

LEADERSHIP

Hand Over Your Inbox, And Other Ways To Let A Great Assistant Maximize Your Productivity

In a perfect world, you'd be the one fetching coffee with all the time your assistant has saved you. Here's what to look for in a slick sidekick.

By: Laura Vanderkam

In pop culture, the boss-assistant relationship rivals the buddy-cop one for comedic fodder. This past spring, Lydia Whitlock's *To My Assistant* book made a splash (and became the subject of at least a pilot episode at FOX) by cataloging the sins of self-important sorts who torment those who help them. Among the things the "good boss" narrator promises not to do that others will? "I will not make you start an office-wide witch hunt because I am absolutely certain that someone maliciously lowered my chair by half an inch while I was at lunch."

But done right, having an even semi-dedicated assistant--a disappearing reality to be sure, with the majority of assistants now supporting three or more people--isn't remotely about status displays. "This person is spending your time," says Melba Duncan, president of The Duncan Group, a firm that places executive assistants with C-level executives. An assistant decides how to allocate one of your company's most precious resources: your minutes. There are just 168 hours in a week, and there's evidence that most people can't (and don't) work 80-hour weeks.

If you're truly leveraging your assistant, you may just reverse the cliché and go fetch her coffee, because you have time to wander to Starbucks.

Reaching the optimal allocation of your work hours "changes the bottom line," says Stacia Pierce, host of the International Women's Success Conference and a coach who frequently works with entrepreneurs hiring their first right-hand men and women. "You can see a percentage increase in 30 days if someone is really working on the right things." That's because the right help "frees you up to do what really brings in the income" instead of being tied down to your desk "doing things that still need to be done."

Indeed, if you're truly leveraging your assistant, you may just reverse the cliché and go fetch her coffee, because you have time to wander to Starbucks during the day if you want. Here are the top three things you can do to help your assistant make you a star:

1. Let your assistant deal with your inbox.

If you get hundreds of emails a day, you simply can't deal with all of them. A program like Sanebox or Gmail's new tabs can file promotions and social media alerts, but as you go up the chain of command, the volume of email that passes a filter's assumption of importance will still be unreadable. If you assume primary responsibility for your inbox, you will never get anything else done. The problem? Even very busy people cling to their inboxes. Seeing new messages--like wrapped presents under a Christmas tree--gives them an endorphin rush. Answering an email in between meetings feels productive. And then there are personal matters--emails from a spouse or friends--that people don't want to share. But a good assistant can make sure that you see only things that need your input in batches at times when it's convenient, so you can actually think during the work day. You know there is nothing exploding, because if there was, you'd be told. "Saving you time and anxiety is what this role is all about," says Duncan. As for personal matters? Ask family to call or text.

2. Empower your assistant to align your time with your priorities.

Once you've articulated your priorities (which, by the way, you should do), your assistant can make sure that your schedule actually reflects those decisions. Everyone knows that's what should happen--putting first things first and all--but you might go wobbly. A good assistant makes sure that if you have a huge speech on Wednesday, there is time on your calendar before Wednesday to practice it, and possibly will have a coach show up in your office during practice time to critique it. You may know that you're grumpy all day if you don't get your run in from 6:45-7:30 a.m. but you don't have the bandwidth to argue that a conference call scheduled for 7 a.m. to 8 a.m. really involves only 30 minutes of discussion points. Your assistant will. "Every leader that has a lot to do has certain things that make them function better," says Pierce. Maybe you're embarrassed by your quirks, but if it's important, tell your assistant. He or she will likely believe that "somehow, this is making the company profitable."

You can also ask your assistant to seize opportunities to free up time in general. This person can look at your schedule, Duncan says, and tell you "I've taken Melba off your calendar because you're going to see her next Sunday at an event anyway." The point is "not putting the person in the position of doing work he or she shouldn't be doing." After all, the ultimate sign of success is an open calendar.

3. Work as a team to optimize travel time.

In an era of global organizations, people spend a lot of time on the road; Duncan reports that a number of her clients travel 80% of the time. Your assistant can book your travel, of course, but a simple flight, hotel, and rental car combo is Travelocity-grade work. What's really critical is working with your assistant to be clear on "what it is you need to achieve," says Duncan, and why you're hauling yourself halfway across the globe beyond racking up frequent flier miles. If the top priority for an excursion is to meet with a potential client in person, that meeting gets rescheduled first when your plane is three hours late. You might land with a note to go straight

<http://www.fastcompany.com/3016629/hand-over-your-inbox-and-other-ways-to-let-a-great-assistant-maximize-your-productivity>, September 30, 2013.

to a different gate to say hello to the potential client, who will be there in 30 minutes because she's also on a flight that day. Sharing your goal for the trip would, in that case, keep you from mostly wasting the trip.

The second part of optimizing travel time? Entrusting your assistant to run things in your absence--checking in on ongoing projects, identifying potential problems, and being a "spokesperson," says Duncan, who is able to speak to a team on your behalf. When your absence is no longer a bottleneck, you can travel as much as you need to, and your team can still get amazing things done.



Laura Vanderkam is a nationally recognized writer who questions the status quo and helps her readers rediscover their true passions and beliefs in pursuit of more meaningful lives. She is the author of *What the Most Successful People Do Before Breakfast* (Portfolio, August 27, 2013), and *168 Hours: You Have More Time Than You Think* (Portfolio, 2010). She blogs at www.lauravanderkam.com.