When you assume negative intent, you're angry or annoyed. If you let go of this anger or annoyance and assume positive intent, you'll be able to listen generously and speak straight far more effectively."

I see the lessons everywhere and try to teach them to others:

Most people don't intend to screw up at work. If an employee makes a mistake, assume positive intent and get to the bottom of the error together.

That neighbor or seatmate who's too noisy? They're not actively setting out to make your life miserable. Really. They're just thinking about themselves and might need a gentle reminder about the impact of their actions on you.

You might want to reread the email or text one more time before you react. Maybe that remark that seemed callous was the result of a very unfortunate typo. Or maybe you missed something the first time you read through and check again before you accuse someone of

screwing up. Look again with the assumption of positive intent. Think before you make a bad situation worse.

This doesn't mean you let everything slide or become a doormat. But what goes around comes around. I make plenty of mistakes and I need some grace time and again. People don't always have positive intent. But when you look at actions and comments through the lens of positive intent, you can be a lot more forgiving, and more importantly, get to the heart of the issue.

And speaking of intent, you don't always have to guess. You can ask a variation of one of my very favorite questions, from author and speaker Meryl Runion: "That sounded like a dig. Was that your intent?"

That brings me back to the story of the customer email. If I had to guess, his primary intent was not to criticize the service provider (even though that's what he did). His intent was to get his issue addressed. So rather than getting too caught up in his tone, she addressed his issue, gave him the information he needed that he didn't read properly the first time, and moved on.

Assume positive intent.