
Management & Leadership

5 Ways to stop multi-tasking and why you should

Is constant multitasking wearing you down and eroding your effectiveness as a business leader? Here are five steps for recapturing your time, attention and productivity:

1. Focus. Focus starts with having a very clear definition of what winning looks like for your organization. Be as specific as possible. What will it look like at the end of 2011 when you have been insanely successful? What key operating achievements will you have accomplished? Who will your customers be and how will you serve them? What products will you have in the market and in the development pipeline? Who will your competitors be and how will they compete against you? What will your brand represent?

To help you stay focused, stage your field of vision by keeping your goals and objectives in front of you throughout the day. Put them on your computer screen and carry them with you. Set up task reminders to ping you, or write them on your whiteboard. Post them in the lobby of your office, or on your mirror at home. Do whatever it takes to keep your goals visible as you move through the day. When you get distracted or interrupted, these visual cues will serve as powerful reminders to refocus on what's really important.

2. Stop trying to know it all. With so much information available, we can't possibly stay current with everything going on in our businesses, markets and industries. In past generations, business leaders had to learn to delegate tasks and responsibilities. Now we have to get comfortable delegating information management. It's okay to know a little about a lot of things. We need to restrict our in-depth information gathering and analysis to those areas where we have the most impact.

3. Schedule alone time. Here's where most business leaders struggle. We get results through other people, so we're supposed to constantly be in meetings, on the phone, texting, solving problems and giving feedback, right? It just doesn't feel right to shut our office door, turn off the cell phone, and work by ourselves without interruption for any length of time.

Yet, research shows time and again that business leaders need long periods of uninterrupted time in order to perform at peak levels. Alone time allows us to slow down and look at things differently. It reduces stress and gets the creative juices flowing. Most important, it enables us to refocus on the high-level activities we *should* be doing that move us closer to our strategic goals.

4. Manage your information/interruption flow. Develop a system and structure for managing the tidal wave of information that comes to you each day, starting with taking control of your email inbox. Instead of answering emails as they arrive, pick one or two (maybe three) times of the day to review and respond to email. Make it a policy to respond only to those emails that require action or a decision from you. If something needs your immediate attention, have people contact you in person, or by phone.

The same goes for voice and text messages on your cell phone or PDA. Shut them down, turn them off, and focus on the task at hand! And no, turning them to vibrate doesn't count. Coach your direct reports on what kind of information and issues they should bring to you and what you expect them to handle on their own. When you schedule alone time, work to truly minimize interruptions by setting expectations on what you consider an 'emergency' or 'urgent' so that others are clear on when it might be OK.

5. Get in the habit of pausing. As business leaders, we thrive on solving problems and getting things done. When we respond quickly to a request or nip a small problem in the bud, it yields instant satisfaction. But that feel-good moment often comes at the expense of more important activities that don't have to be handled *right now*, but have severe long-term consequences if they don't get done.

To counteract this tendency to do what makes us feel good versus what we should be doing, get in the habit of pausing several times a day. Stop what you're doing, pause for a moment, and ask yourself, "Is this task something I should be doing, or am I responding to someone else's sense of urgency? Does this activity represent the best and highest use of my time? Will what I am now engaged in help us to win? Will this make a difference a year from now?"

Multitasking is more than just a bad habit. It's a threat to your effectiveness as a leader and the success of your organization. Integrate these five principles into your daily routine and you'll become more focused and productive while setting an example that everyone in your organization would do well to follow.