

Foodservice Coaching Group™

Helping Accomplished Leaders Achieve Extraordinary Results!

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Managing Interruptions

By Kathy Gillen and C. David Blair, Ph.D.

It was 7:00 p.m. and Mary was still at the office. Sighing as she answered her final E-mail for the night, she thought back over the day, feeling frustrated and tired. "This isn't the job I was hired to do", she grumbled. "Instead of the project management I love, all I'm doing is babysitting...dealing with one crisis after another, and the politics here are killing me! Maybe it's time to start looking for another job."

You aren't alone

Have you ever felt like Mary did? Are you feeling overwhelmed by endless interruptions that eat at your time? Do you leave your desk at the end of the day feeling fabulous about your accomplishments or tired and overwhelmed with the minutia?

It may be hard to believe, but just a little fine-tuning can change the way you feel at the end of your day.

Let's take this situation out of the office environment so you can see the pattern. Think in terms of taking a trip. You start in Chicago and plan to drive to Los Angeles. Your passengers are telling you what roads to take on your trip, and you end up in New Orleans.

The next trip, you vow to get to Los Angeles, so you decide to make some changes.

1. First, you decide exactly where you are in Chicago.
2. You buy a map.
3. You teach your passengers to read the map and tell them where you are going.
4. Together, you plan your trip with the goal of reaching Los Angeles, writing down the turns and distances so you don't get lost.
5. You stay focused on reaching your destination in Los Angeles and reach your goal.

Look's pretty simple, right? Now... let's take this concept back to your office.

Back to work

The first step is to decide that it is time to create the day you want, instead of allowing others to shape it for you.

But before you can make any changes, you must know where your time goes. Write down, in 15 or 30-minute increments, your activities throughout the day. Do this for two or three days and you will have a clear picture of what you are doing.

By doing this, you will quickly see a pattern emerge--meaning several things will stand out that regularly interrupt your work flow. It could be endless meetings, people dropping by to visit, E-mail, or phone calls. The importance of tracking your time is to recognize what is slowing you down. Pick one chronic interrupter and then find some ways to deal with it.

In Mary's case, she was bogged down by people stopping by her office, E-mails, and phone calls. Together, we addressed the issue of people stopping by her office by asking some questions to clarify the pattern:

- Who was stopping by?
- How long did they stay?
- How much time was spent discussing important business? How much time was spent with chit-chat?

If the time was spent on chit-chat, was it productive? Meaning, did it give Mary a needed break or did she feel like they were wasting her time?

Once Mary analyzed each interruption, we grouped them into categories and created strategies to deal with each one.

The first group of interruptions came from Mary's project team. Each member was asking similar questions and giving her updates on the project. Since much of the information was important for everyone to know, Mary added a 15-minute segment to her weekly meetings to insure everyone received the information at the same time.

We worked with her team on communicating their thoughts succinctly and manage their time well.

The second group of interruptions came from one person who liked to visit. He usually had a minor question for Mary, and consistently stayed to talk, so we looked at a range of options for handling this situation.

1. Set a time limit. Mary could say, "I only have ten minutes to talk" whenever he walked into her office. At the end of the time, she stands up and walks him to the door.
2. Say, "I can't talk right now", and give him a time she could stop by and see him.
3. Let everyone know that her door will be open certain times of the day. Then, she would close her door when she didn't want to be interrupted.
4. Explain her needs to this person and schedule a coffee break where they both get away from their offices. It could be a daily or weekly break--she has lots of choices.

Mary chose the last option. She really enjoyed these visits and discovered the coffee break refreshed her and enhanced her day.

In a matter of weeks, Mary reported huge results--finding nearly an hour a day of productive time. Over a two week period, that adds up to ten hours--wow!

Realizing she had more control than she thought, we continued to work on Mary's other interruptions, one at a time. Mary now goes home by five o'clock. And at the end of each day, she reviews her daily results and plans her next day. Mary is now feeling she is back on track and enjoying her job.

Time Mastery Worksheet

From "The Coaches" at Foodservice Coaching Group

Questions we asked Mary to help her control her “E-mail insanity”!

How often did she read her E-mails?

Was her instant messenger turned on? How often did she respond to it? How much was just “chatting”?

Were the E-mails from co-workers lengthy and rambling, or focused?

How much time did she spend decoding what the focus was, and what she needed to do?

Did they have to be answered immediately, or could they wait for a few hours?

Mary recognized that she could set a time to review her E-mails and decided to look at them three times a day--first thing in the morning, at mid-day, and at the end of the day. She turned off her Instant Messenger and set a time limit for the E-mail review, deciding that she only wanted to spend 30 minutes each time.

At first she struggled with the idea of checking E-mails three times a day, but realized that it freed up almost 45 minutes a day...another full day every two weeks.

Time Worksheet 1 – Actual time usage and interruptions

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
6:00					
7:00					
8:00					
8:30					
9:00					
9:30					
10:00					
10:30					
11:00					
11:30					
12:00					
12:30					
1:00					
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2:00					
2:30					
3:00					
3:30					
4:00					
4:30					
5:00					
5:30					
6:00					
6:30					
7:00					

NOTES: Use this page for your ACTUAL day. Block out times, using colored pencils if available, showing when you have time for hobbies, reading or relaxing
 What do you want to do more of? What do you want to do less of?

Time Mastery Worksheet

Goal	Why is this important?	What benefit is it to you?	Who else is involved?	What is your strategy?
(Example) Control your E-mails - what does this mean?	I waste 3 hours/day doing E-mails	Allow me to go home by 5pm	Co-workers who send long E-mails	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Set time limit to check E-mails 2. Discuss ways to streamline their E-mails

Goal Tracking Sheet

Goal	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
(Example) Check emails _____ times/day					
(Example) Plan _____ times/day					

Author's Note:

Foodservice Coaching Group is an executive coaching company that helps successful foodservice executives become dynamic leaders. We help our clients develop their skills, hire superstars, break through the glass ceiling, and make the most of their future. You can contact us by E-mail at coaches@foodservicecoaching.com . Would you like your team to receive training in Time Mastery? For more information, please call Kathy and David at 763-241-8010.

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