

43 Hold That Call..

The supervisor of a payroll processing team had a real problem. Due to staffing shortages, illness and the installation of new technology, a backlog was

building, and in turn this was having an impact on the accuracy of the payroll. Mistakes were occurring in people's pay packets.

The key management skill, in order to control events, is too create purposeful habits in others....



We discussed the problem. The main concern was that, whenever staff tried to address the backlog, the number of incoming calls was such that they were always distracted from the task. So we decided to go with the following idea. The supervisor wrote to all the company's staff, firstly apologising for the payroll errors; secondly, explaining why the errors had occurred; and thirdly, making a request:

“We would like to dedicate

one hour a day, between 8.30 and 9.30 am, to tackling the backlog. We would therefore appreciate it if you could save any calls you want to make to this office until after 9.30. If the matter is so urgent you do have to call before then, that's fine. But if it can wait until after 9.30, we would appreciate it.”

The result
was amazing.

Within a week of the email, internal telephone traffic dropped by 78%! Within a month the backlog had been removed, and the system was back to error-free normality. The supervisor wrote to all staff again, explained all was now back to normal, and thanked them for their support.

There is an even more surprising twist to this tale. Six months later I happened to be visiting the same

supervisor, and discovered that internal incoming telephone calls, between 8.30 and 9.30, had stayed low, despite the follow up email. Incoming calls during that hour were still 50 to 75% lower than before the first email! This meant that her team were able to plan 'maintenance' type work, team meetings, etc, during that hour, knowing that phone traffic would be relatively light then...

We often complain that ‘we are driven by events’ rather than that ‘we drive events’. But people are not mind readers. If there is no predictable shape or pattern to the day, it may be because we haven’t asked for one. Not only did the supervisor ask for a pattern to be created, she did so by firstly, apologising for the error, and then explaining how the pattern would help her readers, her customers. So not only did she ask for a pattern, but she gave her customers a reason, a

benefit, for conforming.

The other key lesson is that a pattern, once established, tends to continue. We are all creatures of habit – of routine. It is easier to maintain routines than break them.

People are not
mind readers.

“If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten” (R. Kipling)

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