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Truth or Dare: Do you really need that device in this meeting?

Wouldn't you love to shout that when you see devices come out in meetings?

It seems to be one of the "liberties" we've created that has gotten out of control. I see people with two phones and an open laptop "ready" for a workshop. And, while I coach every communicator to take ownership for holding a listener's attention, it's hard to command someone's attention when you're not the only "communication" in the room.



I had one leader, Mark, raise this as an issue with his group before a workshop, and he asked me if I would talk about it openly in the program. I suggested we allow the situation to develop first, and then here's what we did. As he expected, people had multiple devices and kept checking them and leaving the room to "take calls" throughout the morning. At the first break, with Mark in the room, here's what I said,

"Mark has been concerned with the amount of distraction that you seem to be managing, and he asked me to pause the program and see what issues he can take off of your plate for today. We've both noticed that all of you have written an email or taken a phone call during the last two hours. So, let's go around the room and share with him the urgent issues so that he can take it from here."

Silence filled the room.

They felt very exposed, and I'm sure they weren't happy with me. But, it gave Mark an opening to say yes, please share what you were doing on your device.

If you see yourself in this example, then you know what happened next. There were a few mumbles about a customer request or an internal meeting. But, nothing was urgent and no one wanted Mark to jump in. It just called out a bad habit that we let each other get away with.

I see and hear about these habits every week. I hear people leave meetings to make dinner plans, respond to texts from personal friends and even Google websites during meetings. My favorite was a woman who was downloading a movie and it blocked the internet juice needed for the PPT!

There are consequences to those habits, and that's what you might not be aware of.

At a minimum, it means that the value of people being together is wasted. Meetings are expensive because they suspend productive time for an hour or more while people try to collaborate and work together. It isn't fair, and it isn't productive to have people engage in and out of that kind of setting. It means some are vested, some are not, and everyone ends up frustrated.

While my example above talks about a manager who was exasperated, it's intriguing to know that the more common situation is the leader who is multi-tasking and not giving his/her full attention to a communicator.

And, that's where the risks get greater. I've coached hundreds of managers on how to capture and hold the attention of a leader. But, the opposite dynamic is a tough one to navigate. Few managers would turn the tables and ask Mark what he was doing on his device. And, they shouldn't have to. Leaders need to take ownership for distractions...like devices...and minimize them.

My mantra to every leader is this: You don't always have to be available, but you always have to be present.

Being present is about giving someone your undivided attention. Attention is about respect, and listening is the most powerful way you can show employees that they matter. If they can't put their ideas together, we can help them get to the point and drive clarity. But, we can't help them get rid of your devices.

The greater risk you have is beyond one meeting and one employee. It's about impressions.

One of the most common questions we have always been asked in workshops is, "What do you do about a listener who isn't paying attention?" Now, it's shifted to, "What do you do with a leader who's on their device?"

Those conversations lead to thoughts of leaders as people who don't focus and don't seem to value what you're saying. And, that's an impression that makes it to the water cooler and into every employee huddle. When you become labeled as a leader who doesn't value input in meetings and who doesn't really listen, then you lose your ability to influence your employees and eventually you will lose your ability to lead. All because of a device. Yikes!

Here are some thoughts on developing a better discipline or policy around devices.

First, make all conversations a part of the meeting. People rarely need to check devices as frequently as they do. Call them on it. The time in meetings belongs to the business, and if people are on devices, then we should all know what they're doing. Maybe we can help them!

Second, limit use of devices. There's no business problem that can't wait an hour, I promise! Business problems have been waiting an hour since you've been in business. And, if there's an occasional fire, someone will get the word to you.

And honestly, if you're having that kind of a day where you just can't focus and you DO need that device every minute, then do everyone else a favor. Stay in your office with the device.

The meeting will be more focused and productive without you. And, that's not an impression you want to create very often.

So, truth or dare...do you really need the device...or does the meeting really need you? I'd be willing to bet it's the latter.

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