

# DISTRACTIONS IN THE BOARDROOM

Are our egos at the heart of our BlackBerry addictions?

BY NARCISA A. POLONIO, ED.D.

As I travel the country and work with boards of trustees, I see a wave of changes that threatens the effectiveness and integrity of board proceedings. I see distractions, interruptions, and inefficiencies contaminating the boardroom. The culprit is the BlackBerry, Treo, iPhone, mobile phone, or your other favorite handheld technology. It is time for boards to reestablish the decorum associated with board proceedings and set parameters, guidelines, and limitations for the use of handheld devices in the boardroom — or better put, define some BlackBerry etiquette.

In the interest of full disclosure, I must confess that I am a “CrackBerry” junkie and have violated all the rules of etiquette that I am about to suggest. Doing research for this article made me fully aware of how I came to believe that being constantly available by e-mail, mobile phone, and text message reflected my commitment. The result is that almost any trustee, president, or community college staff member could reach me anytime, regardless of time of day or geography. For years, I have been proud of my ability to reply to messages within minutes of receiving them. The difficulty is that the volume of e-mail messages continues to grow, creating more and more distractions during meetings and disrupting research and writing projects that require concentration.

But am I — and are you — keeping connected with people remotely at the expense of disrupting and unintentionally insulting others? We make the assumption that everyone expects us to respond immediately to their e-mail or text message and that every message is of the upmost priority. Is it possible that we are fooling ourselves with the belief that our immediate reply is more important than it is — or even that we are more important than we really are? The sense of needing to stay connected, the sense of importance that being connected provides, and the feeding of our own egos are strong influential forces that change our day-to-day behavior. For many of us, the desire to stay connected professionally has become a true addiction that can end up doing more harm than good — to us and those around us.

Sharon Begley wrote an article in *Newsweek* describing how handheld users suffer from distraction overload, resulting in continuous partial attention. “For whatever the virtues of a handheld, there is no question that, depending how you use it, you risk never focusing exclusively on any thought or perception for long and never being able to work straight through to completion on anything,” she writes. This can be particularly



damaging during board meetings, when trustees need to focus on important college business and you see heads down throughout the meeting as people text under the table. It is difficult to determine what important details are missed when a trustee’s attention is diverted to read e-mail or text messages. And it is important to realize the message being sent to the audience and the college community when trustees’ attention is diverted from the business at hand to focus on a personal handheld device. While nobody can be sure what those trustees are looking at, they know it is most certainly not the business at hand. This behavior can ruin the reputation of the board, as a poor professional image is conveyed to the college community.

In the May 2009 issue of *Law Practice Today*, Allison C. Shields penned an article titled “BlackBerry Behavior: Is it Ruining Your Reputation?” Based on her list of BlackBerry guidelines for professionals, here are 10 tips for the community college boardroom.

## Boardroom BlackBerry Etiquette

1. Make an announcement at the beginning of the meeting instructing everyone present to turn off and stow their mobile devices. Consider also putting this request at the top of the meeting agenda and posting a sign in the boardroom as a visual reminder.
2. Request that anyone who is on call for an actual emergency to inform the board at the top of the meeting so that an exception may be made.

3. Turn off your electronic devices, or at least set them to silent (not vibrate), and put them away during the meeting.
4. Do not place handheld devices on the table or check messages under the table during the meeting.
5. If you are wearing an earphone or Bluetooth earpiece, remove it and put it away during the meeting.
6. Remember that just because e-mailing and texting is silent, it is still distracting to you and others — and disrespectful to your fellow board members to divert your attention from the meeting.
7. Take steps to ensure that trustees' attention is focused on the meeting and that they don't leave the room to accept phone calls. For example, the board can plan ahead and announce a 15-minute recess halfway through the meeting to allow trustees to return calls or check messages.
8. Remember your responsibility: during the board meeting, the most "urgent" matter is conducting the business of the college; all other matters can wait. If any member cannot prioritize board business during a meeting, he or she should carefully consider their commitment to the board.
9. Should you accidentally forget to turn your phone off, do not answer it in the middle of the meeting. Silence the device, turn it off, and check your messages after the meeting or during a break. If you must answer due to an emergency, excuse yourself from the room. Under no circumstances should you take a call in the boardroom during a meeting.
10. Never forget that your actions reflect your college and set an example. Behave in the same professional manner by which you expect employees of the college to behave.

## ARE YOU A CRACKBERRY ADDICT? BY DAVID CONNER

"CrackBerry" addiction may seem superficial compared to drug and alcohol addictions, but consider these common indicators of addiction and see how many of them apply to your electronic device usage.

### SLEEP DISTURBANCE

- Bringing your mobile device to bed with you
- Thinking about what messages might be coming in when you should be sleeping
- Waking up to send messages
- Dreaming about using your mobile device

### OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE BEHAVIOR

- Wanting to check your messages, even when it's impossible
- Checking and re-checking for new messages, even when it is unlikely that new ones have come in
- Forgetting or ignoring social norms and etiquette (i.e., e-mailing while someone is talking to you, talking loudly on the phone in public, not turning off your device during meetings or social engagements, even when reminded to do so)
- Communicating primarily by electronic means rather than in person, even with your closest family members

### DIMINISHED ATTENTION SPAN

- Inability to focus on a task that requires great concentration without checking your messages regularly
- Regularly missing parts of conversations due to distraction from an electronic device

### DECEPTIVENESS

- Pretending to turn off your device but keeping it on "in case of an emergency"
- Lying about expecting an urgent call or message in order to keep the device on
- Checking messages under the table or in another surreptitious fashion with the hope of not getting caught

### PARANOIA

- Fear that something bad will happen if you can't be reached at a moment's notice
- Fear that something bad will happen and you won't be able to reach someone else
- Fear that you will be punished for not replying within minutes of receiving messages, especially during off hours

### WITHDRAWAL

- Cravings for the device when it is not around
- Irritability when you can't use your device
- Depression or feelings of being slighted when your messages are not answered immediately
- Panic in the mobile device's absence

### LIFE-THREATENING BEHAVIORS

- Using the device to send text messages, send e-mails, or make calls while driving or crossing streets

These symptoms are no joke. And the last one is not an exaggeration: Each year, hundreds to thousands of people die from mobile device-related traffic fatalities, and hundreds of thousands of related non-fatal accidents occur. Some studies have suggested that phone use while driving is nearly as dangerous as driving under the influence of alcohol, and that sending e-mails and text messages poses an even greater risk than drinking and driving.<sup>1</sup> The hazard is so great that Oprah Winfrey has created a "No-Phone Zone" movement to convince people not to text, e-mail, or call and drive. Your entire board or even your entire campus can take the pledge at [www.oprah.com/packages/no-phone-zone.html](http://www.oprah.com/packages/no-phone-zone.html)

Be honest with yourself. If more than a few of these symptoms apply to you, reconsider how you use your mobile device, and carefully consider why you are so attached to it and how your relationship with it has affected your life.

1 Austin, Michael. "Texting and Driving Worse than Drinking and Driving." June 2009. Accessed May 7, 2010. <[http://www.caranddriver.com/features/09q2/texting\\_while\\_driving\\_how\\_dangerous\\_is\\_it\\_-feature](http://www.caranddriver.com/features/09q2/texting_while_driving_how_dangerous_is_it_-feature)>