

Paul felt his staff's productivity was being hampered by constant disruptions from other staff members. So he made it a standing agenda item at his weekly staff meetings to remind everyone to consider the impact on the other person before interrupting. Was the issue urgent enough to justify the disruption? He offered tips each week, like collecting non-urgent disruptions and handling them all at once instead of interrupting for each one; or using email instead of text messages if an immediate response wasn't necessary.

After a couple of months, Paul was frustrated that he wasn't seeing much change.

When he realized he wasn't getting as much buy-in as he expected, he decided to try another approach. In addition to periodic reminders at staff meetings, every day he looked for opportunities to reinforce the behavior he wanted. When he ran into Cindy at the water cooler he asked her if she had heard back from



the supply vendor yet. He added, "I was wondering about that this morning but decide to wait until I ran into you to ask so I didn't disrupt your work." That afternoon he sent Aaron an email with a list of three issues he wanted to follow up on – Aaron recognized that in the past Paul would have asked about each of those issues as they arose. The next day he thanked Sue for catching him in the hall with a question instead of interrupting him with it.

When the issue was never mentioned except in staff meeting, the staff mentally filed the issue in the category of *things we're supposed to do*. And they only thought about it every week during staff meeting. When the issue was raised in informal encounters, it was mentally filed in the higher priority category of *things that are important to Paul*.

Informal, or ad hoc communication sends different messages than formal communication. Not that communicating formally is bad – sometimes it just isn't enough.

Mentioning an issue on the fly has at least four advantages over agenda items:

1. It sends a message that this issue is important enough to the leader that it's on his/her mind even without looking at the agenda.
2. It serves as a reminder, since they probably haven't thought about it since the meeting.
3. It helps them connect the dots between your words and actual, observable, desirable behaviors.
4. Mentioning it in a one-on-one encounter makes it clear that the message wasn't just intended for everyone else.

Informal reinforcement is an important tool for building the culture you want in your organization. It can also speed up and deepen the adoption of policies and implementation of strategies. It might even help get those assignments done that are on everyone's procrastination list.

A lot of things get communicated in meetings. The important things also get communicated outside the meetings.

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