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Career coach: Slow down

'Be present, engage in listening'

By Claire Bush
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In today's multitasking world where "do it now" is the mantra, career coach Katharine Halpin's advice for better business partnerships seems simplistic. To increase business, build better communication or maximize networking, Halpin's suggestions can be boiled down to two words: Slow down.

Her suggestions to get clients to calm their pace, be "present" and practice what she dubs "generous listening" aren't rocket science, she readily admits. When practiced, however, they open a world of possibilities for better business and personal relationships.

"The most valuable gift we can give to another person is our undivided attention," Halpin says, and the key to this practice, she counsels, is to eliminate the frantic pace. A simple way to do this is to build in 20-minute blocks of time into the day. Before starting a task, leaving for a meeting or preparing a speech, "estimate the amount of time you'll need, then add 20 minutes," Halpin suggests.

Losing the sense of urgency means freeing up mental energy to use for creative ways to approach each new client, contact or meeting. By taking time to think through how the other person can benefit from your service or presentation, you can better serve their needs, too.

"Putting yourself in the other person's place, and asking yourself where they're coming from means

you're in a better position to offer them what they need," Halpin says. That translates into satisfied customers and repeat business.

There's the practical angle, too. Arriving at a meeting early, for example, "places you in an ideal atmosphere to make a potentially valuable contact."

Halpin advises her clients to practice giving others undivided attention by listening impartially without judging or trying to offer instant solutions.

"Listening skills pay off in all areas of life," Halpin says. "Feeling that another person understands and appreciates your perspective means you've made a friend, helped a client, closed a deal and even, she adds, "can help you understand your spouse or child, too."

Is this just another way of practicing the Golden Rule?

"You bet," Halpin says. In business, "doing unto others as you would have them do unto you" pays off handsomely.

Of course, if you're not clear what your company's goal is, it's hard to network effectively. Many of Halpin's clients need help in getting a clear vision of their company's mission and objectives.

"Take the time to clearly determine what your personal and career core values are," the coach counsels. This way, it's easier to decide whether a new client or contact is a match to these goals.

Sheila Grinell, president and CEO of the Arizona Science Center, has applied Halpin's strategy in attracting a for-profit firm for a possible joint venture. Over several months, Halpin helped her to determine a long-range plan and evaluate the direction she wanted the Science Center to go.

"What I bring to the table is 30 years of knowledge in this field, and I'm much surer now of what I have to offer," Grinell says. Having clarity about her goals has made it "much easier" to approach and attract the people needed to complete a project or form a partnership, she said.

"It's all in the mental realm. As an effective person, when your thinking is properly aligned, the world falls into place."

This type of thinking can work within an organization, too, according to Chevy Humphrey, executive vice president at the science center. Overseeing the day-to-day needs of 125 employees can be a challenge, Humphrey says, "especially since we are a non-profit and each of our employees is stretched to the maximum. Katharine has taught me how to get more 'bang for our buck' by making the most of each employee's skills."

Humphrey cites the use of techniques like effective listening, cooperative teamwork and easier decision making taught by Halpin that have greatly increased her efficiency and led to better partnerships with her employees.

Valerie Manning, president and chief executive officer of the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce, has learned to "listen and communicate differently" by using these techniques, she says. In a business where making contacts and networking effectively with others is crucial to the bottom line, Manning has learned that successfully dealing with other people creates goodwill and generates positive results.

"I've learned to slow down and 'think' before I 'charge,'" Manning says. This has translated into better "people skills" for Manning and more business success for the chamber as well, she said.

Finally, you can't go wrong by making sure that others are successful, Halpin advises.

Offering positive feedback whenever appropriate means that clients and employees will begin to come to you on their own. To make the most of your "talk time," clients are advised to ask themselves during each conversation, "Does this make sense? Can I see my role in this vision? What will it take to accomplish this goal?"

Learning to think constructively and logically will provide a common sense approach that is bound to help both you and your associates, Halpin says.

For more information on business networking, call Katharine Halpin and Associates at 602-266-1961.

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