**Why Some People Are Unproductive**

Posted on July 1, 1990

by Phil Parshall

This article deals with the underachievers, who mostly do not work in regulated, supervised activities.

Feeling both pain and perplexity, my missionary friend dropped a bomb on me: "Phil, as I have worked with and traveled among missionaries I have been shocked to meet many who seem so unmotivated and slothful. Large numbers of them seem to be spinning their wheels. Is this a common phenomenon?"

His piercing observation jarred me to write this article, but I hesitated because missionaries are supposed to be among the most sacrificial and highly motivated people in the world. How could I question their performance? How could I even suggest that many of them are lazy and unproductive, when over the nearly three decades of my own work I have known many who are overworked and some who have suffered burnout because of their zealousness for Christ?

Nevertheless, to be honest, I had to admit that there was and is another side to the stereotype of the unflagging missionary. I have not kept notes, so what follows is an impression based on my travels and observations over the years. I estimate that 30 percent of missionaries are hyperactive, 20 percent are balanced and 50 percent are underactive relative to their potential.

Hyperactive missionaries usually work in institutions, where they have to report to their superiors. Their eight-hour schedules are regulated and they often have to finish their work in the evenings. Their lives generally are orderly and fulfilling. However, hyperactive missionaries tend to overdo it and they suffer for this.

The rest of this article will deal with the underachievers, who mostly do not work in regulated, supervised activities. We find them among church workers, evangelists, researchers and language students. Church planters among Muslims and Hindus frequently fit this category.

Why should this be so? For two reasons, generally. First, their own attitudes, and second, the proliferation of high tech distractions. Something useful can easily become frivolous and eat up your time.

**ATTITUDES**  
**Volunteerism.**Most Western job structures are all-pervasive, with clearly set forth expectations. Salaries usually fit the responsibilities. Not so in missions, however, Missionaries can easily slacken their pace when they feel unappreciated, unrecognized, and underpaid. Even one’s spiritual zeal can be quenched when you feel like you are giving out so much and receiving so little in return. Easily, a "who cares?" attitude leads to a work slowdown.

Nearly two decades ago, Robert Evans, founder of Greater Europe Mission, propounded what seemed to many a revolutionary idea. He suggested that mission agencies should recognize accomplishments by their people—things like advanced degrees and published books and articles—and reward them accordingly with salary increases. To my knowledge, not many agencies do this, even though I think it would help to remedy a major cause of underactivity.

Such recognition is not unspiritual. Sometimes we forget that Jesus promised rewards for faithfulness. Professionalism, in the good sense, can be enhanced by downplaying volunteerism. Whether we like it or not, a person who feels professional and is treated with the dignity due to a professional is much more likely to perform well than is someone who is simply regarded as a volunteer.

**Accountability.**Missionaries jealously guard their autonomy. Many, if not most, dread submitting work reports. They want freedom to decide how to use their time and effort. Result: conflict with their supervisors.

I know of a case where, when forced to account for his time in ministry, a missionary had to admit that it came to 12 hours a week. What is his supervisor supposed to do? In this incident, he sought to convince the worker of the total inadequacy of his performance. Supervisors need to do this, while recognizing that too much pressure could force the missionary to resign.

Accountability must be given not only to the administrator, but also to the team’s spiritual counselor. Underactive missionaries may need more than lectures and books on productive time management, however. They may face intense spiritual battles, which leads to the third element in attitude, discouragement.

**Discouragement.**Never in my ministry have I met so many discouraged missionaries as I have in the past five years. Why? Is it because we fail to reach our Western "instant success" expectations? Is it because the methods we learned in school don’t work in the real world? Are we simply overcome by our spiritual impotency in the face of evil and unbelief? Are we falling short of our deepest spiritual aspirations? Are we incapable of handling both emotionally and intellectually, the deep questions of evil, suffering and poverty?

Whatever the reasons, discouragement incapacitates many of us. Gloom settles over many missionaries like an early morning fog. Ritual without zeal takes over. Their unspoken goal is to put in their time and survive until furlough or retirement.

Mission leaders need to face this condition. How can we revive and energize these people? Perhaps with things like seminars, achievement recognition and counseling.

**Fear.**One day my wife Julie and I were standing in front of our Reading Center in the Muslim area of inner-city Manila. Hearing the loud cracks of three gun shots, we ducked for cover. Seconds later I peeked out from behind a concrete post and watched the last movements of a handsome, 20-year-old Muslim university student as he lay dying in a pool of blood. His killing had culminated two weeks of violence within 50 yards of our center. There had been several shootouts in which two men were killed and a number of pedestrians wounded.

Our friends have told us to get out of this war zone. But if we do, that would leave 20,000 Muslims without any Christian witness. Beyond that is the larger issue of our inner spiritual struggle. Will we allow ourselves to be immobilized by fear?

Missionaries all over are vulnerable to senseless acts of terrorism and violence. That’s a prime question raised by people we’re trying to recruit for service in the Philippines. Never before have we had to conduct seminars for missionaries on violence and survival.

I’m not calling for needless bravado, but I am concerned when guarantees of safety seem to predominate over our desire to preach Christ and teach the Scriptures. After all, Jesus challenges us to be liberated from the fear that binds us to inaction. We can’t expect evangelistic success if we sequester ourselves in our mission homes.

**DISTRACTIONS**  
**Living hassles.**When Julie and I went to a rural area of Bangladesh as new missionaries in 1962, our supervisor told us, "The miracle will be that you can even exist in this primitive village, much less accomplish anything for God." And that’s the way it was. Never will I forget those years filled with the hassles of marketing, cleaning the smoking burner of our kerosene refrigerator in the middle of countless dark nights, and pumping up our Coleman lanterns hundreds of times.

Missionaries can easily capitulate to the mundane. The demands of survival force us away from our ministries. Unorganized people give in all too easily and allow myriads of details to dominate their lives. Keeping your car running and your house in order become more of a priority than evangelism.

There’s much help on the market for disorganized missionaries. Leaders need to require their people to read books and attend seminars on time management.

**Computers, videos and television.**Recently I proposed to a group of missionaries that we talk about Jesus as much as we talk about our computers. Embarrassed smiles prevailed. High tech can be either a useful tool or a major distraction. Right now, I surmise that the amount of time and money spent by missionaries on their computers is disproportionate to their value in terms of ministry accomplishments. They are so taken up with the "latest and greatest" that they forget that computers are a means to an end, and not ends in themselves.

Videos and television represent a different temptation. Of course, missionaries need recreation and diversion, but we need to guard against pure escapism. Our challenge is to master those instruments that can be used for good, and not to allow them to drain away our time and energy.

**Fellowship.** All of us need interaction on the field. We need reinforcement and edification from each other. Often, our isolation intensifies this legitimate need. I remember in our early days jokingly suggesting that we would buy plane tickets for people to get to Bangladesh, if they would only come visit us in our rural village.

But good and wholesome things often carry their own perils. Let me suggest some dangers: marathon talking sessions with colleagues, excessive breaks, and prolonged trips to city centers. They can all be used to dodge the tough work we need to do. It’s much easier to talk about outreach than to do it. Our missionary enterprise has its share of makers of grandiose plans who do so to avoid doing undesirable tasks.

How shall we handle this cause of underactivity? We can’t be too hard on our colleagues who genuinely seem to need a great deal of fellowship. But our leaders must keep on stressing the imperative of getting assigned jobs done. If we really enjoy our work, then we’ll find the proper balance between fellowship and ministry.

**Family.**How often have you heard people rank their duties this way: God first, family second, work third? That’s a neat package, but it seldom matches the real world. There’s no question that God comes first, but if family dominates our time, then we need to rethink our call to our work. I have always urged proper time and care for one’s family, but I’m afraid many missionaries are victims of family priority overkill. It’s become an obsession with them, so now we need to come back to compatibility between family and ministry responsibilities.

**CONCLUSION**  
Robertson McQuilkin, president of Columbia Bible College and Seminary, often speaks about the need to maintain a creative tension between all the demands of our lives. Both hyperactive and underactive missionaries need to move toward the balanced twenty percent in my original estimate above. I do not call for ceaseless activity that allows no time for reflection or recreation. At the same time, we must guard against both wrong attitudes and distractions that lead us to become unproductive.

Jesus himself perfectly exemplified both zeal and compassion. At the same time, he took time to pray, to meditate, to have fellowship and to be refreshed. If we can achieve the balance he did, the missions community will not suffer from lazy underachievers.

**NOTE: At the request of the editors, Clyde Cook, president of Biola University, submitted the following response to this article.**

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**Why the Opportunity for Unproductiveness?  
Clyde Cook**

I have been a fan of Phil Parshall’s for many years. His books have stimulated my thinking and this article is no exception. He has done all of us a service by raising this sensitive issue.

There is no question that the missionary enterprise, like any other industry, has people who are not very productive. Phil has done a good job outlining some of the reasons for this, and his reasons match my own experience on the field and in missions management. I remember one missionary who had the finest tropical fish collection on the island, the fruit of hundreds of hours of scuba diving. Instead of fishing for me and women in a responsive field, he simply fished for fish.

Why the opportunity for unproductiveness? Let me underscore Phil’s point about accountability. Missions, perhaps more than any other ministry, can have little accountability. Often working alone, without measurable objectives, many times using home as an office, and thousands of miles away from headquarters, many missionaries find a great chance to be lazy. Anyone can write an interesting letter once a month—often about family—which gives the illusion of active ministry. Not even a visit of a few days or hours by the general director makes for accountability.

When I was president of Overseas Crusades, I tried a modified program of management by objectives (MBO), because the reports from the field simply summarized the number of meetings or activities. All I could tell was how busy the missionaries were, not whether our objectives of stimulating and mobilizing the church for evangelism were being accomplished. Management by objectives helped us to focus on what we really wanted to accomplish, so we could lay plan to meet those objectives. If was not easy to move from busyness reports to such a system of accountability, but it worked because, with few exceptions, we were a team of highly motivated, productive men and women who really wanted to make our lives count.

However, I do feel somewhat uncomfortable with the way Phil Parshall arbitrarily divided up the entire missions community. There is no objective survey data that I know of to support his 30-20-50 breakdown. These numbers really are his subjective guess, based on personal observation only.

Also, if we do classify missionaries, a productivity scale might be more helpful than simply labelling them hyperactive (which could be taken as a pejorative label) or underactive (i.e., lazy. In other words, only 20 percent of all missionaries, according to Parshall, are "balanced," or, to use my term, productive.

One further comment about living hassles. This is not always capitulating to the mundane. You can have a very productive, time-management oriented missionary working against an event-oriented culture. In our time-oriented culture, I can list four or five errands to do in the morning and get them done. In one trip to the supermarket, I can get not only our groceries, but also vegetables and meat and hardware and toothpaste. Then I can stop at the post office and the cleaners and be home in an hour. But when I lived in the Philippines, I had to go one place for our groceries, another for meat, and another for vegetables. The post office stop took an hour. Since this is an event-oriented culture where relationships are important, I had to spend time with people and not race from one stop to the next.

But how do we enhance missionary productivity? Here are a few suggestions:

**1. Reward productivity.**Basing salaries on productivity is not a bad idea, if an equitable way of evaluating productivity is set up. This is difficult in a Christian organization because compassion, forgiveness, tolerance and love are high in our value system, while accountability and productivity are not as high. One of the toughest jobs I have had as president of Biola was to implement a rank-structure promotion based on productivity rather than longevity.

**2. Select carefully.**Take care in the selection process. Has the candidate been productive? Define what the mission objectives are and see if the candidate has a track record in a similar ministry. Also, have similar standards for the missionaries. It is difficult for a missionary to take those he or she is discipling beyond where the missionary is. On the field where there might be one or two missionaries with less preparation than others, a great deal of time can be used by others to train the unprepared missionaries.

**3. Build in accountability.**In addition to management by objectives, which encourages accountability, have a team approach so there is encouragement to be productive. Lone Rangers can pretty well do as they please. If you work by yourself, make sure that you set up a system of accountability which could include having an office outside your home. Having an office improves your standing in the eyes of the pubic so that you are not perceived as either retired or loafing around the house. For those in sending churches, check the materials of the Association of Church Missions Committees, which help to work out methods of accountability, so you can be sure you are supporting productive missionaries.

Phil Parshall has raised an important issue and I hope that his discussion will lead to further evaluations by both missionaries and mission executives about productivity, so that we can be and do everything God wants.

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