

# Please Invade My Space

Beverly Crowell and Beverly Kaye

Technology has been a boon to productivity, but it hasn't contributed as much to relationships between managers and direct reports. There is a simple way to circumvent that: talk.



**P**icture a typical day at work. A manager leaves his office and heads to the cafeteria on the other side of the building. On the way, he passes Emma from the call center. He also makes his way past Lin, who works in the mail room, and then brushes by one of his team leads, Roy. The manager gets to the cafeteria, picks up a sandwich from the cooler and pays Pat at the register.

Who did he see along the way? It wasn't Emma, Lin, Roy and Pat. He saw no one. He only saw the screen on his smartphone, and his employees saw the top of their leader's head as he responded to an email from Roy. Yes, the same Roy he just passed in the hall. Seem crazy? It shouldn't. After all, it's just another day at the office.

#### Why Talk When You Can Text?

With the emergence of email, Twitter, smartphones, instant messaging and other technology-based communication devices, the art of making eye contact and even the simple act of saying hello in the workplace is becoming folklore for workplace blogs. Years from now, archeologists may write articles about how and when the art of a one-on-one conversation became obsolete. True, these advancements may make it easier to communicate faster and with more people at once, but it doesn't always make it better, and it isn't necessarily helping leaders engage and retain their employees.

Physician and writer Deepak Chopra talks about the link between well-being and a manager's style. He suggests that if a manager criticizes an employee, there is a 20 percent chance the employee will be actively disengaged. In contrast, when a manager ignores an employee, the chance of being actively disengaged jumps to 40 percent. In short, employees would rather be criticized by their managers than ignored. Research by Career Systems International confirms the importance of the employee-manager relationship. In a study with more than 17,000 respondents, a supportive manager and great boss rank in the top five reasons employees stay and remain engaged at work.

A number of assumptions may be stopping leaders from having meaningful, face-to-face conversations:

- "My employees know my door is always open and they can come to me anytime."
- "If they need something, they'll ask."
- "No one has time for chitchat."
- "It's a lot more efficient for me to communicate this way, and my employees prefer it."

Rather than make assumptions, talent leaders would be better served to mandate leader-direct report en-

agement. For instance, a senior leader at a manufacturing facility could institute the "eight-foot rule" requiring all leaders to engage their employees in conversation anytime they come within eight

feet of each other. Managers won't start walking around the building with a tape measure, but they will start looking people in the eye, saying hello and even stopping in the halls for quick conversations. The changes aren't monumental, but they are noticeable.

Contrast this scenario with a manager at an aerospace company who chooses to attend his staff meeting via telecomm. No big deal, right? In today's virtual world, it's not uncommon to talk with one's team via phone. In this case, it was a big deal. The team meeting is 20 steps away from the manager's office, yet he chooses to dial in on the conference line. If he's not dialing in, he's instant messaging tasks, questions and updates.

Employees would rather work for the manager who notices an employee in the office and says, "Good morning," not the manager who stays in the office keeping in touch by phone and instant messaging when he sits just down the hall. Employees want to have face-to-face conversations with their boss. When, where, what and how often may vary, but relationships are built through conversations, and employees want a relationship with their boss.

#### Get Up and Start Talking

Research firm the Radicati Group's Email Statistic Report for 2011-2015 reports the average corporate user sends and receives 105 emails a day. The good news is that the rate of daily emails is slowing down. The bad news is that email is being replaced by instant messaging (IM) and social networks.

In 2011, the number of IM accounts reached approximately 2.6 billion and worldwide social networking accounts hit some 2.4 billion. Smartphones keep folks in touch as well, with billions of global wireless users. With ease of use and access to all this communication technology, it's understandable that leaders are using it to keep in touch with employees. It's fast, efficient and accessible. It's also can be a cop out. Technology doesn't always deliver what employees want and need from their leaders. They want communication and information, but they also want to know they matter.

Getting up and starting to talk isn't hard, but in today's technology-based work environment, it does have to be purposeful. Managers need to leave their offices and



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## Reader Reaction

Do you make time for face-to-face feedback? Here's what three Talent Management group LinkedIn members had to say:



**Milissa Danceur:** We [at Capital Lumber Co.] believe that feedback is essential, and that it most often needs to be in person. Interaction is key to our culture in those and most other types of situations, but is done differently depending on specifics.



**Marty Shoemaker:** Face-to-face conversations are absolutely essential in situations that are potentially emotionally laden. There are so many parts of a conversation that are missed by phone and certainly by email since at least half of the meaning of a sentence comes from nonverbal gestures and paralinguistic variables. One of the great advantages of face-to-face is the ability of each other to read the reaction of the other party, and the message can thereby be amended to make it more hearable. Email has made us lazy and too uncomfortable with personal communication as we can hide behind messaging. I think at least if the other party is a long way away, use Skype or a video system to look at each other. Bring back the most basic primate way of communicating so the message will not be lost in translation.



**Timothy Kisner:** We have to ask ourselves, is a face-to-face conversation important to provide data? Important to close a sale? Important to build a relationship? If we know a conversation is important to do these things but we don't do it, that is too bad. If we don't even realize that we should be having the conversation, that is worse. Most of us spend the first five or 10 minutes at the office deleting email. We don't delete face-to-face conversations.

What do you think? Join the discussion at [bit.ly/SPA7N4](http://bit.ly/SPA7N4), follow us @Talent-MgtMag, or join our Talent Management LinkedIn group.

leave smartphones behind. For instance, they can plan weekly face time with their employees by putting it on their calendars and sticking to it. Or, set an "out of office" message on email, and get up and get out with the sole purpose of making face-to-face contact with employees.

Despite myriad available development options, it's not uncommon for leaders not to know what to say during face-to-face interactions. The following are all popular sentiments leaders use to avoid in-person communications: "What will I say? What if they ask for something I can't give? I'm just not comfortable in one-on-one conversations." It can be easier to hide behind an email message, but email is rarely cited as a big retention and engagement tool. Research does confirm, however, that employees are engaged when they believe their manager cares.

Talent managers should encourage managers to be curious about their employees. When people are curious, they are eager to get information. They ask powerful questions to learn more, and managers should actively listen to the answers.

### Don't Be Afraid to Ask Questions

The key is to ask questions designed to get to know employees beyond the daily work they do. The career conversation offers this opportunity. It can help employees uncover skills, interests and values, talk about career aspirations and goals, and learn what engages them and what doesn't. In short, managers must ask questions and listen to responses. Consider these conversation-sparking, career-related questions:

- What makes for a great day at work?
- What interests you most in your current job?
- Which parts of your job do you find the most challenging?
- What do you excel in?
- What do you wish you had more time to do in your work?
- What skills do you appreciate in others that don't come easy for you?
- What's working? What's not?
- How can I support you?

What managers can ask is limitless; it's how they listen and how often they ask that matters most. Keep the distractions at a minimum and focus on the conversation. Try the aforementioned eight-foot rule and see what happens. Don't have time to stop for a conversation? Keep the smartphone in the pocket, make eye contact with employees in the hall and say hello.

However, all this talk about talking wouldn't be complete without a word of caution. Not every employee wants the same thing. For some, invading their space may be equal to declaring battle. Engaging every employee in conversation takes finesse and a little bit of investigative work. For some employees, regular face-to-face communication may be every six months. Others want a daily hello. Managers would be well advised to talk with their employees and get a sense of just how much conversation they want by asking:

- What is your preferred method of communication?
- How do you like to receive feedback or work through issues?
- When would you prefer a face-to-face conversation versus an email?
- When we do get together to talk, what are some topics you would like to cover?



Technology doesn't always deliver what employees want and need from their leaders. They want communication and information, but they also want to know they matter.

Make no assumptions — ask — and understand that what works for one employee may not work for others. Managers with geographically dispersed direct reports will have to make an extra effort to align employee expectations with the reality of time and distance separating them.

According to the Radicati Group, there will be more than 1.2 billion wireless email users by year's end in 2015. Reliance on technologically based communication platforms will continue to grow, with many

positive results. The value of face-to-face conversations won't diminish during that time; it will become more important as employees and managers seek ways to connect and engage at work. **TM**

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