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MANAGING PEOPLE

How to Boost Your Team's Productivity

by Rebecca Knight

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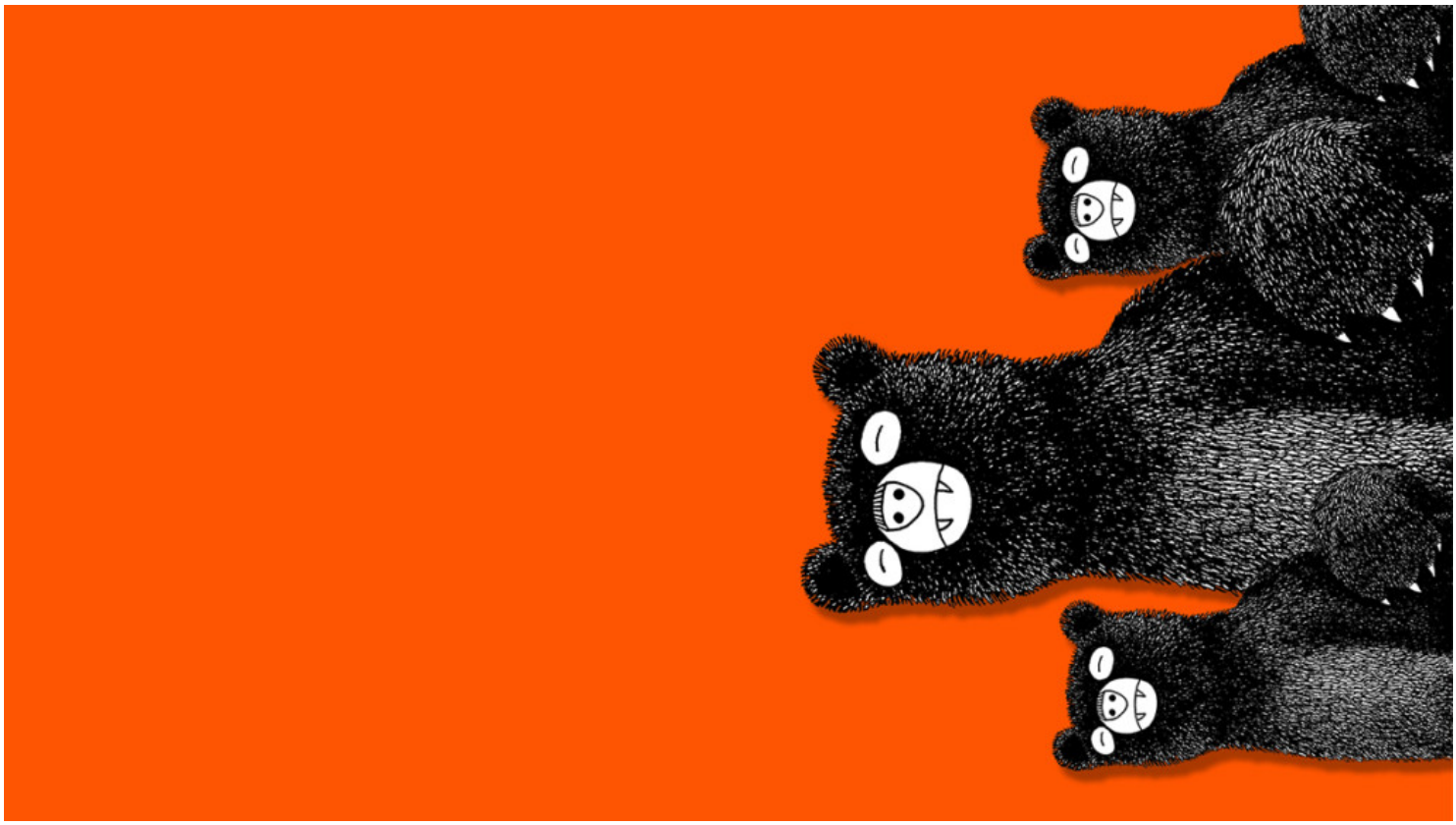

We all have too much to do and too little time to do it. As a boss, you may have already learned how to plan, prioritize, and streamline your work. But how can you help your team members do the same? Should you dictate the processes and tools they use? How do you keep people from taking on too much and burning out or continuously spinning their wheels?

What the Experts Say

In today's complex and collaborative workplace, the real challenge is to manage not just your personal workload but the collective one, says Jordan Cohen, a productivity expert and the Senior Director of Organizational Effectiveness, Learning & Development at Weight Watchers. "Helping your team manage its time well is a critical factor for its success." Elizabeth Grace

Saunders, author of *How to Invest Your Time Like Money* and the founder of Real Life E Time Coaching & Training, agrees. As a manager, your role is to both "set the strategic vision" and serve as "the buffer for unreasonable expectations" from the rest of the organization. Here are some tips to ensure that your team works productively.

Set the example

The first step is to get your own house in order (if it's not already) and exhibit good time management practices yourself, says Saunders. Be smart about how you allocate the hours of your own workday—the meetings you attend, the emails you respond to, and the projects you sign on for—so your team can follow your lead. "If you're stretched and overloaded, you can't think strategically about your own time let alone anyone else's," she says. Adds Cohen: "Model the behavior" and show them that you make time for work that matters.

Set goals

To get a handle on how everyone on your team should be spending their time, you have to "step back" and "think about what exactly you want your team to be working on," says Saunders. Outline key goals and analyze your team's capacity to execute on them. This will help you decide what people should be working on and what they shouldn't and accomplish more by committing to less. It's your job "to set boundaries."

Clarify expectations

The next step, according to Saunders, is meet with your team members one-on-one to communicate the priorities and expectations for their respective roles. "Tell them the top two or three areas where you want them to focus," she says. Be specific. "The last thing you want is for someone to begin his day thinking, 'I have seven projects to work on, where do I start?'" Also be explicit about how much time you expect people to devote to tasks that crop up from time to time. Does an unexpected client pitch meeting require a day, half-day or a few hours of prep? To prepare for an upcoming brainstorming meeting, should someone spend an hour or just a few minutes jotting down ideas? "Help him understand the quality of the work you're expecting," she says. But don't micromanage, Cohen warns. "Describe the outcome you are trying to achieve and then get out of the way—let them determine on their own how best to get there," he says. "Telling them how to do their jobs every step of the way creates bottlenecks." Remember, adds Saunders, there isn't one "right" approach to time management.

Encourage open communication

Conversations with team members about time management should be ongoing, according to Saunders. “Encourage an honest dialogue,” she says. She suggests asking reports about the challenges they face, how you can help them allocate their time more effectively, and whether they need more resources. “It’s when people don’t tell you that they’re overstretched and then don’t follow through at the last moment that leads to problems.” Cohen suggests holding a quarterly team powwow for colleagues to discuss priorities. “Look at the objectives you set back in January and ask, ‘Are these still relevant? Are we on the right track? What has changed?’” he says. If you have a direct report who still isn’t making progress on his work despite ostensible effort, do “some digging” to uncover the root of the problem, suggests Cohen. “Is it the workload? Is it the way the job is structured? Or is it the person? You need to peel it back,” he says.

Give team members autonomy

The key to improving individual productivity is to eliminate or delegate unimportant tasks and replace them with value-added ones, says Cohen. So “give your employees permission to make decisions” on which meetings they attend (or skip), which email lists they are party to, and which responsibilities they hand off. Saunders recommends encouraging them to block out large chunks of time on their calendars to get their day-to-day work done, as well as smaller chunks for “fixed expenses” like daily planning, email, and other “maintenance” chores.

Rethink meetings

Meetings: the worst office time-suck. And yet, you need them to share information, solicit ideas, and make decisions. You can’t get rid of them, but you can surely eliminate some and study up on techniques to make the ones that remain on the calendar more effective and efficient. (Read: shorter.) The Golden Rule of meetings, says Cohen, is to “make sure you have a clearly defined purpose for each one.” He also recommends “sending out meeting material beforehand” because “it takes the reading part out of the meeting and puts the collaboration part in.” Also consider other ways to keep people in the loop, says Saunders. You could, for instance, ask each team member to create and circulate “a list or report of what he or she accomplished last week and priorities for the week ahead. This keeps the team on track and keeps everyone aligned,” she says.

Reserve downtime

If your organization has a hard driving, 24/7 work culture, you should also consider mandating breaks for your team. Research shows that predictable time off improves productivity and

morale. “The manager has to be deliberate about scheduling [downtime],” says Cohen. Even if your company’s culture is more relaxed, it’s still important to communicate when you expect your reports to work and when you don’t, Saunders adds. For example, “if you send [someone] an assignment on Friday afternoon, be clear whether you want him to be working on it over the weekend or if it can wait till Monday. People are often willing to give the extra push, but if they push only to discover that it wasn’t necessary, they end up feeling resentful and burnt out.”

Seek help

Staying on top of the overflowing inboxes and ever-expanding to-do lists of an entire group of people is a challenge even for the most efficient among us. So you may want to enlist “outside help in the form of a coach or an HR manager” to assist you, says Saunders. If an employee is really struggling, “there are things you can do—meet with him regularly, come up with daily plans, give him more feedback—but he probably needs a lot more help than you, the lone manager, can provide.”

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Make smart use of shared calendars by blocking off hours for focused work and evening downtime
- Apprise your direct reports of the team’s progress in meeting its goals; this holds people accountable and lets them know what others are doing
- Communicate when you expect your reports to put in extra hours and when you don’t—failure to do so builds resentment

Don’t:

- Micromanage. Ask your reports about the challenges they face and how you can help them allocate their time more effectively
- Overcommit your team to too many projects and initiatives. You should be a buffer for unreasonable expectations from the rest of the organization
- Discount the idea of enlisting the help of a management coach to assist you

Case Study #1: Create open lines of communication and respect your team's downtime

David Miller, executive vice president of the Columbus, Ohio-based Cameron Mitchell Restaurants—which owns an assortment of high-end eateries across the United States—says he had trouble managing his time when he transitioned from his former job as vice-president of operations to his current role, where he oversees a nine-member executive team.

Then, one day, in an operations meeting, he had an epiphany. "I thought, 'I shouldn't be in this meeting.'" He realized he needed to let go of his former responsibilities and consider strategic priorities for himself, his team, and the organization. Once those were clear in his own mind, David scheduled one-on-one conversations with his team members, including the heads of finance, marketing, and HR. He talked about his vision for each of their departments, but he also encouraged feedback. "I explained to them that this was a new role for me and that I was trying to learn and be as effective as I could be," he says. "I asked them, 'How can you and I best work together? And, 'what do you need from me?'"

He also avoided telling them how to handle their individual work schedules, focusing on results not process. "Everybody's different—from how they manage their to-do lists to the books read—I don't want to micromanage them; I want to support them."

This includes making sure his team isn't "always on." A few years ago, for instance, he heard complaints about the weekly project and status updates he'd asked his executive team and senior managers to send out every Sunday. "I was hearing that this was not necessarily something they wanted to be spending their Sundays writing, so now I ask them to do it only every other week anytime between Friday [morning] and Sunday [evening], which gives people more leeway," he says. And "I want to make sure that my team members have personal time to recharge and to be with their families and friends."

Case Study #2: Communicate expectations and track progress

Jim Keane, the president and CEO of Steelcase, the Grand Rapids, Michigan-based manufacturer of office furniture, says there's no one-size-fits-all approach to time management. "When you're a new manager, you try to help your team get better by telling them what you've figured out," he says. "But one of the humbling things you come to learn is that what works for you doesn't necessarily work for everyone."

He's learned that frequent one-on-one conversations are the best way to make sure that individual team members are managing their time in ways that works for them. If people are feeling overloaded, stressed about "stuff going on at home" or "pushed in ten different directions," that tension will come through. He says he approaches these meetings from "a point of empathy." Sometimes he needs to extend a deadline or ask the stretched employee to recommend a colleague who might help with a particular task. "The job of senior leadership is to align resources around priorities," he says.

Last fall at a management off-site, Jim and his team of 12 senior leaders decided to enter a new line of business. "We got everyone involved to create the objectives, the strategic initiative, and the timeframe, and soon realized that all of the people that needed to execute—that is, most of the executives in the room—were already very busy with their day jobs."

So Jim enlisted the help of his chief-of-staff to block off time in the managers' calendars for work and regular check-ins on the project. "In order for an enterprise initiative to be successful, you have to force it into people's schedules," he explains. He also asked the chief-of-staff to provide regular updates on everyone's overall progress and continues to meet with the team to review expectations and priorities. "It's essential for everyone to be on the same page," he says.

Rebecca Knight is a freelance journalist in Boston and a lecturer at Wesleyan University. Her work has been published in The New York Times, USA Today, and The Financial Times.

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Jacob Stone a year ago

I thoroughly enjoyed this article because it hit on several aspects of team leadership which often go over-looked or are under-appreciated. My one gripe with the article is that I feel as if this article is catered to one or two specific leadership styles and fails to bring context into account. While the two cases discussed provide necessary perspective for the point of view being argued, I think a holistic approach in terms of recommendations being made, based on context, would be over greater benefit to the reader as a whole. Just my two cents, but like I said, it was a great read and incredibly insightful towards the aspects of team management that often go unnoticed, until it is too late.
Jacob Stone, anticipated graduation May, 2016
Freeman School of Business / Tulane University

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