

# Take the Pledge: No Texting While Leading

The technology that gives us the ability to multitask and network with many more people than was previously possible may lead to cognitive impairment while also robbing us of the ability to truly connect with other individuals. The human brain can't handle the overflow of information, and this constant frenzy of activity may be hindering our productivity more than helping it.

**M**y sister came home from her grandson's second birthday party bursting with pride. The little genius is already learning letters and counting to 10. Indulge her if you think that doesn't prove he's the next Mozart or Einstein; after all, she *is* Connor's grandmother.

We've had some anxious moments getting here because Connor was one of more than 520,000 babies born prematurely in the U.S. annually. Although new technologies are making it possible to save more and more of these babies, studies have reported success with a treatment as old as a mother's love: massage. According to the research, massaging preemies with a gentle touch can lead to more weight gain, increased bone density, and other positive benefits—getting them home to their families sooner. But

here's the kicker, as noted in *Pediatrics*, the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics: “the beneficial effects...occurred only if nurses performed the intervention with focused attention on the infant.” In other words, explains one of the authors, Dr. K.J.S. Anand, a quick rub with one hand while tracking a beeping monitor won't cut it. The caregivers must blot out mechanical distractions and even the clinical objectivity drilled into them by medical schools; they must make a genuine *human* connection.

Add this to other research regarding the importance of presence and focus—even as technology enables multitasking—to uncover implications for management and leadership. For example, consider Facebook. Some users boast of having as many as 5,000 friends on the site, but an Oxford University professor contends that the human brain can manage no more than 150 friendships. As found in the research regarding preemies and massage, there's a significant difference between contact and *meaningful connection*.

Not to mention how dangerous distraction can be, as demonstrated by research showing that

texting impairs drivers to a greater degree than alcohol. Psychologists at the University of Utah estimate, “The likelihood of a collision increases nearly six-fold when people are engaged in sending text messages while driving....You are basically driving blind.”

Highly publicized efforts to end texting while driving include Oprah Winfrey's campaign to have people sign a pledge to stop. I suggest a parallel pledge: no texting—or other distractions—while leading. Make it a priority to be truly *present* in conversations. Turn off your computer when you're on the phone. Don't text or check tweets when you're in a meeting—as a matter of fact, don't even keep your phone on vibrate. All of that activity substitutes a frenzied feeding of external contact for true connection to the person with whom you're talking.

Enhancing your ability to truly connect will have quick returns in greater productivity. It also may promote a long-term payoff. About 25% of senior citizens (currently some 15 million Americans) develop “mild cognitive impairment”; of those, 50% have a good chance of an Alzheimer's diagnosis within five years. As the Baby Boomers age...well, do the math.



“Cognitive loss” actually begins in our 20s. If you could look at your brain cells at that age, you’d see something that appears, to me at least, like the root system of a plant. As the years go by, these root-like structures shrink. Equally damaging, if not worse: Tiny nodes on the cell’s tendrils disappear. “Physiologically, there are two events in play as we age and experience cognitive loss,” a Stanford Hospital presentation explains. “One is the shrinkage of dendrites, the structures that branch off the body of the neurons (nerve cells) and conduct the electrical activity of the brain. The other is the loss of the delicate spines that form the critical connection between dendrites.”

In other words, what’s happening is a loss in our ability to *connect*—to remember all the things that make up our identity and facilitate relationships and also to judge what is and isn’t important or appropriate (dubbed “executive functioning”). According to research from the University of California, San Francisco, a big factor is a deficit in the ability to ignore what is *not* important, which means that everyone who multitasks is indulging in behavior that could increase his or her risk of cognitive impairment. As the Stanford researchers conclude: “People who are regularly bombarded with several streams of electronic information do not pay attention, control their memory, or switch from one job to another as well as those who prefer to complete one task at a time.” One of the lead researchers, Clifford Nass, describes multitaskers as “suckers for irrelevancy....Every-

thing distracts them.”

So let’s label multitasking for what it actually is: an addiction—repeated behavior that reduces awareness of the present and damages mental capacity over time. To be a better leader, reduce distractions—both external stimuli *and* internal chatter. As you converse, are you making assumptions or judgments? Are you slot-

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ting what you hear into what you already know? Are you framing your own argument so that you’re not really open to hearing something new? In other words, is your mind so busy with matters touching on identity—thoughts about what’s important to how you are known—that you aren’t connecting with other people or with your own reservoir of deep wisdom?

Profound perspective on that question is at the heart of *My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist’s Personal Journey*. The bestselling book by Jill Bolte Taylor, a Ph.D. in neuroanatomy, recounts the massive brain hemorrhage she suffered at age 37. In recovery she has become an impassioned spokesperson for the power of connection at two levels. For one thing, in order to function well, we human beings rely on neural integration between the two hemi-

spheres of our cerebral cortex. The left brain handles data, definitions, details; the right brain’s forte is the “big picture.” Together, Taylor says, they are “adept at weaving together a single seamless perception of the world....”

Her stroke shows what happens when the seam splits. The left side of her brain was drowning in blood. So while it would pipe up, “You need help. Dial 9-1-1,” she was losing the ability to recognize the numbers on her telephone. At the same time, Taylor became more and more aware of the outputs of her right brain: feelings of “tranquility, safety, blessedness, euphoria, and omniscience.” With awe she describes a second, deeper kind of connection: “...the boundaries of my earthly body dissolved and I melted into the universe.”

Such bliss is hardly a workable business model. Nevertheless, an appreciation of the power of connection is essential to success. Yes, we need sound analysis and the ability to draw on experience to solve problems. And we need to take full advantage of technological advances. But, in addition, we must connect to others in order to reach for possibilities in unknown territory to achieve visions greater than we can realize on our own. And we must connect to *all* of our internal resources, as well—not just data retained from learning and experience, but also nonlinear capacities: insight, intuition, creativity. **SF**

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