

How Busy Colleagues Spread Secondhand Stress Rushing creates anxiety and resentment among co-workers

By
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More workers are tapping a new career tool: looking rushed. Sure, it makes you look busy, but can it also lead to burnout? Sue Shellenbarger and recovering rusher Sunita Badola discuss on Lunch Break. Photo: Getty Images.

Every office has (at least) one—the colleague who is always walking fast, finishing other people's sentences and racing from meeting to meeting while fielding email, texts and voice mail on multiple devices. That person can appear very important.

They may not know it, but they're usually causing secondhand stress.

Rushing blocks thoughtful communication and creates worries among colleagues that "maybe I should be doing that, too, or maybe my stuff isn't as important as his, or maybe he'll be irritable if I interrupt," says Jordan Friedman, a New York City stress-management speaker and trainer.



Ray Hollinger was known for years among colleagues in a previous job as a sales-training executive as "Mr. Busy," he says. In his quest to be a top performer, he says, he often thought, "If all this stuff just keeps coming at me, I will take it on. I will take it all on," says Mr. Hollinger, founder of More Time More Sales, a Phoenixville, Pa., training firm.

He says he wasn't aware that his constant motion sometimes made others feel uncomfortable—until a co-worker pointed it out. She told him that when she tried to talk with him, "your volume goes up, your pace of speaking goes up, and you're not fully in the conversation," he says.

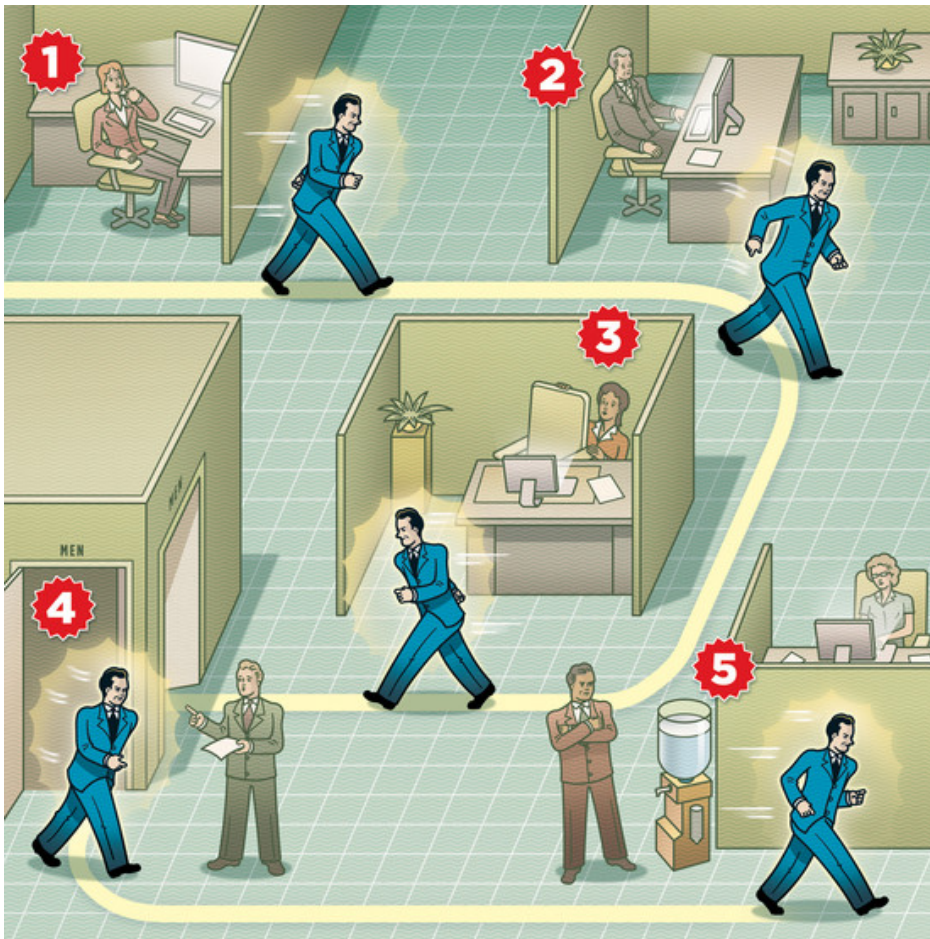
'So Sorry to Interrupt...' To grab a minute of the chronic rusher's time, some colleagues resort to chasing them to the restroom or parking lot. Peter Hoey

Working a few years ago with Rosemary Tator, a Waltham, Mass., leadership-development coach, Mr. Hollinger stopped piling on projects and started blocking out on his calendar the time he needed to achieve realistic goals—including time

for interruptions. He also now stops himself when he talks too fast, by "taking a couple of breaths, and lowering my volume and my pace," he says.

Ms. Tator invites rushers to visualize themselves on video. "What would you think of that person who ran into every meeting late, spent half the time on their cellphone with their email, and had to ask, 'Could you please repeat that?' because they weren't listening?" says Ms. Tator, principal partner in Zbeffective, a coaching and consulting firm.

Seeing colleagues—especially managers—operate at a frenzied, frantic pace can make the behavior contagious, says Robert S. Rubin, an associate professor of management at DePaul University,



Chicago. He advises managers to hold "inoculation discussions, to inoculate the employee from catching the feeling" that rushing around is necessary to being seen as a good performer.

Open-plan offices help spread the contagion. When the boss has a view of the entire office, "no one wants to be seen as the slowest moving object in the solar system. You have to keep up with the Joneses—literally," says Ben Jacobson, co-founder of Conifer Research, Chicago, which conducts behavioral and cultural research for companies.

Architects have begun blurring human figures in drawings of new-office projects, to appeal

How The Rusher Spreads Their Stress

People who appear rushed all the time have a big effect on colleagues. Some common responses:

- 1. Anxiety:** "Maybe I should be rushing around too."
- 2. Inferiority:** "Maybe my stuff isn't as important as his."
- 3. Avoidance:** "I'm afraid he'll be irritable if I interrupt him."
- 4. Desperation:** Colleagues chase the rusher into the restroom or parking lot trying to get a minute to talk.
- 5. Resentment:** "Are you trying to show you're more important than me?"

Sources: Jordan Friedman, The Stress Coach Inc., New York City; Rosemary Tator, 2beffective LLC, Waltham, Mass.; Susan Hodgkinson, The Personal Brand Co., Boston.

to clients who aspire to active, high-energy workplaces, says Jorge Barrero, a technical designer in Chicago for Gensler, an architecture, planning and design firm. The image is one clients "can connect with on an emotional level," Mr. Barrero says.

Tom Krizmanic, a principal with Studios Architecture in New York, says about a quarter of the 218 designs he helped judge in a recent office-design competition, co-sponsored by Business Interiors by Staples, showed humans as blurred figures in motion. The trend began about three years ago, he says.

Some people go into overdrive after getting promoted or taking a challenging new job. Surrounded by senior managers, "they're not the smartest person in the room any more," says William Arruda of New York City, a personal-branding consultant. Instead of prioritizing their lengthening to-do lists, "they go into hair-on-fire mode, telling themselves, 'I'm a machine. I get so much done. There's nothing you can give me that will break me.' "

"The productivity of entire teams can go down," Mr. Arruda says. "If you have one person rushing into meetings at the last

minute and tapping a pencil through the entire session, it changes the cadence for the entire group."

To jolt rushers into awareness, he has them ask for written feedback from 10 to 20 colleagues. The form includes such seemingly frivolous questions as, "If I were a household appliance, which one would I be?" Chronic rushers are shocked when co-workers liken them to "a blender whirring around at 9 million miles an hour," he says.

Executive coach Joel Garfinkle says racing around became a habit for one financial executive he worked with. In the process, he treated other people as a hindrance, pressuring and snapping at them, says Mr. Garfinkle, of Oakland, Calif. Subordinates saw him as arrogant and insensitive, hurting performance and morale.

Mr. Garfinkle's advice to the executive: "You need to leave a smaller wake."

A calm, unruffled work style is still a mark of competency, management experts say. "Executives who have figured it out... are poised and strategic. That's a big difference from reacting all day" to others' demands, says Susan Hodgkinson, a principal with the Personal Brand Co., a Boston-based leadership-development and executive-coaching firm.

It is an approach that signals to colleagues that they can slow down and set priorities too.

When Sunita Badola accelerated her pace to meet growing responsibilities, she says priority-setting was a big challenge. "If somebody approached me with a project and said it was urgent, I would just treat it as urgent," says Ms. Badola, a senior manager at Takeda Pharmaceutical Co., in Cambridge, Mass.

Her style spilled over to her direct reports, making them feel "super-reactive" and "really busy" too, says Russell Walker, a scientist who works on Ms. Badola's team.

Her manager, Elena Izmailova, suggested Ms. Badola get coaching, a benefit provided by Takeda, to help her "understand the big picture and not get caught up too much in day-to-day details," says Dr. Izmailova, director of translational medicine for Takeda. Working with executive coach Beth Benatti Kennedy of Beverly, Mass., Ms. Badola says she learned to limit her daily task list, block out email distractions and push back when colleagues pressed her to hurry on a project, asking questions so she could set priorities herself.

Now, Ms. Badola pulls back the lens and presents the bigger picture to her team, Mr. Walker says. It is an approach that "allows everyone to be a little more comfortable and at ease, because we're focusing on the longer-term goal a couple of months from now—rather than what needs to be done by five o'clock today," he says.

And with a little more leeway in her schedule, Ms. Badola says, she finds a new way to relate to her five employees: She hosts quarterly lunches, to "talk about fun stuff and get to know one another."

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