# TouchPoints

## Why the Interruptions that Drive Us Crazy Just Might be the Most Productive Opportunities We Have Every Day

### DOUGLAS CONANT & METTE NORGAARD

SOME DAYS IT FEELS LIKE the information age has morphed into the interruption age. But what if those interruptions turned out to be our best opportunity to make a difference in our workplaces?

As leaders, we make choices all day, every day. The "knock on the door" happens over and over again in some form—phone calls, meetings, emails, and text messages with questions to answer, concerns to address, problems to solve, and fires to put out. There are big issues and small issues, planned sessions and surprises, and they come at us endlessly and from every direction. We have to make decisions without having all the available information, and we need to make them right now. The workload is expanding, and the time we have to deal with each issue is shrinking.

But what if we could step back and look at all those interactions with a fresh perspective? What if, instead of seeing them as interfering with our work, we were to look at them as latent leadership moments? What if these moments were the answer to transformational leadership in today's busy world?

In our experience, that is precisely what those interruptions are if you look at them in this way: the many interactions you have during your day, whether planned or unplanned, has the potential to become a high point or a low point in someone's day. Each of these small moments is an opportunity to clarify the agenda and to influence the course of events.

Each interaction is a chance to transform an ordinary moment into a TouchPoint.

# The Action Is In the Interaction

So, what is a "TouchPoint?"

TouchPoints take place any time two or more people get together to deal with an issue and get something done. A casual conversation with a colleague can become a TouchPoint when the focus shifts to an impending contract. An email exchange with a team member turns into a TouchPoint when she tells you about a production delay.

A TouchPoint can happen with one other person, a couple of people, or a group that can last a couple of minutes, a couple of hours, or a couple of days. Those TouchPoints can be planned or spontaneous, casual or carefully choreographed. They take place in hallways, on factory floors, in conference rooms, on the phone, and via e-mail or instant messaging. Some deal with straightforward, relatively minor issues, while others involve complex challenges with wide-ranging effects.

Sadly, leaders often see these interactions as distractions that get in the way of their real work: the important work of strategizing, planning, and prioritizing.

Only, these TouchPoints are the real work. They are the moments that bring your strategies and priorities to life, the interactions that translate your ideas into new and better behaviors. How do you do that? By infusing each TouchPoint, no matter how brief, with greater clarity and genuine commitment.

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# Commitment Over Compliance

Every TouchPoint is spring-loaded with possibilities. Each one can build—or break—a relationship. Even a brief interaction can change the way people think about themselves, their leaders, and their future.

Doug experienced a TouchPoint when he was in graduate school that literally changed the direction of his life. A professor with extremely high standards confronted him one day after he had handed in a carelessly done assignment. The professor called him in and said, simply, "Doug, you can do better."

"That's all he said," Doug recalls, "'You can do better,' and of course he was right." Now when Doug reviews work that doesn't meet his standards, instead of writing negative feedback in the margin he tends to write, "I think we can do better here." As it did with Doug, that statement often goes a long way towards increasing people's confidence and encouraging them to stretch.

Mette, on the other hand, remembers an experience of her own that shows the negative potential of TouchPoints. It happened when she was product manager for a mid-sized multinational company. After discovering that a new product was failing to meet the company's quality criteria, she recommended to her immediate boss, the director of marketing, that they stop production until they knew what the problem was.

When Mette's boss took the issue to the vice president, however, he was told in no uncertain terms, "This is the fourth quarter. You've got to keep the line moving so we can make the numbers." After the meeting, Mette's boss called her into his office and told her that her job was to keep the line moving at all costs. When Mette protested, he snapped at her, "If you can't do it, I'll find a real man for the job."

Mette's boss got the job done—the production line kept moving—but he lost her respect. What was worse, her self-respect wavered. She felt that it was the wrong thing to do and wished she had shown more backbone. This experience shows that when a leader goes for compliance instead of commitment, he may erode a person's confidence and damage the relationship.

Have you had these kinds of experiences? Positive TouchPoints that increased your confidence and commitment, or negative interactions that left you feeling worse about others or yourself? If so, you already know the power and possibilities of a moment. You know the potential of a TouchPoint.

## Even a brief interaction can change the way people think about themselves, their leaders, and their future.

TouchPoints can inspire people to give the very best of themselves, and they can make them shut down. Like money, TouchPoints in and of themselves are amoral—neither good nor bad. It is how we use them that gives them (either negative or positive) value and worth. They are a vital resource that we should never squander.

Like Doug's professor, we all have times when we say just the right thing. Like Mette's boss, we also have times when we botch it. The secret to mastering the touch is simply to increase your ratio of "that went well!" to "I blew it."

If you reflect on the TouchPoints you've engaged in during the past few weeks, what is your ratio? What would you like it to be?

It's important to remember that mastering the touch is not about becoming nicer; it is about becoming more effective. It is about engaging people and moving forward faster, instead of tripping up and slowing to a crawl. It is about gaining commitment instead of settling for compliance.

Whether you are a manager, a mentor, or a parent, you want to touch others in a way that makes them want to do the right thing. You want to guide them in a way that helps them make good decisions, even when you are not in the room—which, if you are a leader of leaders, is 99.9 percent of the time.

It helps if you begin with an important premise: *Leadership is not about you—it's about them.*

Keeping that in mind, begin every TouchPoint with a simple question: "How can I help?" This opens up space for people to voice their ideas, concerns, and viewpoints. Those four magic words shift the focus from what you want to communicate or accomplish to finding out what they want and need from you.

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# The TouchPoint Triad

In music, a triad describes the three tones you need to form a complete chord, the three notes that create the harmony. Likewise, the TouchPoints Triad describes the three key notes you have to hit to be helpful in even the briefest of moments.

Asking the magic question, "How can I help?" gets you started. The first note, listening intently, helps you figure out what is really going on and what others need from you; it is a way to tangibly show that you care. The second note, framing the issue, ensures that everyone in the TouchPoint has the same understanding of the issue. The third note, advancing the agenda, means deciding what next steps to take and who will take them. After the TouchPoint is over, circling back with a question such as, "How did it go?" or "Is there anything else you need from me?" is a reminder that you care; it also lets you know how things worked out and whether you were genuinely helpful.

You master the touch by listening intently, framing the issue, and advancing the agenda. So as you engage in TouchPoint after TouchPoint, all you need to remember is: "listen-frame-advance," "listen-frame-advance." And if you do it dozens of times each day, pretty soon, you get very good at it and, believe it or not, you actually look forward to these interactions (and interruptions).

## Listening Intently

Begin the TouchPoint with a quick scan to find out whether you ought to engage fully, and if so when and for how long. Ask yourself: What's the issue? What kind of help are they looking for from me? Whose issue is this—mine, theirs, or ours? What is the time horizon? Is the issue material to the business and/or a matter of principle? There are so many demands on your time, and you need to invest your energy and attention where you can be most helpful and where it serves the team or organization the most.

Once you decide to engage fully, ask yourself, "What is really going on?" Be curious. Ask for the evidence—relevant objective data such as numbers, tangible constraints, and deadlines. If there is only intangible evidence, try to get a sense of the magnitude by asking for a subjective 1-10 rating of the situation.

Keep listening for the real issue. Are there gaps in the information you are getting? If there is something you don't understand, say so. Listen exponentially, not only to the people who are present, but for all the conversations that have led up to this one. Invest whatever time you need to make sure you get it, because when it concerns your area of responsibility, you want to understand it better than anyone else on the planet.

Finally, be intellectually honest about what is really going on. We all have a tendency to hear what we want to hear, and our filters make us listen for the data that confirms our preconceived opinions. It takes mental discipline to allow oneself to hear and understand what is really going on. Keep in mind that there is nothing as useless as solving the wrong problem. It may feel good to move quickly, but moving too fast only creates the illusion of progress and undermines your credibility as a leader.

# Framing the Issue

Before you move onto the second note in the triad, take a moment to summarize what you heard, to make sure you got it right. Then you will be ready to frame the issue in a way that can help the other people in the TouchPoint think about it more clearly. When you do that superbly, people will be able to explain it to others in a way that is clear and compelling.

If people need more clarity, you might need to roll up your sleeves and get into the data with them. They might need some context to understand the competitive landscape and the developments everyone should be watching more closely. Or they may need to understand how their work supports the company's top priorities—a clear line of sight to the strategy. Sometimes you need to bring in models that are unique to your discipline, such as financial formulas, marketing matrices, or work process flow charts. The key is to provide whatever people need to help them see things more clearly.

Sometimes people have difficulty focusing on the issue because they are struggling to choose among too many options: On the one hand there is this, and on the other hand there is that, and if there were a third hand they would bring that in as well. In that case, you need to help them sort through the options. The conversation might go something like this: "So it sounds like we can either do A or B, is that correct?" "Which do you think would be the best choice?" "Okay, if A is the best choice, then you are telling me that we have three options: 1, 2, or 3, right?" "Well, which option do you prefer?" "Option 2? I agree. So since we both like Option 2, what does that mean in terms of next steps?"

If it looks like an issue of confidence or commitment, think about what they love to do and what they are good at. Connect their passion (what drives them) to the purpose of the project. Help them see why their strengths make them uniquely suited for handling it. If they are tired, you might go for a walk together or tell them to take the rest of the day off. If they are overwhelmed, help them define the problem or cut it down to a manageable size. If they seem complacent, talk about the gravity of the situation and stress the need to act with utmost urgency. Whatever the situation, you want to speak from your heart. Let people know why their contribution matters, and show that you have confidence in them.

## Advancing the Agenda

Remember, when people come to you with something, they want to see and make progress. Once you know what is needed, do what you can in that moment to move the agenda forward. If you need to help people make a decision or to make the decision yourself, do it. If you need to connect them to someone, make a call or send an instant message. Show a bias for action.

The challenge when it comes to making decisions is that many people hesitate because they are afraid they will make the wrong call. When that happens, remind them of the risk in not acting. Make it clear that no one makes the perfect decision every time; it's just not possible. All any of us can do is consider the information available at the moment, make the best decision we can, and move on.

Also, it's important to know that solving big complicated problems may require several TouchPoints. Many leaders feel that they have to do too much in any one interaction. Instead, loop back later. For pivotal decisions, it may take dozens of follow-up TouchPoints before the decision is implemented.

Finally, as you need to get the work done through shorter and more frequent bursts of interactions, the risk is that you may not go deep enough on some issues. Therefore, be sure to set aside significant blocks of time with your team members, collectively and individually, during which you can get deep into the issues and prepare for what may lie ahead.

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## Following Up

Following up also helps you find out whether the decision was executed properly and how well it is working. So once decisions about next steps have been made and the TouchPoint is over, make a note to follow up either formally or casually. This is not a check-up but a check-in, a tangible way to show that you care. For example, you might stop by someone's office or send a note saying something like, "I'm really glad you brought that issue up. That kind of information will help us in setting next year's priorities." Or, "Thank you for brining that to my attention. By getting ahead of this problem we will avoid what might have been an unpleasant surprise."

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# The Exponential Effect of a TouchPoint

TouchPoint leadership capitalizes on the social networking effect, or what we call the exponential effect.

Every person you engage with is part of a complicated and influential web of relationships. Whatever you say or do in a TouchPoint may be quickly transmitted to five or six people in that person's network—and then relayed to their colleagues, and so on. Therefore, when you impart a sense of urgency, people may pass that on; when you inspire confidence, that too may be transmitted; and when you blow it, everyone is bound to hear about it. Some people call this The Informal Network, and as a leader, it pays to pay attention to this powerful information broadcaster.

The bottom line? Organizations are living systems where people are connecting all the time. In fact, try to picture each TouchPoint as a synapse in your organization's central nervous system, the small distance across which an impulse must pass in order for the next person to engage. Positive impulses stimulate change; negative ones block it. Thus, creating networks where people are poised for change requires transmitting positive impulses, frequently and consistently.

**When you are fully aware of the exponential power of TouchPoints, you will see every conversation as a chance to give people a reality check, inspire a sense of the possibilities, or stimulate the desire to change.** ⬚

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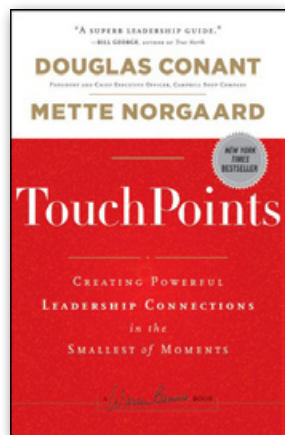


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