



Busyness as Usual

How to get time back and increase business performance

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Preface

Managers are critical to an organization's success in many ways. They manage processes, people and other assets. They are also instrumental in ensuring that people and processes are continually improved. It's their responsibility to ensure the achievements of an organization's objectives are sustainable. Yet when managers get caught up in the demanding details of managing, they can lose focus on important areas that ensure longer term sustainable results. It is when busy managers ignore the future because of daily demands that they fall into *busyness as usual*.

This is especially evident in sales managers in the IT industry, as they occupy a uniquely demanding position. The ever increasing workload of sales management combined with the pace and complexity of the IT industry creates a responsibility where keeping up, much less thinking ahead is very difficult.

In a February 2002 Harvard Business Review article, *Beware the Busy Manager*, professors Heike Bruch of the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland and Sumantra Ghoshal of the London Business School wrote about their studies of busy managers from a dozen companies over a period of ten years. They found that "fully 90% of managers squander their time in all sorts of ineffective activities. [Managers] think they're attending to pressing matters, but they're really just spinning their wheels."

Executives and managers at all levels bemoan the fact that they never have enough time. Isn't it ironic then that up to 90% of them are simultaneously squandering their time?

This paper is about unproductive busyness. Having been a sales manager and senior executive in the IT industry for twenty years, I use this role as

a primary example. However, this paper is intended to create an awareness of *busyness as usual* in managers and executives in all departments in all industries. It outlines the impact busyness as usual has on managers and their organizations. It provides suggestions on how managers can extract themselves from busyness as usual. It outlines twelve principles that help managers "get time back". It gives managers and executives insight and ideas that will increase their value to their organizations and improve overall business performance.

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Executive Summary

Sales Managers in the IT industry face a dilemma. They face the dilemma of "busyness". To be clear, the dilemma is not just being busy, but being so busy that they become conditioned to only dealing with urgent matters and matters that are focused on operational execution. Managers that work in environments intensely focused on short term results over prolonged periods of time tend to get comfortable with it. They unconsciously come to believe it's the way the world operates and eventually accept their tactical environments as *busyness as usual*.

There is no question that business and government require a constant focus on the bottom line. Healthy organizations need a solid majority of their employees working on achieving near term goals.



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The problem arises when managers in an organization, especially sales managers who are the closest to the customer and the market, don't spend some portion of their time and energy being proactive and focusing on matters of broader strategic importance.

It is a manager's responsibility to ensure there is a proper balance on achieving short term goals with making contributions to strategic concerns. Managers must intentionally invest a portion of their time on their own professional development, the development of their people and the long term success of their organization. Great managers attain their short term goals AND make calculated strategic investments of their time and energy into areas that pay longer term dividends. They invest in areas that make high performance not only realistic, but sustainable.

In order for managers to extract themselves from busyness as usual, they have to go through three phases. First, they need to develop an awareness of their mode of operation and to make a conscious decision to do something about it. They need to commit to giving strategic areas more of their attention and not merely give attention to the areas that demand it. Second, they must employ principles that free up some of their time. Without finding ways to free up time, taking on any new responsibilities is wishful thinking. Third, they must create a discipline of investing that free time in their own professional development, the development of their people and the ongoing improvement of the overall organization.

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A Day in the Life

Bzzzzzzzzzz. Click. John hits the off button on his alarm clock. He blinks a couple of times to focus his eyes and sees the time, 5:45am. "Why am I getting up at 5:45am? Where am I?" John thinks briefly to himself. Then, as his mental fog clears, he realizes he is in his hotel room in Chicago. It's his final stop of his three-city trip that week.

John is a senior level sales manager for an information technology solution provider. He has a dozen direct reports located in several cities around the country. He is responsible for his team's sales performance and works unselfishly for the good of his team and the company. For the most part, he enjoys his work, but a prime reason he works in his current capacity is the compensation and the comforts provided by a good salary.

On this Thursday morning John has a breakfast meeting scheduled with a member of his staff and a customer at 7am in the hotel restaurant. Had it been earlier in the week, he would likely not have been as disoriented as he feels this morning. He was in New York City on Monday and Washington, DC on Tuesday. When he packs his schedule like this, by the end of the trip it's sometimes hard to remember where he is, much less whether he's in room 114, 334 or 469, all room numbers he's had in the different hotels he's stayed in over the week.

As John gets out of bed, he still feels a little tired, but he knows the shower and a cup of coffee will get him going. It's been a long week with too little sleep. It was only six hours ago that John and two of his sales reps left the hotel bar where they were having a few drinks to wind down the day before. It was intended to be a casual relaxing end to the long day before, but as usual, the discussion in the bar turned to business. John still enjoyed the late evening conversation with his staff, but it was not a significant departure from the rest of the work day. He gets in the shower.

As John takes his shower, he begins to think through his day ahead. He has several meetings, several conference calls and numerous issues to face. He also has a plane to catch in the late-afternoon so he can get home at a reasonable



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hour. He starts thinking about the end of the day and feels a little excitement. He hasn't seen his kids or his wife since Sunday evening when he started his road trip. The thought of being home gives him a calming affect and puts a smile on his face.

He gets out of the shower, gets dressed, packs up his suitcase and sits down at the dark brown desk in his room. He moves all the hotel literature to the side and powers up his laptop computer. After logging on to his email, he quickly scans the 100+ emails sitting in his inbox. He sees about a dozen that appear urgent and so he quickly reads them and sends back the appropriate response. He will read and hopefully process the remainder of them on his plane ride back home later in the afternoon.

John pulls up his notes from his conference call two days earlier where his team briefed him on the customer situation in which he is about to engage during breakfast. He notes the key reasons the customer is pushing back on some issues, commits to memory the key points he plans to make and thinks through once more the proposed solution he and his sales representative will be presenting.

He heads out of his room to his breakfast meeting. His day is now officially started. He has the breakfast meeting with the customer. It goes reasonably well; although, it creates several new action items for him and his team to address before the week is over. He follows the customer meeting with an internal debrief of the key details and actions with his account team. He then spends a few minutes updating his unit's sales forecast prior to his weekly forecast call.

John has a weekly call where he provides updates to his group executive on the key transactions on which his unit is working and his unit's expected overall attainment for the month and the quarter. He dials into his weekly forecast call, updates his group executive on the customer meeting that morning and then reviews the other opportunities on which his unit is working.

Prior to the afternoon cab ride back to the airport, John attends several other internal meetings and conference calls. They cover a variety of topics,

but in most of them John acts largely as a conduit of information.

Here is John's schedule for Thursday:

Time	Task
7-8:15am	Customer breakfast
8:30-9am	Team debrief
9-9:30am	Prep for forecast call
9:30-10am	Forecast call
10-11am	Complete quarterly personnel report
11-noon	Return calls, check e-mail, eat lunch
Noon-1pm	Special project update meeting
1-2pm	Staff conference call
2-3pm	Review customer proposals, pricing
3-3:30pm	Cab ride to airport
4:35-7pm	Fly back home

“... in most of [the meetings and calls], John acts largely as a conduit of information.”

John squeezes lunch in the middle of his calls and manages fairly well to stay on schedule. He feels good about his day and his week. He knows he helped his team through some issues, helped close a deal and even passed out some overdue, but well deserved recognition to a couple of his people. He met the deadlines he faced for his weekly sales forecast and his quarterly personnel reports. He also felt he had satisfactorily handled the multitude of requests for information from others on his organization's pursuits. “All in all”, John thought to himself in the cab as he headed to the airport, “a pretty good week”.



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The Role of Sales Management

What do you think about John's schedule? Was he busy on that Thursday? He certainly seemed to work hard. Was he effective? It appears he helped his team out in a tactical sales situation. He also completed his assignments. Other than that, did he increase the value of his organization? Did he do anything that would materially improve the organization's performance over the coming months? Maybe not.

If you are in management, especially in sales management in the IT industry, you probably relate to John. Sales management in companies that sell computer hardware, software and services is a demanding responsibility. It is also a rewarding one. It offers plenty of variety, is fast moving, is challenging, keeps you "in the action", often gives you executive exposure, is typically a well respected position and pays well. It even becomes relatively straightforward, at least for veteran sales managers who stay in the role for a few years. After you have been in it a while, the pace, the workload and the steady stream of issues and difficulties become part of "business as usual".

It's obviously not just sales management in the IT industry that is demanding. Sales management in most every industry is demanding. Other roles can also be just as demanding. But there is something unique about sales management in the IT industry that is just now becoming a reality for other industries.

The IT industry has been unique because of the rate of product and service change. The IT industry invented the *digital* growth curve and has operated on it since its inception. With new products constantly coming out, old products regularly becoming obsolete, and price curves always headed down hill, the IT industry is complex and operates at a very fast pace. With that comes limited windows of opportunities that are often measured in weeks and months instead of quarters and years, as in most industries. This creates the potential for big swings in revenues and margins that can be the source of tremendous pressure.

In addition to rapid change, the exponential growth found in the IT industry creates as many new problems as it does opportunities. High growth markets attract and create many competitors. Companies in the IT industry must continually develop and introduce new products into the market. Companies in the IT industry have to operate on a higher level of alert and at a faster pace than most companies in other industries.

Compounding these industry factors, the role of sales management versus many other management positions is unique. Most roles in business including marketing, engineering, customer service and operations have more predictability. The nature of the work in those roles is less impacted by the dynamic competitive pressures most prominent at the point of sale.

The measurements that drive sales are also more objective than for many other roles. In sales and sales management, it is crystal clear how well things are going. In sales and sales management, you don't merely *support* the sale, you *own* the sale. It is your and your team's responsibility. You are where the "rubber meets the road", the "end of the line". Few other roles include that level of specificity, responsibility and exposure. Sales is not like horseshoes or hand grenades. You don't get points for getting close. You and your team are either selling or not selling.

Sales managers are also the critical conduit between a company's strategy and the place where strategy becomes reality, the customer marketplace. Sales managers synthesize all the company's objectives and directives into a motivating message to the market and their sales representatives who represent the face of the company to the market. With that, sales managers convert what are often unclear messages or obvious solution deficiencies into sellable value propositions. They also become adept at breaking down almost insurmountable goals into achievable actions that ultimately determine success or failure.

Sales and other managers typically have numerous responsibilities that impact a company's performance. They usually have operational responsibilities that contribute to near term

objectives. They also have strategic responsibilities that impact both near term and longer term objectives. This is the key area where managers are significantly different than individual contributors. Individual contributors are primarily, if not fully, oriented toward achieving near term goals. They for the most part are focused on executing processes and achieving near term objectives. Managers on the other hand have a responsibility to their organization to ensure that near term achievements can be sustained for months, quarters and even years to come.

What is Busyness?

Having been in sales, sales management and general management, I relate to the day in the life of John. Over my 25 year career, most of which has been in the IT industry, I've lived hundreds, if not thousands of days like the one John had above. I remember some of the days and weeks early in my sales management career where I was so busy that the only break from work I got was when I put my head on my pillow for the night. I remember thinking that I couldn't possibly pack any more into my hectic schedule.

Yet, since my early days in sales management, the pace seems to get even faster and more intense. Quotas go up, resources decrease, competition gets fiercer and customers become more demanding. The only thing that gets better is the compensation ... although the cost of living doesn't remain static either! I enjoyed my time in sales management, but I'm glad I had the opportunity to move up into senior and general management. It gave me not only valuable new opportunities, but deeper insights into sales management and other management positions.

After becoming a general manager and more recently a management consultant, I've been able to get "out of the trees" and "see the forest" in the management landscape. I've also had the opportunity to work closely with clients outside of the IT industry. I've worked in high growth markets like those often found in the IT industry and low growth markets. As an aside, I've seen the

downside of working in high growth markets as they often compensate for and even cover up business dysfunctions.

These experiences have made several aspects of sales management clearer to me. While I still hold tremendous respect for the people who take on the responsibility of sales management, I take issue with a few of the practices and approaches that are commonplace. In many cases, these practices have been unconsciously adopted. I can also point to other sources behind these practices such as poor direction by senior management or bad business processes. But at the end of the day, I believe sales managers have to step up to taking responsibility and addressing these issues.

The practice that is the focus of this paper is "busyness". Busyness as defined here is more than the state of being busy. It is the *continuous condition of being mentally and physically occupied by tactical activities*. It is not to be confused with working hard intentionally. It is very different. Busyness is a condition that controls you instead of you controlling it. It is a prevailing attitude of "just get the job done". "Just brute force your way through it and we'll try to do it better next time."

"Busyness is the continuous condition of being mentally and physically occupied by tactical activities."

Busyness is where there is little focus on being proactive. Daily activities are mostly reactive. Work is all *real-time*. There is little time for new ideas or anything for that matter that offers long term strategic benefit. It's a largely an unintentional mode of operation where managers all but ignore opportunities to take initiative.

Busyness as defined here is about maintaining the status quo. It is about maintaining momentum, not increasing momentum. It is performing tactical

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activities that attempt to maintain the current level of value created by an organization. It rarely increases overall organizational value. As will be discussed a little later, it often leads to a gradual erosion of value.

Because busyness is about being consumed by tactical activities, there is no focus on strategic matters. Focus is on maintaining the current business environment as it has been in the past. It may involve achieving increased performance objectives like sales targets, but it typically doesn't include a focus on improvements to business processes, systems or people skills. These are strategic activities that are mostly ignored in organizations where busyness prevails. As a result, environments based on busyness as usual get increasingly difficult to maintain because objectives increase, but without commensurate improvements in the business infrastructure that enables those increases to be achieved.

There are many reasons for busyness, but one in particular is not related to one's environment. People's natural personalities impact the likelihood that they will or won't fall victim to busyness. People tend to have a natural preference for either being oriented toward the short term or the long term. In Alpine Link's leadership boot camps, we have our participating managers go through a battery of self assessments. One of the outcomes is a score of their *time frame orientation*. People who score at the low end of time frame orientation don't typically look out very far into the future. A 2 year horizon would be long term thinking for them. They are inclined to look for immediate results in the work they do and focus on very near term objectives. They are natural candidates to fall prey to busyness as they are naturally more comfortable with it. So some people may come by busyness honestly.

But regardless of its source, busyness is a mode of operation where activity is commonly substituted for effectiveness. It's a condition where managers stop evaluating the nature of their work. They stop reflecting on whether the work they do is really value adding and whether it is even worth the effort.

Busyness in management is characterized by the following:

- Focus primarily on tactical matters
- Little dedicated attention to professional development of self or others
- Most work done in reaction to someone else's initiatives
- Little energy put into addressing and resolving root cause issues
- Daily activities generally don't increase the value of the organization, but rather maintain it

When the state of busyness becomes a chronic condition, managers often don't know it. It seems normal to them. To an outsider it can be obvious, but to the practitioner, it is "just the way we do things around here". Masking it further, the symptoms of busyness even provide a sense of satisfaction, e.g. you feel good about not having any urgent issues outstanding and you feel like everything is under control.

Another symptom is the tendency to fill up any free time with phone calls and email. A manager might have time to notice busyness, but they don't use their free time to reflect. They use it to perpetuate busyness. It's as if these managers don't know what to do with their free time. They have little imagination and few intentions for work other than "getting the job done". Even in meetings of utmost strategic importance, these managers will be hacking out emails on their handhelds.

In Stephen Covey's best selling book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, he outlined a principle (habit #3) of putting first things first. He explained that most people are driven more by urgency than importance. People tend to work on urgent matters without concern for the matter's level of importance.

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***"People are more driven  
by urgency than  
importance."***

**- Stephen Covey**  
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But to be effective in work and life, people need to prioritize and focus on the important. People need to put important things first. This is even more paramount for managers. Who, other than managers in an organization, is going to ensure that people are spending time on the right things? If managers can't separate the urgent from the important, then how can anyone else be expected to do it?

What's Wrong with Busyness?

Busyness is not inherently harmful. Busyness in fact has some good qualities. It is obviously better than idleness. It results in work getting done. It provides a degree of satisfaction that comes with work being accomplished. The problem arises when busyness becomes business as usual. In other words, it's a problem when there is only tactical activity and focus on accomplishing the urgent. It's a condition where the tactical and the immediate occupy *all* of a manager's mental and physical energy.

Never having any free time or being in a state of constant busyness is harmful in many ways. When managers stay completely focused on achieving their tactical objectives, they neglect areas that are not only strategic to the business, but to themselves. They neglect their professional and personal development. They neglect the nurturing and development of their team.

Managers who operate in *busyness as usual* ignore root causes that lie behind pesky problems. Dealing with root causes typically takes more time up front. Consequently, they tend to focus on temporary solutions that take less time up front. Ironically, temporary solutions only prolong the pain and end up costing managers and the organization more time and money in the longer term.

Much of a manager's busyness is often a result of a lack of prior investment or problem solving by him/her or someone else. As time goes on and root causes and other strategic issues are ignored, achieving tactical objectives gets more difficult.

Valuable improvements in processes, systems and skills that have been postponed eventually cause significant dysfunction. Workarounds start popping up to get around obstacles. The result is unsustainable systems and processes that lead to decreased efficiency.

When strategic areas like investment in people's professional development are ignored, time and energy turn to dealing with the by-product of that neglect. Instead of spending time developing people, time is spent recruiting people because good people are routinely lost. Instead of investing time in solving root causes to problems, time is spent putting short term solutions in place to deal with symptoms. Instead of taking time to recharge people's mental and physical batteries to maintain mental acuity, time is spent overcoming the problems created by fatigue and stress.

The irony of it all is that having a constant focus on the urgent and the tactical actually wastes more time. It increases the level of busyness. Just a little time spent on retention of the best employees can save a huge amount of time, not to mention money, in recruiting their replacements after they leave. Just a little energy invested in a person's mental acuity can result in huge improvements in decision making. Just a little energy invested in improving an organization's business processes can result in a huge improvement in overall operating efficiency for years to come. Time spent on strategic process improvements is more than offset by the savings in time of working around recurring pesky obstacles and issues.

Unlike other bad practices, like poor listening or procrastination, busyness is especially dangerous because some cultures unknowingly reward it. Some companies naturally promote a *fire-fighting* culture. Many executives in these companies believe that anything that isn't urgent, isn't important. Even in companies that don't operate like fire-fighters, upper management often mistake busyness for productivity and unknowingly reinforce it. An experienced manager knows to never answer the classic senior executive question, "How are things going?" with anything other than "real busy". Busyness is often a highly esteemed value in the eyes of unknowing top executives. Top

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executives see managers working late and coming in early. They may see a manager's extensive travel expenses. They hear the updates of all the meetings, tactical maneuvering and problem solving that go on in the front lines. All of this often leaves a positive impression. As top executives recognize and reinforce busyness, so do managers. They see it as a vehicle to more recognition for them and their teams.

In looking back on periods in my own sales management career, *busyness as usual* became so normal that it went largely unnoticed. I see it today, as a consultant to the IT industry, at even more pronounced levels, and it still goes largely unnoticed and unchallenged. New hires can see it, but they are usually so eager to fit in, that they don't often challenge it. People exiting the business see it after they have been away from it for awhile, but given they are no longer in the business, they obviously don't challenge it. Veteran managers in the business become so busy keeping up with the treadmill of activity they don't challenge it. So it is largely a condition that gets unchallenged. But it is there and its impact is real.

The Cost of Busyness

When busyness is the primary mode of operation, it doesn't take long for the neglect of people, processes and systems to manifest itself. Decreases in employee morale and customer satisfaction are early by-products. Especially impacted are customers and employees who see and value longer term thinking. In environments where busyness as usual goes unabated for two or three years ... or longer, the neglect in professional development, business processes and support systems can significantly restrict business performance. In a world where continuous improvement and change are pervasive, skills, systems and processes must keep up. If they fall behind, there is a commensurate negative effect on business performance.

Being constantly busy on tactical activities leaves managers with little time for professional development. They don't invest in themselves or

their people. They leave little time for training or even self-directed education. Reading non-fiction books, listening to them on audio books, networking with business thought leaders and being active members in associations are all activities that get sidelined among the urgent matters and deadlines that exist. Over time, managers and their people fall behind in knowledge and skill.

Being constantly busy on recurring tactical activities dulls a manager's creativity. Creativity is what fuels most organization's competitive differentiation, yet it is a common casualty when there is no down time. Few people come up with their best ideas when in the middle of a deadline or even while working. It is all but impossible for most people to be creative at the same time their mind is occupied with deadlines, issues and a never ending list of outstanding actions. In a busyness as usual environment, truly creative ideas rarely happen. Innovation becomes more of an exception than a regular occurrence.

In addition to decreased creativity, busyness impacts thinking in general. John C. Maxwell, author and leadership consultant says, "The enemy of good thinking is busyness." When busyness becomes normal, it isn't challenged. It is accepted. It becomes a social and business norm. Its grip then soothes people into doing rather than thinking. Busyness actually becomes so routine for some managers that they essentially turn their brains off and merely "do".

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*"The enemy of good thinking is busyness."*

- John C. Maxwell  
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Being constantly busy with real-time issues leaves many managers unavailable to their people, their peers and even their managers. This causes many organizational dysfunctions. It can cause people to seek advice and information in the wrong places. It can cause people to work without the right

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information or resources. It can even lead to a deterioration of trust and confidence. When a manager is regularly unavailable, they are often unknown and assumed to be uncaring. Being unknown and perceived as uncaring quickly deteriorates a manager's trustworthiness.

Managers who operate under busyness as usual tend to be late to meetings, change their schedules frequently and often have reputations for being unresponsive. They not only have limited availability for their people, they have limited availability for others. They are often only accessible outside of scheduled meetings for a few minutes at best. Because they have so little free time, any change to their schedules causes a domino effect of changes that have to be managed.

One of the most important responsibilities of a manager is in the guiding and coaching of their people. Gone are the old days of the industrial revolution where managers just said "figure it out or I'll find someone that can do it for you." Successful companies focus on coaching, mentoring and developing the skills of their people. Successful companies require that their managers spend a significant amount of their time coaching and developing their top people. When busyness as usual is the predominate mode of operation, coaching is usually one of the first casualties.

Another key responsibility of a manager is being a creator and a conduit of organizational communication. But when they are so backed up in meetings, conference calls and dealing with the urgent, they rarely communicate to the extent they need to. They often intend to communicate, but get sidetracked and forget. When they do communicate, it is often extemporaneous or late. They tend to communicate what they heard most recently as opposed to what is most important. When busyness as usual is the daily regimen, managers communicate less frequently and less effectively than they should.

Stress is another by-product of busyness. When managers barely have time to keep up with the urgent issues, they generally don't get to other issues until evenings or weekends ... if at all. This unconsciously raises stress levels. High blood

pressure, the frequent result of chronic stress, is labeled the silent killer because it creeps up on people slowly and they don't know they have it. It begins to impact their emotional stability, their physical health and can make them very different people over time. When there is insufficient time to get everything done, much less have room for a little down time, stress goes up. Busyness is a key contributor to stress and even poor health.

Decreases in work quality are often outcomes of busyness. When there is no free time, planning, preparation and thoroughness are sacrificed. Work is completed hastily and often with defects.

There are often so many meetings and conference calls to attend that they run back to back. This creates a routine of little to no preparation. Before long, any preparation becomes "real time". As a result, meetings and conference calls take longer and more time is wasted. When managers aren't prepared, generally neither are the other people in attendance. People come to meetings with different data sources, different levels of knowledge and take up valuable meeting time dealing with things that could have been covered beforehand had proper meeting preparation been offered and completed.



"Can't you see I'm busy?"

Busyness leaves little room for networking and creating new relationships. I'm reminded of the cartoon shown above where an army general is fighting a battle where he is way out numbered by the enemy. A machine gun salesman is trying to get his attention, but he is so busy, he ignores him.

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Networking represents immeasurable opportunities to increase a manager's scale, competence and performance. Contacts outside of a manager's organization can be invaluable to increasing knowledge. But when a manager's focus is on "just getting the job done", networking is another one of the common casualties.

As mentioned briefly earlier, employee morale is impacted negatively when busyness becomes business as usual. While a manager may be unconsciously stuck in the practice of constant busyness, there are other people in the organization that are not. Yet when these other people try to bring forward valuable new initiatives that require getting out of "busyness as usual", they are summarily rejected. Not having their ideas heard and not feeling involved is a major source of discouragement to employees. When there are multiple discouraged people running around in an organization, they infect others with their discouragement. It can cast a cloud of discouragement over an entire organization.

Another needed contribution from managers, especially sales managers, is their involvement in shaping product direction and even business direction. Who better in the company knows the competitive issues that exist in the market than sales managers? Who better than sales managers know customer requirements? While this knowledge doesn't always come from sales managers in marketing defined segments with an in-depth analysis of the data, it represents realities that provide valuable insight. Yet, when busyness as usual is the norm, there is little time for this.

Since there is little time for sales managers to provide product direction, aside from obvious product deficiencies, marketing, product development and senior management don't get much insight from them to help the company with product direction. As a result, they don't see sales managers as potentially key contributors to business strategy and product direction. They see sales managers as machines of execution who execute their strategies rather than help shape them.

The cost of busyness in sales can also be very tangible. When sales representatives and their managers become so busy that they can't deal with special customer requests or the proper handling of customer objections, they often resort to discounting. Discounting is known to be abused by sales people who don't know how to sell value, but it is also prevalent in environments where sales people would rather discount a transaction and move on than have it take more of their limited time. This issue is compounded by the fact that sales representatives and sales managers in an environment of busyness don't have the time to learn to sell value either.

Perhaps the biggest cost to busyness is the absence of knowledge of oneself. It's the issue of not getting to know oneself and increasing one's self-awareness. When managers operate in busyness as usual, they often don't take time to know themselves. Over time, they actually become a stranger to themselves. Because routine and urgency displace time for thinking, they don't spend much time reflecting on their own behaviors and habits. They don't make their self the object of their own inquiry. They don't take time to understand how people see them. They don't take time to see how they may be the cause of issues or conflicts. They often don't even know how they would spend their time if it were back under their full control.

Self-awareness is the foundation on which great managers and leaders base their professional development. While many people think they know themselves, the truth is that most people don't. Ben Franklin once said, "There are three things extremely hard: steel, a diamond, and to know one's self."

Most people focus their assessment energy and judgment on others. Even those that make themselves the object of their inquiry, tend to evaluate themselves based on their intentions, not on their actions. They judge others based on their actions, but only the intentions of themselves.

I took a four month sabbatical after seventeen years of working in the IT industry. Up until that point in my life, I could only speculate how I would spend my time if it were up to me. Before the



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sabbatical, I can recall saying on a regular basis that I would eat lunch with my kids at school and would attend more of their sporting events if I had the time. But inside, I remember questioning the validity of those words. I remember thinking, "I wonder if my busyness at work is just an excuse for what I subconsciously don't want to do with my kids or in fact it is a real reason". I honestly didn't know for certain.

After the sabbatical, I learned many truths about myself. As strange as it may sound, I learned that I did have a genuine desire to spend time with my family. I learned that I would invest time in reading. I learned that I would involve myself in industry associations. That I would volunteer for non-profit board positions. And that I would become much more valuable to the business community for it. As hard as it might be to believe, busyness as usual doesn't leave enough free time to really know oneself.

Self Assessment

We all have periods in our work that are busy. That is normal. It's when periodic busyness becomes chronic busyness that being busy leads managers to a dead end. It's a problem when you look back over the last two, three or more years and see that

you neglected strategic opportunities, yourself and the development of your people.

Henry David Thoreau said, *"It is not enough to be busy, so are the ants. The question is: what are we busy about?"*

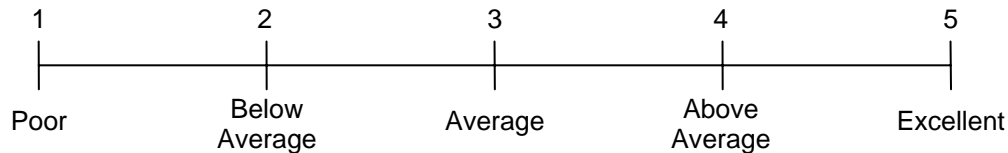
People often get so busy they never stop to think about what they are doing. So it's now time to think about what you're doing. It's time to take a few minutes and think about how you spend your time. To assess how much value you create for your organization. To understand how much time you spend on your own professional development. To think about how much time you spend developing your team.

"It is not enough to be busy, so are the ants. The question is: what are we busy about?"

- Henry David Thoreau

Take this quick self assessment to see how much busyness rules your work life.

Use the following scale to score how you do in each of the areas listed:



Without regard to reason or opportunity, how would you rate your:

- | | Score (1-5 scale) |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1) Availability to Others – Being readily accessible to others when they need you. | _____ |
| 2) Investments in Yourself – Reading non-fiction books, taking assessments to increase your knowledge about yourself, attending professional development courses and staying current on management thought leadership. | _____ |
| 3) Development of Others – Directly helping, coaching and mentoring others to enhance their business effectiveness and professional development. | _____ |
| 4) Impact on Business Improvement – Identifying and embedding new best practices into the business as sustainable improvements. | _____ |
| 5) Contribution to Market Intelligence – Influencing product development and other areas of business strategy. | _____ |



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- 6) **Cross Unit Focus** – Contributing time and resources that help other organizations in the company _____
 - 7) **Leadership** – Being proactive, volunteering for task forces and accepting value adding assignments without reducing the performance of your own organization. _____
 - 8) **Creativity** – Taking time to brainstorm, think outside the box and developing new ideas. Being open to new ideas and creating a climate that encourages innovation. _____
 - 9) **Networking** – Attending industry associations, involvement in business associations, volunteering for non-profits and taking board positions. Meeting new people internally and externally that can help increase your knowledge, competence, scale and performance. _____
 - 10) **Productivity** – Rarely re-doing things, regularly finding ways to automate redundant tasks, being efficient in operational areas. _____
 - 11) **Communication** – Spending most of your communication time inspiring, motivating, encouraging and leading others. Spending little of your time defending positions, clarifying topics that are confusing, explaining points that were misleading or rationalizing events that appear to be out of alignment with company values. _____
 - 12) **Value-add Focus** - Staying aware of and spending your time on activities that directly increase the value of the business. _____
- Total Score out of a Possible 60:** _____

If you scored:

- Less than 30:** You consistently scored yourself below average. You are clearly not focused on investing in yourself, your people or your business. You are deeply embedded in busyness as usual. Challenge yourself to rise above your current practices. You need to find a better balance between “just getting the job done” and making intentional investments in yourself, your people and the business. Pay full attention to the suggestions on the following pages. They are for YOU.
- Between 30 – 45:** Your score is somewhere in the average range. You may be doing well in one, but probably not all three areas, e.g. investing in yourself, your people and your business. Identify the area(s) in which you fall short and challenge yourself to rise above your current practices to create a little balance between the tactical and the longer term.

- More than 45:** Congratulations. You consistently scored yourself above average. Unless you overrated yourself, you are probably not stuck in busyness as usual. Continue focusing on investments in yourself, your people and the business. Don't neglect the reason you are employed, e.g. to achieve your performance objectives, but continue to focus on ensuring they are achievable for years to come.

Overcoming Busyness

Busyness is not a condition in which great leaders spend a significant portion of their time. Great leaders develop habits and a discipline that prevent them from getting stuck in busyness as usual. Great leaders are intentional. They create a balance between the strategic and the tactical. They may have to schedule time in their busy calendars to focus on strategic matters, but they do it. They know that a strong tactical focus pays

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the current bills, but attention must be kept on strategic matters to pay the bills in the future.

For managers embroiled in busyness, it's a different story. In their environments which are centered on near term objectives, they put little focus on long term matters. And when many managers collectively stay focused on the short term, entire organizations and even companies fall into busyness as usual.

When left unresolved for prolonged periods, busyness as usual erodes the operational quality of an organization. It becomes harder and harder to get things done. It takes more effort and time even though it appears easier because it is more familiar. Companies don't escape the impact caused by a lack of professional development or root cause issue resolution. It catches up.

Busyness can become such a liability that only draconian measures can reverse its effects. Left unresolved, busyness can necessitate a downsizing, a change in "C" level management, a merger or even a restructuring of the business to catch up from the lack of investment in the people and the business.

However, there is another alternative to these draconian measures, but it takes good old fashioned discipline and effort. Managers can individually decide to take a stand against it. Their company values and culture may continue to reward busyness, but they can make an individual decision to combat busyness. If enough managers take this approach, it can ultimately turn an entire organization and even a company around. As this happens, an organization may at first look like a number of

small islands of excellence in a sea of busyness, but overtime, enough islands can make up a sizable land mass.

The steps to overcoming busyness are straightforward. As shown in the figure below, it starts with an awareness of busyness. Before you can do something about busyness, you must understand it and believe in its harmful effects.

When you become armed with an awareness of busyness and have an inner desire to change course, you have the foundation in place to start the journey out of the abyss of busyness. It may take a period of reflection during a long vacation or even a sabbatical to get going, but when you see and understand the cost of busyness to yourself and the business, you can easily develop the passion needed to combat it.

The next step is assessing your own level of busyness. You need to understand how firm a grip busyness has on your mode of operation. Hopefully the preceding sections helped you with both of these steps.

Third, you need to create and execute a plan to free up some time. When you operate in busyness as usual, you have no time. By definition, the condition of busyness leaves no free time. You will only have a chance of escaping busyness if you free up some time that you will in turn invest in strategic activities. This is a critical step. You can have an awareness of busyness, have come to the realization that you are a serious perpetrator of busyness and even have a plan to be more strategic, but without any free time, it is unlikely to happen.

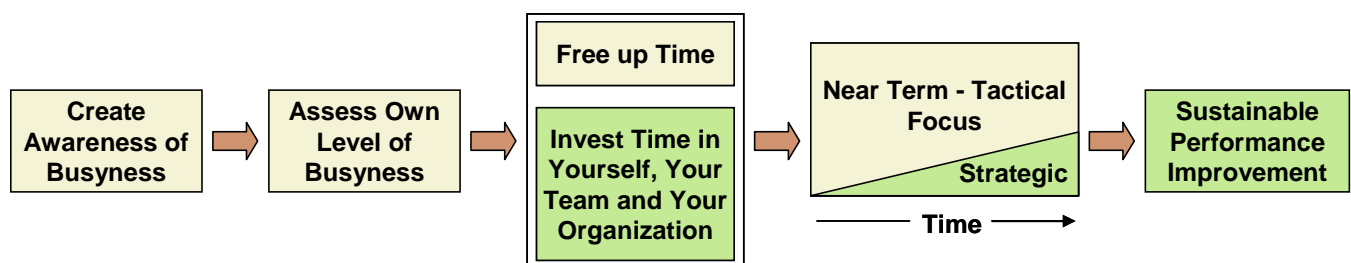


Figure: The Process of Overcoming Busyness

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A lack of time is the biggest obstacle to overcoming busyness. Just the thought of adding anything else to an already packed schedule is daunting. So, the key is not adding more to an existing busy schedule, but making your busy schedule a little less busy. You have to open up some free time on your calendar to even begin thinking about strategic issues, much less reading books, joining associations, developing your people and so on.

Lastly, in conjunction with creating a little free time, you must invest that time wisely. Putting free time to use by watching TV, playing golf or pursuing other avenues of entertainment is not the purpose. You must create and execute a plan to deploy your new found free time into strategic areas. You must put that time into your own professional development, the development of your people and in sustainable improvements to your organization's processes and systems.

As you follow these steps, you will gradually see a shift in the nature of your work. As you free up more time, you will invest more time in strategic areas. You will see a balance emerge between busyness and strategic activities. You will continue to focus on your near term goals, but instead of ignoring recurring problems, you will find yourself dealing with them. Instead of neglecting your professional development, you will invest in yourself and find yourself becoming more knowledgeable and valuable. Instead of managing your people, you will find yourself coaching and leading your people. And you will begin to see sustainable improvements in your organization's performance.

12 Principles That Help *Get Time Back*

The following are twelve ways to get time back on your side that will help you get out of busyness as usual. While each one deserves much more discussion than given here, they are relatively easy to understand and put into practice.

1. Keep your "batteries charged." Build up and maintain your energy level. Mental and emotional rejuvenation occur when you are not working. Resting, relaxing, playing and even exercising recharge your mental and emotional batteries. The time you take to recharge your batteries is more than offset by improvements in productivity and decision quality.
2. Set up a filing system that provides ready access to notes, communication records, articles, etc. Don't stack papers on the corner of your desk or in a drawer. Take the time to create a filing system, both for physical files in your filing cabinets and electronic files on your computer. File your notes, articles and reports in places that you can quickly find.
3. Read books by listening to abridged versions on CD (Automobile University). If you don't want to take the time to read books, listen to them. Use your commute time or time on long road trips. Have a pad of paper handy and take notes when you can safely do so. When you get back to your computer, enter your notes into your electronic file system. This process not only gives you a future reference of the books you read, but it helps you retain what you learned.
4. Know what's important to you. Set your own standards and learn when to say "no". We often become victims to the long list of important causes and programs that exist in our lives. School parent-teacher organization meetings, neighborhood socials, town meetings, birthday parties and other events will all but totally fill up your free time if you choose to let them. While many are valuable and worthy of your time, don't let your calendar become a victim to other people's priorities. Make your own decisions and attend those functions that are important.
5. Make a daily "to-do" list of *next steps*. Prioritize the "high mental energy" tasks at

the top. A to-do list of outcomes can be overwhelming. Not only the enormity of the work that may lie behind some of them, but the lack of clarity in the first step required to start them. Break large tasks down into small steps. List next steps on your to-lists instead of the outcomes. Don't worry about losing sight of the desired outcome. If your next steps are focused on achieving the outcome, you will achieve the outcome.

6. Communicate often. Be clear on expectations and assignments. Poor communications is always an accomplice to any serious business problem. Communicate often and clearly. Don't assume people are well informed.
7. Agree to meetings only when an objective, background, agenda and approach are provided. More time is wasted in group meetings than any other business activity. Call group meetings only when you clearly need one. And when you call or attend a meeting, follow meeting best practices.
8. Resolve problems and conflicts before they become significant issues. Big problems rarely start out that way. They usually start out as small problems that get ignored. Small problems, like minor conflicts, can go away, but they often become more serious. Use good judgment. Error toward the side of overreacting to problems and conflicts. Deal with problems before they get out of hand.
9. Create templates for repeated tasks, e.g. proposals, business reviews, meetings. If you find yourself or others around you repetitively recreating things, look for ways to automate them. Look for opportunities to create templates and tools when there is an obvious return on your investment.
10. Deal with root causes, not symptoms. When dealing with problems, avoid the tendency to deal with the obvious. It is often not the obvious that is the real issue. The obvious is often a symptom of

something else. Dig into issues and look for their root causes. Then put resolutions in place that permanently fix the issue and do it swiftly.

11. Do, delegate, delete or file. Be discerning with what you put in a tickler file. Try to only "touch" items in your in-basket once. You shouldn't have to read, review, answer, deal with or even touch most of the items that come across your desk more than once. *Do* them if they are obviously yours to do and can be done quickly. *Delegate* them if they can better be done by someone else. *Delete* them if they are of no value to you or your organization. *File* them if they represent something you might want to refer to at a later point in time. Don't set them on the corner of your desk or leave them in your in-box for prolonged periods of time.
12. Get started, even if you can't finish ... and stop at a point where it will be easy to start back again. People unconsciously avoid tasks that require lots of time or require a lot of mental energy to get started. Many large or complicated tasks are better performed over multiple periods. Allow time to at least start tasks, even if you can't finish them. Try to stop at a point where it will be easy to pick back up again.

By putting these ideas into practice, you start the process of thinking more strategically while getting back a substantial amount of time.

As you develop free time, the only obstacle left is making the right choices. This may require that you get out of your routine and even your comfort zone. You'll need to make new choices. You'll need to decide in favor of strategic value over matters that are urgent. You'll need to choose options that may be uncharacteristic of the larger group of which you are a part. You may need to choose to defer a small short term gain in favor of a much larger long term gain.

As you get time back on your side, use your new found time to make investments. First, invest time and energy into your professional

development. Participate in professional development education. Read non-fiction books ... or listen to them on audio CDs. Join an industry association or even become a board member.

Second, make investments in your people. Get to know them. Learn how they are motivated and de-motivated. Learn how to inspire and motivate them. Identify their developmental needs and coach them. Share with them the lessons you have learned. Help them become more self sufficient and effective.

Third, make investments in your business. Don't ignore recurring issues by continually putting short term solutions in place. Don't rule out long term initiatives just because they are not doable in a few weeks or months. Give time to brainstorming and soliciting new innovative ideas. Dig into issues to identify core root causes. Put systems, processes, structures and programs in place that deal with the broader environment in which you work. Don't just limit your thinking to your own organization.

While freeing up some time to spend on strategic matters is necessary to getting balance back in your work environment, it is insufficient by itself. Without a strong belief in putting busyness in its proper place, the urgent and the tactical will likely regain their grip on you.

Create two plans. Put them in writing to help you crystallize your thoughts and specific actions. Create a plan to get some of your time back. Create a plan to use that time for strategic matters. If necessary, block out time on your calendar to create your plans. When writing your plans, list very specific actions you plan to take, with dates on when you plan to do them. The more specific you can be, the better. Specific plans help guide and they help you evaluate your progress.

If your manager isn't on board with the concept of getting out of busyness as usual, review it with him or her. First, assure your manager you won't be less effective or less productive. In fact, the goal of getting out of busyness as usual is to be

more productive and more effective. Change your mode of operation one step at a time. This is intended to start you on a journey, not create an overnight transformation. Your new found awareness may be enlightening and motivating, but be careful not to swing the pendulum too far in the other direction too fast. The daily execution of your business responsibilities and keeping a focus on short term goals are still your meal ticket.

Secondly, if there is still any skepticism, perform an assessment of how management time is spent in your organization. Understand how much time is squandered in overcoming recurring obstacles that are being treated as symptoms rather than root causes. Look for areas where creating templates or embedding best practices would save time. Assess how much wasted time could be avoided with a little investment of strategic time and energy.

Evaluate the nature of communications and how more effective communications would impact the organization. Assess how more skilled and competent managers would impact the organization. Review how your time spent coaching and developing your people would impact the performance of your organization. While busyness is an intangible, it creates tangible consequences that when understood and quantified can make the unseen seen.

Summary

While your new focus on professional development and business improvement can have an immediate impact on morale, it may take 12-18 months for the impact of your investments to show up directly on the bottom line. Don't despair, your employee morale boost alone can justify it. Then, with discipline and patience, you'll see even bigger rewards.

In my leadership boot camps, I often ask my students what percentage of their strengths and talents their employers utilize. The average answer is below 50%. On average, a full half of

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people's skills and abilities go unused in their workplace. Busyness turns people into machines and doesn't allow them to utilize their skills and natural abilities.

It reminds me of how Mack Brown, the head coach of the Texas Longhorns college football team, leveraged the talents of his quarterback, Vince Young. In Vince's first year at Texas, Mack forced Vince into his pre-existing system. In this system, Vince's talents went largely untapped.

Because Mack had a balanced focus on strategy and execution, he didn't have the attitude of "Vince, just work in our system and get it done". He and his assistants challenged each other and came up with a better approach. They in turn worked with Vince, changed the system and ultimately won the NCAA College Football National Championship in 2006.

Great managers take the time to get to know their people. They get to know their people's strengths and talents. They put them in roles that leverage their strengths and talents. They don't just put them into standard roles and expect mindless cookie-cutter execution.

Just think how much more capability and capacity your organization would have if everyone in it could say that 70%, 80% or even 90% of their abilities were put to use. Get out of busyness as usual and tap into the resources that are currently right there in your midst. Free up time so you can develop yourself, your people and your organization.

In summary, getting out of busyness as usual requires that you:

- Have an awareness of busyness. Know how you spend your time. Look at your activities and assess how well you are doing.
- Free up some time. Deploy time management techniques and other productivity best practices to free up some time so that you can spend it in areas of importance to you, your people and your company.

- Create and execute a plan that imbeds balance in your schedule. Commit to achieving your near term goals AND making calculated investments in strategic areas. Pick areas in which to invest. Don't accept being a machine of execution. Invest in yourself, your people and areas that improve the long term health of your company.
- Create a discipline of putting first things first. Don't let the urgent regularly replace the important. Don't let reactivity displace proactivity. Prioritize your tasks and ensure you don't just spend time on matters that scream the loudest.
- Invest in yourself. Look for opportunities to increase your knowledge and experience. Look for opportunities to get to know yourself. Building your knowledge and competence makes you more confident and more valuable.
- Invest in others. Help them know themselves. Transfer your knowledge and lessons learned to them. Coach and develop them. Help them be successful. Help them operate independently.
- Invest in areas that increase the value of your organization. Look for opportunities to improve processes and systems. Before dealing with a problem, brainstorm it a little. Assume it is a symptom of something else. Look for and solve root cause problems.

Imbed these practices over time and at some point you will look back and see a huge difference. You will look back and see the obvious difference between your organization and the others that didn't escape busyness as usual. You will look back and see the sustainable improvement you made in your organization's performance.

Good luck on your journey out of "busyness as usual" to "effectiveness as usual".

Your feedback is welcome. You can contact me at mike@alpinelink.com.