



ATTACK OF THE SPACE INVADERS

HOW THE BOSS CAN BE THE UNWITTING CAUSE OF LOW-LEVEL PRODUCTIVITY

I have a client, let's call her Janice, who is a high-level executive working in a corporate office setting with dozens of other professionals. She has over 30 direct reports and she has two bosses to whom she reports.

Janice called me in to consult with her a couple of years ago so that she could become more organized in her office and more productive in her workday. Janice and I set up new file systems for approximately six file cabinets of paper and files – she's been working there almost 20 years – set up an electronic task management system, organized computer documents and files, worked on e-mail management skills and have talked about better time management.

However, during our consultations, I discovered that despite her progress in all the areas we covered, Janice is not as productive as she would like to be because she is trapped in a cycle of attacks by space invaders. She is suffering from too many interruptions all day, every day – from her bosses.

Janice explained to me that the interruptions are due to their reactivity to things happening in their day. It would be hard enough with just one boss, but between the two bosses, Janice is interrupted all day long and is expected to drop what she's doing, no matter what it is, to address the new emergency. Apparently everything is urgent, but the bosses do not take the time to discuss priorities or a plan of action. One of the bosses even went so far as to interrupt a meeting in Janice's office by knocking on her door, then just walking in. At least the other boss respects the closed door! Janice says that they have been running around the office like this for years and have not realized how destructive and unproductive it is for those they lead, like Janice.

IT TAKES TWO

Janice is not the only one who has asked me, "How do I get my boss to stop interrupting me all day long? I can't get anything accomplished!" This article is for you if you are a boss and

you keep interrupting your employees or colleagues whenever something pops into your head. This is a plea to stop doing that.

However, you may say, "My employees are supposed to be there for me when I need something!" And while that may be true, it is more efficient to employ strategies that maximize their time. You'll get much better results out of a person if they can be left alone for stretches of time than if you constantly break their focus.

Of course it's only fair to mention that the door swings both ways. Many employees interrupt their bosses all day long, too. Plus, colleagues do this to other colleagues, so there are multiple space invaders in the corporate universe and it doesn't bode well for office productivity. Circumstances can change only when two parties sit down to discuss breaking this destructive habit.

Until then, one party is the space invader and the other is the enabler. So for all the professionals out there who are also like jack-in-the-boxes when something pops into your head, this is for you too. There's a better way for everyone to manage their day and save everybody a lot of time and effort.

THE COST OF INVASION

The most invasive of interruptions are the repeated, in-person pop-bys where one person visits another person more than a few times a day. The other kind would be the repeated phone call to the same person throughout the day. And the one that takes the prize is the kind where someone repeatedly shouts out over a cubicle wall, or even through a real office wall, to the person next door, breaking the focus and concentration of the other person, not to mention all the other professionals around

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them. That can waste lots of valuable time for the interrupted, who now has to refocus after each interruption. Plus, the shout-outs are a bit selfish and disrespectful of other people.

According to Jonathan Spira (Basex Research 2005), the cost of interruptions to the U.S. economy is estimated at \$588 billion a year. I can only imagine what that statistic would be now in 2008. I've also seen varying statistics about how long it takes to return to a task after being interrupted, anywhere from five to 25 minutes, if a person returns at all. So if a professional in your office is interrupted more than a couple of times in an hour for all eight hours of the day, what's that costing your company in lost time to get back on track? Some folks can refocus rather quickly – but some cannot.

FOUR WAYS TO FIGHT SPACE INVADERS

There are four tactics you can employ to ward off space invaders:

1. *Schedule Regular Meetings.* It sounds elementary, but you would be surprised at how many executives don't have regular meetings in place with key colleagues or direct reports. Leaders should meet regularly with the people with whom they are most involved on projects.

Bosses with administrative assistants should meet with them every morning for 15 minutes. If you can't meet in person every morning, then at least do it over the phone. I have a client, an executive assistant, who recently asked me how she can talk to her boss, the president, about meeting daily to touch base on current topics, issues and circumstances. They used to meet every day, but the routine fell apart and now it's essential that they get back on track.

Key employees to whom you delegate on a regular basis need regular meetings too. These one-on-one meetings don't have to be long. But at least once a week, sit down and go over the list of open items, see where you are, ask and answer questions, and document who does what by when. Once you start covering the list of priorities, you'll see how long it takes and then you can judge how long these weekly meetings need to be. It's important to be efficient during these meetings, too. Both parties need to keep it moving and get to the point. This is also your opportunity to delegate more and re-prioritize accordingly.

If you conduct regular staff meetings, review that agenda carefully. Keep

it to items that would affect the whole group and leave the individual topics for the one-on-one meetings. Why waste everybody's time talking about an individual subject that has no impact to anyone else on the team?

2. *Stop, Think and Make a List.* Before you feel the urge to pop up and go down the hall to ask another person a question, stop and think. Is this a person with whom I have a one-on-one meeting each week? Can this topic wait that next scheduled meeting? Barring any major deadlines or emergencies, most things can wait a little while. Both parties should define "emergency," too, so that you are communicating in the same language.

If you can't wait, then make a short list of things you want to ask someone or several people on that day and wait as long as you can before deciding to make your rounds. If you can group your thoughts and requests into a single list, you can cover many things all at once, minimizing your time running around the office while minimizing the interruptions to others.

3. *Keep Lists or Agendas for the One-On-One Meetings.* Hopefully your one-on-one meetings will be scheduled on your e-calendar. The list of what to cover in these meetings can be in the notes section of that appointment. If you have a physical folder set up for that person where you can drop in a written list of notes or questions, then put your list there. Just keep adding to the list, wherever it is. Then throughout the week, only interrupt if it's an emergency or it's deadline driven.

These meetings will not only help with managing interruptions, but they will also give your employee the chance to ask questions about the new tasks or projects as compared with what they were already working on for you. This keeps communication open on a two-way street so you're not "dumping" on them all day or pulling a hit-and-run without giving them a chance to ask questions or clarify priorities.

4. *Set Expectations.* If you have so much to cover all day, then make an agreement with your employee that you'll only touch base with them at specific times in the morning or afternoon, if you have anything at all. That way, they'll know when to expect your call or your visit and they can focus on their own tasks for the rest of the time.

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