



By KIMBERLY ALYN, PH.D.

The Multi-Tasking Myth

Think Multi-Tasking Is Making You More Productive? Think Again

It has been said, “Multi-tasking means screwing everything up simultaneously.” Many fire service leaders believe they have mastered the art of multi-tasking and become more effective in every area of their lives. While furiously typing at their computer keyboards, they are receiving text messages. They quickly answer them and go back to typing. While sitting at a fire conference session, they open their BlackBerrys. While talking on the phone, they browse their emails for important messages and update their Facebook status.

For some leaders, however, this habit is negatively affecting their ability to connect properly with their followers and a study now shows it is negatively affecting their ability to retain information and pay close attention to what is going on around them.

Most people are under the assumption that those who can multi-task are more productive than people who focus on one thing at a time. People in technology-rich environments are usually seen multi-tasking constantly. Well, Stanford University researchers report that people who are taking in multiple streams of electronic information simultaneously do not fare as well as one might think in some key areas.

The Stanford study compared two

groups of people: those who engage in regular media multi-tasking and those who don't. Different experiments were conducted testing the ability of both groups to pay attention, retain information and switch from one task to another. The results showed that multi-taskers do much worse in all three areas than those who prefer to focus on one thing at a time. In fact, the more the study participants multi-tasked, the worse they did.

The study concluded that people who heavily multi-task have developed habits that cause everything to distract them. This in turn affects their ability to remember things or give something their full attention. I see this in a lot of leaders today. They have developed these media multi-tasking habits and, as a result, many of them have become horrible communicators. They don't remember what was said because their ability to pay close attention has been compromised.

If someone is trying to carry on a conversation with you and you are paying attention to your cell phone or another electronic device, you are not demonstrating good leadership skills. This type of behavior will prevent you from properly connecting with people and will inhibit your ability to be an effective leader. If anything, you will frustrate and discourage others with this behavior. If you can't have a conversation with someone without being attached to some electronic device, you need to “unplug.”

Do not deceive yourself into thinking that your constant multi-tasking is making you more productive. The areas

where you may think you are being more productive are actually being countered by the areas where you are paying less attention and retaining less information. Additionally, you are pushing your followers away when you fail to give them your undivided attention. These multi-tasking bad habits that many leaders have developed are preventing the level of connection they could be experiencing with their followers.

Some leaders may be thinking that this is the manner in which they communicate best with their followers – electronic devices. They send text messages to their followers to say “good job.” They send out an email to reiterate the mission and

purpose. These forms do not replace the face-to-face communication that is necessary to truly stay connected. If you want to be a more effective leader, you need to examine your dependency on electronic devices and ask yourself if it is affecting your ability to properly communicate and connect with your followers.

Whether you are a formal or informal leader in the fire service, take some time today and think about how often you attempt to multi-task while someone is trying to communicate with you, or how often your focus is interrupted by multi-tasking. By giving everything your full attention, you will become more productive and more connected.

It's never too late to break a bad habit. Start today by putting down your electronic devices and giving people and projects your full attention.

The habit may negatively affect your ability to retain information and pay close attention to what is going on around you.

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