

## **“I Only Need to Be Asked Once”**

**By Ron Carroll**

All of us belong to organizations of people—business or personal—who are attempting to accomplish some important purpose. Sometimes we work under the direction of other people and sometimes others report to us. In these settings, there is one personal attribute that contributes more to our success than any other. It isn't our intelligence, our talent, or even our good works.

The secret to personal success in any organization often depends on a simple thing that anyone can do well. This skill can propel us up the corporate ladder, preserve our job during downsizing, or get us desired pay raises. Failure to do this one thing can give us a “black eye,” even if we are otherwise making important contributions to the organization.

What is this miraculous skill? It's *follow-through*. Let's explore some facets of follow-through that you may not have thought of before.



One of our clients provides services for people with developmental disabilities under contract with the State of Utah (the customer). Years ago our client employed an executive director with professional degrees and strong skills in the area of human behavior. He had a great vision of how the company could serve its disabled clients. Unfortunately, he was very poor at getting his monthly reports turned in on time and other follow-up tasks. In frustration, the State agency finally sought his dismissal. A young man was hired to fill the position. This new college graduate had little human behavior experience. However, when the State people said “jump,” he said, “How high?” They loved him and he became very successful in the job. Fifteen years later he is still the executive director. You see, the most important thing to the agency people was getting timely reports from the programs so that they could submit them to *their* supervisors on time. The self interest of the State employees was far more important than any grand vision how to deal with the behavioral issues of clients!

## **“MAKE IT SO!”**

I think we all have the same feelings when it comes to follow-through. *We love it when people only have to be asked once and the job gets done.* In the old *Star Trek* series, Captain Picard often said to his Number One commander, “Make it so.” That’s all he had to say, and he knew the task would be accomplished. Whether we report directly to customers or supervisors, we become very valuable to them when we are consistent with follow-through. Their confidence in our ability to complete assignments engenders trust and produces strong and lasting relationships.

In our day, there are many demands on our time. People are doomed who rely on memory to keep track of all the things they are responsible to do. The only way to shine at follow-through and reporting is to write it down. This goes for all personality types! It’s simple! Keep a to-do list that is continually added to and deleted from. If you are given an assignment, or you think of something that needs doing, or you hear something at the water-cooler, write it down! Do it. Then report its completion to your supervisor or customer.

If a task responsibility changes hands between you and your supervisor or customer, always “push the ball back into their court” as soon as possible. Don’t be the one who “drops the ball.” The single skill of prompt follow-through will make you stand out like a “purple cow in a field of brown cows” (Seth Godin, *Purple Cow*). You will be remarkable in the eyes of those you serve.

## **PLAY THE GAME WELL**



Even though no one ever talks about it, there is a continual game at play. This is how the game works. If you ask me to do something in a meeting, in the hall, over the phone, or through email, I will immediately write it down on my perpetual to-do list. There is a stated or implied deadline in every request. It may be “as soon as possible,” “by the end of the week,” or by a specific date. If I am unsure, I will ask.

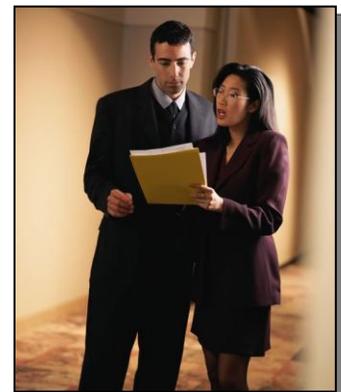
I then establish priorities with my to-do list. I may decide to tackle the most important task first, or I may want to get a lot of little things done in a hurry. I need to anticipate my supervisor’s or customer’s “hot buttons.” I must also understand that he or she is subconsciously keeping score and one day that score will either accrue to my benefit or to my detriment.

Now, the speed with which I complete tasks on my to-do list is important. The more things I quickly report back to my supervisor or customer, the higher the score I get in his or her mind. If things take longer than expected, and I report progress, or even that I haven't forgotten but will be done soon, I am still scoring points. Every task completed within the expectation of my supervisor or customer continues to add even bigger points. However, if he or she has to remind me of a task or ask how I am coming, I immediately start losing points. If my supervisor or customer asks twice, game-over. I lose. Get out the ice pack for my black eye.

However, I don't just want to win this game. I want to win big! I have come to know my supervisor or customer and how he or she thinks. I am also observant to things going on around the office and informal conversations. My antenna is always up. I am proactive. I do things without being asked and report on them. I anticipate things that my supervisor or customer will likely ask of me and just do it before they get around to asking. I even do things that are hard to do or that no one else wants to do.

By being continually on top of things, I make myself indispensable. Soon, my supervisor or client can't live without me. And of course, this is the proverbial story of the person who started working in the mail room and eventually became the president of the company. You can easily win this game no matter where you fit in the organization.

The other day, my secretary sent me a little email following up on several tasks that I had given her. In an instant, I was completely informed. I was grateful that some important things were accomplished and pleased that other items would be done soon. With peace of mind, I turned back to my hectic schedule. I felt very appreciative of this thoughtful note.



When we perform at this level most of the time, we make lots of deposits in the account of "good will." Then, when we do make a mistake and something "falls through the cracks" or doesn't get done on time, a withdrawal from the account doesn't hurt us. In fact, in the mind of the supervisor or customer, something important or beyond our control must have come up to prevent our normally reliable performance. If we apologize for a delay before our customer or supervisor asks about it, we will actually score points even when we fail. How about that! You see, when people trust us, when they can count on us, we are always earning points. It's that simple.

## BE A FINISHER



One more thing: Many people start projects and never quite finish them. Be a finisher! Bear own and get the task completed. A to-do list with a lot of half finished items will create stress and a feeling of being overwhelmed. In a demanding environment, scratching items off your to-do list can be very therapeutic. Having a reputation as a “finisher” will put you on top in the minds of those you serve.

Start today by writing things down. Follow-through and report back to your supervisor or customer in a timely manner. Remember, missed or unfulfilled expectations are the greatest cause of relationship failure. Strengthen all your business and personal relationships by becoming the kind of person that **ONLY HAS TO BE ASKED ONCE**. Score big in the game of *follow-through* and everyone will want you on their team!