A modern office desk with a computer monitor, mouse, notebook, glasses, and a mug. The monitor displays a colorful abstract image. The desk is white and reflective. The background is a plain white wall.

The Gatekeeper's Guide

Screening Callers to
Ensure Privacy and Safety

Prepared by:
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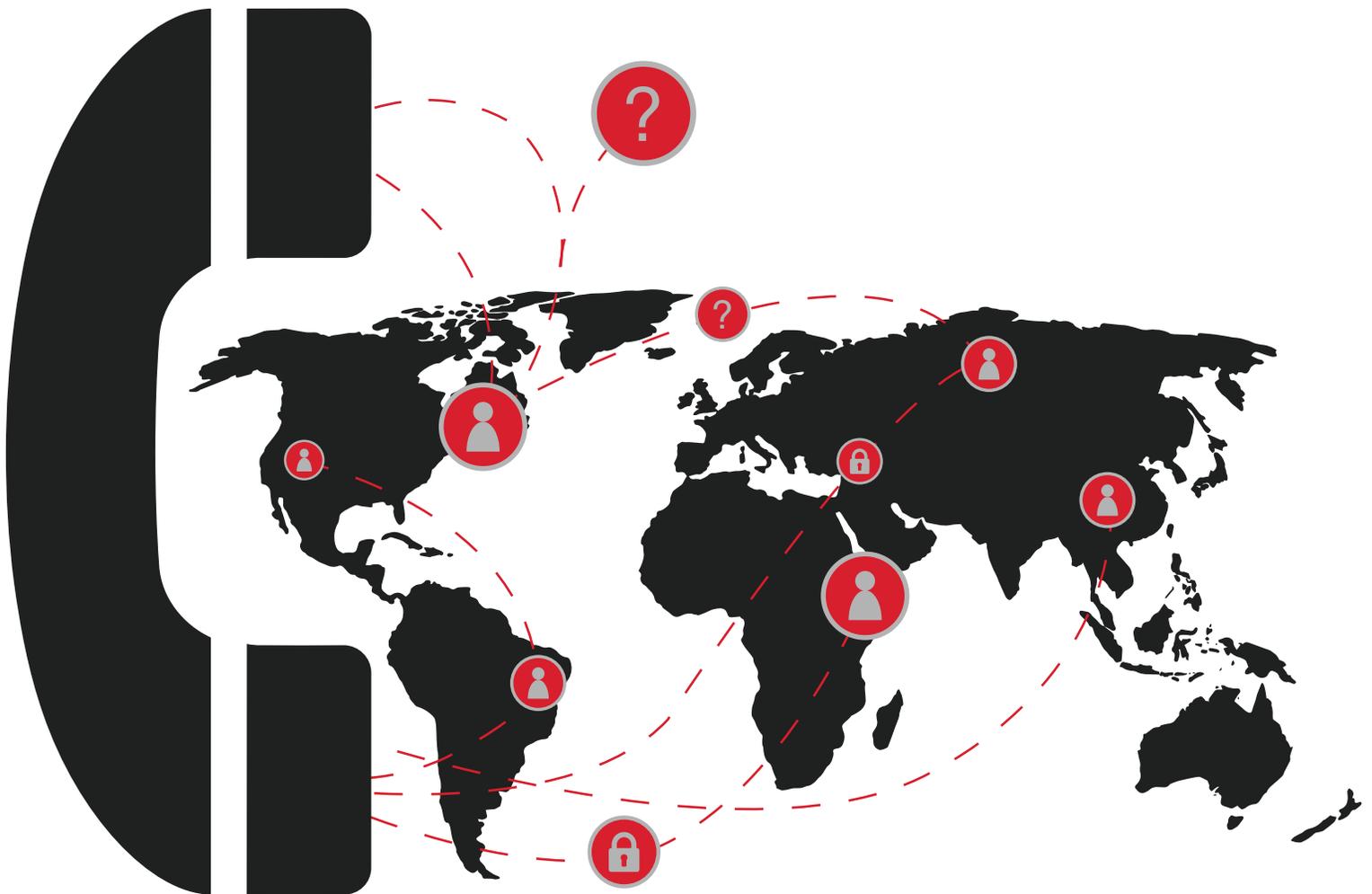
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THE GATEKEEPER'S GUIDE:

Screening Callers to Ensure Privacy and Safety

by Joan Burge



Message from Joan Burge

Telephone skills have always been important in the business arena regardless of industry, size or geographic location. That includes answering the phone, taking accurate messages, careful screening of calls, protecting corporate and personal information, transferring callers, using proper tone of voice, and knowing how to tactfully handle difficult callers.

While we tend to think of the telephone as just a hard piece of equipment and something that interrupts our already busy day, it actually is about building relationships.

Excellent telephone skills are taking on a stronger emphasis as we move into the 21st Century. As our society changes, we grow more diverse, and we are pushed to move at a faster pace, it is paramount that we learn to be excellent Gatekeepers of telephone communications. There is a fine line between building rapport with the caller and guarding employee and company information.

Whatever role you play in telephone communications, you must be as knowledgeable as possible about protocol, especially where personal privacy, security, and safety are concerned. Accurate and efficient screening will benefit your managers, co-workers, and their families. You would not want to jeopardize the safety of any of these individuals. It is not that you would do this intentionally; you may innocently divulge information that a caller should not be privy to.

While this booklet cannot address every situation and relationship for every phone call you will encounter, I have provided several examples, guidelines, and relevant information to help you make good decisions when dealing with others on the telephone.

Best of luck!

Joan Burge
Founder and CEO
Office Dynamics International

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#1: Communicating Appropriate Processes With Your Executive

It is imperative that you and the person for whom you are taking calls:

1. Review these guidelines together.
2. Determine whether there are any that would not fit your particular situation and document your own list of exceptions.
3. Implement your plan and processes.
4. After you have practiced these for 30 days, review how your process is working for you and the people you are supporting.

There can be many types of individuals that your executive interacts with via the telephone. You might want to spend time with your executive deciding how specific categories of people should be handled. Some of these categories are:

- vendors
- business colleagues
- clients
- superiors
- subordinates
- professional organization representatives
- personal friends
- personal business relationships
- solicitors

Make an effort to touch base in the morning to review the day's schedule in relation to anticipated telephone calls. And then as the day passes, continue to dialogue on priority calls.

If your executive is working to meet a deadline, find out what calls your executive wants to receive.

Know the names of people who might be calling your executive and which calls should be transferred, no matter what the situation. Even though a person may have an important title, their call may not be urgent. And a subordinate's call may be urgent even when you think it is not because of their position.

***Communication is key to ensuring
employee privacy, security, and safety!***

#2: The Role of a Telephone Gatekeeper

A Gatekeeper can be one or all of these:

- an administrator
- an assistant
- a facility operator
- a receptionist
- a department coordinator
- any other employee

When you are interacting with a caller on behalf of others, you accept the responsibility for the relevant interests of the person for whom you are answering the phone. You are entrusted by them to use good judgment when responding to caller's requests for information. As a Telephone Gatekeeper, you are a "keeper" of information. It is a role of extremely high importance and one that absolutely cannot be taken lightly.

In relation to the telephone, a Gatekeeper has a high level of responsibility to ensure that he or she:

- gathers accurate information from the caller.
- clearly understands the nature of the call.
- recognizes when a call is truly urgent.
- builds rapport and goodwill with the caller.
- uses good judgment in determining what and how much information should be divulged to the caller.
- uses tact and professionalism in all dealings.

Just as you play an important role in this, so do the people for whom you screen calls. They need to let you know when they are waiting for an important call so you can connect them with that person. They need to let you know when they absolutely do not want to be interrupted. Or if they are going to be out of the office and want you to transfer a caller through to their cell phone or not. *Communication is key.*

#3: Telephone Ethics Overview

An accurate, factual and focused approach is essential. How do you achieve this and at the same time protect the personal privacy, security, and safety of your executive, department colleagues, management team, and company? This is where you have to be focused in your response to the caller.

For example, let's say that Robert works at a separate worktable in his office when working on large projects so he can spread out his papers. Robert has told you that he does not want to be disturbed as he has to finish the project by 4:00 p.m. today. You could say for example, "Robert is not at his desk right now." This is accurate and factual, and it protects Robert's need for a period of privacy.

When you are accurate, factual, and focused in screening calls:

- your executive becomes known as a courteous, conscientious person who returns phone calls and doesn't stoop to hide-and-seek with callers.
- it decreases your chances of using the same "excuse" on the same caller too frequently.
- there is a reduction in repeat phone calls from those who believe you don't give the executive messages.
- You extend a courtesy to the caller that their time is not wasted calling again and again or in waiting for a call to be returned "any moment."

If you stay focused, you can be factual, accurate, and safeguard important information.

#4: Employee Privacy, Security, and Safety

There is a fine line between divulging too much information and not enough information, or between being accurate and factual with a caller's request for information and safeguarding privacy, security, and safety. There are topics that definitely are off limits to authorized callers. The following points are provided for your guidance in that regard.

1. A person's privacy, security, and safety must be the guiding factors upon which you base your decision in favor of or against releasing information.
2. If you are uncertain, politely withholding information is the best policy; you can always get back to a bona fide, well intentioned, and entitled individual after obtaining direction or guidance from your executive.
3. With people you do not know, it is essential that you pre-qualify the nature of the communication. You must comfortably establish in your best judgment, that the query is bona fide, well intentioned, and carries no malicious or onerous tone or intent.
4. Unless you have clearly established the need to do so and have assured yourself that the caller is entitled to the information, and you are willing to accept the responsibility for doing so, you should never give out information regarding:
 - health, illness, injury, accidents, funerals, or special events being attended by an individual
 - leave of any kind (vacation, conference, compassionate, etc.)
 - reasons for absence
 - anticipated duration of absence
 - attendance at funerals
 - home addresses
 - non-business telephone numbers
 - personal movements, personal plans, personal matters
 - details of employment
 - other personal details
5. If an unverifiable caller gives the excuse that they are "stepping out" and that they will try again later, ask if there is a message or if someone else in the office can help them.
6. If a caller persists with inappropriate questions, you may answer, "I am not at liberty to provide you with an answer to that question (or with that information)."

I would be happy to pass your request on to the appropriate person.” And then gather any information you can from the requestor.

7. Never verify personal information about the person they are calling for, even if it is correct. Tell them you do not know, however, you will give the message to the executive for response.
8. Callers requesting payroll information should not be transferred to payroll. Obtain a name and number from the caller and have someone in payroll return the call. This is a good way to screen fraudulent calls and safe guard employee personal and financial information.

There is a fine line between divulging too much information and not enough information, or between being accurate and factual with a caller’s request for information and safeguarding employee privacy, security, and safety.

#5: Telephone Protocol: Guidelines for Screening Calls

The key to screening is to get the information you need without making the caller feel as if they are being interrogated. An example of how the caller might feel this way is where you would ask the caller for their name before telling them whether your executive is in or not.

If the caller states their name, and then you say the executive is out (which may be true), you can give the impression that the executive just doesn't want to talk to them. Overall, you don't want to give the *impression* that you are screening the call. You want to do this with great skill, tact, and confidence.

Guidelines for Receiving and Screening Callers

1. It is up to you to elicit information from the caller. You should always get their name, organization or company name, telephone number, and nature of the call. Other information that may be important is alternate phone numbers and their mailing address. If the caller says, "He has it," don't take his word. It is your responsibility to get as much information as possible, accurately document it, and then pass it on to the appropriate person. By collecting the necessary information, you save your executive time and ensure accuracy.

When recording information from the caller, if the name is unfamiliar or you do not clearly understand the caller, ask them to please spell their name for you or try to spell it out loud to the caller. They will correct you, if you are incorrect.

2. When you are giving the message to your executive, be sure to add your impressions about the urgency and nature of the call. If the caller says, "I need to speak with Samantha by 3:00 today because she has information for a report I am writing," then be sure to communicate that to Samantha. If you feel the caller was annoyed, frustrated, angry, perplexed, be sure to communicate that as well. This is important information and helps determine the priority of the return call.
3. Be sure to keep a record of all incoming calls so you can confirm a message or double check information.
4. If your executive has requested that you take messages because she will be in a meeting or is working on a project and cannot be interrupted and the caller insists that you interrupt your executive, say something to the effect of, "She cannot be interrupted at the moment. She will be available later this afternoon (or tomorrow morning, whichever) if you would like her to return your call or if you would like to call again."

If your executive truly needs to speak with a particular person, your executive should tell you so before going into a meeting or closing their door to work on a project. This is why it is important that you and the person for whom you are managing calls (or visitors) communicate on a regular basis.

5. Keep a paper and pen near your telephone and jot down key information from the caller and about the caller. Do not assume that you will remember anything.
6. When you need to place the caller on hold, wait for a response from the caller when you ask, "May I put you on hold?" The rule of thumb is to go back to the line every 30 seconds to ask if they will continue to hold.
7. When a person is away from the office for more than a day, especially on personal business, never promise that the person for whom you are taking messages will return a phone call. They may never! Say, "I will give her your message." Or, "I will give your message to Michael who is handling her responsibilities." You need only use the second statement if pressed by the situation to do so. Volunteering information to someone you do not know or whose motives are suspect or not understood, is not normally a good practice.
8. Learn to recognize names and voices (together) of people with whom your executive frequently interacts and the nature of their relationship. Even if your executive has a close business relationship with a particular person, it does not mean they want that person or anyone other than their boss, their immediate reports, or you to know that they are out of the office for two weeks.
9. In some situations, you are not the best person to help the caller. In those instances, you can say something like, "Maureen, I don't handle that but I will be happy to give the appropriate individual (or their name) your message. Let me take your phone number." Or, "Maureen, that is handled by our Human Resources Department. I will be happy to transfer you to Beth Meyers."
10. You may not always know the answer to the caller's question, but at least show you care and will try to find a suitable answer. You could say, "I don't have that information, but I will try to find out and call you back. May I have your phone number?"
11. Exhibit professionalism and discretion when responding to phone inquiries; not drilling, not disinterest, but smooth screening skills to assist your executive in taking only the calls that are appropriate.

12. Project professionalism and discretion in responding to caller inquiries on an individual's whereabouts. The following two responses create negative impressions for the caller.
- When your executive is out of the office, has not yet arrived, or is working offsite, "He's not yet arrived" (if call is in the a.m.) is not necessary information for the caller.
 - Neither is "She's off today." Or, "He's gone for the day."
 - In either case, an appropriate response would be: "She's not available but I will leave a message that you called," or, "He's not currently in his office."

13. Another example of how to handle a call when someone is out for more than a few days would be as follows.

Example: Your executive, John Camaron, is on vacation for two weeks. Someone calls for John. You might say, "John is currently not available to take your call. I would be happy to take a message for you and pass it on to him."

If the caller is persistent and says, "When do you expect him back? Is he coming in later?" You can say, "John will be unavailable the rest of the week. However, he is checking in for messages and returning calls as his schedule permits." Or, "Bonnie will be handling John's responsibilities this week." Or if the call seems urgent, you might tell the caller (if this is true), "I can get a message to John (or the person handling John's responsibilities in his absence) and notify him of the urgency of your call. Can I please take your name, telephone number, and time you can be reached?"

The reason you would tell the caller up front that John is not available the rest of the week is so that they don't call you every day to see if John is available.

As a Telephone Gatekeeper, you need to lead the caller appropriately so that within reason, their needs can be met and the needs of employees can be safeguarded as well. Don't let the caller take the lead.

14. Before your executive leaves for vacation or for a conference, discuss the manner in which he or she wants non-urgent calls and emergency calls handled. While guidelines are provided in this booklet, some people have specific ways in which they want their calls handled. It is imperative that the two of you review these guidelines and determine those that are applicable to your individual situation, industry, and your executive's level within the organization.

Some Examples of What Not to Say:

- "He hasn't come back from lunch yet." (Implies that he's late; leaves a bad image.)
- "She took the day off." (Much too personal and private.)
- "She's on vacation for two weeks." (Extremely personal and potentially very dangerous. If this information inadvertently or innocently reaches the wrong ears, the person on vacation could have their house robbed, car stolen, or they could be harmed during a robbery if they are staying home on vacation.)
- "He's out ill today." (Extremely personal.)
- "He's out of town for two days." (Carries the same risks as vacation scenario.)
- Never give out personal information to a qualified, bona fide, entitled caller when someone else, not entitled to this information is standing within earshot.
- Never post personal information discussed in this booklet, on a personal status board in your office where unknown, unentitled people can read it.

Some Examples of What to Say:

- "She's in a meeting this morning. May I take your name and number?"
- "She has someone in her office."
- "He's not currently in his office."
- "She stepped away from her desk."
- "Marc is taking care of his responsibilities today. I will pass your name, number, and message to him." Or, "If you wish to call him directly, Marc's number is 555-1212." (Make sure you have cleared giving Marc's cell phone number to people.)
- "I'm really not authorized to provide you with that information. Perhaps I could take your name and number and have the appropriate person call you back."
- "I'm unable to discuss this right now. Can I call you back in five minutes?" This can be done when unentitled strangers are standing within earshot of your conversation.

#6: Handling Upset or Angry Callers

Here are specific, concise techniques for professionally dealing with upset and angry callers. The most important strategy is to listen. Depending on the situation, you may have to apply more than one strategy.

What Upset Callers Want:

1. Be taken seriously. Don't say things like "you're kidding" or "you've got to be joking." Be professional and confident and respond seriously.
2. Be treated with respect. Don't be arrogant. Use concern and respect.
3. Get immediate action. They don't want you to look into it tomorrow, next week, or next month. Show your concern by moving briskly.
4. Gain compensation. They want someone to pay for the damage or inconvenience.
5. Have the party who wronged them reprimanded or punished. Assure the caller that corrective action will be taken.
6. Clean up the problem so it never happens again. Sometimes the caller just wants to know that some action has been put into motion.
7. Be listened to. Upset callers first want to be listened to. It's difficult to listen carefully in a tense situation but this is your best tool.
8. Other tips include:
 - Probe for more information.
 - Repeat their condition to make sure you've understood.
 - Show you value their patronage.
 - Explain options or ask what they would like to have happen.
 - Summarize actions to be taken - yours and theirs.
 - End pleasantly.

Listen

Empathize

Clarify

Problem Solve

#7: Beware of Common Tactics People Use to Bypass You

Just as you can become a skilled Telephone Gatekeeper, people are skilled at breaking through the Telephone Gatekeeper. They can use one or more tactics to break through or gain information.

Here are few of the tactics these people use.

1. The caller pretends that they are a good friend of the person whom they are trying to reach. They have a "buddy/buddy" approach or sound to their voice.
2. The caller uses a gruff or rough tone with you as if to sound very upset and "you better get someone on the line immediately."
3. You may need to be direct with a caller who is vague or elusive. Ask them specifically, "Is this a personal call?"
4. A caller may try to get friendly with you. While there is nothing wrong with people being friendly, this caller has a different motive and you have to know the difference. Try to keep the phone call short and simple. It is easy to get caught up in conversation with a caller who believes you are withholding information from them. Before you know it, the information you were guarding is given out unintentionally.
5. You can spot callers who really don't know your executive because they mispronounce his or her name (if not a common one, like Smith).
6. Rude callers can definitely try your patience. And, therefore, you start giving out confidential information. A general rule of thumb is that the nicer you are, the quieter they get. When this does not work, the best tip is to maintain patience and a calm tone of voice.

#8: Borderline Telephone Calls

While we have tried to map out most situations that you would encounter in telephone conversations, we cannot cover every situation. When you take a "borderline" confidential call, you will have to use sound judgment. If you have learned the voices and names of frequent callers and know the relationship they have with the person they are calling, this definitely will help you.

- A good rule of thumb is to maintain a position of **information gatherer** rather than **information divulger**. When in doubt, take down all the information you can including the caller's phone number. Let them know you will have to look into the situation and call them back. Anyone phoning with a good and specific purpose in mind will have no problem giving their name, phone number, and reason for their call.
- Callers may also try to catch you off guard. They may start asking to speak to your executive who may not be in the office. Then as the caller is saying their good-byes to you, ends with an "Oh, by the way..." Thus catching you off guard to possibly reveal information that they should not be privy to.
- Beware of the media! If specific guidelines are not in place at your organization a good approach would be to get all the information from the caller and let them know you will pass this information on to the appropriate person. Don't feel that you have to answer any of their questions. Be careful to not give out any off-the-record information.

Joan Burge, Founder & CEO, Office Dynamics International



Joan Burge is an accomplished author, professional speaker, consultant and corporate trainer. In 1990, she created a business in an untapped niche, overcoming monumental obstacles involving corporations' and managers' attitudes, prejudices and stereotypes about executive assistants and administrative professionals. She dedicated herself to inspiring excellence and encouraging administrative professionals to reach for the stars! Her company, Office Dynamics International, is a global industry leader which offers a broad range of solutions and provides high-performance, sophisticated executive and administrative assistant training and coaching.

She is the creator and host of the *Annual Conference for Administrative Excellence™* (started in 1993); the *World Class Assistant™* Certification course; *Mastering Exceptional Self-Leadership* Certification course; and more than 40 customized workshops and seminars for executive and administrative assistants.

Joan has authored four groundbreaking books for administrative professionals including the Amazon Best Seller - *Who Took My Pen ... Again? Secrets from Dynamic Executive Assistants*. Her administrative-career "bibles" entitled *Become an Inner Circle Assistant* and *Underneath It All* continue to be favorites among executive and administrative assistants worldwide.



Since 1990, Office Dynamics International has been the global industry leader in the development and presentation of sophisticated executive and administrative assistant training, coaching and resources. We offer a broad range of solutions that create behavior change and produce sustainable results.

Office Dynamics' experience and expertise in the administrative training industry are unparalleled. We have crafted and refined a unique line of premier educational products and training programs that boost success for progressive employers and enterprising administrative professionals, secretaries, and support staff.

As our founder Joan Burge says, "We help clients transform their corporate culture, resulting in administrators who desire to perform their jobs with excellence, thereby providing even greater support to leadership."

Our expertise is found in how we partner with our clients to find the best solution, whether that means training a group of assistants, coaching a C-level executive assistant, facilitating a workshop, teaching managers how to utilize their assistants for maximum benefit, or identifying administrative competencies.

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