

Telephone Etiquette: Reach Out and Clout Someone

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"I know it's 3 A.M. over there in Hong Kong, but I'll only take a minute." The manager of the company's East Asia office, roused from his sleep by these words, holds the phone in trembling hands and waits to learn what calamity is about to befall him.

On the other hand, consider the blow to the presidential image when the White House staff decided not to wake Mr. Reagan with the news that American pilots had been attacked in the Bay of Sidra and had shot down two Libyan planes. The president was rendered vulnerable to attack by his opponents, who ridiculed him with jokes like "Wake me when it's over."

Certain people are always on call—doctors, lawyers, psychiatrists, clergymen, personnel directors and consultants. William Randolph Hearst once said that he paid his people extraordinary salaries so that they had to be available 24 hours a day. Today, as a rule, no subordinate considers his salary big enough to buy him completely: He still retains a sanctuary of privacy.

That goes on every level. The chief executive of a major company, whom the law would consider at least a quasi-public figure with fewer rights to privacy than the average citizen, tells of an occasion when a phone call from a reporter woke him at one in the morning.

On hanging up, he called the newspaper's publisher, who growled: "Don't you know it's 1:15 A.M.?"

"Certainly," was the answer. "But I thought you ought to know how it feels to be disturbed in the middle of the night, as your reporter has just done to me."

In the case of subordinates, phoning their superior after regular hours to relieve their own anxiety or fears of future criticism may prove dangerous. Making the call to raise a trivial issue, to seek stroking, or to engage in apple polishing will likely turn out to be examples of poor judgment in the eyes of the boss.

An industrial relations director says he is even cautious about transmitting glad tidings after hours and on weekends because he knows that his chief executive officer can be irascible about invasions of his privacy. He says: "If I settle a strike, which is always good news, I call the vice president in charge of operations, and I let him decide whether we should call the president."

Many executives are quite clear on the line that separates what they "need to know" from what is "nice to know."¹—The latter rarely justifies a late-hours call. However, the executive who doesn't want his leisure hours to be interrupted with messages that fall into the latter category has a duty to clarify the standards he uses in distinguishing nicety from necessity.

On the other hand, executives are not likely to resent what would otherwise be an intrusion if it is clearly being made in their interest. A communication that saves the executive from being surprised or suddenly confronted with a challenge is almost certain to be appreciated. You may be helping him to preserve his image by protecting him from embarrassment that would be occasioned by ignorance of information he is expected to know. So, too, you reduce the wear and tear on his psyche if you prevent misinformation from getting to him first or you give him the facts before he gets a slanted version when he listens to the nightly news on television.

For the executive, there are any number of ill-conceived justifications for invading subordinates' personal time. Impulsive executives tend to use the telephone as an instrument for ventilating their feelings. Often the only

result is to transmit, not to relieve, the anxiety.

There is a temptation to use the off-hours call to rehash the facts about a disaster. If the motive is to issue a rebuke or call for an explanation of what went wrong, the matter can usually wait. As Robert J. Sanator, president of Fairchild Republic Co., put it, "That's like the foot ball player who has to punch somebody after the game is over and lost."

Wallace Rasmussen, former CEO of Beatrice Co., warns in general against using the telephone for criticism or for the discussion of controversial issues. "It's easier to get mad over the phone," he says. "You don't see facial expression, and you are more likely to let your emotions carry you away. Also, if you're the boss, you may hang up faster than you should without giving full opportunity to the other fellow to state his side of it. When you're face to face, you're more likely to mute your irritation."

Of course, while the midnight call from your superior can be an awful bother, some people see the interruption as a welcome sign of their importance. Gene Cattabiani, a vice president at Westinghouse Electric, told industrial psychologists at the recent convention of the American Psychological Association that "the 6 a.m. phone call is more likely to occur in participative management than in authoritarian management." One executive, now in the job market, told us: "You know you're on the skids when the weekend calls stop coming in from your boss."

Calls made by executives after regular working hours may evidence a real concern for subordinates. President Lyndon Johnson used to insist that every phone call to the White House that warranted a call-back had to be returned the day it came in, even if it had to be done at mid night.

Mr. Rasmussen notes that when a subordinate has attempted unsuccessfully to see his superior during the day, it makes sense to call the subordinate in the evening and start with the statement: "I understand you were looking for me today. I didn't want the day to end without getting back to you."

However, there are limits. As a steel company executive complains, "it is most annoying and even alarming to get a call Friday evening from the boss, who wants to know if you'll be free on Monday at 10 a.m., and when you ask what it's all about, he says, 'Just a few items,' and hangs up. And you spend the weekend worrying." An out-of-the-ordinary phone call should never leave the recipient frustrated for lack of explanation.

Executives spend much of their time on the telephone, in and out of the office. This essential instrument of communication in our society can, in an instant, become an invader into one's inner sanctum. Such an intrusion is a threat to privacy-"the most comprehensive of rights and the right most valued by civilized men," as Justice Louis Brandeis once described it.

The thoughtful executive moves cautiously in this area.

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