

April 2008

## The Desired Outcome

### This Month: Making Room and Energy

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#### YOUR BUSINESS

## Remove Chaos

Over-busy is a problem many are facing these days. With cost pressure always increasing, it is typical that fewer people are expected to do the same or even more work.

Granted there are some times you need to buckle down and work what feels like 24x7 to accomplish a specific deadline. But what I am talking about here is the kind of over-busy that creeps into steady state, and getting control of it.

In my experience, steady state over-busy has two main causes:

1. Signing up for more than you can actually do
2. Organizational chaos which makes everything you do take longer.

I will share five ideas based on my own experience leading organizations which help break through the over-commitment and chaos, and maximize the time spent actually getting benefit from work vs. dealing with things that get in the way of doing the work.

1. Focus on the work that needs to be done
2. Focus on the can't fails
3. Force clarity
4. Communicate better
5. Have Better meetings

#### Focus on the work that needs to be done

One of the worst parts about being over-busy is the FEELING of being overwhelmed.

These do not need to be 100% connected.

Feeling overwhelmed happens to me most frequently when I do not have a clear written list of the work that needs to get done. This results in "thought attacks" where task after task come into my mind and builds up a mountain of responsibility that seems impossible to bear.

I have found that simply writing down everything that specifically needs to get done makes the overwhelmed feeling go away even though the work doesn't!

I also typically find that the list of things I feel most stressed over because they are committed to, but not getting done is more like 6 things in reality, not the 47 things it feels like before writing it down.

**Having a clear list of the specific work, and having discussion with your people who are feeling overwhelmed, goes a long way to making more energy for you and your team.**

#### **Focus on the Can't Fails**

I have mentioned the concept of "Can't Fails" in the February 2008 issue on [Strategy into Action](#)

It is a good exercise to go through with yourself and with your team, to sort all the work that needs to be done (which you listed above) into

**the difference between: "Really Important" and "The Business is going to Die" if we don't do this.**

An example of this that I can offer is when I was running marketing for a business globally and we had some very important marketing priorities. But I realized that the sales force had stopped selling our products -- We had no channel. The "can't fail" became, "if we don't have a sales channel we die".

There was no one other than me to take that on, so re-building, re-recruiting, and supporting the sales force became my biggest "cant' fail". In order to do it I had to let many very important marketing initiatives take a back seat.

Think very big and broadly about the can't fails. What do you absolutely need to make true one year from now? What will kill your business if it doesn't get done?

You will find that some of the critical priorities rise above the others when you put this filter on it. You will also feel better if you are confident that you getting the true can't fails done, even if some of the other critical things are slipping.

#### **Force Clarity**

As a manager it is easy to think you are being clear when you are not. You always know what you are talking about!

It's easy to communicate and assume that people heard, understood and internalized what you have communicated. It's important to recognize that this is more often not the case, and give special attention to making sure that the communication "took hold".

**Any communication that is not clear, causes chaos and wasted time.**

My technique for dealing with this was to have a review board of people across the organization that would be a test for the messages.

They got early access to information, and provided insight about what was not clear. I also had processes to poll people across the organization on a regular basis to seek out where there was confusion and chaos that could be solved with more clear communications.

I can't say I always had a perfect record, but I do know that by putting these checkpoints in place, me and my senior team were able to eliminate a significant amount of confusion and wasted time for people to have to seek out clarification, or spend time working in the wrong direction.

#### **Communicate Better**

I keep learning the lesson over and over again that you need to communicate more than you think you do. It's well studied in marketing that only when you are completely bored with and sick of hearing your messages, is when they are starting to register with your audience.

**Once you get clarity on the work to be done and the can't fails, and you have tested your messages, remember to keep communicating.**

Make this an explicit objective for your staff to pass on the communication with their teams. Once you know something, and you've heard it a few times, it's natural to feel like it isn't news any more.

I recommend building a systematic communication process that you can feed information into and be assured that it will reach everyone who needs to hear it.

Consistent communication creates more room for real work because you cut down on the emails, meetings, and discussions where people are trying to understand what they are supposed to be doing.

Also, I provided some specific ideas for communicating with your organization in the [August 2007 Issue: Communications that really break through](#)

As well as the [February 2008 Issue on Strategy into Action](#)

**Have Better meetings**

Bad meetings are a tribute to Chaos.

I'll be brief.

1. Start on time
2. Make it clear to anyone who is late that this is not acceptable
3. Ban email in meetings (and have a shorter meeting as a reward)
4. Be clear about the purpose and the desired outcome for the meeting before you start it.
5. Take notes and distribute decisions and action items right after the meeting
6. Schedule 25 and 50 minute meetings instead of 30 and 60 minute meetings so people stand a chance of being on time.

Think about spending even two hours less a week in meetings, and getting real work done in all the meetings you do have. You will make time and energy and get better business results along the way.

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YOUR PEOPLE

## Not delegating is NOT a choice

One of the most common problems I hear when I talk to managers is "I try to delegate but then when it comes back it's wrong or it's not good enough, so then I have to do it myself."

This is a very important point.

**When it turns out wrong, you must resist the temptation to do it yourself.**

You have only two choices: either you must:

- ✦ Do a better job delegating so it turns out right
- or...
- ✦ Change the person to someone who can handle it.

I am stating this harshly, but the point is critical.

Doing the work yourself is not good for you or the organization. And it's not your job. You are creating a bottleneck which should not be there at your level. It is your job to make sure that the work gets done well by your team.

If you prefer to actually do the work then you should step aside and let another manager who will not create a bottleneck step in.

So let's look at the two choices.

### **Change the way you delegate so that it comes back right!**

1. Understand what went wrong
2. Think about why you do it better. Really analyze what you do.
3. Be clear about communicating what right and wrong look like
4. Create checkpoints or templates in the process to ensure quality

Here is an example.

A business leader had the responsibility for delivering proposals to a client. The proposals are highly confidential to a subset of people at that client, they need to sell the offering, and reflect the high quality standards of the company.

This particular manager has people on his staff who are responsible for creating and delivering proposals, but found himself jumping in and re-writing them regularly because they were not "good enough".

An example of such proposal that was not "good enough"

- ✦ Went to a broad distribution at the client (huge confidentiality issue)
- ✦ Had incorrect pricing on it
- ✦ Had names of other past clients in it
- ✦ Omitted one of the offers that should have been included.

When this type of thing happens, his instinctive response was, If I want it to come out right I have to do it myself, or review all the proposals myself.

This is exactly the urge that must be resisted. In such a case the manager needs to revisit the only two choices. 1) delegate it so it works, 2) change the people.

I will walk through how you might delegate this so it works.

1. Institute a confidentiality checklist. For any report have an explicit list of names that this person goes to, and when it is distributed have a sign off step that confirms it only went to the approved list.
2. Have an administrative person check all proposals for formatting, margins, page numbers, typos, and names.
3. Isolate the pricing section to a specific sub-section which makes it possible for a quick review vs. hunting through the entire document
4. Have a template for offers and sales language that should be included in every proposal of a certain type.

A process like this would ensure that the manager would either not have to review each proposal at all, or it would streamline the time it takes. The work gets done and there is no bottleneck created at the manager level.

When you do a task you tend to take for granted many of the steps in the process and the things that make you good at it.

If you find yourself jumping in to do the work yourself really consider what you do. How do you think about it? How do you make choices, how do you structure the work?

What do you add to make it special or exciting? How do you judge if it is?

Challenge yourself to create checklists and templates and train people on the specifics of what is required to do a good and complete job.

**You are not only saving yourself time, you are growing the capability of your organization, which is your actual job.**

If your job degenerates into doing all of the work that your team doesn't do well enough, then you are not doing your job as a leader in growing the capacity and capability of the organization.

And you will always be overwhelmed with too much to do.

If you do all of this and you have people who are still not capable of doing the job, it is your job to change the people.

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YOUR VISIBILITY

## Don't do everything

This is a big aha for many people. It's simply – don't do everything. Most highly successful executives that I know are not the ones that are used up and burned out and pissed off. And they don't do everything. They have a way of covering the can't fails and setting expectations so that they can maintain some "buffer" in their schedule.

This allows them to be responsive to new "can't fails that come up", and not get burned out along the way.

As I mentioned earlier, sometimes you need to work 24x7 to meet a deadline, but if you are in a steady-state of over-busy, you need to find a way to contain the work, lead, and make more room.

**It's important to remember that no one other than YOU has any motivation whatsoever to make you less busy.**

Your boss, your team and your peers only benefit from your endless output. It's up to you alone.

### **Take some time out for yourself**

Recognize when you have hit a wall and go hide for a couple of hours. Do whatever you need to do to renew yourself.

You will easily make up the work and be even more productive if you stop to take breath when you really need one.

### **Be seen as responsive without responding to everything.**

It's important to be seen as being responsive. The trick is to be seen as responsive with actually responding to everything.

Quick "got it, thanks" on email can go a long way, and filtering your responses to respond quickly to the most critical items vs. responding to everything really works. Remember, the more email you send, the more email you get!

### Create the right story for what you do and don't do

I know some executives that are very successful that don't do everything and they consistently disappoint people in their own organization and their peers. This does not necessarily make them unsuccessful because what they DO get done is stuff that has the biggest impact and they always cover the can't fails.

The learning here is that successful executives don't do everything.

Another option that I would use is to set expectations more explicitly. I always told my team. I promise you that I will do an incomplete job. If you see something that I am missing that you believe is vitally important, please bring it to my attention.

I would then emphasize clearly and consistently what I WAS working on, and why those things were the priorities. I would give examples of the kinds of things I was letting drop.

Then when people observed that other things that got dropped I did not get too many "points marked off".

### Think about which things must be top quality, which things can get by with just getting done, and which things won't kill you if you don't do them at all.

If you try to do a top quality job of everything you do, you will be less successful than if you hit the critical ones out of the park and let some other things go.

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#### YOUR LIFE

## Give your values some "airtime"

One of the things that makes me feel overwhelmed is if I feel like I have zero time to do the things outside of work that I want to do.

Work can have a way of squeezing out everything else.

One of the things that makes this most challenging is if the thing that is getting squeezed out represents a core value for you.

It could be something to do with your family, or that you personally need an adventure, or you need a sense of calm to do some critical thinking, or you desire surrounding yourself with nature or music, or friends...

One of the exercises I take people through in my workshops is defining what your core values are, and then once that is done, understanding how well you are doing serving them.

Most people don't get to optimize all their core values at one time. You may emphasize financial security at the expense of freedom, or you may sacrifice personal flexibility in favor of family.

But when you recognize and focus on what your values are you can challenge yourself to take a value that is getting zero "air time" and start giving it some.

There is an enormous difference between zero and even a small amount of time. Zero feels bad. Even 30 minutes can make big impact. It feels very significant and is an effective way to build up your energy.

I have two examples.

1. A man was missing spending time working out. It felt like "zero" because of his work and his schedule of

picking up children from activities. He focused on this and changed his gym to be one that was less nice, but was right next to where his kid's activities were. He was able to fit in a couple of short workouts each week in the course of going from work to kids to home. It wasn't a lot of time, but the fact that it was non-zero made a big difference to him.

2. A lady who had excitement and achievement as core values was stuck in a bureaucratic environment at work where there was no interest in creating a big breakthrough. Instead of looking to fill that value with work, she decided to take up rock climbing. Here excitement and achievement values were being served, and it gave her more energy at work too.

Consider what is really important to you and if you feel like any of your core values are being zero'd out, do something specific and remember it does not need to be a big time-consuming endeavor, it just needs to take something from zero to more than zero and it will make a big difference.

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I hope you have found a few useful ideas that you can apply right away to start building value in your career and business.

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### About Patty

Patty Azzarello was the youngest general manager at HP ever at the age of 33. She ran a \$1B software business at the age of 35 and was a CEO for the first time at the age of 38. Patty is known for her personal leadership qualities, her straightforward and practical manner, and her genuine interest in making a real connection with people to help them to advance their career and business, and to find ways to enjoy their life more.

[More About Patty >>](#)

Today Patty Azzarello is the CEO of Azzarello Group, [www.AzzarelloGroup.com](http://www.AzzarelloGroup.com) a unique services organization focused on helping companies develop and motivate their top performers and grow their business.

Azzarello Group delivers practical, experience-based tools, through products and services including, executive coaching, public speaking, leadership workshops, online programs, and consulting with teams on business execution.

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