

Do You Chase Your Tail?

Supporting Others While Still Protecting Your Work Time

“I thought having an open-door policy would be a good thing for the teachers, admin, children and parents. I’m happy to help but some days I feel like I’m everyone’s parent rather than their leader. I spend most of my day repeating myself.”

Have you ever caught yourself thinking or saying something like that? Ben shared this with me and continued with, “If I’ve told them once, I’ve told them a hundred times how to do it...”

He was particularly frustrated with one teacher who should know what they needed to do. They’d been in the role at the same school for years. “He keeps coming to me with the same problem and I’ve repeatedly told him what he should do to fix it.”

What Ben needed to do was to stop chasing his tail. As a school leader, it’s easy to feel the pressure to have all the answers, and to give all the answers. If Ben stops doing all the thinking for everyone, especially the one teacher who should know better, and adopt a more consultative or coaching approach, he’ll soon see a positive change. Ben adopted two strategies:

1. To be unavailable for twenty minutes each day so that he could get some planning, thinking or work done. **To do this, he**
 - Let others know he was not to be disturbed for 20 minutes,
 - used an empty office, closed the door, and
 - put a sign on the door that said, “Please do not disturb between 11:30 am and 11:50 am.”

After the first five minutes of the first time Ben did this, he was hooked. He decided to make this a regular practice. Because he managed other’s expectations about this short period of time, he found that most people simply got on with their work while he did, too.

2. Instead of chasing his own tail answering the same questions over and over he would step back from solving the problem for them and invite them to problem solve, to get them more engaged in the solution finding part of any issues.

To do this he:

- Stopped telling them his way or using phrases like, “This is what you should do.” He learned to catch himself before giving a direction.
- Took a deep breath, and
- asked questions!

As the quote goes, knowledge is having the right answer and intelligence is asking the right question! (Author unknown)

It felt a bit clunky to start but once he got into the conversation, he found it much easier to ask more questions and encourage others to engage deeper in their own problem solving.

To turn the conversation around from giving direction or repeating instructions, try these questions examples:

- a. “As this is work you’ve done before, can you recall what you did last time?”
- b. “I enjoy being a resource for you, however I’d like to see you problem solve for yourself first. I think you’ll come up with a range of options and answers, given your experience. You could trust your instinct of what to do and use the department manual to guide you. If you’re still stuck after that, come to me. Let’s make it your default that you’ll try to find the answer for yourself first.”
- c. “If you were to give advice to someone else about how to do it, what would you tell them to do?”

In interpersonal communication, we all have the capacity to delete, distort or generalise the messages we receive. Unless we work hard to be fully present and listen actively, we:

- hear what we want to hear.
- stop listening as soon as we think we have the answer.
- filter the message based on tone rather than the words.

Your day-to-day is busy enough, so anything you can do to stop chasing your tail is going to positively impact your productivity, reduce your stress, achieve more and engage others more deeply in their work and decisions. 



“If you stop doing all the thinking for everyone, and adopt a more consultative or coaching approach, you’ll soon see a positive change.”



Sarah Foley-Lewis

2019 Learning Professional of the Year Finalist and named as one of the 25 LinkedIn Top Voices for Australia for 2018, Sally positively impacts results, leadership and team performance.

Obsessed with productivity and self-leadership, she’s presented to, coached and worked with 10,000+ people from Europe, the Middle East, Asia and across Australia.

An author, speaker and coach, she blends experience, extensive qualifications and a wicked sense of fun to get results.

Contact her at:
sally@sallyfoleylewis.com