

Corner office career advice: Hold that holiday message ... and more

As we wrap up 2019, our expert executive (who is also anonymous), shares his thoughts on leadership, productivity and taking much-needed breaks.

Hold that holiday message to the staff

Q. I'm not sure what to say to the staff at the start of the holiday party this year, and I'm always nervous in front of that many people (about 500). We didn't have a good year at all ... any advice?

A. I used to deliver many such intros, but I soon realized that every word I spoke was detrimental to the atmosphere. It took me years to realize that the one thing the staff wanted at the holiday party was an escape from what they felt and who they were during the typical workday. So I stopped with all the year-end wrap-ups and even the sweeping statements of gratitude. My advice would be to get up there and set the tone of the party with a single lighthearted comment and invitation for everyone to have a great time. Show your thanks and share your outlook for the business the day after.

It's OK to lose the Battle of 4:00

Q. I can sense my staff fading slightly toward the very end of the day. Their productivity flags starting at 4:00. How do I counter this?

A. You don't. This is the organic result of many things: the ingrained sense of fixed schedule workers have adopted over the centuries, the anticipation of going home, the subtle satisfaction of coasting downhill after climbing up many work hills all day. If they're excited about what they're doing, the energy will keep going. But it's really not natural for human beings to go full throttle as dusk approaches. Let 'em breathe out. Good people naturally make up for that minor shortfall during their times of higher productivity.

Leadership by watching, waiting

Q. What is the biggest mistake you see leaders making today?

A. In a visibility-obsessed world, they more than ever want to do things, constantly, to reinforce their status, even if it's only in their own minds. What they don't realize is that less is more. Instead of hiring good, dedicated people and letting them work, leaders want to be seen as a force for change, a guiding power that must put a stamp on everything. What you want instead, I believe, is the greatest influence for the least possible action. So many leaders believe their hands-on guidance is desperately needed, but mostly it's just not true. I tell people that whenever I have the urge to do something "leadery," I lay down for a while until it goes away!

To tweet or not to tweet?

Q. What sort of advice do you give leaders about their personal use of social media?

A. If you're not in a very high-profile position (very few are, though they like to *believe* they are), I say it's something to be avoided. The number of situations where it benefits your company to say anything at all is incredibly small, and you should do that through slower, more tightly controlled channels.

Also, beware of social media's sinister way of allowing you to create a flawless, curated persona that you might start buying into when you receive adulation and "likes." It will only dangerously inflate your ego. Be strong and resist the deceptive narrative that the digital world is creating: that you must speak on all things. You don't. Silence is often power.

Time for an adventure?

Q. Did you ever take some time away from the job, or between jobs, to embark upon a personal quest of some sort? I'm pondering how a truly epic journey might change my life (even if it hurts my career).

A. I went sailing for three months after one company I worked for went out of business. It was a bit of a disaster (that's another story), but I realized something: Most of us spend our adult lives being led around by our jobs, having the entire sweep of our lives dictated by the things we do to make money. I think snapping completely out of that mode every four or five years is absolutely essential to find out who exactly we are, and what's most important to us. Go!