

How Connected Are You?

by Margaret J. Marcuson

How often do you check your e-mail? How about your voicemail? Some people check every e-mail as it comes in, while some don't even have e-mail. How connected are you? And perhaps a more important question is, how do your connections serve your goals as a leader? Developing relationships is an essential part of leadership, and electronic communication can facilitate that process, making it easy to connect with a lot of people.

However, being constantly available in the short term can get in the way of long-term goals. I'm working on a new book this summer, and I'm very excited about it, but at difficult moments in the project I find myself turning to e-mail to see if anyone has contacted me in the last fifteen minutes. It's disrupting my focus and slowing down my progress. Leaders must have time to think in order to be clear about their own purpose and direction, and e-mail can distract from this higher-level thinking. Leaders also need rest, and responding to the needs and requests of others continuously is tiring. And leaders who expect staff and others to constantly respond to their requests run the risk of wearing their followers out.

Maintaining the boundary between ourselves and others will help us sustain ourselves over time. Developing relationships with our followers will help us sustain our leadership over time. Both are important. How to manage the balance? It's more of an art than a science, and it will be different for different leaders. One leader may never check his e-mail on vacation. Another may turn her cell phone off in the evenings. It's important to figure out where *your* limits are.

You may want to ask the question: which connections serve my goals, and which connections consume my attention randomly? This question is worth asking about people who want your attention in person as well as electronic communication. Setting limits with those who demand your attention is good for you and good for them. You may say, "I have fifteen minutes to give you now, and we can set a time later if you need more."

Regulating your answers to calls and electronic communications can help lower your anxiety, too. How many times have you jumped to respond to an anxious e-mail and wished later you'd been more thoughtful? Mark Forster (www.markforster.net) suggests answering e-mails and calls the next day, if possible, to avoid having your agenda constantly hijacked by others. Deciding whether and when to answer may make your responses more thoughtful.

Just as being overly available gets in the way of leadership goals, so does the opposite tendency. If you'd rather hide out than be available, you'll find it hard to develop the kind of relationships that are essential for leadership. If no one can ever track you down, in person or electronically, they will find it hard to follow you. When anxiety is high, even if you're an extrovert, you may find yourself avoiding people in your organization. But when things are bumpy, it's even more important to stay in touch.

A strategy to build real connections with those you lead can help you be thoughtful about both face-to-face and electronic communications. Whether you thrive on e-mail and text messages or dread checking your voicemail, your interactions with your followers shape your leadership, and can help or hinder as you move toward your goals.

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