

For Managers, Principals, Team Leaders and Internal Consultants

Author: Henry Blatman

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Is this habit a good one? How changing habits can create the business that you want.

Recently I had a coffee with Mark a partner in an accounting firm. During our 50 minute conversation his mobile phone rang several times and he received a couple of SMSs. Mark responded to the SMSs and eventually, 30 minutes into our chat, answered one of the calls. It was a client who asked if Mark had a minute. He said he was in a meeting, but told her to go ahead. He ended up speaking to her for about 6 minutes. Before I go on, let me go back 15 minutes into our meeting:

I had asked Mark to tell me the biggest challenges he faced in his business:

- Getting more staff to perform the day to day work
- Being able to increase charge-out rates
- Managing client expectations for immediate responses (Mark blamed 'technology')
- Stopping his staff from abusing internet access

Back to the call

The client was asking for advice on completing a form. After our earlier discussion my interest was piqued; "Could any of your staff have answered this question," I asked. "Of course," Mark responded sheepishly. He knew where this conversation was going.

Mark had built a rod for his own back. He was the dog being wagged by the technology tail.

Mark had also complained about not being able to raise his charge-out rates. Is this any wonder given he spends time doing work that could be done by more junior staff.

What's really happening

Great managers are the masters of self-management. They set their own agenda for working with the clients, their staff and other stakeholders. Which is not to be read as lacking care. On the contrary, they care enough to respect their own time and to build a business that gives opportunities to others to develop and solve client problems

This is just a shift in habits towards setting the rules of the game for yourself. Mark needs to trust that the client will stay with him even if he does not solve every problem personally. Mark also needs to have faith in his people's abilities to handle the work and, most importantly, needs to have the self-belief to progress to a true leadership role - both for the clients and his people. As David Maister describes in 'Managing the Professional Service Firm', Mark is currently "pinching the kids work".

My question: Is Mark still doing the same work he was doing 5 years ago?" I suspect the answer is yes, as it probably is for many of his team members and for many of the readers of this report.

It is not possible to grow businesses or people if senior managers continue doing work they did 5 years ago. Work that indeed could be done by others perhaps faster and more effectively. Stagnation breeds boredom and discontent, which often means that good people leave. Or possibly worse - people stay but have lost their zest and are just marking time.

This is not a value judgement of Mark; many of us are 'Marks' ourselves. I am saying that Mark has a choice. Mark is not a slave to technology or to his charge rates. Mark is a slave to his habits. The good news is that this can change.

Other options - What can Mark do differently?

It is true that clients want their problems solved. They don't always need to have them solved then and there or by you. Mark could have arranged to call the client back. Better still, he could have arranged for a staff member to solve the problem for the client. Bingo! Mark is freed up for other work, his staff member gets more client-facing experience, and the client gets her problem solved. Next time the client would phone Mark's staff members directly as she'd have confidence in their ability to solve her problems.

From a longer-term perspective, Mark could sit down (with the phone turned off!) and give himself "think time". What does he really want from his job? How does he want to be working? How does this align with what the business needs from him? Without a well developed sense of purpose we all find new habits hard to keep.

It may also be helpful to discuss this with a colleague or professional coach. In his book, 'The Leadership Mystique', Manfred Kets de Vries talks about our blind spots and says that there are always things about leadership which we cannot see for ourselves and that other people may be able to help us identify. The colleague or professional coach can keep you focused on your direction.

Main Takeaways

1. You are not a slave to technology or your charges but to your own habits.
2. Develop your people. This frees the leaders up to pursue activities that really add value to the business or clients.
3. Be a leader - manage and respect yourself and your time first and set an example for others to do the same.
4. Set aside some "think time" to get clarity on your role and the direction you want to take it.
5. Seek the help of a colleague or professional coach to help you surface and understand your 'blind spots' and make them disappear!

"The common denominator of success -the secret of every man (woman) who has ever been successful-lies in the fact that they formed the habit of doing things that failures don't like to do"

Albert Gray

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