



Career Path: With Experience Comes ... Patience

Skills and Professional Development



We normally assume it is wisdom that comes from experience. No doubt this is true for some of us. But I wonder if what we think of as wisdom is based on a healthy foundation of patience. Let me give you one small example to illustrate the idea.

Have any of you ever been away from work and neglected to respond to an URGENT request, only to find the matter resolved upon your return? If you have ever managed to step entirely away from your work for a week or more, I expect you've experienced this. What can we learn from this phenomenon?

Well, it could be that people are incautious in their requests, and label them "URGENT" when they are not urgent. Or perhaps, for matters that are truly urgent, the requestor finds another way to satisfy their request when they realize you are absent. Either scenario might lead you to ask yourself, "Why did they come to me in the first instance when there was another way for them to get what they needed?"

Requests within the scope of your job

Maybe the request falls clearly within the scope of your job. Then I think we would agree it is reasonable for people to ask you for help. Most of us are not bothered by legitimate requests, so long as they are legitimately delivered. A legitimate request becomes an inappropriate burden to us when the person simply sits on it for no good reason other than their poor time management.

We've all experienced a request for expedited service only to realize our counterpart could have asked for our help weeks earlier. I don't know about you, but it burns me up to respond in crisis mode when an issue has become a burning issue because of someone else's negligence.

The chairman of my company asked us to follow two simple rules when making requests of others. I try hard to honor these rules in all cases:

1. Always assume the person you are approaching is as busy as you are. They are not sitting idle waiting for your request. Your proposed deadline must take the recipient's busy schedule into account.
2. After considering the first point, tailor your proposed deadline to the difficulty of the task. You should propose a shorter deadline for responses that take only a moment to deliver. But allow more time for tasks that take more time.

You might find these rules blindly obvious and simple. I do, too. But ask yourself how often people observe the rules in practice, and you will appreciate the beauty of learning to follow them yourself.

Requests outside the scope of your job

This all relates to legitimate requests, i.e., those on topics within the scope of our jobs. How shall we think about requests that fall outside the scope of our jobs? For all the things that we must do, there are a great number that we could do. And because we are conscientious, hard-working, and competent, in our heart of hearts we know we can do many things better than our work colleagues themselves.

Have you ever found yourself doing something that was technically a co-worker's job? Maybe they asked you nicely and you didn't want to say no. Maybe you knew you could do it relatively quickly and it would save you time later not to have to correct their sloppy work.

Whatever your rationale, consider that you may be sabotaging your own success. If you have any meaningful responsibilities, then you are already busy. If you are working strategically, then you have already set your own priorities. Yes, we adjust our priorities according to external circumstances. But adjusting your priorities to suit a colleague's laziness or incompetence only enables them and harms you.

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Now I suspect you are more tactful than I am and would never call your colleagues lazy or incompetent, at least not to their faces. This is where patience masquerading as wisdom comes to your rescue.

No matter what type of URGENT requests you receive, simply continue to do your own work according to your own priorities:

The person who is trying to get you to do their work for them will see that you do not rise to the bait. They will eventually look elsewhere with no drama.

The person who has mismanaged their time needs to suffer consequences for their failure. Let them. Even if this means they try to escalate to your boss. If they have caused a crisis for you by their own poor time management, your boss will also see it.

And if an unexpected, truly urgent topic comes up that deserves your immediate attention according to your pre-determined strategy and priorities, you may work on it with a clean conscience. But only then.

So in sum: Stick to your own priorities. No need for an ugly confrontation. No need for bitterness. Only patience. Maybe that's true wisdom after all.

Be well.

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