This month's 5 x Harvard Management Tips

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Tip No 1 - Learn How to Say No to New Assignments

Most of us say yes to requests and assignments without filtering them by what's urgent, let alone what's possible. We like saying yes to our superiors, but agreeing to do too many things leaves us overstressed and overworked. A better approach is to remember that saying no is critical to your, and the company's, success. Being effective requires making tradeoffs. So remember that it's OK to raise questions and push back on assignments, even if it's scary to do. You can ask senior leaders whether a new assignment takes precedence over your other projects, or how a new task fits with the company's priorities. Voicing your concerns ensures that senior leaders have fully thought through what they're asking you to do. And it gives you a constructive way to say no to assignments that you just don't have the bandwidth to take on.

Adapted from "Stop Trying to Please Everyone," by Ron Ashkenas and Matthew McCreight.

Tip No 2 - Make Your Presentation a Conversation

When giving a presentation, structuring your talk around "the great unveil," saving key findings for the end, is tempting. But the last-minute nature of the unveil means your audience doesn't have time to fully understand the information, so they won't be prepared to discuss it. An unveil can also create problems if you're surprising people with a new idea – especially if it's controversial. Instead, structure your presentation to invite discussion and participation. Draft your talk in partnership with important members of the audience. Getting people involved early helps identify problems that need solving and solutions that have been tried. Send out pre-reading materials so people aren't absorbing your findings as you say them. And appoint facilitators to draw out questions and comments from the group after you've finished presenting.

Adapted from "Create a Conversation, Not a Presentation," by John Coleman.

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Tip No 3 - A Good Summary Can Help Your Résumé Stand Out

The average recruiter spends just six seconds deciding whether to read your résumé or pass on it. How can you hook someone to keep reading in that short a time? Start with a brief but memorable summary of yourself at the top of the page – think 20 to 30 words. Highlight your areas of expertise that are relevant to the job, then focus on specific results you've achieved in those areas. Highlighting your accomplishments shows the hiring manager that you've solved the kinds of problems she's dealing with. Next, note the types of organizations and industries you've worked in, and include your years of experience. Distinguish yourself from other candidates, making it immediately clear that you have what it takes to excel in the position. And be sure to avoid generic terms like "results-driven," "a proven track record," and "team player" that don't really say anything.

Adapted from "Yes, Your Résumé Needs a Summary," by Vanessa K. Bohns

Tip No 4 - Get Yourself Out of a Rut at Work

People judge you by your writing. They decide how smart, creative, and trustworthy you are — all from what you've written. So be sure your writing makes a good impression on the reader. Here are some common mistakes that cast you in an unflattering light:

- **Using lots of pairs or sets of threes.** For example, avoid sentences like this: "The policies and practices of business and non-profits can be expected to change and grow."
- **Inventing names or acronyms.** Making up terms sounds pompous, not smart.
- **Repeating words with no good reason.** Writers seem inattentive when they have a lot of empty echoes in their documents.
- **Using nonparallel bullet points.** If three of four are complete sentences and one is only a phrase, that's sloppy.
- **Changing the order of items.** If you refer to A, B, and C, don't discuss them in the order A, C, and B.

Adapted from "Improve Your Writing to Improve Your Credibility," by Barbara Wallraff.

Tip No 5 - Know when to ignore someone's feedback

Feedback helps us learn and grow. But it's important to remember that not every opinion is useful. It's okay to ignore feedback when it's vague. Many people will want to share maddeningly non-specific feedback with you ("I didn't think it was as strong as it could have been" or "There was just something off"). But if they can't tell you exactly what the issue is, it's not your job to figure it out (unless, of course, they sign your paycheck). It's also okay to ignore feedback when it's only one person's opinion. It's easy to fixate on critiques, but one person's take (no matter how influential they might be) isn't always reliable. Their feedback might not even be about you – it could be the result of having a bad day or personal bias. So be wary of such advice until you get confirmation from other people.

Adapted from "When It's OK to Ignore Feedback," by Dorie Clark.

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