How CEOs Can Take Control of Their Emails and Achieve Inbox Zero

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Although there are many methodologies that a leader can practice to manage their emails effectively, a consistent and thought-through process is the most effective way to systemize and respond to emails and is a step of stewardship for the effective leader.

I have worked with CEOs for two decades, and almost every CEO deals with an enormous amount of emails and struggles with how to manage them effectively. In one survey that I conducted with over 1,000 CEOs and business owners, 93% stated that they struggle with email management. Through my experience as a founder of CEO Experience and having worked with CEOs of both large and small businesses, I have found that effective email management can mean good overall management.

In today's world, email is a critical tool for leaders to communicate effectively. Unfortunately, many leaders either neglect their email correspondence or lack an efficient method for managing their inbox.

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1. Divide your emails into your company business year

In business, starts and stops are essential to success. Many

things in business are divided into a yearly structure. Business finances are often divided into a business year. One major mistake that many CEOs make concerning their emails is never dividing them into a business year. They continue to let their emails build up year after year. When you divide your emails in each calendar year, leaders can have a start and stop in their email inbox. Each new calendar year will bring your emails to zero.

For example, if your business calendar year ends in September, you should archive last year's emails and create a new main folder for the new business year. Effective email management starts with understanding your email information's starting and stopping points.

2. Create folders for your main subjects

An important step to effective email management is organizing your emails into folders. Folders allow the leader to categorize key areas of focus that the leader might have to deal with repeatedly. Folders should be created for key topics and key people in the organization. The better a leader can identify their folders, the better the leader will be able to manage their email.

3. CEOS need folders on these nine key areas of business

Every business, no matter its size, deals with issues related to strategy and vision: accounting and finance, sales and marketing, human resources, operations, customers, personal leadership and issues, kingdom impact, and team development and culture. When a leader knows where to file their emails, emails become easier to manage. Many emails stay in the inbox because the leader has nowhere to file the email.

4. Create sub-folders under your main folders for easy seating capability

Once your main folders have been created, the task of creating subfolders to organize your emails better should be created. For example, you might want to create a subfolder for each employee in your company under the human resource folder. These would allow you to keep critical information on the employee that would be easy to search and find. Subfolders are essential to good email management.

Only emails that are useful for future consideration or record-keeping should be kept. Don’t forget that your sent folder is also a document folder for information that can be searched when needed.

One example that I use is to copy or blind copy myself on a sent email for filing purposes.

5. Create email templates for emails you know you will use frequently

Great leadership is consistent leadership. When leaders repeatedly do tasks, they will find success when the task is done well. There is much repetition in email correspondence. The CEO who will use emails they write as a template for later emails can save themselves hours of work time and practice good stewardship.

6. Use flags or develop a way to

identify critical email follow-up

One way to sort through emails quickly in your inbox is to flag them for future follow-up. You can color code emails using flags or file an email with a reminder to work on the email later.

In my experience in managing massive amounts of emails, I address every email in one of four ways: unessential emails, which can be deleted; FYI or understanding emails, which should be read and then deleted; U-turn emails that need action but at a later time; and urgent and timely emails that need action immediately.

The third category (u-turn) of emails is those that need action and will often be forgotten unless flagged for a later date.

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7. Challenge yourself to act on each email every day

Being aggressive about email management will reduce stress and make the leader more productive. Calendaring times throughout the day to read email can be helpful. For example, a leader could schedule 15 minutes at 9, 11, 2, and 5 to check email and respond appropriately. The more consistent habits and behaviors you establish as a leader, the more productive you will become.

One senior government executive I have worked with has effectively managed her email inbox to zero over her two decades in government. She states, “Effective email management will reduce stress, enhance performance, and help the leader to gain credibility in every area of their leadership.”

Although effective email management may not be the only key to business success and good stewardship, it is an essential part of the process in which many executive leaders spend their time and effort.

Email is a component of every job and task in the workforce today. Managing emails and responding promptly can make the difference between business success and failure. When leaders understand how to effectively use email as a tool instead of seeing it as a burden, they will move from just responding to emails to utilizing it as one of the essential technical aspects of the business in which they work.

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