

Getting the Boss to be Around More

02/13/06

How do I get the owner to show up at the office more often? It seems like he's always out in the field, and I get stuck answering questions that I think he should be dealing with. Sometimes he misses appointments, and I have to handle the situation, which is awkward and uncomfortable. I think we have a good company, and the owner is a good guy – don't get me wrong. It just seems that he'd be more on top of the business if he were around more. How can I help to get him there?

This question comes from a manager, who works for a multi-million dollar service company. The writer is correct: it is a good company, profitable, hard working, with an owner who is committed to the success of the company. That said, I agree: the owner and company would both benefit if the owner could be in the office more often. Let's take a look at some of the reasons that owners end up out of the office, and what can be done to help with those situations. Also, I'm asking readers to mail in their observations to aGray@StrategyLeaders.com. Let's hear your viewpoint.

There are lots of reasons that owners end up out in the field. They have customers and prospects to see, they need to collect payments or make sure work is getting done. They like being out in the field, or they don't want to be in the office, or they are stretched too thin with

commitments outside the business, to name just a few. Let's take a look at each of these situations, and see what can be done about it.

An owner's job includes seeing prospects and customers, which are the lifeblood of the company. Unfortunately, too many owners are not organized enough, or predictable enough, in the way they handle their schedules. They end up driving from Yonkers to Danbury. They over-commit, cut things too close, and promise to be in two places at once. You, as a manager, can help. Lay out a schedule: Monday's in southern Westchester, Tuesday's in northwestern Connecticut, etc. You can mapquest appointments, plan out travel and appointment time. Add in time for delays. If your boss gets ahead of schedule, be ready with names of a couple clients or prospects in the neighborhood, and suggest a drop in. Or, suggest your boss come back to the office early, to catch up on things.

For the boss who is out overseeing work, consider this. It is important that the boss is aware of how work is going. And one way to know how things are going is to go out in the field and inspect. There are other ways. The company can put together a procedure checklist, which employees can check off. Customers can be asked to sign off on work completed. Managers can follow up on completion

check lists, calling customers to see if they were satisfied. Many times the owner gets involved before he needs to, because he can't see what's going on. Try to fix that by using status and job completion reports.

Often, owners assume they need to be involved in collections, when someone else could be doing the job. If your boss is out collecting, suggest that he try to hand over some of that responsibility to other people in the company. Point out that his time is way too valuable to be running around chasing bad accounts. Ask if some of your customers are costing you more time than they are worth, because you constantly have to be on them about paying their bills. Whatever you do, try to shift your boss to the big gun calls – where everything else has failed, and you need someone with authority to get involved on your side, talking to someone with authority on the client's side.

Some bosses just like being out in the field. They enjoy the freedom, and they find it is one way to get out from under the noise or aggravation that goes with being in the office. Many owners love the work of the company – that's why they got started in the business in the first place. They are presented with problems they feel poorly equipped to handle. Or, they lack patience to deal things that come up. Or, they know that changes

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need to be made, but find the thought of implementing those changes to be overwhelming. In any case, you, as a manager, can work with your boss to find a balance.

Talk with your boss about what has to happen in the office. Suggest your boss make a list of things he or she does, prioritize the list from most to least important, keep only the top priority items, delegate the rest. When your boss does come back to the office, avoid the temptation to run in with a list of gripes, problems, and urgent issues. Instead, try to solve problems while your boss is out. Think of how you would handle things, if your boss was on vacation for a couple weeks – then follow through and do it. Bosses usually enjoy returning to the office, when it is to hear what got worked out in their absence.

Schedule regular time on your boss' calendar to meet and discuss what's going on – you are less likely to be overlooked if you have an appointment. Come prepared with an agenda, and you increase your chances of getting done what you need.

Ask you boss what he or she thinks would be a good balance, between time in the office and time out of the office. Make an agreement to do both, and create a schedule that shows both happening. If your boss disappears for an afternoon, don't

quiz as to where he was, or what she was doing. Do point out that their time was needed.

Suggest that someone in the company help your boss out by scheduling their calendar. Get a palm pilot that can sync to Outlook every time the boss comes into the office. Make one person the point of contact for putting things onto the boss' calendar. Most people are amazed at how helpful it can be delegating scheduling to someone who is a step removed, who can look at how to efficiently get things done.

Occasionally, bosses get over-committed with activities outside the business. Ask the boss to discuss with you how he or she would like things to work in his or her absence. Suggest that having other people handle things in the boss' absence would be preferable to letting pressures build up. Most bosses are looking to find a balance, and may just need someone to talk them through it.

Whatever the reason, there is probably a solution. Start by pointing out that there may be a great outcome: a better running company. Ask if your boss is open to suggestions: taking a load off his or her desk. Then follow through: a common calendar, a list of delegated items, actions taken and problems solved when he or she is absent.

Looking for a good book? Try The Organized Executive: A Program for Productivity – New Ways to Manage Time, Paper, People and the Electronic Office by Stephanie Winston.

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