Ever been sitting at your desk delving into a strategic project that deserves your full time and attention, and just as you get settled into the details, the phone or intercom rings, or worst yet, someone knocks on your door and before you even respond marches into your office. It’s urgent, so you drop what you are doing and handle it.

Once you get that crisis out of the way, you try to tackle your project again. Since you were mentally derailed, it takes a little while to settle your focus back. You grab a beverage and try again. About 30 minutes later you are making great head way and BOOM! Another interruption. It’s happening again. Sound familiar?

This little scene I’ve played out happens to every CEO across America! It doesn’t matter if you run a team of hundreds and make multimillions at the bottom line or it’s just you and a handful of family struggling to make a profit. People are bound to interrupt you and make you crazy!

I didn’t think about this much until the other day. I was leading one of my business coaching groups on a webinar session and decided just for fun to ask them what was making them crazy that day. I keep the session on mute, so the confidential answers began flying into my Q and A area. Can you guess what they answered? It wasn’t PCI, it wasn’t truck technology, it wasn’t acquisitions, growth, marketing or margins. It wasn’t even tight cash flow. It was people! People issues were making them nuts!

But, you aren’t surprised at all, are you. Deep down, you understand that your problems with employees, vendors, customers, and family trump just about every other challenge you have. So, how’s it going with your people -- your staff, your customers, your vendors? Do you find yourself reacting to unexpected situations or just plain frustrated with people not doing their jobs to your satisfaction? If so, then check out these 12 practical tips so you can:

- Have more time for strategic planning (what you are supposed to be doing!)
- Have less “people challenges” in your day
- Watch your cash flow grow since it’s people that create profits!
Here are those 12 practical techniques to conquer your people problems once and for all!

1. **Use the Power Motivators Daily** – People are desperately hungry for acceptance, approval and appreciation. As Ken Blanchard, *The One Minute Manager* author aptly said, your job is to catch people doing something right. John Maxwell, one of my Christian business mentors, kept a list of his staff and ticked off when he delivered kind words of approval and appreciation in his team. Now that is being deliberate. And, it was never faked. It was always sincere. Use these three powerful tools as often as you can.

2. **Listen More Actively** – We’ve all been in situations where someone was talking and as they spouted on we either were thinking about something else, or brainstorming in our mind our next reply. When you do that, it’s likely you miss a good portion of the message. Not only do you lose the message, but the speaker instinctually realized you are only half-engaged (if that) so may feel disrespected. Give them less than full attention trivializes what they are saying. Practice active listening. Shut off your brain, look them in the eye and try to hear every word.

3. **Summarize** – People feel valued when they know you’ve heard them, and the only way for them to know you accurately heard them is to summarize what they said. This is an excellent technique particularly whenever the person speaking, be they employee, customer or vendor, is dissatisfied or angry. Check in to see if you got their message correctly. And be prepared when you open that door for them to dump more on you! That’s OK!

4. **Deal Only With Trustworthy People** – stop having interaction with people who have proven they don’t deserve your trust. Life is too short to do otherwise. First, point the finger inward and ask yourself if you are trustworthy. Do you always do what you say you will do without excuses or blame? Next, if you have untrustworthy staff, fire them! Right now! Have customers you can’t trust? Let them go to your competitor! Vendors you can’t trust? Find new vendors. Rid yourself of people who have proven they are not to be trusted.

5. **Set General Expectations and Guidelines** – If you can only give someone 5 or 10 minutes of time, let them know that in advance. They can either agree to your timetable
or offer to defer the meeting for a better time. In addition, let them know what you intend to cover or expect them to cover in that time.

6. **Verbalize Specific Expectations** – Whether with a staff member, customer or vendor, don’t expect people to read your mind. People want to know what is expected of them. Whenever possible, set expectations verbally and then follow-up with written summarization and detail. One trick I learned from one of my business coaches was have the staff person do the written summarization rather than do it myself!

7. **Check for Understanding**. You’ve just given what you believe are perfectly clear instructions. However, what your listener heard and what you thought you said may be totally different! Next time you delegate, ask the person to summarize what you asked them to do and be sure both of you are on exactly the same page.

8. **Use Delegation Midpoint Checks**– Most petroleum CEOs complain of one particular thing when it comes to delegation – they don’t have a good follow-up system. There is nothing worse than finding out at the last minute that something you delegated and trusted to get done didn’t happen. When you delegate, especially to someone whose abilities are unknown or unproven, establish mid-point benchmarks and targets. Microsoft Outlook’s Task function is a fabulous tool for follow-up tracking so you don’t forget to check in. Use the reminders for specific interim benchmarks and you will never miss get another nasty, last minute surprise.

9. **Provide feedback with FACTS**. Believe it or not, every human being wants feedback about how they are doing. Especially when there are problems, stick to factual, observable, quantifiable behaviors. “Mr. Customer, 4 out of the last 5 payments you’ve made we received 10 days after our cut off date.” That is far more powerful than telling them they are always late!

10. **Welcome and receive feedback**. Simple things like, “what do you need from me to do your job better?” or “Did we meet your expectations?” and ultimately, “would you recommend us to a friend or associate?” are important questions to ask regularly. In fact, there is a whole science devoted to this now called “Net Promoter Score” that tracks how well you are doing.
11. **Ask for solutions.** It’s easy for people to whine, blame and criticize. You’ll reduce these energy-draining behaviors if you constantly ask for solutions. When someone comes to you for a decision or with a problem, lead with “what do you think we should do?” Create a culture of positive expectations.

12. **Document.** When difficult issues arise with people, employees, vendors, or customers, write down the situation and your response. When you see repetitive patterns, whether yours or theirs, take action immediately.

As I catapult all sizes and sectors of petroleum companies on to more cash and profits, especially lately with our Hidden Profits business coaching, one thing is perfectly clear to me. Profit and cash are still all about the people – employees, customers and vendors. Conquer your people challenges, and you can conquer the world!

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