

TALENT@WORK BLOG

What to do When Your Boss Keeps Interrupting You

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By Jeff Davidson, ©2012

Because my coaching clients keep sharing a common concern, I wanted to share this article that provides solutions:

It's bad enough being constantly bombarded by all the forms of electronic communication that most people must grapple with today but, if you have a boss who, on top of everything else that competes for your attention, constantly interrupts your work flow, it may seem as if you have few options...

After all, this person is your boss and probably has a direct impact on your continued employment, earnings, and prospects for promotion.

Fortunately, strategies exist that you can easily put in place to help both you and your boss work more effectively, cooperate on a higher level, and respect each other's need for fewer interruptions.

Establish a Regular Meeting Time

My friend Robert was continually bombarded by phone calls, email messages, and even text messages from his boss at all times throughout the day. Soon, Robert realized that if he didn't confer with his boss and forge some kind of understanding, he was going to be perpetually interrupted, pulled off course, and perhaps end up doing less than his best work.

The solution that Robert derived was simple, yet ingenious. He met with his boss and discussed the fact that both of them were extremely busy, were managing a vast array of projects, and needed to have clear uninterrupted stretches of time when they could focus on the task at hand.

By acknowledging that his boss also needed this same non-intrusive operating environment as Robert himself needed, the meeting was already off to a great start. Robert then went on to suggest that each of them hold the garden variety of issues that arise during the work day until 3pm, at which time they would meet for 15 minutes. Robert's boss immediately liked this idea.

During the next few days, an amazing thing happened. Both Robert and his boss realized that they didn't need to meet every day at 3:15, because the system of holding on to the garden-variety issues until the appointed meeting time worked so well, they were able to drop back to three times a week: Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

Throughout the day, yes, there were occasionally issues that merited one or the other immediately getting in touch. These were, however, few and far in between. In the weeks that followed, both Robert and his boss were far more productive, more respectful of each other's time, and able to get out of the office at a decent hour, which hadn't occurred all that often beforehand.

In your own situation, what kind of agreement can you craft that will help to lessen the frequency of interruptions?

Minimize The Interruptions That Do Occur

If your boss interrupts you for any reason, do your best to keep that interruption to a minimum. Don't use the occasion to bring up another issue beyond the issue that your boss has raised. Also, through body language, vocal intonation, and facial expression, let your boss know that while you're always ready to field any questions, or handle any concerns that he or she raises, you have work to handle. Don't appear too content or too willing to drop everything and launch into a 10-minute conversation about the topic at hand.

You cannot assume that your boss is aware of the current challenges that you face. If you don't stand up for yourself in the subtle but effective manner suggested above, you end up offering the message "I'm here and available anytime you want to interrupt me, on any topic, and for any length of time." When you send out that nonverbal message, guess what? You end up interrupted more often than ever!

Meet Away from your Office or Work Space

If your boss drops in on you and takes the seat directly across from your desk, you'll have a relatively tough time dislodging him or her. Conversely, when you discuss an issue in your boss's office, a conference room, the hallway, or some other neutral location, through your own body language, you can convey that you're happy to address the issue your boss is raising and soon thereafter, you need to return to what you were working on.

Keeping the above in mind, when your boss reaches you by phone, intercom, email, or other messaging system, volunteer to go to your boss's location. Make your reply be, "Hold on, I'll be there in a minute." This gesture offers you two advantages. First, you seem like the energetic, go-getter type who is willing to depart from your own chair and save your boss the trouble. Second, you avoid the trap of having your boss sit down in your office or at your work space, which makes extracting him or her all the more difficult.

While it may take a little more time and effort to get up from your seat to address the issue, in the long run you'll be back to the task at hand sooner. That's a trade I'd take any time.

Establish Quiet Time

Let your boss, as well as project team members, peers, and other coworkers know that you need quiet time during a particular stretch in the course of a day or a week. Inform all concerned parties in an effective manner: post a note, send an alert, or raise the issue at a meeting. The time you can carve out for yourself with no interruptions is valuable.

Your boss, and others, can understand and respect your request because, after all, they're up against many of the same types of challenges. They're being hit with all forms of communication all day long, demands for their attentions, and disruptions in their work world. Effective personal practices that you put into place could serve as a model for others in the office.

Likewise, let people know when you are available – perhaps a half-hour before lunch, a half-hour afterwards, near the close of the day, later on Friday, and so on. Most people will respect the hours that you've carved out for both yourself and for interaction with office mates.

Maintain Perspective

Your boss has other responsibilities and probably supervises other people than just you. He or she strives to be an effective leader, and probably doesn't want to unduly interrupt you, but sometimes issues arise that are best addressed in the moment. If you've implemented the first four strategies (discussed above), then the number of times that your boss interrupts you in the course of a day, or a week, will dramatically drop. Thereafter, the times that he or she has to interrupt you will represent less of a burden.

The level of interruptions to which we are all exposed is likely to increase for the foreseeable future. The workspaces that mobile devices enable us to establish, unfortunately, all hold the potential for numerous interruptions when we don't establish effective procedures to lessen their rate of occurrence and duration. Fortunately, each of us has the capability to diminish the volume of potential interruptions we encounter, whether the origin is from our boss, or any other source.

*Jeff Davidson, "The Work-Life Balance Expert®," is a preeminent time management authority, and is an electrifying professional speaker, making 806 presentations since 1985 to clients such as Kaiser Permanente, IBM, American Express, Lufthansa, Swissotel, America Online, Re/Max, USAA, Worthington Steel, and the World Bank. Jeff is Executive Director of the Breathing Space Institute; and the author of numerous books, including: *Simpler Living* (Skyhorse Publishing), *The 60 Second Innovator* (Adams Media), *Breathing Space* (MasterMedia), *Complete Idiot's Guide to Managing Your Time* (Alpha/Penguin). Jeff is a thought leader on work-life balance issues and has been widely quoted in the *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *New York Times*, and *USA Today*. Cited by *Sharing Ideas Magazine* as a "Consummate Speaker," Jeff believes that career professionals today in all industries have a responsibility to achieve their own sense of work-life balance, and he supports that quest through his websites www.BreathingSpace.com and www.Work-LifeBalance.net and through 24 iPhone Apps at www.itunes.com/apps/BreathingSpaceInstitute.*