

How to Make Communications Technology Work for You, Not Against You

Do you have enough time during the day to respond to all the messages others send to you and spend a high quality and quantity of time developing your people? Chances are, you don't. I have heard many managers complain because they feel drowned under the "product" of today's communications tidal wave - innumerable messages from cell phones, e-mail, fax, voice mail, etc.

You are committed to achieving success, but you may be feeling very frustrated by the "communications fire drill" - the glut of urgent messages, any one of which can send you scurrying off to track down information, people, product, etc. These communications fire drills rob you of the time you need to perform the truly important functions of leadership, such as growing and developing your people.

Webster's Dictionary defines leadership as "to guide or direct others, by persuasion or influence, to a course of action." And "management" can be defined as "getting things done through others." Your goal, however, is not to be an average leader/ manager. You want to be a superior leader/manager; which means you want to obtain superior results from your people by being more persuasive, more influential, and more directive of your subordinates.

At any given moment of your day, you are involved with either tasks or people. Tasks are pieces of work demanded of you. People are those individuals who produce the results by which you are measured. If you spend too much time on tasks, and not enough on people, the results of your business will suffer.

Communications Clutter

The facts on the proliferation of communications are startling. Studies have found that the average executive receives more than 40 voice mail messages a day, 60 e-mail messages, 25 faxes and a couple dozen "While You Were Out" slips. One sales manager recently told me she receives more than 150 e-mails each day.

My point is that it's impossible to respond to 150 e-mails, 40 voice mails, 25 faxes, etc. every day and be a superior leader/ manager. I'm afraid we've become so busy reacting that we're not making enough time for those important people who produce the results we desire: employees and customers. You can only lead, manage and develop relationships face-to-face. Every minute you spend glued to your telephone or computer is one less minute you have for your employees and customers.

My urgent question for you is this: can you make communications work for you, instead of against you? If you can, you will surely race ahead of your competition. Here are a few helpful hints for taking back control of your time:

- Be conscious of how much time you spend working on tasks vs. working with your people.

You became a leader/manager because you were proficient at a front-line skill. For, example, a great salesperson who was promoted to sales manager. This means that, as a salesperson, you focused on tasks, and felt a sense of accomplishment each time you completed one. Now, as a leader/manager, you must be careful not to allow yourself to be drawn into these activities/ tasks (such as responding to messages). You must not forget that your primary purpose as a leader/manager is to develop your people into peak performers.

- Schedule a time every day for handling details of the business.

One manager I know schedules a 30-minute meeting every day at 4:15PM with his office manager to handle the issues that came up that day. Then if certain items require same day response, he's still got time to respond before 5PM. And, his office manager gets right to the point on these issues because she's anxious to go home at 5PM.

- Designate an assistant to screen your messages.

To reduce the number of unnecessary interruptions, give your assistant direction on how to screen your messages. For example, A: Is this an issue that can or should be handled by another person? If so, forward it to the appropriate person. B: Is this an issue that can wait until your 4:15PM "details" meeting? If so, save it until then. C: Is this an issue that does not require your action, but never-the-less, it is an issue you should be aware of? If so, save the issue for your afternoon meeting. D: Is this an urgent issue that requires your immediate attention? If so, interrupt you (but it better be important!).

- Get out of your office between 8AM and 9:30 AM. and interact with your people.

Each morning, between 8-9:30, my former sales manager would sit in his office handling paperwork, making phone calls, or talking with salespeople. If a salesperson had a question for him, the salesperson would come in, sit down, often have to wait until he got off the phone, before discussing the issue. I suggested to my sales manager that instead of sitting in his office, he ought to get out of his office and interact with his people in their office space. This simple technique resulted in many benefits.

Because the meeting was held outside his office, often in a stand-up discussion, he could move on to another person or issue once it was resolved. Also, it gave him more face-to-face time with his people, and helped him build stronger relationships with them. And, it ensured he was interacting each morning with all of his people, not just the ones that needed his help.

- Create a company-wide e-mail policy.

All too often in the past, my people would "cc" me on an e-mail they sent to a prospect or fellow employee. So, I held an office meeting to agree on standards for copying others on e-mail communications. At the meeting I learned that most everybody else was frustrated about the number of e-mails they received. Since holding the meeting, I've seen a 50% drop in the number of e-mails I receive from our employees. Now, I've got more time to work with my people face-to-face.

- Have incoming telephone calls screened and schedule call-back times each day.

Return calls when it's convenient for you, not the caller. Choose two 30-minute time periods to return calls each day, one period in the morning, the other in the late afternoon. The grouping of your return calls will reduce the number of interruptions you experience dramatically. And, it will allow time for callers to resolve the issue themselves.

- Schedule time with your people.

I know this may be difficult but try leaving your cell phone in the office when you travel with your salespeople. Many of the issues that come at me when I'm in the office seemed to get resolved by others when I'm out of the office - and unavailable.

- Don't be the "Shell Answerman"

Remember that television ad many years ago where people would ask the Shell Answerman any question about their car and receive an immediate answer? That may have worked well as a commercial for an oil company, but it doesn't work well as a successful management strategy. When you immediately answer the questions of your subordinates you are relieving them of their capability and responsibility to think. The best way to develop your people is to become skilled at answering their questions with a question of your own.

For example, if a subordinate comes to you with a pressing issue, you could ask, "What do you think should be done?" In this way, you are requiring your people to bring you at least one possible solution for each problem.

Time is our most precious resource, and the effective use of time will certainly determine the level of success each of us enjoys. In case you haven't guessed, I've been buried under communications clutter just like you. Recently I resolved to implement the eight strategies above because I'm committed to making communications work for me, not against me. I'm reminded of that line in the movie Network, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it any more!"

Will you join me?