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# smart **Business** matters

*Advice for Success!*

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## Stop Hearing, Start Listening

Your ability to listen may be the difference between keeping or losing a valued customer, engaging or alienating an employee, or capturing or losing new business. Here are a few tips on how you can become a better listener.

### Focus on the Speaker.

Stop what you're doing, face the speaker, and make eye contact. When you acknowledge your customer, business contact, or employee, you show the speaker that you're interested in hearing what she or he has to say. Don't interrupt; hold that really good point you want to make until the speaker is finished.

### Empathize and Accept.

"Walk a mile" in the speaker's shoes. Make an effort to understand the speaker's feelings as well as the facts. Avoid verbal and non-verbal expressions of disagreement. Too many questions may lead the speaker to feel badgered, while restating what's been said can affirm you hear and understand the speaker.

### Be Observant and Be Aware.

Remember that not all information is verbal. Watch the speaker's expressions, gestures and other non-verbal cues. Be aware of your body posture as well

– remember that crossed arms may feel comfortable to you, but may look like you are putting up defenses from another's point of view. On the other hand, nodding your head can be a great way to say, "I'm listening."



### Be Candid.

Often, the easiest way you can get others to open up is to be honest and open yourself. Throwing your sword and shield away can lead to a more open, problem-solving dialogue. Talk about your observations, perceptions, and feelings in a direct, concrete, non-threatening manner.

### Tailor Your Response to the Situation.

When in doubt, listen. When asked to respond, respond thoughtfully. The more you listen, the more you'll actually hear, and the more effective your conversation will be. Taking the time to listen can go a long way towards handling irate customers or frustrated employees and may help you to avoid those stressful situations in the first place.

## Enhance professionalism and boost your company's image with an e-mail policy.

Think of the e-mail messages you and your employees send from your company's e-mail system as the equivalent of letters sent on your company's letterhead. Do these messages reflect well on your company?

It's easy to take e-mail for granted; it's reliable and simple to use, it boosts productivity, and it enables quicker communication with customers and vendors. In the wrong hands, however, e-mail can pose a danger, exposing your company to negative publicity and, possibly, lawsuits.

You can help employees to minimize risks and make the most of e-mail. Explain that e-mail is for occasional personal use, like making personal phone calls. Set clear and comprehensive rules for acceptable e-mail use. Your policy should cover these basic tenets:

- E-mail should be professional and courteous and should not contain lewd jokes, religious messages, or political correspondence.
- E-mail must not contain any illegal, libelous, or offensive statements. All statements meant to harass – sexually or otherwise – are prohibited.
- E-mail is company property and is not private. The company has the right to access e-mail sent to or from every computer and to retrieve e-mail stored on its servers that users have deleted from their email programs.

Include the e-mail policy in your employee handbook and use it when training new employees. Employees should sign the policy to acknowledge that they understand it.

## To gain better control, learn to let go

Every business can benefit from a leader's laser focus and passionate attention to detail. However, when passion turns to obsession, productivity and morale are at risk.



**Passion or micro-management?** When owners can't let go, companies fail to grow. Opportunities stall at the feet of an owner who insists on knowing every trivial thing, attending every routine meeting, meddling in the everyday tasks of competent staff, calling each and every shot. If you want your business to expand, you need to curb the urge to micro-manage.

**You are not a Super Hero, and you cannot do it all.** Trying to do it all, in fact, can be a recipe for failure. Taking everything upon yourself could eventually lead to an inability to meet a customer's needs and frustrate capable employees who are eager to expand their skills and grow with your business. Learning to delegate, train, and trust key employees will ensure that you keep valued customers and retain qualified employees.

**A desire for perfection can be trouble.** Working to provide your customers with the best service or product possible makes good sense. But beware thinking that no one else can do anything as well as you, nobody cares as much about customers, no one puts in as many dedicated or productive hours. Recognize that nobody, including you, is perfect. You need a clear assessment of your own strengths and weaknesses, space for contribution of good ideas, and a plan to develop additional talent to fuel growth. Some people out there have skills you may not have, and some of them may be your employees!

**Let go in stages.** Delegate thoughtfully and incrementally. Suddenly shifting your responsibilities all at once won't work. It should be done gradually, so both you and your employees can grow into new roles. Your employees will better represent you if you train them gradually and reward them with increased responsibility.

**Get help from specialists.** Tapping the objective insights of outsiders can help you figure out where to hold on and where to let go. Regular meetings with an informal board of advisers can help, whether they're paid or not. Also consider working with a professional business coach, or rely on close friends or professional associates.

# On the Road to Better Time Management

You can't create time, however, you may be able to better manage the time you have. Here's how:

**Choose a Destination** - Increasing time spent on one task or project requires your spending less time on another. Take a moment to re-examine your long-term goals. What are your work and personal goals for the year? List five things you would like to accomplish, such as: cultivate clients in a different sector, boost sales of an existing product, or spend more time with family. Prioritize them, giving as much thought to your "wants" as to your "needs." Focus first on the goals that are most important or urgent—the ones you value most and are willing to commit to.

**Make Each Mile Count** - Choose one or two goals to accomplish over the next few months, moving on to other goals on your list as the year proceeds. The majority of your time should be spent in completing goal-directed tasks. Create a list of objectives, or "steps" towards each goal. If your goal is to expand your business in a new sector, schedule time to research potential areas of profitability or identify and meet new clients. Schedule tasks such as soliciting a number of clients each month or attending a networking event to help you keep moving forward. You'll stay on target if you ask yourself daily, "Am I doing what I'm supposed to be doing in order to reach my goals?"

**Take What You Need** - Consider the equipment or services you need in order to reach your goals. Use of accounting software, such as QuickBooks or Peachtree, could allow you to spend more time soliciting clients and less time going over the books.

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## Navigating Through Your Days

### Tips for Time Management

We all begin our days with the best of intentions to be as productive as possible, but we frequently find ourselves "sidetracked" by the day-to-day unforeseen circumstances that tug us in different directions. Here are some tips to help you navigate around day-to-day time "hazards."

- Set aside 15 minutes to a half hour at the end of each day to review what you've accomplished and to make a To-Do list for the next day. Prioritize! Either list the tasks in order of importance or assign a letter to each task "A" being urgent, "B," important, and "C," of less importance. The next day, pull out your list and take care of your priority tasks first.
- Some times it's good to get "lost," because you can't be found and interrupted. If possible, schedule blocks of time out of the office to complete important projects. Work at your library, your home office, or a local coffee shop. Or set time to close your office door and let employees know that time is sacred.
- Coming and going from the office to run errands can be a time-waster. Group errands to the post office, store, and bank to make the best use of your time, or, if possible, delegate them to an employee.

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## On the Road

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Minding the store could be delegated to a capable employee. Hiring an expert to update your website or help with other areas could free up more time to concentrate on goal-oriented items.

**Pack Well** - Everybody has their own organizational style; some offices are cluttered and others pristine. As a general rule of thumb, organize the tools of your trade in such a way that they are always at hand when you need them. Don't lose a half-hour searching for the "one thing" you need in order to complete a simple five-minute task. If clutter burns up excess time, bring in a file clerk or professional organizer for a "tune-up."

**Always Look Ahead** - Keep your calendar handy and with you at all times. If you make an appointment, get some news, or have an idea, jot it down immediately. Set aside some time at the end of each day and week to assess your progress and to strategize for the following day and week. Schedule tasks, meetings, and, most importantly, blocks of uninterrupted time to work on your short- and long-term goals. If you have work due for a client, allot enough time for completion. Don't forget to factor in important personal and social obligations!

**Fuel Up** - You can't run on fumes forever, and you can't run on empty at all. Be sure not to drain yourself by overbooking, over-committing, skipping breakfast, or sacrificing exercise or family time on a regular basis. Plan quality time with family and friends. If exercise is important to you, schedule it. Allow yourself substantial time to complete tasks. After work on a big project, take a break. Meet a friend for lunch, take a walk, or shift to work that requires less thought or energy. Put yourself and your needs "on the agenda."

## Navigating Through

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- Take a break or two. Take time to breathe, relax, or stretch. Don't skip the morning coffee break. If you work on a computer for long stretches of time, be sure to stand up and stretch your arms and legs.
- Are you in control of your paperwork, or is controlling you? If you have difficulty finding important papers, hire someone to help you set up a simple filing system.
- The manner in which you organize and plan is up to you, whether your choice be a detailed planning system or simple To-Do lists. Electronic devices are great when you're on the go and computer software calendars and organizers are useful for those who travel with a laptop. You might find a program like Microsoft Entourage, which provides project management tools, helpful. The important thing is to choose a system that works best for you.
- Technology is a godsend, and a curse. E-mail, the internet, and faxes are fantastic business tools, but they can be great time-wasters as well. Unless you have urgent outgoing or incoming communication, check your e-mail and faxes after lunch and again later in the day. Respond to the most urgent and put the others on your agenda for the next day. As much as possible, set aside a scheduled time for e-mailing, faxing, or surfing the net. This will make it easier to set limits.
- Communication is important, but too many phone interruptions can leave you with a feeling you've accomplished nothing. If your days are fragmented with incoming and outgoing phone calls, and if your business allows, schedule blocks of time during the day to return or make calls. Consider hiring a secretary to answer and screen calls, or allowing calls to go to voice mail if you're in the middle of a project. Cell phones are a great way to keep in touch, but again, allow yourself some down time; don't be afraid to turn your cell phone off.

**"Time is the coin of your life. It is the only coin you have, and only you can determine how it will be spent. Be careful lest you let other people spend it for you."**

**Carl Sandberg**