

Have you ever thought about...

## ... the DNA of good decisions?

After combing through 14 years of research, here's what **GOOD TO GREAT** author Jim Collins says about the art of making decisions:

● Great decisions come from saying "I don't know."

Collins asks: "Which is best? Saying you don't know when you've already made up your mind?"

Or presuming to know when you don't and, therefore, lying to yourself?

Or speaking the truth, which is: 'I don't yet know?'"

● The higher the questions/statements ratio, the better.

The best leaders Collins studied did the best job at igniting debate using Socratic questions.

As for himself: "I tried to make heroes out of those on my team who identified flaws in my thinking," Collins says.

"At the next meeting, I might say: 'I really want to give Leigh E credit. She really pushed my thinking, and I wasn't looking at this right.'"

● Deciding is not about consensus.

Debate can be "violent," but in the end, the leader makes the call. "No major decision we've studied was ever taken at a point of unanimous agreement," Collins says.

● Great decisions come from external awareness.

Fabulous organizations are internally driven but externally aware.

● Even huge decisions decide only a tiny fraction of the outcome. "The big decisions are not like 60 of 100 points," Collins says. "They're more like six of 100 points. And there's a whole bunch of others that are like 0.6 or 0.006."

● Think long term. Real leaders manage for the quarter-century, not the quarter.

● You can make mistakes—even big ones—and prevail.

**What a relief. ■**

SOURCENOTE: Adapted from *JIM COLLINS ON TOUGH CALLS*, by Jerry Useem, in *FORTUNE*.

## Give workers a direct pipeline

No matter how many times you tell workers you want their feedback, it won't sink in until you show them you mean it. Mike Warren — CEO of Alagasco, Alabama's largest natural gas distributor — drives home the message by prominently displaying "Hey Mike" suggestion cards throughout the organization. Workers using the cards can be assured their comments will get the boss's full attention.

—Adapted from *GoalManager.com*

BUSINESS

# ALERT!

Hands-on help that works

Vol 8 No 4

## How to handle interruptions

*With such a barrage of people demanding attention and only so many hours in the day, even the smallest interruptions can rob you of the time you need to achieve your goals and run a successful company.*

by Natalie A. Gahrman, M.A.

**SO, IT'S VITAL TO DEVELOP a knack for dealing with this, though striking a balance between being approachable and maintaining productivity is tricky.**

### An open attitude

"Interruptions (from staff) can be a good thing," says Sarah McVittie, CEO of mobile messaging information firm RESULT, which also runs 82ask.com. "It means you are approachable and not detached from the rest of the company. I like to have a very open office."

So does Arman Khan, co-founder of infrastructure management services provider 3net. He sits alongside the rest of his company, divided only by glass partitions, and believes, "It's critical I achieve an open-plan policy.

"I used to work for bosses who always frowned and had a 'what is it now?' expression on their faces whenever anyone went to speak to them," Khan recalls. "I'm trying hard not to have that attitude."

### Just say no... politely

While being approachable is important, regular non-urgent interruptions can break your focus and you may end up wasting time trying to re-engage with your thought process, or lose the thread altogether. So, when they do happen, the challenge is to take a moment to appreciate the importance of the person's enquiry while keeping your train of thought on track.

You may have to learn to say 'NO' to some requests, while others you defer to more convenient time.

"Balancing productivity and approachability is difficult but if you say, 'I'm in the middle of something right now but I'll come and see you in an hour and then we can talk', you are not discouraging people coming to you with ideas but you can continue to work effectively," explains Khan.

When it comes to phone interruptions, one solution is to identify regular times

when your phone is diverted to voicemail or someone else handles your calls.

This gives you the opportunity to deal with the enquiries in order of priority at a later date.

### Surgery hours

One simple but effective method of avoiding untimely interruptions is to have specific times when you are available and others when you are off-limits, except for real emergencies.

"If someone has something they need to talk to me about, I encourage them to mention it first thing in the morning," says McVittie. "That way I can schedule them into my day from the start."

Another option is to pre-empt interruptions by holding routine meetings with people.

3net has adopted this policy and implemented an informal forum when employees know they can ask questions, offer suggestions and make comments in a relaxed atmosphere every Friday afternoon.

"If people know they can have access to you on a regular basis once a week or once a month, they are much less likely to disturb you during the week with something that can wait," explains Khan.

Even with more organized and scheduled interruptions, it's important not to let them overrun.

Meeting with colleagues in their offices or in a meeting room gives you more control, as it is far easier to excuse yourself and leave than to kick people out of your own office.

### Signs of availability

A good practice is to establish a company-wide policy on what signals you'll use to indicate you're unavailable.

This can include putting a sign on your desk or simply closing your office door.

While McVittie and Khan both sit among

*(concluded overleaf)*



Is your business working?

**AS I WORK WITH PROFESSIONALS AND BUSINESS OWNERS, I see far too many of them working hard to earn a living but utterly failing to build an effective business.**

Many business owners work hard all day and struggle with marketing and maintenance and production until they are exhausted at night.

Or, even worse, they don't have enough work or customers to keep them busy, so they fret and worry; but again, they aren't building an effective BUSINESS so, day-after-day, nothing changes.

The goal of any business is to SERVE CUSTOMERS and the goal of an effective business is to do it in a way that makes a profit and makes sense for the owner, the employees, and the investors.

The 'end' of any business has to make sense — as well as dollars and cents!

- Is your business 'working' for you, or are you struggling?
- Do you have 'enough' customers to make a profit and the 'right' customers so your business really works for everyone involved?
- Do you have a plan (a blueprint, with details and dates) for growing the business?
- Do you have an exit strategy for when you want to retire or are ready to move on?
- Do you make time (no one 'has' time) to plan and design the future?
- Are your plans being implemented on a regular basis?

**If the answer to any of these questions is no, then make changes!**

Adjust your schedule, get training, hire an assistant, or get a coach!

As Michael Gerber says in his wonderful book, "The E-Myth," you want to work on your business, not just in or for your business.

Design and build an effective, efficient (and profitable!) business that works FOR you!

**Let me know if I can help. If you would like coaching, contact me, please! ■**



Michael Akbar

## The way I see it...

### Not many days left...and counting

**Depending on which survey you believe, only about four per cent of business people have a written list of personal goals.**

We all know that goals are the heart and soul of success, but even among business executives, the percentage who can describe their personal goals rarely goes above ten per cent.

In reality, we do have goals. The problem is that most of them are unconscious, unclear or unproductive.

Too often our most important "goals" are to be comfortable, to avoid risk or to maintain a familiar routine.

The fact of the matter is that ANYTHING will go better if we write down exactly what we want and describe a path for getting it.

Whether you want more time as a family, or more money in the bank, pause to consider exactly what you really want and, in most cases, a few simple strategies will come to mind 'automatically.'

There's no mystery to having more time with your spouse or saving a bit of money, is there?

Of course not! And most goals are like that. Now, here's the kicker.

There are not many days left in 2007. If you began the year with written goals, that is FANTASTIC!

You are one of the few and undoubtedly your performance has improved because of it

But what if you didn't create goals for the year?

#### **It's never too late!**

What do you want to achieve between now and the end of the year?

Want to increase sales? Want the holiday of a life-time? Need to lose weight, hire more staff, or get your pilot's license?

Whatever it is, WRITE IT DOWN and create a plan to make it happen (or at least get started).

Between now and December 31st, make this your best year ever! ■

### Ethical management

## Run all decisions through this 'ethical checklist'

**WHENEVER YOU'RE FACED with a tough decision, ask yourself these three questions:**

**1. Is it legal?** Will you be violating either company policy or the law?

**2. Is it fair and balanced?** Are all people involved in the decision being treated fairly — in both the short and long term? Will certain individuals get hurt?

**3. How will I feel when it's done?** How will the decision make you feel about yourself? Will you be proud of what you did? If it were published in the newspaper, would you feel good about your friends and family reading it?

SOURCENOTE: Adapted from THE POWER OF ETHICAL MANAGEMENT, by Kenneth Blanchard and Norman Vincent Peale

### HOW TO HANDLE INTERRUPTIONS

— Concluded from page 1

their employees in an open plan office, CEO of outsourcing provider Pasporte, Gary Woodward, has a separate office but adopts an 'open-door policy' and staff know that on the rare occasions when the door is shut he is not to be disturbed.

If he does have work that requires his undivided attention, Woodward will use time at the beginning or end of the day to do it at home, free from the distractions of a busy office so he can be more available when in the office.

"I prefer to be viewed as open and approachable," he explains. "People can come to me and I often wander around the office to talk to them. It's a question of being far enough distanced to work productively but near enough to remain

hands-on."

But can this delicate balance be maintained in the long term?

Woodward hints at the possibility of more separation in the future.

"We are currently all crammed together on one floor but the time will come soon when we are a size that demands we expand elsewhere. With some people in different locations, a different culture may have to emerge."

3net's Khan is hesitant about such change and adds, "I may be being naive but I will always resist the temptation to lock myself in my own office away from staff, even as the business grows." ■

SOURCENOTE: Business | 21

Can you trust your staff?

**RESEARCH SUGGESTS companies of all sizes should keep a closer eye on staff and adopt a zero-tolerance approach to employee theft.**

Small firms are being warned to keep a closer eye on staff after a survey revealed 72% have stolen from their employer on at least one occasion.

According to a poll of 2,062 office workers by employment law consultancy Peninsular, this is in spite of 81% believing that stealing is morally wrong.

Peter Done, managing director of Peninsular, is urging companies to adopt a zero-tolerance approach to stealing.

Employers should make it clear in staff employment contracts that stealing is unacceptable and set out clear punishments for anybody who does so, according to Done.

"Employees may well believe that because they can get away with stealing smaller items, they may well be tempted to steal larger and more expensive items, which could cost the company even more money," he said.

"Workers need to realize that they simply cannot continually get away with stealing from their employer; it is an illegal act and criminal prosecutions can be brought against them for doing so," he added.

The most common items stolen by staff are stationary such as post-it notes, pens and pencils, and also include computer equipment and software.

"It is shocking to see that, although 81% of those who stole believe it to be morally wrong, they still went ahead and did it anyway," said Done.

"We appear to be becoming a culture where it is deemed evermore acceptable and commonplace to steal from your employer.

"The ethical boundaries that once existed in our society appear to be becoming evermore watered down and eroded," he added. ■

## Smart managing

# Management by delegation

*Do the following scenarios sound familiar?*

**YOU'RE WALKING TO YOUR OFFICE and an employee stops you to give you a rundown of what's happening:**

"I made a phone call to Bill. He says that we can't get the project done until July 7, so I'm going to work on the Smith account, and after lunch turn MY attention to the Lion account.

"The newsletter project will be finished on June 17 and, by the way, the copy machine is broken. Should I call a repairman?"

As you get to your office, another employee stops you to give a rundown of his situation. This lasts another three minutes.

Frustrating? You bet.

And you wonder why can't these employees take more responsibility and not drop every detail of every project in your lap?

**Maybe it's not them, but you.** Maybe you are not delegating effectively.

Here are some key points to remember:

- **Stress results, not detail.** Make it clear to your employees that you're more concerned about the final outcome of all projects, rather than the day-to-day details that accompany them.

- **Don't be sucked in by giving solutions to employees' problems.** When employees come to you with problems, they're probably looking for you to solve them.

*Don't.* Teach them how to solve problems themselves.

This, too, can be frustrating because it takes time. But in the long run, you'll save yourself time and money.

- **Turn the questions around.** If an employee comes to you with a problem, ask him or her for possible solutions.

If an employee comes to you with a question, ask for possible answers.

- **Establish measurable and concrete objectives.** With all employees, make your objectives clear and specific.

Once this is done, employees will feel more comfortable acting on their own.

Think of this plan as a road map and your employees will, too.

- **Develop reporting systems.** Get your feedback from reporting systems: monthly reports, statistical data or samplings.

Or consider weekly meetings with employees.

- **Give strict and realistic deadlines.** If you don't give clear deadlines, employees won't feel accountable for the completion of their tasks.

- **Keep a delegation log.** When you delegate an assignment, jot it down. You'll be able to monitor the progress and discipline employees when necessary.

- **Recognize the talents and personalities of your employees.** Being a good delegator is like being a good coach of a sports team.

You have to know what projects each employee can handle, and what projects they can't. ■

SOURCENOTE: Adapted from METHODIST LEADERSHIP

## Staff retention

# How to eliminate staff turnover

*Do you have a high turnover rate?*

**CONSIDER STARTING a company newsletter or creating a news-cassette tape.**

That's what Barr-Nunn Transportation did.

Because of the technological revolution, many of Barr-Nunn's employees had little contact with the office.

And the results of this were high turnover (55 per cent annually) and low morale.

Solution? As soon as Barr-Nunn started a newsletter and distributed a four-hour cassette filled with industry news, country music, interviews, and company information to its drivers, turnover dropped to 35 per cent. ■

SOURCENOTE: Adapted from INC MAGAZINE

## Information retention

# Remember to underline

*Finding important info again*

**UNDERLINING PASSAGES in books and journals can help you locate important information easily when you come back for it.**

But don't underline *while* you read.

*Reason:* Most of us underline too many words, and don't understand the key points until we've finished the passage.

Wait until you finish an entire section or chapter, then go back and highlight key points.

SOURCENOTE: Adapted from 360 Most Guarded Secrets of Executives (National Institute of Business Management)

# The Institute for Independent Business

FOUNDED IN 1984 in the UK, the Institute for Independent Business (IIB) is now one of the world's largest international networks of business advice providers.

As of 31 October 2007, 4,948 carefully-selected men and women had been accredited worldwide as IIB Associates.

## Experienced professionals

Experienced senior business people in their own right, who have elected to become self-employed business advisers, Associates and Fellows of the IIB have received additional training to enable them to focus accurately and cost-effectively on the needs of clients and prospects.

This ensures that Associates' clients receive the "practical advice that works"—the Institute's motto in every country in which the Institute operates. ■

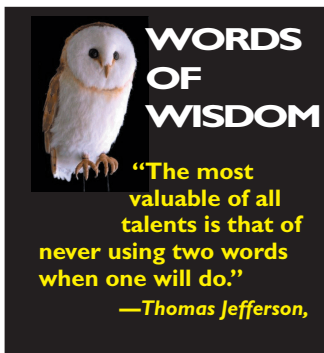
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## Communication

# Talk like a leader, be seen as a leader

*Three ways to shut down an unruly motormouth*

**Your time is valuable. To keep others from frittering it away by rehashing the same old issues or by making idle chitchat, take action.**

Here are three effective strategies:

**1. Keep absolutely quiet.** Any oral response (even sounds like um and uh-huh) will encourage more chatter.

Make a nonstop talker feel selfconscious through total silence.

**2. Speak at an especially slow tempo.** Most chatterboxes are fast talkers.

Create a contrast and you will call attention to how the other person is monopolising the dialogue.

Your goal is to make them think, "Gee, I'm talking too much here."

**3. Never restate what you hear.** Typically a good way to confirm understanding, but this is a bad idea with a chatterbox.

If you're accurate, they'll say, "Yes. That's right." And then repeat themselves.

If you're wrong, they'll worry they aren't making themselves clear and talk twice as much!

A better approach: When they're through, say, "Got

it." Then say goodbye.

Stop speaking the language of weakness. Overdosing on qualifiers, inserting needless filler phrases and giving wimpy opinions will destroy your authority.

Add muscle to your words with these tips:

• **Cut the constant "I."** Starting with "I" undermines your power because you imply that whatever faults you describe are your problem, not theirs.

For example, "I have a problem with the tech support manager, who doesn't organize time well" sounds as if you're talking about you. Saying, "The tech support manager doesn't organize time well" keeps the focus where it needs to be.

• **Talk tough.** Always say exactly what you mean, and don't habitually hedge your comments.

For example, if the CEO asks you for your opinion about a business deal, don't say, "I feel it was a winner," or, "I really like how we handled it."

Instead, make a specific observation:

"It worked because we negotiated several key concessions," or, "We won by forcing his hand." ■

SOURCENOTE: Executive Leadership

## Brief and to the point

### Indirect ploys

**If presenting your case directly strikes you as unwise, tactless or potentially ineffective, try the following:**

• Ask for clarification. Let the individual work through the flaws by including them in an "If I've got this straight ..." summary.

• Ask questions. Tell someone something and you question his competence. Get him to think of it himself and there's no problem. Just keep your voice neutral.

• Fill in the picture. Anyone can make faulty decisions if he has limited knowledge of the situation.

• Shift the blame. When the individual is "never wrong," state the negatives in terms of the other parties involved. Example: "That customer is touchy." ■

### The careful critic

**No one likes to be told he's wrong. But shrewd executives know how to deliver sharp criticism without cutting thin skin.**

Some guidelines:

Speak to the person's agenda. Say nothing until you determine how your negative comments affect the individual's self-interest.

Every employee wants to be promoted, keep people off his back, get rich and be perceived as a leader.

So express your opinion in terms of how his approach will interfere with his goal. Example: "That's CJ's pet department. We'll never hear the end of it if his people get upset and complain." ■

### Office politics

**You can win at politics without creating enemies.**

Don't believe CEOs who tell you they never had to play politics to get to the top. They may not have plotted endless maneuvers and gotten swept up in boardroom paranoia, but they certainly did what they had to do to set themselves apart.

Here's how you, too, can transcend petty politics without leaving yourself vulnerable to more aggressive competitors:

• **Never discuss politics.** Period. Never rail against it, pontificate about it or even claim you're above it. Just keep quiet and let your actions do the talking.

• **Don't bad-mouth rivals.** Avoid making caustic comments about rivals. It's fine to express mild "concern" or "surprise" at a competitor's actions or behavior, but don't feel you must be instantly quotable.

• **Build trust through praise.** Find honest ways to praise even co-workers you like the least.

It's the best way to inoculate yourself against backstabbers.

• **Be honest with yourself.** Don't attribute every setback in your career to a political defeat. If you look for political intrigue, you'll always find it, even if it does not exist. ■

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