



Stop Wasting Time (Recognize the top 5 drains)!

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“Wow, I can’t believe how much I got done this week—it was phenomenal!” When is the last time you heard yourself saying words like this? Based on my informal poll of managers across various organizations, you may *never* have heard yourself say these words!

In a recent national poll, more than 90 percent of managers admitted that they wasted time in carrying out their job responsibilities. Time is easy to waste, especially if you are not highly focused on its passage. Benjamin Franklin once wrote, “*You may delay, but time will not.*” The problem with time is that it keeps on ticking away, whether you notice it or not.

Time is not only fleeting, it is costly for an organization. When I deliver leadership training to groups of managers, I always remind them at the beginning of the series of courses that their organization is investing a great deal of money in their development. No, I tell them, not because of my fee, but because of the cost of four hours of time for a group of 20 managers, times six monthly meetings. That’s an organizational investment of nearly 500 hours of salary and benefits! Your time costs money.

TOP 5 DRAINS. So, how do most organizational leaders waste time? From my executive coaching conversations, here are the top five time wasters and ways to counteract them:

1. **Superfluous meetings, emails.** In coaching Dan, a high potential manager working for a major construction company, he confided in me that he put in 65-70 hours a week and it was killing him. Already knowing the answer to my question, I asked what the norm was for leaders at his level at the company; he answered “50”. The problem in most organizations, including Dan’s, is that people who are known to work that many extra hours are seen as ‘unproductive time wasters’, rather than ‘hard-working heroes’.

When we mapped out his typical week on a piece of paper, it was clear that Dan was spending far too much time in meetings where he already had a representative there from his team, where he was only observing in case something came up, or where he only had critical input for a portion of the meeting time. Moreover, he was included on too many email strings that were superfluous. Dan’s most important steps toward stemming the waste of his time was to ***only attend meetings where his input was critical to the shaping and decision-making of the group, and where his boss considered it a priority; immediately cut himself off most email strings.*** This eliminated about 50 percent of the meetings he previously attended and 25 percent of the emails, freeing up time to focus on strategic and operational issues.

2. **Unnecessary interruptions.** It is widely accepted that when unanticipated interruptions disrupt your train of thought, it takes 10-15 minutes for that train to get back on track. Most of these interruptions are unnecessary, in that the person knocking on your door usually could hold the issue until later in the day or the next day. This appeared to be the case with Renata, the controller for a

high tech manufacturer. She complained in our early coaching meetings that her hours were stretched so thin and her frustrations were coiled so tightly that she tended to explode at various times throughout the day or week.

The biggest problem she identified as a time waster was people on the team, her peers, and senior leaders who had ‘emergencies’ she was forced to handle. We talked about how she was likely wasting two to three hours a day in lost concentration on those days with constant interruptions. I suggested she ***be assertive about her time in these ways: set specific hours during the day when her door was open for drop-ins, work from home or an obscure conference room when she needed to focus for lengths of time, and reschedule time for those who still dropped in without warning.***

3. **Unimportant tasks.** Too often, leaders spend a great deal of time focused on the wrong tasks. This is akin to working very hard to climb a ladder, only to discover it’s leaning against the wrong wall. What are the right tasks? These are usually the highest priority ones your boss is asking you to focus on, the ones most directly related to accomplishing your team and individual goals, and the ones that are likely to have the greatest impact for the organization. For most of us, it feels great to check off a bunch of tasks from our administrative to-do list, to plow through a large number of unread emails, or to organize those files we’ve been trying to get to. As a self-employed consultant who only gets paid when I’m working on billable projects, the cost of spending chunks of time on the wrong tasks is very clear. The key step here is to ***ask continuously, “is this the best use of my time right now?” Posing this questions and being brutally honest in your answer will minimize focusing on the unimportant tasks.***

4. **Procrastination.** Some leaders wear procrastination as a badge of honor, believing that putting things off leads to better results in the long run. However, I help them understand that procrastination is actually perfectionism in disguise, and its roots actually are underlying irrational fears. One of my coaching clients, Gerry, asked himself questions like, “What if it’s not done perfectly enough for the client?” “Suppose new information comes along tomorrow, and I’ve already made the decision today?” These are examples of fear-based thinking that delays critical decisions. And, as we usually discover, if you put off a decision long enough, someone else or the marketplace conditions makes the call for us. The antidote here is to ***recognize that the underlying motivation usually is to avoid making a mistake and that the driver is irrational fear. Ask yourself, “What’s causing me to be afraid of making this decision or moving this project forward; how big a deal is it if I decide now, and then change my mind with new information later?”***

5. **Delegation avoidance.** Perhaps the most insidious and common of time drains, this one undermines a majority of my coaching clients. Oh, they usually have reasons that seem legitimate to them—“My people are too busy--I’ll just do it myself,” or “It’s too menial to hand off,” or my favorite, “It will be quicker to just do it myself.” While these and other reasons for not delegating have some truth to them, the net result is leaders spending too much of their time on detailed tasks, and direct reports not learning or developing enough through delegated work. This represents what I like to call a lose-lose-lose, where neither the leader, nor the direct reports, nor the organization benefit. The solution here is to ***inspect each task on your to-do list and determine (honestly) if it is a task you could delegate to someone else; would delegating it free time on your calendar for higher priorities, as well as provide a learning experience to someone on your team?***