

ST★R TEAM



The goal of building a Star Team is maximizing effectiveness through synergy.

Four Ways You And Your Assistant Can Build An Invaluable Relationship



BY JOAN BURGE, Founder and CEO, Office Dynamics

One of your most valuable assets in the workplace—indeed, one of the keys to continuing professional success as an executive or manager—is your secretary or assistant.

Assistants can save you time, manage your projects, reduce your workload, act as liaisons between you and your staff (or others), become buffers in challenging situations and help you stay organized, among other things. They're literally worth their weight in gold.

And they're even more valuable when the two of you form what I like to call a "Star Team." Do you have one?

Building Star Teams

Star Teams don't just happen. You build them over time. It's rare that a boss and assistant instantly have a rapport. Even when they do, they'll likely have problems to overcome at some point. That's natural.

The goal of building a Star Team is maximizing effectiveness through syner-

gy—meaning that, together, you and your assistant are able to achieve even more than you would independently, experiencing greater success and fewer obstacles in the process. In short, the two of you "click!" The right hand knows what the left hand is doing, and vice versa—so you're more efficient and productive, both individually and as a team.

The best, quickest way to achieve synergy is to treat your assistant as an extension of you, and to follow through on certain responsibilities that'll help create a Star

Team. Here are 4 ways to start doing that today:

1. Schedule Time Together

The most important part of your day is the time you dedicate to your assistant — preferably in early morning, just after settling into your office (as long as you don't have an obligation or meeting that prevents it, of course).

If you haven't yet embraced this “best

practice,” consider doing so. Regular, uninterrupted meetings are critical to the success of any Star Team. Further, if you wait until the end of the day, it may never happen, as priorities tend to shift—and they could easily edge out this vital meeting. Finally, make sure others know that, barring emergencies, you and your assistant are not to be disturbed. Have calls sent to voice mail or make arrangements for someone to cover the phones.

Then, be sure to discuss the following:

Daily calendars. Schedules often change, or meetings might be posted on wrong days at the wrong times. To ensure you're both on the same page, it's always best to review the day's events together.

Telephone messages. This is the perfect time to go through your stack of telephone messages and pass along those your assistant can handle.

Mail. Have your assistant organize your electronic and written mail, weed out junk mail, and highlight critical information such as dates and times of meetings, deadlines, items requested by others, or anything needing follow-up. Discuss how your assistant may be able to help.

Project overview. Review projects you've been assigned or have delegated. Can your assistant lend a hand—conducting research, assembling information, creating graphs or charts, or doing calculations? It might require a little coaching on your part, but this “future focused” approach will be worth it—saving you plenty of headaches and time going forward.

Other topics you may want to discuss during these morning meetings include departmental issues, visitors, employee-related issues (both good and bad) and upcoming travel.

Note: If such meetings are completely new to you, try this:

Start by meeting with your assistant every Monday morning. Then work up to three mornings a week, and so forth.

In a short while, this small effort should begin yielding big benefits: You'll reduce stress, prevent last-minute chaos, improve communication, decrease paperwork, tackle priorities even better and remain organized. Equally important, your assistant will complete your assignments more quickly, with better results.

2. Share Your Expectations

Are you impressed by assistants who seem to be able to read your mind? Avoid thinking they can! Even the best assistants will fall short of this expectation, because they can't know what you think at all times.

If you have a concern about anything your assistant does or doesn't do, speak up in a timely fashion. Communicate expectations clearly and tactfully on issues related to performance, quality of work, deadlines, etc.

Perhaps you think you're already giving clear directions when, in fact, you've only described the end result you're looking for—not a roadmap on getting there. Most managers give their assistants bits of information and expect them to piece the entire puzzle together. That works for some assistants, but not for all of them. So remember, the more detailed you are about your expectations—including the way you want things done, as well as deadlines—the more likely your assistant will meet them.

Conversely, give assistants the opportunity to express *their* needs and expectations, too. Often, your assistant may simply require additional information. Whenever you assign a task, be sure to ask, “Is there anything you need from me?”

Here are additional questions that can help strengthen the work relationship:

How do you suggest we work better together so we're more effective and successful in our tasks and careers?

What matters most to you in your professional and personal life? (Note: Asking this question will help you understand who your assistant really is, as well as what may motivate outstanding performance.)

How can I use my talents and resources to help you become an even more accomplished and helpful assistant?

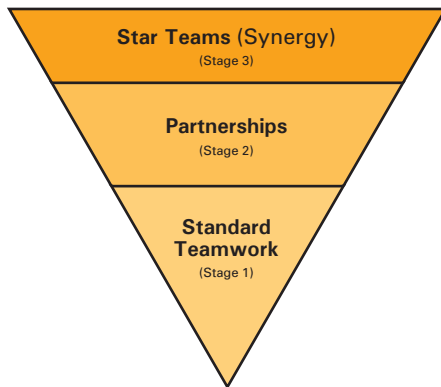
You may also want to find time to talk about larger issues, such as the office culture or environment, your families and friends, industry trends or news in your line of business, and your own personal and professional goals as well.

3. Depend on Each Other

To enjoy that “Star Team” synergy mentioned earlier, embrace the view that you

Stages of Manager/Assistant Growth™

Star Teams don't just happen. You build them over time. Note here that the majority of manager-assistant teams never become true partnerships, where there's at least limited give-and-take. And even fewer partnerships graduate to “synergy,” where both manager and assistant work most effectively and productively as individuals and as a team.



How To Build A Star Team With Your Assistant

- Give plenty of discretion.
- Set realistic deadlines for projects.
- Develop trust over time.
- Avoid micromanaging.
- Share information in a timely manner.
- Listen closely.
- Include assistant in goal-setting.
- Hold formal and informal reviews.
- Co-develop assistant's career by supporting professional growth opportunities.

and your assistant are partners who depend on each other. Success is not a one-way street!

Your assistant depends on you for guidance and information, and to hand over assignments early enough to do them well.

You depend on your assistant to be organized and pleasant with internal and external customers, as well as to help manage calendars, keep you on task, and free up time so you can focus on major responsibilities and projects.

And what better way to depend on each other than to communicate about issues, tasks, problems and solutions early and often? Remember: If you don't find the time to communicate—and depend upon each other—days and weeks can pass where you're both "doing" things—but not using synergy to accomplish even more. As a result, projects can fall through the cracks, confusion can cause unnecessary rework, and stress builds up.

4. Openly Discuss Differences

Finally, recognize that even the best executive-assistant teams experience strife or conflict from time to time. What makes a Star Team is a willingness to resolve the problems.

When you avoid issues, "negative hidden communication" occurs. Essentially, this means you both sense a problem isn't being addressed—which throws up roadblocks to good dialogue, stifles creativity, and sometimes fosters resentment and anger that can pull the two of you apart.

One solution: Positively approach your assistant with constructive feedback or your view on this difference of opinion.

For instance, say you want your assistant to handle certain duties that he or she doesn't feel ought to be managed without your approval or direct authority. Invite the assistant into your office in a welcoming, open way and discuss the matter. What objections and concerns exist, and why? How can you address them or explain your expectations even better?

Using this three-step approach throughout the conversation may help:

Changing Roles

Savvy executives and managers understand that administrative professionals' roles have changed dramatically in the past 40 years. The typical assistant has moved...

| From | To |
|------------------------------|---|
| Message taker | ▶ Call handler |
| Task completer | ▶ Project manager |
| Problem identifier | ▶ Problem solver |
| Sole contributor | ▶ Partner and team player |
| Follower | ▶ Leader of process improvements |
| Average interpersonal skills | ▶ Excellent interpersonal skills |
| Direction taker | ▶ Self-motivator |
| Minute taker | ▶ Meeting participant |
| Typist | ▶ Skilled computer user |
| Information collector | ▶ Researcher/information organizer |
| Few challenges | ▶ More high-level responsibilities and greater challenges |

This is what I expect....
This is what I would like you to do....
I believe you can handle these responsibilities. Here's why....

Then take time to listen and learn how your assistant feels about what you've just said. Concede any valid points—and conclude by vowing to work even better together.

If you do this and the other best practices listed above, you'll go a long way toward forming a Star Team that'll boost the value that you and your assistant bring to the workplace. And you'll both enjoy greater job satisfaction and career success as a result.

Joan Burge, founder and CEO of Office Dynamics, is one of North America's foremost authorities on administrative effectiveness and workplace effectiveness. A renowned speaker and trainer, she's best known for her Star Achievement Series®—a sophisticated, 12-part administrative and support-staff training program promoting "Star" performance that's been endorsed by some of the world's most prestigious businesses and organizations. The celebrated author of *Become an Inner Circle Assistant* and two other books for success-minded employees and executives, Joan has been sharing her unique brand of enthusiasm and insight since founding Office Dynamics in 1990. Contact her at JBurge@OfficeDynamics.com.