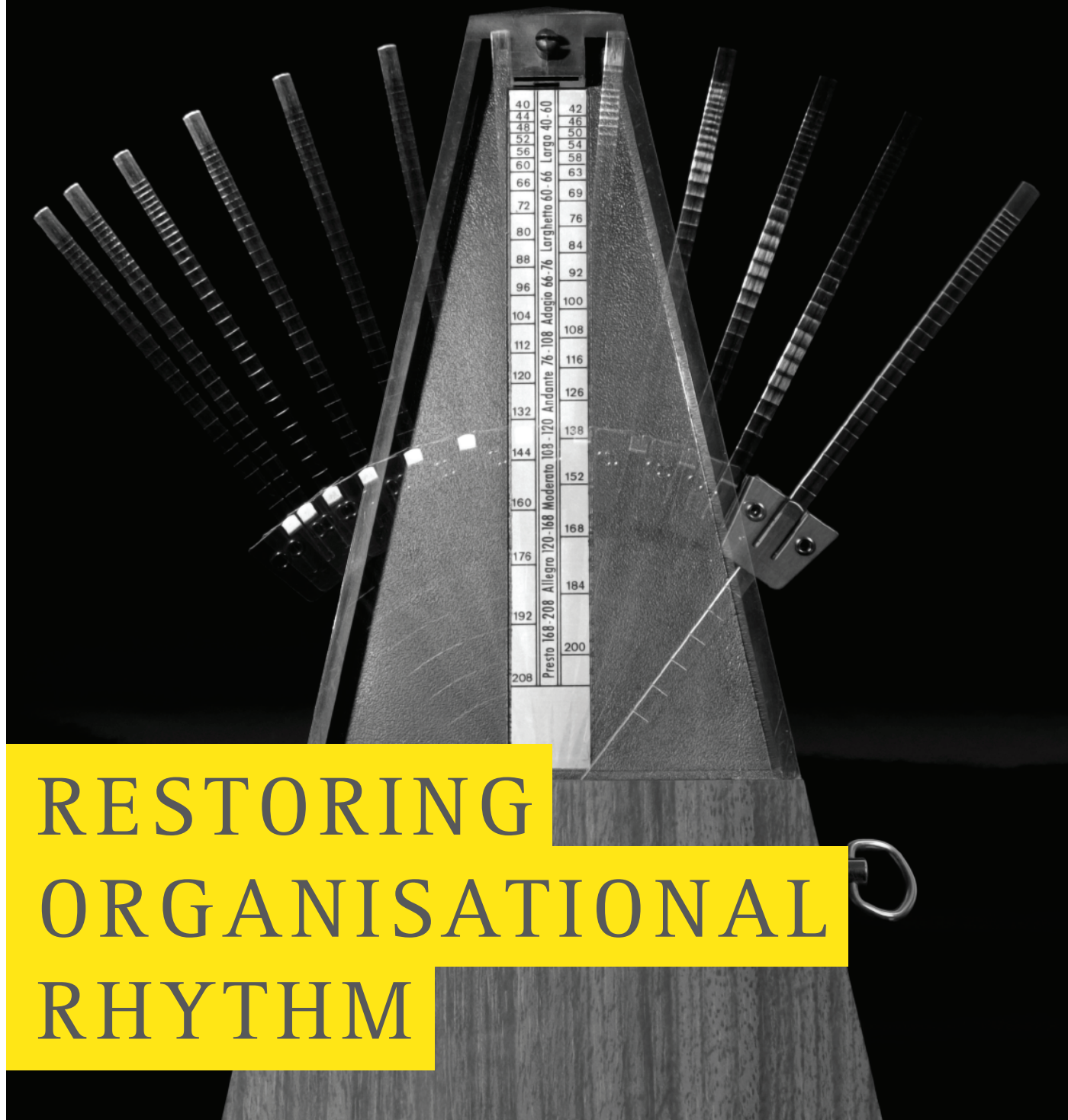


PERFORMANCE ARCHITECT



RESTORING
ORGANISATIONAL
RHYTHM

RESTORING ORGANISATIONAL RHYTHM

by Andrew Simon

“Steering the organisation to build its own sense of rhythm in organisational life and work so that high performance can be sustained through an organised and well managed approach to work is a management responsibility.”

Today's workplace can be dangerous, damaging and dispiriting – to both individuals and organisations. It is management's responsibility to prevent such situations and the effective leader can do much to ensure balance in the rhythm of the organisation.

The symptoms of an out of balance work system are familiar to us all – people reporting that:

- they feel overly stressed, anxious, tired, confused about priorities that appear to change on a daily basis;
- their work days are taken up with reacting to urgent demands that are perceived as meaningless at the expense of meaningful core work;
- unplanned absences, above normal rates of bullying and harassment and a fruitless struggle to achieve sustainable levels of high performance;
- a constant and continually reactive stance to daily work or where teams don't even have visibility of what their work week will be like; or
- energy levels sapped through constant flux and change or where frantic, spreadeagled activity is much more common than enthusiastic focus.

In each case the symptoms are indicative of having lost a sense of rhythm to the way work is organised, managed and carried out. In such situations, well meaning, diligent, talented, highly responsible people will start to crumble, to fall sick and to lose heart. Organisations cannot afford such damage if they are genuinely concerned about their people or about sustainable organisational performance.

Building an organisation's sense of rhythm in its work and work approach is a clear management responsibility. It is also a major enabler for sustained high performance. Steering the organisation towards and along this path is a challenge for the leader and a benefit for all.

I use the term rhythm in the context of organisational life and in the work at individual and team levels, to refer to the regular and recognisable periods of highly productive work that has a positive momentum. At such times employees and staff are able to focus high energy, enthusiasm and solid effort in the knowledge that there will be transitional periods, however brief, in which to de-escalate once a task is accomplished or a milestone met, before the next period of high intensity begins.

The wise manager recognises that if left to chance, such new emergent patterns may not be desirable or productive. Vigilance and deft intervention are sometimes required.

The nature and pattern of this periodicity differs according to organisations and contexts, but patterns do exist across many organisations and work systems. Think of the patterns of work and the organisational rhythms in highly complex airports for example, or the complex supply chains used by large supermarkets and retailers, or the pattern of work on farms, vineyards, factories, power stations, live TV, radio stations and in shopping malls. These are all complex sites of work, yet there are recognisable patterns to the rhythm of work that have been designed, adapted and managed. These organisations and/or their industry settings are not simple, static or fully predictable. Indeed, each sector has its own complications, pressures, risks, surprises, failures, disasters and opportunities. Our modern economy is built on many organisations operating successfully in complex systems, and all have some sort of pattern to their work.

There is a close, symbiotic relationship between patterns and complexity and where this relationship breaks down, chaos tends to reign....for a time at least until a new pattern emerges. The wise manager recognises that if left to chance, such new emergent patterns may not be desirable or productive. Vigilance and deft intervention are sometimes required.

So how can organisations re-establish and restore some sense of positive rhythm to their work? Well...

- Design and embed workable and realistic business models and work flows. It's really hard for an organisation to find its rhythm and to function at sustainable peak performance levels if these are flawed, clumsy or disjointed.
- Map out workflows at the most meaningful level, so that people can see how the work of the organisation or team is organised and managed. This gives confidence to people that work is generally organised, even if there are frequent interruptions to this in reality. Don't just rely on organisational charts to do this.
- Make the whole system visible. Show interdependencies and how each component part of the organisation fits and interacts.
- Uncover and make existing patterns visible or recognisable to demonstrate that patterns do exist and that contemporary work does have some rhythm and forward momentum. This provides perspective for staff and keeps people honest.
- Design recognisable patterns to work but keep them loose. This facilitates easier change, flexibility and adaptability if required.
- Allow sub-units and staff to organise their work in a way that they can see a recognisable and productive pattern to their work. This could include:
 - Allowing for peaks and troughs in work load and intensity;
 - Identifying important core workflows that require steady and continual attention and quarantining these from distractions as far as possible. This provides the work unit with a backbone around which more reactive work can take place without compromising core business or feeling a loss of control;
 - Identifying types of work that can be modularised over chunks of time;
 - Pattern work that is in a continuous, reactive flux, by introducing other predictable periods such as breaks, time outs, organisational routines etc.;
 - Building in time for routine but necessary tasks; and
 - Scheduling plans for staff leave, time off in lieu and time for modest celebrations to mark accomplishments, as an integral part of routine business planning and workforce management.
- Encourage people to question the assumptions behind assigned work. This facilitates deeper understanding and ownership of the actual task and work.

“Action and reaction, ebb and flow, trial and error, change - this is the rhythm of living. Out of our over-confidence, fear; out of our fear, clearer vision, fresh hope. And out of hope, progress”

- Bruce Barton.

- Know the difference between urgent and important and teach your staff to discern the difference.
 - Insist people stop marking things urgent when they are not.
 - Provide meaning to genuinely urgent tasks. Provide context, rationale and logic - don't just mark things urgent without explaining why.
 - Know and appreciate the moving parts. The system you manage or lead typically has many moving parts which interact with other parts and systems; there is always a consequence and impact even if you do not see it at first.
 - Build in periodic interventions which are predictable periods or events/ activities which deliberately interject a sense of pattern. This could include regular:
 - Organisational team briefings and updates
 - Feedback sessions and conversations
 - Individual catch ups with staff
 - Celebratory events
 - Just for fun activities
 - On the job learning opportunities
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