

THE CONNECTED LEADER

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[How can we keep up with our busy schedules, manage our families, and still be available to communicate with the people under our care?]

Today's leader—just as in any age—must stay in touch. Communication is vital for every pastor or ministry leader who desires to relate to and with those they're leading. We must be accessible and approachable. But that's not always easy.

Thanks to new technology, leaders have more choices in how they can connect to others. Since time will not allow us to personally engage every person we lead, these new technological choices also present a potential drawback. Often, in the name of efficiency, leaders can now take shortcuts. But sometimes an email just doesn't cut it. We can be much more effective as leaders if we know how to balance personal interaction with electronic communication.

Electronic or Personal Contact?

Leaders tend to fall on one side or the other of the communication conundrum: Do we take the electronic approach or the personal approach? When considering others' needs and which form of communication is most effective, consider these three levels to help decide what makes the most sense.

Level 1—Social: This includes friendly chitchat, touching base, and general catching up. It is perfectly acceptable and even encouraged in these cases to engage in electronic communication (email, social media messages, text messages). A well-connected leader must master modern communication techniques to keep in touch with those they lead. Around the world, adults and young people ages 45 and

under have embraced the use of electronic media for the purposes of communicating with friends and family (even many older adults rely on this type of interaction). Leaders who are reluctant to engage in these methods risk losing touch with an entire generation. We cannot afford to opt out of the social media phenomenon. After all, the Pony Express is out of business! People like to know that their leaders are engaged on their level and understand the current culture.

Level 2—Personal:

Typically, this involves someone who is in need of encouragement, personal care, or is facing a challenge. Depending on the age of the follower and the nature of the issue, a text or social media message may be effective (especially for younger people). There are times, however, when there is no substitute for hearing the voice of a compassionate leader. A savvy and discerning leader knows the best approach. There's just not enough time in the day to call everyone who is in need. A timely and well-worded email may be exactly what is expected. But words on a screen can also appear cold and uncaring. We must remain in touch with the Holy Spirit and the people in



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our organizations if we expect to get this right. As a general rule, if a person is hurting, make the call.

Level 3—Conflict or Crisis: If the person you are contacting is in serious crisis, by all means, call them—and, if possible, see them. Distraught people are vulnerable and in need of a personal touch. If the subject of the call is especially sensitive, if there is the possibility of being misunderstood, or if “reading between the lines” could be problematic, a face-to-face conversation is needed. This is no time for electronic communication. Facial expressions and body language impact sensitive discussions. You want to leave no doubt as to where you stand on touchy topics. The temptation is to take the easy route. It is much easier to confront from the safety of your computer, because boldness comes more easily when we are not eyeball to eyeball with an offending person. Remember, however, that the chances of successful relational healing degenerates the longer personal contact is avoided. Leader, be strong enough to face these types of situations in person.

Here’s the bottom line: You cannot lead solely from a computer or smart phone. While these tools are necessary in leading people on most levels, a dangerous trend is developing among some emerging leaders. Human contact is becoming less common. Convenience determines the ministry offered rather than effectiveness. We need to ask ourselves what people really need. If it is a personal touch, shut down your laptop and go be with them.

Watch Your E-step

One of the major pitfalls facing today’s leaders involves wasting time. We can easily spend a significant portion of our day checking social media updates, reading email, or playing games. Often we don’t even notice we’re doing it. An occasional glance, a couple of “check-ins” per hour, and before we know it, we have spent valuable work time with zero productivity.

Along with the issue of integrity (if we are on company or ministry time, we should be working), we must also consider the perception of other people. They may know how much time you spend playing on the computer or on your phone, especially since social media is just

that—social. More importantly, though, God knows.

Keep in mind that there is a difference between communicating and killing time. Leaders must know the difference. Whether or not you think this may be an issue for you, try this experiment: For one day, keep a log of how much time you spend on your favorite social media or game sites. At the end of the day, add up the minutes. If you don’t like the results or if you are cutting into your work time with these distractions, make the necessary adjustments now.

Despite the challenges, this is a great time to be a leader. We have been given amazing tools and technology. Time-saving devices and productivity-increasing resources are easily accessible—and often free. We have opportunities that would have been a “dream come true” for our predecessors. Let’s not squander these opportunities. Let’s use modern technology to improve our communication and, therefore, our effectiveness as ministry leaders.

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