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## Getting it done among multitaskers

Mildred L. Culp

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Have you ever worked on a project where a multitasker seemed to be in another orbit, oblivious to your need for project completion? Whether the person was your co-worker, consulting client, supervisee or boss, you may have been climbing the walls.

Is this unusual?

"When you hear about good managers, you hear that they're very good at focusing," observes Pam Lenehan, who serves on the board of two large corporations and is president of Ridge Hill Consulting L.L.C., in Boston. "Technology has created a generation of poor managers, because people aren't giving their attention to the problem at hand."

Rick Brenner, principal of Chaco Canyon Consulting in Cambridge, Mass., specializes in fine-tuning teams and their leaders, and resolving conflict. He maintains that a distracted multitasker may be a micromanager, an employee on overload or a person with unreplaceable skills.

Does that mean if organizations are responsible for developing a work style that is less than civil, then individuals can blame it on their companies?

Regina Barr, founder and president of Red Ladder Inc., in St. Paul, Minn.,

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consults on multi-departmental projects. She often finds herself leading meetings where attendees chronically check in on their PDA's and voice mail.

"They're never fully present in meetings, because they're managing multiple projects and initiatives," she states.

She acknowledges that downsizing has contributed greatly to increased work loads, and the problem isn't necessarily generational.

"As level of responsibility increases to director, VP or senior executive," she explains, "there's a feeling that it's almost a need to stay on top of things at all times. After meetings, people know there will be numerous e-mails and voice mails."

In other words, they're heading that workload off at the pass.

Laura Browne, program manager of the Phoenix-based WOMEN Unlimited Inc., which provides mentoring and development programs for high-potential women, contends that multitasking "isn't necessarily about getting it done the best way, but getting it done quickly and not necessarily making people feel good about it."

She also points out that many people are proud to be effective multitaskers: "They feel that they can cram a lot more things in a day than others."

### THE OFFENSIVE

When you're certain that your project takes precedence, that you're not being selfish, you might do what Barr does, which is to state prior to meetings that multitasking disrupts the team and the workflow. Suggest that the person send an alternate rather than "half-attend." She advocates "addressing it upfront so it doesn't become an issue."

Such behavior can become predictable, particularly when you're working where a person doesn't complete projects, according to Barr. Lenehan advises that you "use this as a leadership opportunity." Outline the tasks and schedule, with a little breathing space for you.

Browne agrees with the extra time, because it accommodates the multitasker's tendency to become distracted.

"Give them brief reminders to get them back on track," she recommends. "Stop by their desk or send quick emails to remind them of what you need and when you need it."

She points out that orbiting multitaskers will tackle parts of projects more quickly than entire projects, but that you won't change them.

"Get the person excited about the task so he or she will want to focus on it," Browne states. "Show how it will benefit them to get it done as quickly as possible."

Lenehan says that you need to be direct, not too polite. You might mention, for example, "Look, I need this material or this project isn't going to get done. Do you want to be responsible for this? I need all of your attention for five minutes."

If shaming the multitasker doesn't work, lather the person with attention. A stroke in time can save your project.

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