



**Figure 15.2 A Typical Memo** The writer has provided a copy to each appropriate recipient—no one appreciates being left "out of the loop." Because of this memo's length, it is more suitable as a PDF attachment than as the body of an email message.

## Memo Tone

### 15.3 Use proper tone in all memos

Memos are most often distributed internally within an organization and written for employees at different levels and functions. Memos are written to address questions such as the following:

- Who's doing what, and when, and where?
- How will any changes to existing policies or procedures affect employee workplace activities or conditions?
- What is the status of a project or recent meeting or discussion?

What memo recipients want to know

Memo topics often involve evaluations or recommendations about policies, procedures, and, ultimately, the *people with whom we work*.

Because people are sensitive to criticism (even when it is merely implied) and often resistant to change, an ill-conceived or aggressive tone can spell disaster for the memo's author. So, be especially careful about your tone. Consider, for instance, this memo—an evaluation of one company's training program for new employees:

No one tells new employees what it's *really* like to work here—how to survive politically: For example, never tell anyone what you *really* think; never observe how few women are in management positions, or how disorganized things seem to be. New employees shouldn't have to learn these things the hard way. We need to demand clearer behavioral objectives.

A hostile tone

Instead of sounding angry and demanding, the following version comes across as more thoughtful and respectful:

New employees would benefit from a concrete guide to the personal and professional traits expected in our company. Training sessions could focus on appropriate attitudes, manners, and behavior in business settings.

A more reasonable tone

*NOTE* A professional, reasonable tone is always important in all workplace communication but is especially critical when communicating via email. See Chapter 14 for more on tone and style in email.

Achieving the right tone in your memos involves using some common sense. Put yourself in the shoes of your recipients and write accordingly. Be polite and avoid sounding bossy, condescending, and aggressive, or deferential and passive. Don't criticize, judge, or blame any individual or department. Don't resort to griping, complaining, and other negative commentary. Try to emphasize the positive. Finally, approach difficult situations reasonably. Instead of taking an extreme stance, or suggesting ideas that will never work, be practical and realistic.

Using common sense

The tone of a memo also comes across in the sequence in which you deliver the information. Depending on the sensitivity of your memo's subject matter, you may want to take a direct or an indirect approach. A direct approach begins with the "bottom line" in the first sentence (as well as in the subject line) and then presents the details or analysis to support your case. An indirect approach lays out the details of the case over several sentences (and leaves the subject line vague) before delivering the bottom line later in the paragraph.

Being direct or indirect

Readers generally prefer the direct approach because they want to know the bottom line without being told in advance how to feel about it. Assume, for example, that a company payroll manager has to announce to employees that their paychecks will