

# Beware the Busy Manager

The next time an executive tells you that he doesn't have enough time to perform his duties, take a critical look. There is a probability that they might not be that busy, but just bad at managing their time. In their article, "Beware the Busy Manager," Sumantra Goshal and Heike Bruch write: "Executives are under incredible pressure to perform, and they have far too much to do. But very few managers use their time as effectively as they could." The authors believe that most executives mismanage their time to a great extent and they have named this mismanagement of time as "active non-action."

Both Goshal and Bruch have compiled their findings on "active non-action" by studying top-level managers in nearly a dozen large companies for about ten years. Some of the companies that have been profiled include: Sony, LG Electronics, Lufthansa, etc. Their study reveals that nearly 90% of managers squandered their time in all sorts of ineffective activities. In other words, a mere 10% of the managers spent their time in a purposeful and committed manner. The authors believe that this ineffectiveness is mainly due to procrastination, lack of emotional connection to their work, distraction from the task at hand, etc.

A typical executive claims that he spends the day in grappling with strategic issues, focusing on cost reduction, devising creative approaches to new markets and beating new competitors. But this is always not the case as the findings suggest. According to Goshal and Bruch, "Executives rush from meeting to meeting, check their e-mails constantly, extinguish fire after fire, and make countless phone calls. In short, you'll see an astonishing amount of fast-moving activity that allows almost no time for reflection." Goshal and Bruch believe that to make the business more than just a function the managers need two vital ingredients—Focus and Energy.

## Focus and Energy

The authors define "focus" as concentrated attention. By focus, they refer to the ability to narrow in on a

goal and make sure that the task is successfully completed. According to the authors, focused managers choose not to respond immediately to every issue because they have a clear understanding of what they want to accomplish and hence carefully weigh their options before selecting a course of action. Goshal and Bruch illustrate this point by narrating the example of an Executive Vice-President of Lufthansa. In the late 1980s, the Vice-President was convinced that a corporate university would be an invaluable asset to a company. After joining Lufthansa, he prepared a detailed business case that carefully aligned the goals of the university with the company's larger organizational agenda. In spite of the senior management's skepticism, he carried on with it and in 1998, he helped create Lufthansa School of Business, the first corporate university in Germany. This example illustrates that focus on one's task goes a long way in achieving desired results.

Of equal importance is "energy." Energy is a result of intense personal commitment. Energy is what pushes managers to go the extra mile when tackling heavy workloads and meeting tight deadlines. The authors explain the importance of energy through the example of Sony Vaio (first PC to let users combine other Sony technologies, such as digital cameras, portable music players, camcorders, etc.)—"Responding to Sony CEO, Nobuyuki Idei's challenge to create an integrated technological playground for a new generation of 'digital dream kids' the chief engineer and his team put in 100-hour weeks to create the kind of breakthrough product Idei hoped for. One manager was so devoted to the project that he spent every weekend for three years conducting consumer reconnaissance in electronic shops." All this hard work eventually paid-off and Vaio ended up capturing a significant share of the Japanese PC market.

Though, both focus and energy are important qualities, neither of them alone is enough to produce the desired results. Four types of behavior among managers—disengagement, procrastination, distraction and purposefulness have been identified by the authors.

## The Procrastinators

From the studies, it is known that about some 30% of the managers suffer from low levels of both energy and focus. This group of managers is termed “the procrastinators.” Goshal and Bruch explain, “Although they dutifully perform routine tasks—attending meetings, writing memos, making phone calls, and so on—they fail to take initiative, raise the level of performance, or engage with strategy.” During their research they found out that at Lufthansa, the manager incharge of internal survey delayed beginning the project until the deadline had passed. It should be noted that procrastination doesn’t wholly depend on personality but is also influenced by organizational factors.

## The Disengaged

Close to 20% of managers fall into the high focus but low levels of energy types. According to the authors, “Some of these managers are simply exhausted and lack the inner resources to reenergize themselves. Others feel unable to commit to tasks that hold little meaning for them. Many managers in this group practice a form of denial we call- defensive avoidance.” Defensive avoidance can be described as a situation where a person, instead of acknowledging a problem and taking steps to correct it, try to convince themselves that there was no problem at all. Disengaged managers are known to be plagued by feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, anger, frustration and alienation. They seek comfort by withdrawing and doing the bare minimum and this makes the situations even worse.

## The Distracted

More than 40% of the surveyed managers belong to the category of highly energetic but unfocused people. When they are under pressure, distracted managers feel a desperate need to do something—anything. The drawback of such managers is that they don’t reflect on what has happened and so have trouble developing strategies and adapting to new requirements.

## The Purposeful

Around 10% of the managers studied were highly energetic as well as highly focused. Not only do they

put in more effort than their counterparts but also achieve important long-term goals more often. Such managers are more self-aware and a sense of personal responsibility for the company’s performance also contributes to their purposefulness. “When nobody is responsible, I am responsible” is the motto. They are not only purposeful when faced with a crisis but remain so even after the problem is resolved.

The biggest difference between purposeful managers and managers of the other three types is their approach to work. Most managers’ feel constrained by outside forces (bosses, peers, salaries, job profiles) and they take all such factors into account when they’re making a decision—“they work from the outside in.” Purposeful managers do the exact opposite. They decide first what they must achieve and then work to manage the external environment to meet their goals.

## Conclusion

The research findings suggest that a company on an average has only 10% of managers who are truly effective. It may not be true for all companies but the authors believe that the result is consistent for most companies. Since, focus and energy have been identified as vital components for a manager’s performance, companies need to raise the energy and focus levels of their teams. However, trying to prevent managers from losing energy or focus (or both) is an ambitious proposition and it will involve paying more attention to how individual managers perceive the broad meaning of their work, what challenges they face and the degree of autonomy they enjoy. Companies should realize that motivating people or telling them what to do could prove negative.

It is very vital that companies have as many purposeful managers as possible. The following quote best explains how to build purposeful managers: “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to go to the forest to gather wood, saw it, and nail the planks together. Instead, teach them the desire for the sea. In managers, a desire for the sea springs from two sources: meaningful challenge and personal choice. If you combine challenge and choice with a sense of profound urgency, you’ve gone a long way toward creating a recipe for success.”■

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