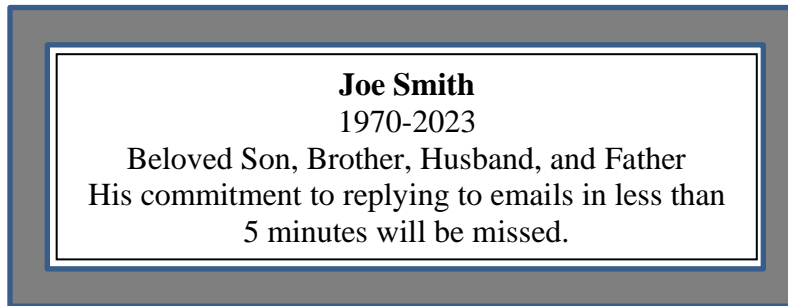# LeaderShifting Email "Addiction": a 12-Step Program for Recovery

By Shani B. Magosky, Founder of The LeaderShift Project™

Can you imagine this?

> **Joe Smith**
> 1970-2023
> Beloved Son, Brother, Husband, and Father
> His commitment to replying to emails in less than
> 5 minutes will be missed.

#kiddingnotkidding. I'm a leadership and organizational culture change consultant and executive coach. I don't pretend to be a psychotherapist, but I do know that email remains an addictive productivity drain and culture killer for many leaders and companies with whom I work. This diverts attention away from doing the things that really matter - both professionally and personally - for individuals, teams, and orgs.

Leaders don't get promotions, raises, bonuses, and accolades for their email prowess. What matters is delighting customers, attracting/motivating/retaining top talent, creating value, seeding innovation, and leaving a legacy of service. If you're ever conflicted about not spending enough time on email, I hope you'll remember this mock epitaph to LeaderShift yourself and your people.

As a fellow recovering email addict, I can testify that it is possible to change behavior. First though, learn to recognize the signs of email addiction:

- Do you jump right to your inbox like one of Pavlov's dogs every time you hear a chime?
- Do you frequently feel as though you accomplished little in your workday besides email?
- Does your inbox double as your primary To-Do List?
- Do you sneak quick hits of email on your phone at every red light, while waiting to check out at a store, or as soon as your dining companion gets up to go the bathroom?

If you answered "yes" to ANY of these questions, then you may have a problem. Here is my recommended 12-Step Program for overcoming email addiction:

1. **Admit that you have a problem**. Of course, that's the first step!

2. **Turn off notifications.** Every email platform has interruptive chimes and pop-ups to alert us to new messages. Depending on the research you read, interruptions cost anywhere between 2-20 minutes for the mind to refocus and gain the same level of concentration held prior to the disruption. Multiply that by the number of emails you receive daily to gauge the potential time you could be wasting by dealing with emails one at a time as they hit your inbox.

3. **Focus on your goals.** American author Robert Heinlein once said, "In the absence of clearly defined goals, we become strangely loyal to performing daily acts of trivia." Spending all or most of the day in email is as trivial as it gets for most roles. Effective leaders know what their "big rocks" (Stephen Covey's analogy from *First Things First*) are every day and allocate their time accordingly. If you aren't focusing on priorities, loitering in email is an easy way to delude yourself into thinking you're busy. Of course, busy doesn't necessarily mean productive.

4. **Align with your team on a different tool for communicating emergencies.** Does email contain important information? Yes. But life-threatening crises? Highly unlikely. If a building is on fire, a loud and persistent alarm goes off. Yet if there is a critically urgent customer or production situation, too many people send emails that may or may not be noticed in a timely enough fashion to put out the figurative fire. Instead, lead your team in a discussion to select a more appropriate method, such as phone call, text, or face to face. Use email for important but non-urgent matters and align on standard response time expectations. Once such a shared communication protocol is in place, everyone on the team can stop checking email incessantly.

5. **Plan email time on your calendar like any other task.** Instead of being at its beck and call, handle email in batches at various intervals throughout the day, as appropriate for your role, functional area, communication protocols agreed upon with your team (see #4), and other contextual expectations. For example:

   o   A very senior executive focused mostly on strategic initiatives can effectively process email 2-3 times per day. Lucky ones can have a trusted admin help filter and prioritize the inbox intraday.
   o   Someone in a high-touch customer service role may need to process email in frequent blocks of time, perhaps a few minutes at the top of every hour, or even half hour, to meet response time commitments.

   It's ok to glance at the inbox every so often to scan for something you're expecting, but then get back to non-email business until the next email time block.

6. **Maintain a separate To-Do List.** The inbox is a lame substitute for a robust task function. Keep track of all your commitments in one place (or as few as possible) that you can access from computer, tablet, and smartphone. Outlook's To-Do app is awesome, and Gmail's Tasks function has been vastly improved. And of course, there are many cloud task and project management apps to choose from.

7. **Use the 4Ds when processing email**. One way we exacerbate the tendency to spend too much time in email is by letting it linger in the inbox far too long. Every time we look at an email after the first time is an unnecessary waste of precious time. Touted by productivity experts worldwide, the 4Ds are –

   i.   Delete
   ii.   Do it, if you can reply and/or file it very quickly
   iii. Delegate

> iv. Defer, which means add the action generated by the email to your to-do list (see #6) to complete later and/or put it on your calendar to complete on a specific date and time.

8. **Delay sending.** Leaders who send emails on nights and weekends should not be surprised that people reply (despite half-hearted work-life balance sermons to the contrary!), thus spawning a self-reinforcing crescendo of email outside of normal work hours. I appreciate that nights and weekends are sometimes the only times available to get caught up, but don't shoot yourself in the foot by generating more! Use the Delay Delivery option in Outlook or install Boomerang for Gmail and specify a less disruptive time to send it.

9. **Protect crunch time.** The Out of Office feature isn't just for vacation! When you really need uninterrupted focus, set an Automatic Reply to communicate short term inability to respond in a timely fashion. For example: "I'm on a tight deadline today. If this is urgent, please call me. Otherwise, I will respond by COB tomorrow." Then you can crank without being distracted by email.

10. **KISS your email filing system.** Keep It Simple, Silly! You will waste far more time filing emails in a magnificent yet labyrinthine system of dozens or hundreds of folders and subfolders than you will by conducting key word searches within a much simpler system. Filing by quarter or major responsibility area are methods I've seen used effectively.

11. **Put the laptop and phone away after a certain time.** Develop the discipline to disengage from email by a reasonable time every evening. The better night's sleep you'll get will be an additional boon to your focus and productivity.

12. **Enlist an accountability partner**. As with anything, accountability improves likelihood of follow-through. Ask a colleague, friend, family member…or heck…Siri and Alexa to support you in new email addiction busting habits. Explain what you're working on and empower them to nudge, call you out, or even hide your devices.

Wash, rinse, repeat. This takes discipline and practice because ticking off emails is perversely rewarded by the brain with shots of happiness hormones until your neural patterns are finally rewired. Anything worth doing well takes commitment. As Arnold Schwarzenegger says, "You don't get bigger muscles by watching me lift weights." Pick a few of these tips and commit until they become habits. You'll be amazed at the hours freed up and the positive difference it makes on the culture and performance of your business.