



Harlene Anderson, Ph.D.

Tips for How to Have a *Good Assistant*

Most bosses depend on a right-hand-person to support them. Whether you are in the “corner office” or the owner of a small business, having the most effective assistant is one of the most valuable assets you can have. They will help you be more efficient and productive by helping you generate a positive work flow, schedule meetings, work with clients, and run your office as flawlessly as possible. But how do you get the “right” person? Many bosses think it’s in the interview/hiring and to a large extent it is. You, however, are the key to having a good assistant: taking the time to explain your work style, expectations and their worth, as well as learn about their expectations on the job, will be time well spent and will help you save time and company dollars without having to cut corners to meet goals.

Here are some tips to best maximize your assistant’s talents and potentials, regardless of your office size or your position. In my consulting and leadership training experiences, I continually received positive feedback on how these tips have helped bosses and their assistants develop positive working relationships, creating a more productive, effective and successful office. You’re the boss, so take the lead.

Seven Tips, Plus One

These tips can simply be summed up as “having good manners” and “following the golden rule.” See what you think.

1. **Respect and trust.** Assistants are people not just robots performing a job. They need to be treated with respect. Keep in mind that respect is a two-way street. It is a relationship characteristic and not a personality trait. If you want your assistant to respect you then you must respect them. But first of all, you must believe that every person is worthy of respect, and this includes respect for one’s self. Respect can be communicated in many small ways: by your voice tone, attitude and body language. A dismissive gesture, a roll of the eyes or ignoring what another person says is not a respectful response. Responding respectfully does not mean that you agree or condone the other’s words or actions, or even like them. It refers to the manner in which you handle tense situations, disapprove a decision or express frustration. Keep in mind that trust like respect is a two-way street. It is a relationship characteristic not a personal one. If you want your assistant to trust you then you must trust them.
2. **Appreciate.** Most people like to be appreciated. Being appreciative is showing acknowledgement of the person, and expressing value demonstrating gratitude for them. Showing appreciation does not mean you must be effusive. Appreciation can be demonstrated and communicated in many small ways: an approving nod of head, a thumbs-up gesture or a simple “thank you” or “you’re welcome.” Keep in mind that both

private and public appreciation and acknowledgement go a long way. Research indicates that feeling appreciated can be equally important to an employee than a raise or bonus, and sometimes more so.

3. Delegate. The purpose of delegating is simply so you don't have to do it. It is not to get something done more quickly or efficiently but to get it done by someone other than yourself. Know when and when not to delegate. Know how to delegate. State your request, expectations and deadline clearly. Developing a good delegating relationship with your assistant can take time, yet time that is definitely worth it for both of you.
4. Open and closed doors. Let your assistant know when it's okay to interrupt you. If your door is open does that mean you can be interrupted? Maybe yes, maybe no. So, be clear. Keep in mind that there are some things that are important for your assistant to know. Good assistants keep their eyes open and their ears tuned-in. They watch you and listen to you. They try to foresee your needs. I call it the "gift of anticipation." For instance, if your door is open and they can hear you on the phone, it doesn't necessarily mean that they are being nosy. Good assistants automatically listen to your call while doing something else. Based on what they hear, they can anticipate your needs – perhaps you need a report while on the call or a memo afterwards. It can also be helpful with some calls to use speaker phone so they can hear both sides of the conversation. Again, this is especially helpful if you gesture or write a note that you need some documents during the call or want them to summarize the call. The same can be said for meetings: invite your assistant to sit in on meetings for which their help with note-taking and follow-up can save you time.
5. Information Flow. Another time saver is letting your assistant help you with information flow. Delegate certain snail mail, interoffice correspondence and email sorting and responding. Give clear instructions regarding what to handle and how. Assistants are often like a "telephone switchboard", a lot of information flows through them and others in the business might be more likely to talk with them than with you. In other words, they usually know more than you do about what is going on the business, especially when it comes to people.
6. Be discrete. Know what is important and appropriate to share and what to not share. Being discrete does not mean being secretive but careful, whether with business information or company politics. Don't hesitate to ask your assistant for feedback. Don't hesitate to say "please keep this confidential."
7. Notice, nurture and support potential. Recognize, and help your assistant recognize their potential, and encourage a willingness to learn new skills and to stretch old ones. Think of yourself as not only a boss but also a mentor. Help your assistant grow in the position. You will reap the benefits of giving time off to attend a seminar or paying the registration fee if training is in your budget. The better your assistant can perform, the better you can.

Plus one:

8. Personal Tasks. Personal tasks can be a deal breaker or a relationship breaker. Asking your assistant to take care of personal tasks can be touchy. You want to be very clear

upfront if you expect help with handle personal tasks such as running errands, booking hotels, getting you coffee, etc. If your assistant is a formal hire, you can list such responsibilities in a job description, and clarify in the interview why this kind of help is important for you. If your assistant is someone from within the business who “fell into” the position informally it is especially important to take the time to discuss both your expectations and theirs.

These tips are especially important with a new assistant. Taking the time upfront to develop the relationship and let them know your expectations, preferences, etc. will save both of you time and frustration down the road. If something happens that displeases or frustrates you, address it sooner rather than later. The key to a positive resolution though is being thoughtful as to how you do so.

It’s easy to inadvertently assume that your assistant can read your mind. For instance, how do you like phone calls to be handled? If you are busy, on another line, at lunch or playing golf, tell your assistant what you want them to tell the caller. Or, you are in a meeting and your spouse, another manager in the company or an important customer calls and says it’s important that they speak with you asap. Your assistant needs to know how to handle such calls. Do you want the call put through? Do you want a note passed to you and you nod “yes” or “no?” If you don’t want the call put through, do you have a standard response that you want your assistant to give the caller. If so, say what it is. Be clear and explicit.

These tips can help you select your next assistant and get off to a good start. You can also use these tips to restart your relationship with your current one. If you have a sense of humor, you might say, “Can we start over?” Let’s pretend that you are interviewing for your position.” Or, you can simply start over in how you relate and communicate with your assistant. Keep in mind: you can’t change another person but you can change yourself.