

Working Smarter



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Legend has it that during World War II, Navy fighter planes had a watch embedded in the steering column – not to help the pilot keep time, but to help save his life. You see: the first step in a pilot’s emergency response process was to wind the watch. It may sound crazy, but Navy psychologists had proven that the split second required for a pilot to wind the watch was enough time for him to clear his head of distractions and to focus instead on the emergency at hand. The one second spent winding the watch bought him considerable time, enabling him to react in a more logical, coherent way. In today’s business world, we are all so busy, so stretched, so overcommitted, and so inundated with information, that we sometimes forget to wind the watch – to focus on what’s important and create space to accomplish our ultimate objectives...

People are busy. Very busy. And very stressed. If you are out of a job, you’re probably spending most minutes of your days trying to find one. And if you’re fortunate enough to have a job, you’re probably spending most minutes of your days trying to keep it – working like mad to do your own work, and possibly the work of others who have departed. Long term, this stress may really have a negative impact on health and well-being. But in the short-term, I think individuals can follow some simple tips to reduce workload, refocus on priorities, and improve their professional productivity – allowing them to accomplish more in a shorter amount of time (and hopefully with reduced anxiety).

Last month, the Minnesota Council for Quality hosted a half-day workshop facilitated by Dr. Art Hill, a professor at the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota. The workshop, “Lean Principles for Getting Good Things Done” outlined several tips for improving personal productivity – at work or at home. Dr. Hill had many excellent insights, but I’ll offer only a few:

Keep Focused. Dr. Hill cited research that there is, on average, about 2.5 minutes between distractions for managers in the workplace. Yikes – 2.5 minutes?! In an average 9-hour day, that’s 216 interruptions a day (actually, come to think of it: that sounds about right for many of my days!). Think about it: the phone rings, you get an email, someone stops by your office/cube, your mind wanders to another task, etc., etc. And to compound the problem, other research claims that professionals’ recovery time from distractions at work to be about 10 minutes per interruption – time to re-gather your thoughts, dig back into your task, and so forth. So basically, we spend most of every day being interrupted and recovering from those interruptions. That can’t be very efficient.

Like the “wind the watch” story above, we should all practice staying focused. Try tuning out your distractions by turning off your phone while you’re focused on a major task, shutting your door, turning off your email. Find a quiet place to work. Remove clutter from your desk to reduce distractions and temptations. And practice something Dr. Hill calls “capturing your tasks.” Basically, if something pops into your mind – someone you forgot to call, something you need to do later, etc. – take two seconds to write that down, but resist the temptation to do it then.

Set Priorities. Similar to staying focused, Dr. Hill says that we all suffer from “polluted priorities” – doing things that we should not be doing, procrastinating (by delaying important but difficult tasks in favor of easier tasks), or doing what he calls “chasing rabbits” (think of a puppy walking down the street...he sees a rabbit, he chases the rabbit – setting a new priority and completely forgetting about the original task at hand). I think we’re all somewhat victims of chasing rabbits. Charles Hummel’s 1967 paper called this behavior the “tyranny of the urgent” rather than staying focused on the important.

Dr. Hill suggests that we should all keep one consolidated calendar and one consolidated task list. He’s also developed what I think is a very effective triage process for handling one of our most time-consuming (and oftentimes low value-added) activities: email. This process helps us think through how to quickly and efficiently handle the growing volume of emails we all receive (by deleting, delegating, filing, suspending, processing, or taking other action).

Set Boundaries. Do you mow your neighbor’s lawn? Probably not (unless you have some sort of arrangement, I guess). But we all spend time every day doing the work that others should probably do. Dr. Hill says that this problem is because we don’t often enough set – and maintain – boundaries at work (or home). As a result, roles sometimes become unclear, leading to redundant work and/or misplaced work.

Dr. Hill recommends that we use methods like project charters, role descriptions, and RACI (Responsibility, Accountability, Consulted, Informed) to set clear boundaries, allowing workers to focus on their core strengths and responsibilities. Dr. Hill says that you’ll be “...doing others a favor by not doing their job.” That behavior, he suggests, can lead to unproductive co-dependency at work (or at home).

Increase Capacity. Dr. Hill says that we all are suffering from “minimal margins” – a phrase first coined by Richard Swenson in his 2004 book “Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives.” We are all overcommitted – personally and professionally – which is complicating our lives, and reducing our capacity to perform. In fact, Swenson calls it “chronic overloading” and it’s impacting our ability to maintain emotional, mental, physical, and financial balance.

Think about it in a financial sense: if you have a credit card with a \$10,000 limit but you’re carrying \$9500 in debt (a scenario that’s far too common these days, I might add), you don’t have much margin – much capacity – to maneuver if something happens and you need access to cash. The same scenario is true with your emotional bank account, your physical bank account, your professional bank account. You need capacity – not being completely overcommitted – to be able to respond to the needs of your changing environment.

Dr. Hill suggests that there are many ways to increase our margins – simple things like learning to say “no” to new tasks (as appropriate), using a phrase “I’ll get back to you” before you commit to new assignments, and trying to accurately estimate the time tasks really take so that we don’t over-commit (he suggests tasks take 2-3 times what you originally estimate, so build that in). There are also other ways to create margin – like eliminating waste and low-value added tasks,



reducing the number of meetings you attend (if you can), and reducing your email and calls (using do-not call lists, opt-outs). Margin happens because we make it a priority: we should get out of the habit of trying to fill every single second of every hour of every day with scheduled activity. Then, if we encounter a new priority, we'll actually have the capacity to respond.

There's one more tip I'd like to add to the four above, and it really cuts across a few of them (and, truth be told, it's not my tip, but was written by Liz Reyer in the Minneapolis Star-Tribune about two months ago). Her advice is, quite simply, to slow down – to take a long look at a situation at work before acting. Really, her advice is like winding the watch.

Reyer says that "slowing down is not about doing less; it is about working more effectively and efficiently." She says: "[we must] understand the cost of haste. For many of [her] clients, much of the pressures they face comes from fixing mistakes. Look at the project that you and your team work on. What happens on rush jobs when you have insufficient time to plan? Consider the impact on quality and cost, along with the effect it has on morale when people know that they can't do their best work."

She says that the old adage "measure twice, cut once" makes sense in building a house, making a dress, or working with people in business. And imagine the impact on your capacity – your personal margin – if we all just took a deep breath, wound that watch, and then moved forward in more thoughtful, calculated ways.