



The Great Multitasker

*"To do two things at once is to do neither."
Publilius Syrus, Roman author, 1st Century BC*



Study after study has shown that multitasking is counterproductive. This is especially true for leaders. Multitasking is one of those “pay me now or pay me later” propositions. It causes us to do a quarter or half of a task and then move on to doing a small percentage of the next thing. Meanwhile, a large pile of unfinished business begins to breathe down our necks, casting a huge shadow from the past over things we need to get done in the future.

That’s the way I look at it, and I can tell you because I have been guilty of it.

Organizing expert and bestselling author Julie Morgenstern, author of *Never Check E-mail in the Morning and Other Unexpected Strategies for Making Your Work Life Work*, says that people should avoid multitasking, because it scatters their efforts, making for a longer, less productive day.

Morgenstern urges people not to do “chores” when they are faced with real work and deadlines on a vital project. She says they need to accomplish the biggest task they have ahead of them first rather than putting it off by doing other little “chores” that can be done relatively quickly.

Doing these chores may provide a small sense of accomplishment, but if something unforeseen happens to take up your time, you may not be able to accomplish that big task by the deadline or even at all.

The “Instant Messenger”

Don’t allow yourself to become the “instant messenger,” whether it is on electronic devices or in person. As a leader, you need to be responsive, not just a responder. There’s a big difference between those two terms, and your people will see it once you start choosing responsiveness over responding. This can be a major tool in your ability to delegate responsibility as a leader.

It is easy to fall into this trap, and once you are in there, you will have a hard time getting out, because creating an expectation that you respond immediately brings with it a host of problems.

This is how it happens: You receive an e-mail from a subordinate and your immediate inclination is, “If I respond to this e-mail right now, I’m done and can move on to the next thing.” But are you done? Can you move on?

You have been hit by a stimulus and are providing a response, but you haven’t taken the time to think the entire issue through. And what happens? In a few minutes the person is back with another question or issue that wasn’t covered in your quick response, and a dozen e-mails later, an hour of your day has suddenly evaporated. The difference in not taking some time to think it through and let the issue sink in before responding is twelve e-mails vs. two.

You might consider multitasking and procrastination to be completely opposite terms, but think about it. If you are shooting off a quick response to an e-mail to get the issue temporarily off your plate, what are you doing? Multitasking is a form of procrastination—it just feels better because there is a sense that you are get-

...continued on page 2



The Great Multitasker *continued...*

continued from page 1...

ting something done and getting back to what you were doing...temporarily.

When you get yourself into the trap of immediate response you turn your job into an assembly line that never stops, and you soon discover that you are not only responsible for your task on the line, but you are starting to pick up tasks on the line that other people should be doing. Being an instant messenger can ruin your ability to delegate as a leader.

Being the go-to guy instead of the delegator can also jeopardize your position. Think about that middle management jack-of-all-trades guy in your organization who answers every message in seconds, who knows everything, and who can turn a project around all by himself on very short notice in a crisis. Do you promote him when the time comes for a promotion in your organization? Probably not, because you want him right where you have him.

As a leader you can't be that kind of person. Your effectiveness and the quality of your achievements come from the work you are able to accomplish through a group of talented people with diverse skills. That's why you need to stop that assembly line before it gets going, or bring it to a halt if it is already speeding along. You can't be the instant messenger, whether it's electronically or in person.

Your immediate response to me might be: "There is no way I can do that. They have to be able to contact me at all times, and I need to be on top of everything every second, and...."

If you think you can't stop that assembly line, ask yourself "Why not?" If you are like most leaders who are constantly in that stimulus and response mode, chances are you are the one who created the expectation that put you there.

That means you are also the one who can uncreate it, and you don't have to do it by decree. Just re-educate and acclimate yourself and your people to a new model.

You will also learn another benefit to waiting until you have the time to respond. You will begin to find that you receive "never mind" e-mails more often because in the time between their e-mail and your response, they have either remembered something important or have taken the initiative to find out the information themselves without relying on your instant response. So by not responding immediately, you have saved yourself time to devote to important tasks, and you have done a fantastic job of delegating work and empowering people without having lifted a finger.

Keep in mind that acclimating people to your new e-mail habits is going to be a transition. You may have people coming down the hall to see if you are all right at first when 15 minutes goes by without a response to their e-mails. But they'll get over it, and they'll learn to appreciate you for it because of the responsiveness and thoughtful attention they are beginning to get from you.

Just a final note on e-mail: I know a woman who works in a consulting firm, and who only answers her e-mail twice a day—once in the late morning and then at about 4 p.m. This is no problem for her clients, because she has trained people that these are the times of day they can expect to hear from her. I imagine the rest of the day she is getting a lot of work done.

That's enough about e-mail, because the multitasking problem should not be thought of as simply a technology issue. Consider the leader who is sitting in a meeting with staff members speaking, and the leader is looking at memos and jotting down unrelated notes while

...continued on page 3



The Great Multitasker *continued...*

continued from page 2...

looking up once in a while to make sure everyone is not looking for a response from him. The impression created is that he doesn't listen, or he doesn't care about the issues or the work his people have been doing.

Simple Solutions

The following are three easy things you can do to get out from under the yoke of multitasking and improve our effectiveness.

1. Clean up your desk. A scattered work area encourages scattered work methods.

2. Block out time for vital projects and finish them. Imagine you have an annual report due in two weeks. Once you have delegated all of the pieces you can delegate to people and have given them deadlines, you have three leadership-related portions that only you can do, and that would take about four hours for you to finish. For this project, block out five hours, say from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. The extra hour would be for you to take a brisk walk and then have a healthy snack in the middle of it to clear your mind and help you gain greater focus for winding up the task and bringing it all together. Also, make sure you block out this time days before the deadline you have given everyone else, and let them know that your part is finished when it's done.

Turn off your e-mail program and cell phone as you work on the report. If you have an audible alert when you get mail, turn that off too. While you are working on this task, if there is something you need to look up online or ask someone for, save it until later in the day, when you have all of these loose ends identified and can

get them together all at one time. You will be amazed at how quickly you finish and how satisfied you are with the result.

The multitasking instant messenger would probably complete this four-hour task in small pieces over a two-week period, it would end up taking ten hours, and it would likely not be as logical and cohesive as the project that was completed in one highly focused session.

3. Start turning people away at the door. If you are in the middle of a task and someone knocks on your door or walks in, determine whether the issue can be resolved in a minute. If it can't be resolved quickly, you will likely be too distracted to give your full attention to this person. In this situation, you can say: "I have to finish this proposal I'm working on, and then I can give you my full attention. It will take about 20 minutes, so I'll come down to your office in 30 minutes and we'll talk."

When your task is finished, turn off your cell phone, walk down to that person's office, close the door, look him or her straight in the eye and get to work on the issue, with no distractions. Your people will respect you for it, and will quickly learn this is the way you do business.

The message is simple—no matter how good you think you are at multitasking, the fact is that you're not, because there is no such thing as good multitasking. In the pursuit of trying to do three things at once, we lose focus, something that is critical to effective leadership. Your people look to you to keep focused on the big picture and strategic thinking.

You can't keep your eye on the ball while you're trying to juggle four of them.

Betty Till