



Maximize the Time and Talents of Your Assistant

"Today's office professional is dynamic, ever changing, part of the management team, makes decisions, takes risks, and participates in staff meetings. Through a manager's encouragement, sharing of responsibility, information, and willingness to see his or her assistant as a business partner, the assistant will become a valuable asset to the manager." — Joan Burge

By *Joan Burge, founder & CEO, Office Dynamics International*

Both Sides of the Desk

During my 20-year career as an administrative professional, I was fortunate to experience working relationships with numerous managers, executives, and Presidents in various industries. However, there were only three executives that impacted me, my career, and proved to me that an assistant and executive can truly have a synergistic relationship. I also learned what an assistant needs from an executive to be successful and to get the job done in stellar fashion.

Since 1990, I've been sitting on the other side of the desk as founder and CEO of my own company which provides training and consulting services to assistants and executives. I have had more than eight assistants work for me over the years and know the difference between an assistant who just gets the work done and one who truly is my strategic business partner. Both have impacted my success and productivity negatively or positively. I have been able to soar with the right administrative business partner and so can you.

In today's fast-paced corporate world, many executives rely on the newest technology to advance their objectives and help the company grow. Between e-mail, virtual assistants, palm pilots, high-speed Internet connections and a host of other technological marvels, many managers mistakenly believe they are more independent than ever – making their own travel plans, faxing their own letters and scheduling their own meetings. In reality, these independent executives have lost sight of the one asset that can truly impact the company's bottom line: their administrative assistant.

In order to make the most of your administrative assistant and advance your company's mission, you need to treat your assistant like a business partner and develop their skills on a daily basis. Only then will they have the know-how and confidence to make decisions and take charge of challenges that arise during the day.

No matter how advanced your office becomes, your assistant and administrative team will always prove to be your greatest asset. Not only will they pick up the slack in your absence, they'll also stand by you during the toughest business challenge. When you encourage your assistants to become true work partners by unleashing their creativity and broadening their scope of responsibility, you will become more productive and your company will grow.

It Starts With Perceptions

It begins with changing your thinking about the role if you are still thinking like the '70s, '80s, or even early '90s. The new generation of assistants is eager to learn, ready and willing to jump in and get the job done, long to have a great working relationship with the person they most support, and want to use their talents. They want to be trusted, challenged, and empowered. Even assistants who have been in the field for 25+ years have plans to work for several more years and have aspirations of topping their past performance.

When you change your perceptions of this role, your work life will change. You will be doing more of the things you like to do and were hired to do. Your time will be spent on things that make a difference and impact the company's bottom line. And you will definitely reduce the stress in your life. A star assistant is worth her or his weight in gold! It's up to you whether you want to invest in this relationship.

To Do or Not To Do?

I see far too many executives and managers performing tasks and taking on projects that their assistant is quite capable of doing with a little bit of guidance or training. Even with something as small (or as big) as managing their e-mails. Before we explore how to determine what to delegate, let's look at . . . why you are not delegating certain items.

Some reasons that I hear from executives are:

- I'm a perfectionist and my assistant won't do as good a job as I would.
- I've had bad past experiences with other assistants.
- My current assistant has let me down.
- I'm too busy so I don't even think about delegating.
- I'm too busy to turn it over properly.

These are legitimate reasons and I would agree with some of those same experiences as I've had them with past assistants in my office. The bottom line is that as a time-compressed executive you need to let go.

How do you determine what tasks to assign to your assistant?

Here are some questions for you to ask yourself.

- Does my assistant have the innate ability/talent? For example, one of my assistants was excellent with writing, punctuation and grammar. It was easy for me to give her many assignments using her talents. Another assistant may be a great at project management, meeting planning, or communicating with potential clients. Look deep and you will find those hidden talents. Then assign tasks based on them.

List 4 innate talents your assistant possesses:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

- Does my assistant have experience in a particular area that I don't know about? (This would be experience the assistant has from past jobs or outside work activities.) If your

assistant is involved in IAAP (the International Association for Administrative Professionals) and works on a committee or chairs an event, that demonstrates leadership skills.

- What is the long-term time-savings cost? If you take time today to teach your assistant a task or a project, how much time will it save you in the next 12 months and beyond?

Example: It takes you 2 hours to teach your assistant how to do a monthly report but it will save you 2 hours x 12 months = 24 hours. That is the long-term savings. What could you be spending your time on that has a bigger impact than that monthly report?

Some other questions for you to ask yourself are:

1. What areas of responsibility do I currently have that I would most like to see handled by my assistant?
2. What skills does my assistant possess that are being underused?
3. How could I better use my time if I were freed of some of the hands-on managing I do now?

Make Time for Human Moments™

The types of communications you have with your assistant will make or break the relationship and the team's effectiveness. All day long we communicate using various tools, but mostly e-mail. I'm in offices where assistants and managers are only 10' away from each other and yet they still e-mail each other rather than get up out of their seat. Often they spend more time e-mailing back and forth than they would have had they just met face-to-face. I want to highly encourage you to make time for Human Moments™. Technology will never replace what you build when you sit with your assistant, have a beverage, and discuss the days' and weeks' priorities and events.

When I ask assistants what they would most like to see their executives do, increase, or stop doing, their answers usually fall under the umbrella of communications. Here is what 90% of assistants need in regards to communications.

- Precise details about projects, not just hearing "type this."
- More direction; more guidance
- Open communication
- An understanding of what's going on (details and big picture); not just what to do, but why.

- To be “in the loop.” E-mail and self-sufficient executives have made it more difficult for assistants to know what is going on. Therefore, they cannot be as effective which ultimately impacts their executive.

Bringing Your Assistant Up To Speed

How can you bring your assistant up to speed on the business so that your assistant can be more involved and make good decisions?

- Make time to explain things rather than just a piece of the project.
- Include the assistant in management’s special meetings; and not just to take notes.
- Invite your assistant to attend staff meetings or business events.
- Expand your one-on-one meetings to be a time of learning.
- Forward periodicals, correspondence, and resources to read that relate to the business.
- Bcc or cc on e-mails.

Investing in Your Assistant

The greatest investment you can make, besides investing in yourself, is to invest in your assistant. See this person as someone who will grow, blossom, and become more valuable. When I left the administrative profession after 20 years, it was because I felt there was a strong need for in-depth training for assistants. I had thought to myself, “Executives get training all the time. They attend conferences, workshops, on-site programs, college courses, and more. Yet the very person who supports them on a daily basis gets very little training. An assistant is just expected to jump in and do the job. Or if an assistant does get to attend a workshop, it is usually a one-day “away-from-the-office” event vs. a long-term development program.

The benefit to you is immense and yet the concept is quite simple. As your assistant develops new skills, attitudes, competencies, and behaviors, he or she will become a greater asset to you. This allows you to become more valuable to your department or organization. It is a win-win.

The only exception would be if your assistant outgrows the current position and wants to advance to another position or career within your organization. Even then, the organization still benefits – which ultimately benefits you as an employee.

I remember when I was an Executive Assistant to a CEO of a large banking institution and I decided to move on (for various reasons), he said to me, “That’s ok. A good executive will let their people spread their wings.” This wise and respected CEO also told me, “Life is like a book; when one chapter closes, another one opens.”

Today there are many options for developing your assistant ranging from formal on-site programs to conferences, CDs, DVDs, audio books, on-line learning to college courses. You have an opportunity to teach your assistant something new every day. If your assistant makes a less-than-favorable decision, explain to her why it was not the best approach.

Today’s assistant is a “cognitive being”; not an order-taker and task-doer. As your assistant learns new skills and you can delegate more responsibility, her or his value to you will grow immensely. Just remember that you may have to invest some time or money to develop those skills.

Note: The information provided for this article is an excerpt from Joan’s 3-hour workshop exclusively for managers and executives.

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About the Author

Joan Burge is known as the red-lipstick-wearing “Rock Star” of administrative and executive assistant training and a successful entrepreneur who created a unique niche in 1990 by founding a training company that would uniquely provide sophisticated, robust educational programs and information to administrative professionals. Joan is an accomplished author (8 books), professional speaker, consultant and corporate trainer.

She is the creator of: Annual Conference for Administrative Excellence™; World Class Assistant™ Certification course; Star Achievement Series® Certification and Designation course; 30+ customized workshops, 200+ educational videos, 150+ articles and nearly 1,000 blog posts for executive and administrative assistants.

Her company, Office Dynamics International, is a global industry leader which offers a broad range of solutions and provides high-performance, sophisticated executive and administrative assistant training and coaching.