PRODUCTIVE USE OF YOUR ASSISTANT

–DAVID ALLEN

HOW CAN YOU MAKE THE BEST OF YOUR ASSISTANT'S TIME? HOW CAN YOU HELP THEM FUNCTION AS PRODUCTIVELY AS POSSIBLE, WITHOUT TAKING TOO MUCH TIME OUT OF YOUR DAY?

Every relationship between a manager and their assistant will be unique, with the factors of history together, experience, work style preferences and personalities on both sides affecting the dynamic. Following are some basic principles, though, which may assist in assessing improvement opportunities.

The number one factor in productively working with anyone, and especially with an assistant, is that the "transom" between you is tightly defined and maintained. No matter how good and trusted your assistant may be, it needs to be very clear whether you or he/she has the next action on something—who has the ball. One of the greatest sources of frustration is the lack of pristine clarity about whether the assistant is supposed to be taking the next action on arranging the next trip or the boss. So the rigor of maintaining our self-management process becomes extra critical when there are others closely dependent on the communications and the hand-offs. "But I thought you were going to...!" is too often the result at the back end, because the delegation or communication was not clear. Make sure that any communication about any situation or possible project or task is ended with a very specific question: "so, what's the next step on this, and who has it?"

That situation is more easily managed when the communications are in paper or email instead of face to face. The repository of in-trays or inboxes can be a nightmare if they're not controlled. But, if they are being worked appropriately, it allows communications to be made without the presence of the other person, in our own timing, and there is a physical or digital object that can now serve as a trigger or reminder of the actions required. Dictating something into a digital tool or voicemail (if that's still used) can also work, if that's a convenient modality. You want to be able to offload information, ask a question, or hand off projects and tasks as soon as they occur to you. So the more "virtual" the tools and the habits are, the more productive both people will be.

This also helps improve a major glitch in office productivity—the boss randomly interrupting the assistant as soon there's a need or thought. It takes more than twice as long to finish some task if we get consistently interrupted, and the psychic scatter and static that likely ensues is dangerous. Interruptions of a staff person should be saved for the exceptions where immediate communication is really required. They'll get tons more done in much less time. If a face-to-face interaction is required, save it up in an "agenda" folder or list for the once-a-day or once-a-week meeting together that is needed to keep the relationship clear, handle sensitive or subtle details, and regroup for the bigger picture view.

One detail that I often coach managers on is to stop having their assistants sort incoming mail and phone calls, except for the simple "signature required" kind of category. What winds up happening in a meager attempt at productivity is that the assistant has to review, assess and attempt an

organization of input, when the manager winds up wanting or having to do the same kind of review, assessment, and organization once it comes to them anyway! The manager should be skilled enough at processing input to not be disturbed by an in-tray with a combination of read/review, calls to return, and mail to read.

If the assistant can be judged skilled or knowledgeable enough to read, review, and HANDLE the input, without it ever having to get to the manager—fantastic. And you would want to maximize their ability and license to do that. But if it's got to have the manager's eyes on it anyway, don't duplicate the effort.

There can be exceptions to this, of course. Calls to return may be sorted by an assistant into "Client calls." "Internal calls," and "Personal calls," when there is a huge volume of them, and they come in rapidly.

Interestingly, the more admin-friendly you as a professional are, the more you get to use your assistant to handle projects instead of just be secretarial. The more you can handle your own simple communication chores, the more you can utilize assistants for higher level tasks which will relieve you of a lot more pressure. If you still are not typing more than hunt-and-peck, and in general you are not computer-savvy yet, increasing your typing speed and knowledge of keyboard and software basics will improve communication and general productivity immensely. If you're mobile and have the Weird Windows of Time that grace (or plague) us all these days...where's your laptop? Or at least your smartphone? (And make sure your assistant is equally computer-friendly. Facility with basic applications and comfort with troubleshooting problems and working with computer consultants should be job skill requirements for hiring them. You're really in the pink if you find one that loves the new technologies and has resources to tap to help you out in that area.)

One of the most obvious ways to find out how to make better use of your assistant is, unfortunately, one of the most neglected—ask them! Make a special meeting with them with the sole agenda of reviewing your protocols with each other, and simply ask, "What are we doing that really works? What are we doing that doesn't work as well as it could? How could we improve that? What are we doing that we don't need to be doing at all?" You must regularly keep reviewing your process because things change, and what may have worked at one time may now be outdated and inefficient.

And if you want to keep a good assistant and make great use of them, let them know how they are needed and appreciated, especially when it's not necessary to let them know that.

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