

CHAPTER 13

Identify Your Key Constraints

*“Concentrate all your thoughts on the task at hand.
The sun’s rays do not burn until brought to a focus.”*

Alexander Graham Bell

Between where you are today, and any goal or objective that you want to accomplish, there is one major constraint that must be overcome before you can achieve that major goal. Your job is to identify it clearly.

Ask yourself these questions: What is holding you back? What sets the speed at which you achieve your goals? What determines how fast you move from where you are to where you want to go? What stops you or holds you back from eating the frogs that can really make a difference? Why aren’t you at your goal *already*?

These are some of the most important questions you will ever ask and answer achieving high levels of personal productivity and effectiveness. Whatever you have to do, there is always a **limiting factor** that determines how quickly and well you get it done. Your job is to study the task and identify the limiting factor or constraint within it. You must then focus all of your energies on alleviating that single chokepoint.

Identify the Limiting Factor

In virtually every task, large or small, there is a single factor that sets the speed at which you achieve the goal or complete the job. What is it? Concentrate your mental energies on that one key area. This can be the most productive use of your time and talents.

This constraint may be a person whose help or decision you need, a resource that you require, a weakness in some part of the organization or something else. But it the limiting factor always there and it is always your job to find it.

For example, the purpose of a business is to create and keep a customer. By doing this in sufficient quantities, the company makes a profit and continues to grow and flourish.

In every business there is a limiting factor or chokepoint that determines how quickly and well the company achieves this purpose. It may be the marketing, the level of sales or the sales force itself. It may be the costs of operation or the methods of production. It may be the level of cash flow or costs. The success of the company may be determined by the competition, the customers or the current marketplace. One of these factors, more than anything else, determines how quickly the company achieves its goals of growth and profitability. What is it?

The accurate identification of the limiting factor in any process and the focus on that factor can usually bring about more progress in a shorter period of time than any other single activity.

The 80/20 Rule Applied to Constraints

The 80/20 Rule also applies to the constraints in your life and in your work. What this means is that 80% of the constraints, the factors that are holding you back from achieving your goals, are **internal**. They are within yourself, within your own personal qualities, abilities, habits, disciplines or competencies. Or they are contained within your own company or organization.

Only 20% of the limiting factors are **external** to you or to your organization. Only 20% are on the outside, in the form of competition, markets, governments or other organizations.

Your key constraint can be something small and not particularly obvious. Sometimes it requires that you make a list of every step in the process and examine every activity to determine exactly what it is that is holding you back. Sometimes, it can be a single negative perception or objection on the part of the customers that is slowing down the entire sales process. Sometimes it is the absence of a single feature that is holding back the growth of sales of a product or service line.

Look into your company honestly. Look within your boss, your coworkers and members of your staff to see if there is a key weakness that is holding you or the company back, which is acting as a brake on the achievement of your key goals.

Look Into Yourself

In your own life, you must have the honesty to look deeply into yourself for the limiting factor or limiting skill that sets the speed at which you achieve your own personal goals.

Successful people always begin the analysis of constraints by asking the question, "What is it *in me* that is holding me back?" They accept complete responsibility for their lives and look to themselves for both the cause and cure of their problems.

Keep asking, "What sets the speed at which I get the results I want?"

Strive for Accuracy

The definition of the constraint determines the strategy that you use to alleviate it. The failure to identify the correct constraint, or the identification of the wrong constraint, can lead you off in the wrong direction. You can end up solving the wrong problem.

A major corporation, a client of mine, was experiencing declining sales. They concluded that the major constraint was the sales force and sales management. They spent an enormous amount of money reorganizing the management and retraining the salespeople.

They later found that the primary reason that their sales were down was a mistake made by an accountant that had accidentally priced their products too high relative to their competition in the

marketplace. Once they revamped their pricing, their sales went back up and they returned to profitability.

Behind every constraint or chokepoint, once it is located and alleviated successfully, you will find another constraint or limiting factor.

Whether it is getting to work on time in the morning, or building a successful career, there are always limiting factors and bottlenecks that set the speed of your progress. Your job is to find them and to focus your energies on alleviating them as quickly as possible.

Often, starting off your day with the removal of a key bottleneck or constraint fills you full of energy and personal power. It propels you into following through and completing the job. And there is always something. Often alleviating a key constraint or limiting factor is the most important frog you could eat at that moment.

Eat That Frog!

1. Identify your most important goal in life today. What is it? What one goal, if you achieved it, would have the greatest positive effect on your life? What one career accomplishment would have the greatest positive impact on your work life?

2. Determine the one constraint, internal or external that sets the speed at which you accomplish this goal. Ask: "Why don't I have it already? What is it in me that is holding me back?" Whatever your answers, take action immediately. Do something. Do anything, but get started.