

PowerTalk has been especially designed for women leaders who want to leverage Return on Investment (ROI) in their careers and life experiences and take the next leap. Each issue of PowerTalk focuses on key strategies that will increase your leadership effectiveness. Review the suggestions and write down ways you can implement. Use these suggested strategies today to enhance your tool kit or even rewrite the script for your future.

Don't Succumb to Multitasking Mania!

We live in a world of short attention spans where multitasking reigns. We listen to a colleague while typing the last paragraph of an email, check our BlackBerry for messages while driving, write reports while taking calls. And even on those rare occasions when we don't engage in simultaneous activities, our minds are usually in more than one place at a time. For instance, as we deliver a message to a team or a colleague, our wheels are already turning around the next task or a problem to be solved.

Although multitasking and the ability to divide attention between two or more activities are indispensable skills in today's rushed environment, the risk is that certain critical leadership competencies are being lost in the shuffle. Here are just a few examples of what I'm hearing from my clients.

- **Peripheral vision.** In an executive's 360 feedback, her colleagues commented that she did not see eyes rolling, fidgeting and other behavior that clearly signaled the group was not on board with a solution she was promoting. Instead of using her peripheral vision to observe their reactions, she was racing to the finish line with her mind fixed on the outcome she needed to produce so she could get on to the next meeting or task.
- **The patience to gather all the facts.** A manager told me that he leaves out details and options when presenting decision-making information to his boss, who has a reputation for having a five- to ten-minute attention span and a preference for bullet points. He explained that he does not want to "waste her time" or risk being dismissed without having achieved closure. Thus, his boss sometimes makes decisions based on an incomplete picture. She loses out on additional options to consider and on details of complex issues that might alter her decision. At another institution, a vice president hands out projects without leaving time for her team to discuss competing priorities or negotiate deadlines. While it may be appropriate to convey a sense of urgency, unrealistic project schedules only set people up for missed deadlines or failure.
- **Relationship building.** Another executive always rushes through a list of bullet points when she meets with people. She lacks the interpersonal savvy to understand that making time to build relationships is a worthwhile investment for a leader who depends on others to deliver for her. Although she may think of herself as efficient, she comes across as uncaring and therefore no one wants to go the extra mile to help her in a crisis.

There Are NO Perfect Leaders

Are you tempted to delete this article half-read to rush off to your next activity? If so, take a deep breath, relax and keep reading! Every leader is a work in progress and even small steps can make productive differences. Here are a few to get you started.

1. **Make a conscious choice not to multitask during certain times of the day or during key events.** For example, when on deadline to complete a proposal or report, block white space on your calendar, put away distracting files, don't check email and put a note on your office door to "Enter at your own risk." An alternative is working from home provided it's distraction free. At system meetings, conferences and seminars resist the urge to check email constantly, put off finishing that letter and don't read your mail while listening to a speaker. Instead, take a moment to recall why you are attending the meeting or conference and strategize what you could learn that will make your investment of time and resources worthwhile.
2. **Practice what John Kotter calls "urgent patience."** For example, in meetings, differentiate between long-winded colleagues who suck all the oxygen out of the room and opportunities to actively listen to the details you need for a full understanding of complex issues and proposed solutions.

Practice self-reflection. Take some time to assess the degree to which your leadership philosophy and style have been effective over time. Ideally, ask a few trusted colleagues for feedback about what you are doing well and ways in which you could improve your leadership effectiveness. If you find there is room for improvement, reflect on what behaviors you may need to unlearn. For example, do you admit mistakes or engage in blaming behavior? Do you demonstrate style flexibility in diverse situations with diverse players, or do you stay in your comfort zone and expect others to modify their style? Do you avoid conflict or encourage healthy debate that results in better decisions? Are you over-utilizing certain strengths rather than practicing new skills? For example, if you prefer to make decisions based on quantitative data, you may need to learn the art of storytelling and the use of humor to influence others who are swayed by emotions more than hard facts. Getting buy-in may depend on it.

3. **Ask questions and seek advice.** Doing so is a sign of strength, not of weakness, and draws others into your sphere of influence. You do not have to be the most brilliant person in the room to prove that your boss made a great hiring decision. Instead of multitasking and forging ahead with the obvious solution, get comfortable asking questions. Learn to say, "I don't know; let me get back to you on that." Learn to acknowledge and leverage someone else's strength by seeking that person's advice. For example, you might ask, "How have you handled that situation in the past?" or, "What are your thoughts on that? What have I missed?" Give up your need to be seen as the expert, focus on strategy instead of multitasking, and watch your influence grow.
4. **Build relationships.** Stop multitasking now and then to have a cup of coffee with a colleague or spend a few minutes before or after a meeting to ask how someone is doing. Take the time to learn more about the other person and find opportunities to collaborate on issues of common interest. Relationship-building is a vital leadership strategy that forges a web of connections and advisors you can draw upon to achieve institutional goals and progress in your career.
5. **Practice patience.** Take the time to dig deeper into the details of complex issues and examine a range of options. For example, after a less than perfect decision, conduct what Jim Collins calls a "blameless autopsy." The idea is to learn from what went wrong and agree on what should be done differently in the future.
6. **Hone your peripheral vision.** As you speak to individuals and groups, refine your ability to observe their non-verbal behavior. With practice, you will soon learn to "read" the signals that tell you if your approach is working or not. In conjunction with developing your observational powers, practice the art of reframing so you can modify your approach when necessary. Interpersonal savvy is one of the most important leadership skills, and its foundation is understanding your impact on people and situations. Such an understanding comes from careful observation, reflection and learning from mistakes.

If you're still reading, congratulations! You've already taken the first step by resisting the urge to leave a task unfinished to rush off to the next one. If you can out-multitask a Gen-Xer, great, but don't lose core leadership skills in the process.

Additional Resources:

- **Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership**, by L.G. Bolman and T.E. Deal (Jossey-Bass, 2008).
- **A Sense of Urgency**, by J. P. Kotter (Harvard Business Press, 2008).
- **Mistakes Were Made (but not by me)**, by C. Tavis and E. Aronson (Harcourt, 2007).
- **Change the Way You Persuade**, by G.A. Williams and R.A. Miller (Harvard Business Review, Reprint RO205D, www.hbrreprints.org, 2002).



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