



Working Resources

Helping Companies Assess, Select, Coach and Retain Emotionally Intelligent People

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Newsletter

Beware of Busyness: Harnessing Willpower for Purposeful Action

“Only a small fraction of managers actually get something done that really matters or moves their organizations forward in a meaningful way.” – Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal in *A Bias for Action: How Effective Managers Harness Their Willpower, Achieve Results, and Stop Wasting Time* (Harvard Business School Press, 2004)

Only about 10 percent of managers work purposefully to complete important tasks, according to a 10-year study of managerial behavior across a variety of industries. The other 90 percent self-sabotage by busily engaging in non-purposeful activities, procrastinating, detaching from their work and needlessly spinning their wheels.

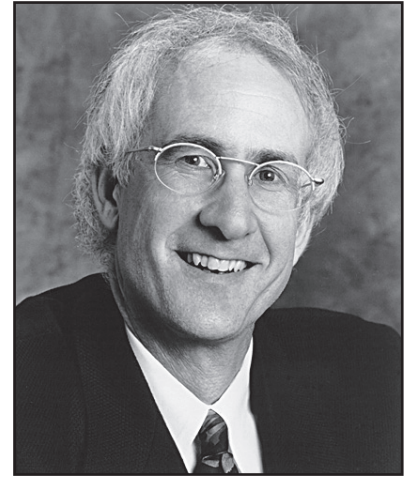
“Busy idleness,” seemingly an oxymoron, affects most people, pervading all aspects of personal and professional life. While we have easy access to knowledge and timesaving resources, we continue to spend most of our time making the inevitable happen, instead of committing energy and focus to the few activities that can really make a difference.

Beyond routine, day-to-day tasks, most managers fail to seize opportunities to achieve something significant. Why do so many smart, talented executives lose such valuable time and energy, rather than behaving in truly productive ways?

This problem is nothing new. Stanford University Management Professors Jeffrey Pfeffer, PhD, and Robert Sutton, PhD, studied this dynamic for their book, *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge Into Action* (Harvard Business School Press, 2000). They asked: “*Why does so much education and training, management consulting, and business research...produce so little change in what managers and organizations actually do?...Why [does] knowledge of what needs to be done frequently fail to result in action or behavior consistent with that knowledge?*”

Daily routines, superficial behaviors, and poorly

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Dr. Brusman is a highly sought-after speaker and workshop leader. He facilitates mission, values, and vision retreats.

“Maynard Brusman is one of the foremost coaches in the United States. He utilizes a wide variety of assessments in his work with senior executives and upper level managers, and is adept at helping his clients both develop higher levels of emotional intelligence and achieve breakthrough business results. As a senior leader in the executive coaching field, Dr. Brusman brings an exceptional level of wisdom, energy, and creativity to his work.” – Jeffrey E. Auerbach, Ph.D., President, College of Executive Coaching

He has been chosen as an expert to appear on radio and TV, and in the Wall Street Journal and Fast Company.

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prioritized and unfocused tasks zap managers' capacities. Operational activities squeeze out problems that are more crucial to achieving results. Managers often ignore or postpone dealing with the most critical issues, in favor of putting out fires and attending to squeaky wheels.

Unproductive busyness is perhaps the most serious behavioral problem in large companies.

Everyday managerial work is hazardous to one's ability to focus. Managers typically work on multiple tasks simultaneously. They must rely on others' help to get the job done, often without tangible milestones or clearly defined processes or goals. Days are full of interruptions and unexpected demands.

Even so, some managers are able to surmount the urgent interruptions and focus on getting the right things done to achieve results. What, then, makes these 10 percent more successful?

Energy and Focus

People who exhibit purposeful action possess two critical traits: energy and focus. Energy is characterized by more than effort; it requires involvement in meaningful activities, fueled by both external and internal resources. Purposeful action is self-generated, engaged and self-driven.

Purposeful action also demands focused behavior—conscious and intentional, guided by a decision to achieve a goal, disciplined enough to resist distraction and overcome problems, and persistence in the face of setbacks.

If 90 percent of managers fail to act purposefully in their everyday work, what exactly are they doing? How are they carrying out their work? Bruch's and Ghoshal's study, conducted over a 10-year period (1993 to 2003), identifies four profiles of managerial behavior, as charted in the following grid:

High Focus	The Detached	The Purposeful
Low Focus	The Procrastinator	The Frenzied
	Low Energy	High Energy

The Frenzied: Forty percent of managers are distracted by the overwhelming tasks that face them each day. They are highly energetic, but unfocused; they are enthusiastic about their work and identify strongly with their jobs. But *"the need for speed"* prompts them to be unreflective. Instead, they toil ceaselessly and act without hesitation. To others, they appear frenzied, desperate and extremely hurried. They could achieve more if they consciously concentrate their efforts on what really matters.

The Procrastinators: Thirty percent of managers procrastinate on doing their organizations' most important work. They lack both energy and focus, spending their time handling minor details in lieu of what could make a real difference to their organizations. These managers often feel insecure and fear failure.

The Detached: Twenty percent of managers are disengaged or detached from their work. They can be focused, but have no energy. They seem aloof, tense and apathetic.

The Purposeful: Only ten percent get the job done. They are highly focused, energetic, and come across as reflective and calm amid chaos.

The costs of unproductive busyness take a toll on both managers and their companies. Managers who identify strongly with their jobs tend to become frustrated or hurt when confronted with setbacks, criticism or mediocre performance. Continual unreflective activity has a direct effect on an organization's profits and managerial morale, as it's ineffective and ultimately unsatisfying.

For example, frenzied managers often act in extremely shortsighted ways. Under extreme time constraints and the need to do more with fewer resources, they become adept at finding short-term solutions. As a consequence, they seldom take time to reflect, and neglect long-term issues. Frenzied managers demonstrate a well-intentioned, but desperate, need to do something—anything—which makes them potentially destructive.

Chronic procrastinators are generally recovering frenzied managers. Once they have learned that frantic, desperate actions are unsatisfying, many lapse into procrastination, losing energy and focus. It becomes all too easy for them to put off action altogether.

The Purposeful Manager

What distinguishes managers who take purposeful action from those who do not? Why are some managers highly energetic and focused, while others procrastinate, disengage or invest energy in unfocused busyness?

Managers' tasks are complex, requiring creativity and innovation. They often strive to meet multiple and conflicting goals, many times on long-term projects that require a sustained effort. Ambitious goals, high uncertainty and extreme opposition can seriously limit many managers' ability to maintain focus.

When managers can make things happen under these conditions—and when they consistently exhibit purposeful action—they have learned to harness the power of their will.

Willpower is the force behind energy and focus, enabling managers to execute disciplined action. Even when uninspired by the work and tempted by other opportunities, purposeful managers maintain energy and focus through willpower. They are committed to achieving results and, no matter what, will not give up.

Developing Willpower

Purposeful managers exhibit an insatiable need to produce results—a key finding among successful executives interviewed by former Stanford University Business School Lecturer Jim Collins, MBA, for his book, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't* (HarperBusiness, 2001). Managers with willpower overcome barriers, deal with setbacks and persevere to the end.

For willpower to flourish, managers must commit to three action steps:

1. Develop a clear mental picture of their intention.
2. Make a conscious choice to commit to—and pursue—this intention.
3. Develop strategies for protecting this intention against distractions, boredom or frustration.

Without willpower, top leaders simply cannot direct or encourage others, nor provide meaning to their employees' work. Unfortunately, most leaders actually wind up destroying their managers' willpower by encouraging superficial acquiescence to tasks, but not real commitment to specific goals.

Leaders who activate their own willpower can effectively engage others' willpower. They may need to commit to more difficult routes of persuasion, rather than getting quick buy-ins. They must encourage their employees to consider conflicts, doubts and ambivalence, while openly discussing difficulties and costs—not just painting a rosy picture of necessary tasks.

Willful leadership is neither easy nor intuitive. Ultimately, it is less risky than merely motivating managers and assuming their compliance.

Organizations That Support Purposeful Action

Leaders who make a serious attempt to foster managerial willpower must establish three critical working conditions:

1. Create space for autonomous action.
2. Build processes for providing professional, social and emotional support.
3. Develop a culture that celebrates the exercise of responsible willpower.

Managers must first have sufficient freedom to act, with leaders allowing enough autonomy to grant managers a sense of personal ownership.

Ideally, managers will have informal relationships with peers and mentors who can provide professional support, including the information and resources needed to accomplish their work. They also require emotional support to cope with stress and leverage powerful emotions. An executive coach can often provide support.

To unleash managers' willpower, leaders must embed purposeful behaviors as a central element of the company's core values and shared understanding of how it does business.

Developing autonomy, support and a culture that encourages willpower is not intuitive. Personal freedom and shared support are difficult to combine. Highly autonomous managers focus only on their own tasks, often neglecting to share knowledge with others or invest energy in helping them succeed.

Yet, leadership that is courageous, persistent and patient can reconcile these tensions. No quick organizational fixes will create a culture of sustainable, willful action. It results from a long journey, through which leaders continuously demand purposeful action and personal

To Jump-Start Your Energy...

1. Define your goal by asking yourself:

- a. *Do I need a mentor who can help me see the big picture? Do I need to research data or strategies that will allow me to make a thoughtful, informed choice about my goals and objectives?*
- b. *Is my goal well defined and concrete? Do I understand all of the components, including the potential obstacles?*
- c. *Can I personally identify with my goal? Is it worthwhile, given my values and those of the organization?*

2. Strengthen your confidence in your ability to achieve your goals by asking yourself:

- a. *What experience do I have in achieving comparable goals? Can I do it again?*
- b. *Which of my role models can help me understand what it takes to achieve my goal?*
- c. *Who can give me feedback to evaluate my capacities to achieve my goal? What must I learn to ensure success?*
- d. *Can I experiment and rehearse critical tasks while pursuing my goals?*

3. Overcome negativity and develop positive thoughts and feelings by asking yourself:

- a. *Which emotions do I harbor—and what triggers them? Should I change my tasks or goals so that work is less stressful? Do I have healthy outlets—hobbies, sports, friends—for these feelings?*
- b. *What about my work creates enthusiasm, fun and excitement for me? What do I love doing? Apart from my work, from what personal well can I regularly draw balance or strength?*

To Sharpen Your Focus...

1. Visualize your intention by asking yourself:

- a. *What does my intention look like? What simple image can I keep in my mind when I need to remember my intention?*
- b. *How can I accomplish my intention? What specific steps will I need to take to reach it?*

2. Make a personal commitment by asking yourself:

- a. *Does this particular intention feel right? Do I really want it?*
- b. *Does my intention excite me? Is it something for which I can maintain my passion and commitment, even when obstacles arise?*
- c. *Does my intention jibe with my personal values and beliefs? Can I stand behind it with head and heart?*

Resource:

Bruch, H., & Ghoshal, S. (2004). *A Bias for Action: How Effective Managers Harness Their Willpower, Achieve Results, and Stop Wasting Time*. Harvard Business School Press.



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