

PERFORMANCE ARCHITECT

UNPRODUCTIVE
BUSYNESS



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By Andrew Simon

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As we move around organisations and meet with clients, partners and stakeholders every day, it's a rare thing to come across someone who will admit to having a bit of free time!

Almost everyone we meet says that they are really busy, and they seem to be really busy with back to back meetings, responding to emails, (most of which seem to be marked urgent), returning phone calls (or not!), making appointments for even more back to back meetings, editing documents, correcting other people's work and putting out "spot fires" that inevitably happen in busy places.

And while people seem to be run off their feet with such busyness, it is often unclear just what is being achieved, accomplished and finished.

Activity unfortunately, does not always equate to accomplishment.

One consequence of such busyness is that we deny ourselves the opportunity to pay attention to the quality, depth and impact of our work. We find that we don't have time to read submissions properly or to form a considered view, to design a workable way forward or to innovate. We spend a lot of time at meetings walking over documents which we should have read beforehand, instead of using the time to make good decisions or to have conversations which matter. Our days become long and we get more and more tired just trying to keep up with these kinds of relentless demands on our time, attention and energy. For some, feelings of being out of control, exhausted and of being overwhelmed are common.

Of course, intense activity and busyness can be exhilarating. Being intensely busy is not necessarily negative, provided our busyness is meaningful and purposeful. Unproductive busyness which lacks coherence of effort and purpose drains us as we realise that our effort no matter how well meaning and diligent, appears pointless.

In such a context, our emotional, psychological and physical resources drain very easily and our capacity to lead, to manage, to be strategic, to contribute and to learn is hampered and compromised. Indeed, recent research suggests that our desire to be good corporate citizens as well as helpful colleagues and peers diminish as we become more and more tired. Attention is decreased and passivity increased which leads to lower performance on the job especially as managers and leaders. We then tend to avoid all non-essential, non-rewarded, discretionary good behaviour and bunker down.

We cannot let our need to learn and to be good leaders and managers be robbed by unproductive busyness, if we are to navigate uncertainty and continuous change and if we are to see and seize the opportunities that such conditions bring.

We often see the effects of this kind of drain in our leadership development work, where participants can be distracted, lack focus, are sullen and impatient, non-contributing, and tired. They are not in the mood to learn, to question their assumptions and to explore new ways of doing things.

This is a significant threat to the effectiveness as leaders and managers. Active reflection, practical learning, knowledge sharing, the questioning of assumptions, deep conversations and meaningful relationships are critical to getting any complex job done effectively and efficiently. If there is a perception that there is no time to do any of this and that there is no time to learn to be better managers and leaders, then the effectiveness of leadership and management will logically diminish, and with it, the capacity of organisations to respond to new issues and opportunities and to navigate uncharted waters.

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While each individual and organisation will have different ways to cope with unproductive busyness, it is perhaps useful to consider several strategies which may help break the negative cycle of unproductive busyness and drain on our emotional, psychological and physical resources. This could include:

Encouraging people to take effective work breaks.

Recent research by the Rotman School of Management, suggest that in general, there are two kinds of breaks at work that most people usually take: the chore kind of break, where people use whatever brief time they have to get household or personal chores and duties done e.g. paying bills, making the quick dash for groceries etc. and respite breaks, where work like tasks are not required, expected or performed.

In respite breaks, very little work related demands on our emotional and psychological resources are made and so people feel refreshed and revitalised, even if the break was relatively brief.

Re-balancing the demands of the job with the degree of control one has over this
However, being able to take respite breaks is a consequence of the degree of control that one has over the demands of the job. The same research has shown that the more control individuals perceive they have over their job requirements, the more they will be inclined to actually take work breaks which provide effective respite.

Enabling people to have control, discretion and autonomy over their jobs can be really difficult in a context where managers are "clock watchers" or where they might believe that staff need to be ultra-responsive to every request, always available for last minute urgent jobs and always physically visible as proof that they are actually working! In such a context, autonomy and self-directness by individuals over their work is very difficult to achieve.

Inculcating self-directness and autonomy requires managers and leaders to:

- Focus on and managing meaning, purpose, outputs and outcomes, not activity.
- Triage and prioritise requests and demands on time and resources based on an acute understanding of organisational strategy and objectives.
- Put in place supportive workplace habits and practices which allow staff to discuss and plan for their workloads, for their peaks and troughs, leave and time off in lieu.

Finally, managers and leaders need to make time to build capability and capacity so that their people have the skills, knowledge and attitudes to be able to exert control over their work and to produce successful, meaningful outputs which have an impact.

- Build a trusting workplace where mature professional relationships are focused on producing useful outputs and where staff can question and stop unnecessary activity.
- Encourage staff to judge for themselves, to give themselves permission to do or not do things, rather than to seek this from others all the time and to be accountable for their decisions.
- Be courageous in deciding, explaining and defending what gets dropped off, or delayed or de- prioritised or made a priority.

Finally, managers and leaders need to make time to build capability and capacity so that their people have the skills, knowledge and attitudes to be able to exert control over their work and to produce successful, meaningful outputs which have an impact. This kind of leadership and management is not technical nor is it new. But this kind of leading and managing is to do with liberating people so that they can use their abilities and potential to lead themselves. It may not be easy and we may feel that we may not have time for this, but it may be the only way in which we will be able to cope with and thrive in the busyness of our world.

"Good leaders liberate"- Amanda Sinclair.