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SENDING THE RIGHT SIGNALS: What Your Office Says About You

What does your office say about you?

That's a question many people would rather not answer.

While you may think the way you keep your desk is a matter of personal preference and style, it isn't. Your office is about as public as it gets. Even if you don't have outside visitors, your colleagues, direct reports and boss see it every day. While standards for neatness in your company may not be high, that fact doesn't get you off the hook. At the conscious or subconscious level your boss notices and judges you accordingly, often harshly.

I'll never forget the first time I walked into Frank's office. His boss described him as a brilliant engineer, talented leader and strong candidate for a promotion. But this CEO couldn't feel comfortable moving him up. He just had the sense that Frank wasn't going to be able to handle senior management. When I saw his office I knew why.

Everywhere you looked there were stacks of paper; next to the computer, on the round conference table nearby, on the floor. Like many brilliant, busy people, Frank had a lot of complex projects to manage. I was fairly certain however, that if I opened the file drawers that I would find them empty. They were.

People make assumptions about your competence, professionalism, intelligence and future based on your management of time and workspace. If it looks like a bomb went off in your office, you are sending all the wrong signals.

Your workspace is an extension of you. And this isn't being nit picky. It's not just an aesthetic issue. It's grounded in reality.

I recently read that each lost piece of paper costs a business \$120. And 15% of all paper handled in business is lost, according to the Delphi Group, a Boston consultancy. 30 percent of all employees time is spent trying to find lost documents. (Boston Globe, March 12, 2006)

Given that fact, when your boss walks into your office and sees a state of general disarray, what do you suppose she concludes?

There are countless books on office and space organization. They usually emphasize how paper shuffling and distraction waste your time. All that is true! For some people it's motivation enough.

But if you need an extra nudge, let me offer this. In addition to wasting your time and creating stress and reducing productivity, an office set up that signals "overwhelmed" could be a career dead end.

As business psychologist Ross De Simone says, "People look busy, but they are not getting anything done. There are things in our work lives that we feel less comfortable and confident about so we mask these insecurities by being busy in areas that we do not feel comfortable."

Getting organized and creating a better work environment is rarely a matter of simply clearing the papers off your desk. One of the top experts in the field, Julie Morgenstern, says in *Organization from the Inside Out*, that there are usually issues and road blocks you need to address.

Morgenstern talks about common misconceptions, including:

- Organizing is a mysterious talent. It's not. You aren't born with it.
- Organizing is a complex skill. Wrong again. It's quite simple.
- Organizing is an overwhelming, hopeless chore. Nope. It's cleansing and empowering.
- It's impossible to stay organized. Not if you set up a system.

Morgenstern also says there are psychological barriers to organizing. "You haven't bothered 'settling in,' because you long to be somewhere else."

It could be sentimental attachment. "Often it's hard for people to let go of things they aren't using anymore because they infuse them with a tremendous amount of meaning," she says.

There's also the need for distraction, or the need for perfection; you either need something to take you away from what you aren't enjoying, or you don't want to organize unless you can "do the job perfectly," says Morgenstern.

Why would you want to get to the bottom of all this and figure it out?

David Allen, author of *Getting Things Done, The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*, says "Executives at the top are looking to instill 'ruthless execution' in themselves and their people as a basic standard. They know...that behind closed doors, after hours, there remain unanswered calls, tasks to be delegated, unprocessed issues from meetings and conversations, personal responsibilities unmanaged, and dozens of e-mails still not dealt with," says Allen.

“Many of these business people are successful because the crises they solve and the opportunities they take advantage of are bigger than the problems they allow and create in their own offices and briefcases. But given the pace of business and life today, the equation is in question.”

Recently we moved our office to a larger space, so we had the opportunity to do several things; clean out some files, toss what we no longer needed, and plan the new space with our storage needs in mind.

Starting fresh I must admit is wonderful, because you must confront whatever you “stopped seeing,” some time ago. Moving also motivates you to think about how you want to work each day. “You should make it a nice space,” said my husband. “You deserve that, because you spend a lot of time there.”

However, if you don’t have the opportunity to move, you can still start fresh. Walk into your workspace or office with fresh eyes. Imagine you are visiting for the first time. What is your impression? Do you want to be there? Is it inviting? Would you be embarrassed if your boss walked in on Monday morning?

Here are some tips I have found helpful in getting organized:

- Eliminate everything on your desk except what you are currently working on, so you avoid the frustration and distraction of jumping from one project to the next without completing anything.
- Go paperless. If the document exists in the computer system, you probably don’t need a paper copy. We only keep paper copies of legal documents such as contracts. Some paper we keep temporarily for a project, but we try to toss it when it no longer has a purpose.
- Don’t let things pile up. Go through the inbox, regularly.
- Be realistic. If you aren’t going to send that article to someone, or read that magazine, get rid of it. If you aren’t going to attend the event, toss the invitation in the trash. If you let that stuff pile up, you can quickly become overwhelmed.

We now have a beautiful space we are proud to show our clients, and that’s a good feeling. The waiting area, our offices and conference rooms are inviting and nearly clutter free. While there was nothing particularly wrong with our previous office, we all feel very different in the new space. There’s something more “professional” about having a clean, organized space – and it can truly impact the day-to-day mentality of people working in it.