

THE EMAIL BLACK HOLE



Are you convinced you
are too busy to keep up
with your inbox?

Do you regularly
apologize to people
after failing to return
correspondence?

Does your staff send you
multiple follow-up emails
covering the same topic?



Technology allows us to access information at the touch of a finger, and email and social media help teams connect to members across the globe. Yet, there are many among us who routinely take more than 72 hours to return emails, if we return them at all. These email black holes cause serious bottlenecks in workflow and decision-making, and if you exhibit the tendencies described in this article, you may be part of the problem. In fact, you may be derailing.

Derailers are personality characteristics that may actually be strengths under normal circumstances. Under mounting pressure to perform and as your career progresses, those same personality characteristics turn into dysfunctional interpersonal tendencies that can deal crippling blows to your professional and personal reputation.

A reputation for creating email black holes can affect your career on three levels:

1. The majority of leaders who fail do so because they are unable to build and maintain a functional team. If you have a reputation for going off the grid when your team is under pressure, they are less likely to trust you as a leader.
2. If trust is important among your employees, it is critical among your colleagues. A reputation as a flaky communicator will make others wary of dealing with you.
3. Studies show that your boss is more likely to pay attention to your reputation than your performance data, especially when considering you for a raise or promotion.

The Best Defense

So, how can you avoid a reputation for creating email black holes? The answer is self-awareness.

Personality assessment and feedback provide a clear understanding of your reputation and the characteristics and behaviors that contribute to that reputation. This powerful knowledge allows leaders to

Derailers and the HDS

Hogan measures derailing characteristics along 11 scales using the Hogan Development Survey.

Excitable: easily annoyed, hard to please, and emotionally volatile

Skeptical: cynical, sensitive to criticism, and focused on the negative

Cautious: resistant to change, risk-averse, and slow to make decisions

Reserved: uncommunicative and indifferent to the feelings of others

Leisurely: overtly cooperative, but privately irritable, stubborn, and uncooperative

Bold: overly self-confident, arrogant, with inflated feelings of self-worth

Mischievous: charming, risk-taking, limit-testing and excitement-seeking

Colorful: dramatic, attention-seeking, interruptive, and poor listening skills

Imaginative: creative, but thinking and acting in unusual or eccentric ways

Diligent: meticulous, precise, hard to please, and tends to micromanage

Dutiful: eager to please and reluctant to act independently or against popular opinion

make adjustments and implement behavioral changes to manage themselves.

Although Hogan's assessments and coaching can shed light on the reasons behind derailing tendencies, most of the time, our derailed behavior is fairly obvious, at least to those around us. By understanding some of the warning signs, of which being an email black hole is one, we can begin to take steps to mitigate those behaviors before they do any permanent damage.

Five Reasons You Might be Creating an Email Black Hole

- 1. You can't keep up with email demands.** This behavior is typically associated with the Mischievous and Colorful scales of the Hogan Development Survey (HDS), and is a sign of poor managerial discipline. Leaders with this problem tend to thrive on big things like closing sales and working on important projects, but are easily bored, distracted, and uninterested in the day-to-day responsibilities. Unfortunately, this kind of behavior kills staff engagement because employees are often stuck waiting for approval or help with decisions and daily challenges.
- 2. Your time is limited, so you need to pick and choose what to respond to.** Often high scorers on the HDS Bold scale, arrogant and

what they perceive as unfair demands on their time and personal agenda. To deal with these feelings, they tend to procrastinate in responding or ignore emails they don't want to deal with. Since so much of the passive aggressive leader relates to private conflict, email can be one of the more public ways that this type of toxic leadership behavior emerges. Over time, staff realize that their requests are a source of frustration, and they avoid communicating on important issues.

- 4. You need time to think.** Leaders with higher scores on the HDS Reserved scale tend to hit their breaking point around crisis and tough decisions. During these times, their natural tendency is to disengage, reasoning that they will reemerge after a break with renewed energy to tackle tough

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self-aggrandizing leaders tend to prioritize emails based on how personally important they are instead of how important they are to the people who sent them. Individuals on a team feels that what they are doing is important, so a conscious choice not to respond to an email is typically an indicator of a self-centered approach to leadership. Staff engagement is likely damaged because employees know they are a low priority.

- 3. You feel overburdened by everyone's needs.** Leaders who are slow to respond or seemingly forgetful about emails are often exhibiting passive-aggressive tendencies - associated with high scores on the HDS Leisurely scale. They tend to feel irritated and resentful about

problems. Unfortunately, these leaders begin to get a reputation for being unreliable, especially when they are needed.

- 5. You want to be thorough.** Some leaders, especially those with high HDS Diligent scores, have a natural tendency to turn emailing into a rigorous, perfectionistic task. For them, the question is not if they will respond, but when. Perfectionistic leaders approach every email as if it requires careful thought and data collection as well as perfect sentence structure and grammar. The same rigid behavior tends to extend to other leadership tasks where they are slow and get caught in the weeds. Staff will eventually avoid communication with their leader, so that their own work progress isn't slowed down.