

## “MANAGERS, ARE YOU REALLY AVAILABLE TO YOUR EMPLOYEES?”



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Some organizations, in order to break through the “ivory tower” syndrome of inaccessible managers, have mandated that management must leave their doors open at all times. The purpose is to convey the message that “I am here for you, and accessible if you need me.” While the intention is admirable, this extreme (and possibly counter-productive) gesture will not necessarily solve the real issue of management accessibility.

Physical availability involves being on site, within view, door open or perhaps MBWA - management by walking around - where people can literally physically access you. However, as companies have implemented multi-rater assessments or evaluations on their leadership, it frequently is revealed that many leaders who are physically available are not necessarily psychologically available to those who need their assistance.

For instance, some managers may abide by the “open door” policy in the literal sense, but when someone approaches the doorway they are given clear signals – both verbal and non-verbal – not to disturb or interrupt them. These can include: not looking up, looking up and showing subtle annoyance, or acknowledging the person but curtly saying, “Yes- what is it?”

No one wants to “bother” their boss, and some managers can make their employees feel as if wanting to access them is an imposition. The quality of interaction is likely to be brief and superficial, with the employee following suit and staying transaction- oriented. They may leave feeling as if their needs or concerns won’t be addressed, and that the boss is merely going through the motions being available.

This is in contrast to the genuinely available and relational manager who clearly welcomes people when their door is open: an employee in the doorway is first positively acknowledged with eye contact, a smile, or a wave to come on in. This is often accompanied by a welcoming statement such as “Hi, Roger, what can I do for you?” The employee in this circumstance is more likely to feel supported and valued. An effective communicator will also probe the importance of the issue, and if the time is not good for a lengthy discussion, will suggest an alternate time.

Managers today have a genuine challenge in balancing the needs of their employees with their own needs in order to be fully effective in their role. They need to be available to support their employees with coaching, guidance and resources for them to do their best work and accomplish their goals. They also have a need for quiet private time to think and to develop thoughtful proposals, plans and reports.

Managers therefore need to create legitimate uninterrupted time to do the aspects of their work that require their focus and concentration, making sure that they balance that time with sufficient accessibility to their staff in other parts of the day or week. When their door is open, they need to be prepared to give employees their full and uninterrupted attention.

Ultimately, the issue of an “open door” policy is as much about being mentally and emotionally available as it is about a physical presence. People know which managers are really accessible and which are not, regardless of whether or not their door is open.

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