



I want you to imagine for a minute that you're working on a really important project.

You're in your most comfortable chair.

The temperature in the room is just right.

You're focused.

You've blocked out the time and you're ready to go.

You start typing away at your computer and you can feel yourself getting into the zone. You type away. You work away.

And then the phone rings.

You immediately get out of the zone you're in. You decide whether or not you should answer the phone. Either way, your thought process is interrupted.

Now you have to start all over again.

Does this sound familiar?

Does this happen to you multiple times a day?

Because it sure happens to me multiple times a day.

This atmosphere of constant interruption is harming the work that we do. As the leader it's up to you to set boundaries and expectations not just for yourself, but for your team as well, so that situation I described just before is often referred to as flow.

Flow is a state where you are completely immersed and focused on what you're doing.

It could be work-related. It could be something that you're doing outside of work.

Recently, I had to buy a new desk and I had to assemble literally from nuts to bolts. I sat upstairs on my third floor for four hours. I didn't go to the restroom. I didn't get a drink of water. I ignored my cat and I sat there so determined to put together this desk.

But the four hours, I won't say it went like that, but I certainly wouldn't have said it felt like four hours. I was so driven and focused to get this desk built that I didn't want to stop. That's flow.

That's when our best thinking and our best best working happens.

Unfortunately during the work day, we are very often interrupted with things like phone calls, emails, people dropping into our office unannounced.



What the research says about interruptions to flow is it can take anywhere from 7 to 12 minutes to get back into that flow state. If it happens once, probably not a very big deal. But if it happens throughout the day, it's likely you never even get to that flow state in the first place.

As leaders, especially when we're starting out in our attempt to be supportive to our teens, we say things like, 'I have an open door policy' or 'call me anytime' or 'whatever you need, just ask.'

Have you said these things to your team before? Or things like this? Have you had these things said to you?

The problem with these things is not the intention behind them. In fact, the intentions are quite good. The problem with setting up these expectations is that 1) They are unsustainable and 2) they are harmful to the development of your team.

Part of being a leader is empowering your team to have what they need to do the work they need to do and solve the problems they need to solve.

That doesn't mean you're never involved but it does mean you shouldn't always be involved.

Also when you say things like, 'I have an open door policy' and then when your staff reaches out to you and you close that door literally or figuratively you're breaking down trust because you're not keeping your word.

Finally, you're setting up expectations for your team, that that is how they should operate too when, again, it's not a sustainable, effective way to operate.

In addition to the things we say, we do things like eat lunch at our desk or send emails late at night and on weekends. Or never take our vacation. We may do this in the spirit of being hard workers, but the expectation we are sending to our teams is, that's the way we operate here.

In many cases leaders will say to their teams, 'make sure you take lunch. It's really important to take a break throughout the day'.

And they say it as they're sitting at their desk typing and eating at the same time.

Or they say something like, 'make sure you clock out at the end of the day. Make sure you leave your work in the building.'

But then the leader sends emails late at night and on weekends. I used to do this all the time and my boss pulled me aside one day and asked me why. I explained that there were so many interruptions at the office and when I was home, I could get into that flow state.



He listened and explained that I was sending a message to my team that I expected the same from them. And I said, 'oh no, I never expect them to email me back. I never expect them to be working at night. In fact, I don't want them to be doing those things.'

But what he said that has stuck with me ever since was, 'they are constantly watching what you do much more than what you say. You can tell them you don't want them working on weekends, but when they're constantly receiving emails from you on weekends, you're sending a very different message.'

This is a group called The Beastie Boys. They have this great line in one of their songs where they say, 'your pop caught you smoking and he said no way. That hypocrite smokes two packs a day.'

(Talk about flow!)

But this is what we do- the do as I say not as I do. And that's not how people operate. If you work with kids, if you have kids, it's the same idea. If you tell them one thing and do another, they're paying more attention to what you're doing. As a leader of adults, it's not much different. It's not just important to verbalize boundaries and expectations. It is essential that you're following them as well.

So, the most important question for you is, what expectations can you set and follow to best support your team?

How do you create boundaries that send a message that breaks are important and necessary? That vacation time and time away from the office is important and necessary. That having time to work on what you need to work on in an uninterrupted way is important.

I always suggest to leaders I work with to think like a college professor and say, 'here are my office hours. You can come in any time on Tuesdays and Thursdays between such and such a time.'

And then think like a hotel guest and feel very comfortable to put the Do Not Disturb sign on your door. Tell your staff, 'I'm working on something. Do not disturb me during this time', or 'I'm going to leave the office so that I can work on this thing uninterrupted.'

Of course emergencies happen, and we need to be able to respond to emergencies, but very often we designate things as emergencies that are not really emergencies.

One of the resources I recommend to you is the exercise to see how well you have established expectations and boundaries with your team. Then you can determine what expectations and boundaries you still need to set. This is a great exercise to do with your team to make sure that you and your team are on the same page.

Again, make sure you are taking care of your team by also taking care of yourself.