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Be The Boss!

12 Winning Strategies For Executives With ADHD

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Meet Ami, a business development manager for a financial firm, who manages 30 people at branch locations in three cities. Her daily schedule is a blur of meetings with clients, and taking individual and conference calls with the staff people who report to her. Her e-mail box is overflowing, largely because it takes her too long to write replies. She struggles with completing reports on time. Ami is stressing out over not completing half a

dozen performance evaluations, because she hates giving any negative feedback to employees.

Meet Jim, a project manager in a large construction firm. He coordinates multiple projects and manages dozens of people. Half his work day consists of planning meetings, the other half being bombarded with phone calls and e-mails that require his attention. His office is a mess, which makes it more difficult to keep track of all the paperwork, records, and tasks to get done. Despite working long hours and taking work home on weekends, he somehow just can't manage to catch up.

Jim and Ami are both adults with ADHD. First impressions to the contrary, both are highly successful executives who are very good at their jobs. They are hardly alone. There are thousands of adults with ADHD in executive and managerial positions in every profession and field of business. The challenge for Ami and Jim, along with many others in their position, is to learn how to manage their ADHD well so their jobs are less stressful and exhausting. Below are some strategies they found helpful.

Write yourself a clear, well defined job description.

As a rule, most employees have a clearly defined job with specific goals and structured job routines. This is very often not the case with executive positions, where expectations and responsibilities are more loosely defined and open ended. If someone else has not given you a clear, structured job description, write one for yourself.

An unstructured executive is likely to be all over the place, more distracted by small things and wasting a great deal of time in the process. Another danger is that, without realistic expectations and healthy limits, an executive's job can easily take over his or her life. That, as Jim discovered, is a recipe for burn out.

Make planning your top priority.

The most important responsibility for any executive is to do the planning required to manage projects and people effectively. Take time to plan, long term and short term, and think through the details of what, who, and when of any project. It is self-defeating in the extreme to take the position that "I just don't have time for that."

The problem for many executives with ADHD (indeed, for most adults with ADHD) is that they get so caught up in putting out the immediate fires, they don't take time to look ahead and plan effectively. The long term result is usually disaster. One of the most crucial lessons Jim learned was that the more effective he became in doing the planning, the fewer fires he had to put out. As he explains it now, "my most important task as an executive is not to *put out* fires, but rather to *prevent* fires from flaring up in the first place."

Structure your work environment to eliminate distractions.

The more distractible a person is, and the more details she needs to deal with, the greater the need for an organized work environment. Hello, executive with ADHD! Make it an ongoing mission to eliminate and reduce distractions in your office as much as possible.

For Ami the biggest problem was the constant stream of e-mails. Every time she stopped to read one, she explained, "I had a terrible time trying to get back on track." The solution was to give herself dedicated e-mail times for reading and replying to e-mail, and to ignore them the rest of the time when she needed to focus on other scheduled tasks.

One problem for Jim was that his desk faced a glass wall, which looked out into the larger office complex. The simple solution for him was to turn his desk around so that it faced a solid wall. When it comes to reducing distractions, every little bit helps.

Delegate efficiently.

One of the perks of being an executive is that you have some prerogative to delegate work tasks to others. An efficient executive does this — an inefficient one does not. Delegating well requires, first, that you are very clear about what types of tasks should be delegated, and which should not. Second, it requires getting over foolish pride. One of Jim's old bad habits was being reluctant to delegate because "I didn't want to look like I was shirking." This was a clear case of working harder but dumber, and happily the old habit was discarded.

Learn when to say "no".

There are two main reasons why people become overwhelmed in their jobs. One is that they are inefficient in their work, which requires improvements in productivity. The second reason is that they take on too much work, for which the only solution is cutting back expectations and learning how to say "no" when necessary. An executive who plans well should always be aware of what is doable or not doable, and make commitments or turn down requests accordingly.

Be productive — not perfect.

Once you have reviewed, prioritized, and planned your day, give your utmost effort to complete the tasks within the time limits allocated for them. Ami had a tendency to get lost in little details, and complained that "I'm always trying to re-organize information" to make reports or e-mails more perfect. Her perfectionism, coupled with her distractibility, slowed her productivity down to molasses speed. It was only by forcing herself to stop on schedule — and quit a task when its time was up — that she was able to stay on top of her work load efficiently.

Keep meetings and presentations short and focused.

Whether you're running an internal meeting with colleagues, or an external meeting with clients, always prepare a concise agenda and stick to it. Not only does it help you organize the information well, it also saves everyone time.

Don't agonize over giving performance evaluations.

Many individuals with ADHD tend to be people pleasers, and may be very sensitive to the discomfort or pain of others. This can be overdone, particularly in situations where your job requires that you supervise, evaluate, and sometimes discipline people who report to you.

Ami's discomfort with providing performance reviews came from her concern that receiving constructive criticism makes some people uncomfortable. She stopped procrastinating when she began to approach a performance review as a teaching opportunity, *not* a confrontation. The evaluation was her best opportunity to tell her employees how to be more effective in their jobs.

Don't skip lunch.

When the work piles up and you're tempted to work through lunch — don't. Maintaining a healthy blood sugar level is essential to maintaining a healthy level of attention and concentration. Besides nutrition, a lunch break also provides a mental break that helps prevent afternoon mental fatigue.

Be productive in the air.

If travel is part of your job, spend the many hours sitting in airports or on a plane by catching up on some of your written work. There is an extra bonus to working on the plane — you don't have to take phone calls.

Schedule a regular time for completing routine tasks.

Mundane tasks tend to be avoided or forgotten unless they become a routine. For example, turn in expense slips by noon every Friday. Ask your office assistant to remind you if you forget or procrastinate.

Get professional help when needed to help with ADHD management.

Work with a therapist or counselor on developing specific behavioral and organizational strategies that meet your particular needs. If you take ADHD medication, get the

medication right. It might take several trials to find the right medication and dosage level that is most effective for you.

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About The Author

Peter Jaksa, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist with over 30 years' experience working with children, adolescents, and adults with ADHD. Dr. Jaksa is the author of numerous articles and columns about ADHD, including articles published in **ADDitude Magazine**, **Attention Magazine**, **Organize Magazine**, and **FOCUS**. He has provided interviews to national publications and news organizations including the **Wall Street Journal**, **CNN**, **U.S. News & World Report**, **Chicago Tribune**, and **Men's Health Magazine**. He has presented at national conferences to health care professionals, educators, and the general public. Dr. Jaksa is a contributing writer for **ADDitude Magazine** and a member of the Scientific Advisory Board. He is the author of *Life With ADHD* and co-author of *Real People, Real ADHD*.