

MiamiHerald.com 

Posted on Wed, Aug. 27, 2008

Business coaches help workers stay focused

BY CINDY KRISCHER GOODMAN

Ever sit through a meeting and have no idea what happened? With increasing distractions, most of us struggle throughout the day to stay in the present.

Now, in a budding trend, business coaches want to teach us how to have a conversation with a colleague or client without allowing our minds to drift. In The Moment Coaching challenges workers at all levels to stay focused at work or home.

Experts say it is the key to better relationships. Our inability to be in the present and really listen when a customer, co-worker, spouse or friend talks to us can cause us to miss crucial information.

Business coach Anese Cavanaugh, owner of Dare to Engage, says although we get stuff done, "we miss out on huge opportunities to engage and connect with other humans." Cavanaugh's Illinois business is designed to help managers work better with their teams. She starts by telling a manager to turn his back to his computer when someone is talking to him. "When you are in the present and pay attention to what's going on, you learn not just what's being spoken, but also the underlying emotion of a team, and that's when things open to you as leader."

Indeed, some experts say workers are discovering the greatest casualty of our mobile, high-tech age is attention. Most of us have become masters of multitasking, adept at responding to e-mail messages during meetings or while on the phone. We manage to make time for multiple distractions when we're actually trying to get work done. Yet, we feel inundated and overwhelmed.

"It's a real problem," says Harvey Sepler, a Miami appellate lawyer, who also teaches at University of Miami law school. "Often, I'm talking to someone and I'm thinking about something I've got to do."

Sepler says when he becomes distracted at the office, he's begun to do the same thing he teaches students -- get up, stretch, walk away and then come back and focus.

Workplace expert Gloria Mark discovered the average worker switches tasks every three minutes, and, once distracted, takes nearly a half-hour to resume the original task. We take our distractions home, too, spending time with our family, only to think about everything that happened at work today and what's about to happen tomorrow.

Because everyone's brain is wired a little differently, solutions vary. Miami business coach Roberto Suarez of Biz Champions says attention can be bolstered through training. He teaches office workers to use the same technique for staying in the moment as golfers -- the standing meditation. In a standing position, he has them focus on body position and silence.

Two weeks ago, Suarez held a workshop at Terrabank in Miami as part of employee appreciation week.

Terrabank's human resources chief, Adriana Nino, says she had attended a previous coaching session

with Suarez. "People need to forget about the distractions and stop worrying about problems in the future," says Nino, who meditates twice a day. "I'm not at work thinking whether my daughter is doing her homework. The only way to stay focused is to practice at it."

Sue Bethanis, an executive/leadership coach, says in meetings where everyone is checking e-mail, or thinking about the next meeting, opportunities for staff engagement are lost. Her San Francisco firm, Mariposa Leadership, teaches people to make the most of the moment. "It's relationship building," she says.

To calm a racing mind, she counsels workers to concentrate on breathing, and then bring the spotlight of their attention back again and again to the work at hand or the person talking to them. "You might even need to write something down which is better than continuing to think about it."

Sometimes, it takes eliminating distractions. The most common suggestion idea is to try to pull the plug on electronic devices. A typical office worker turns to e-mail more than 50 times a day and uses instant messaging 77 times, according to Seattle-based computer productivity consultant RescueTime.

In her new book, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*, author Maggie Jackson writes, "If we jump on every e-mail message or ping, we'll have trouble pursuing our long-term goals. To make inroads on the deep, messy work of life, we need to stay focused."

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