



The Effective Organization

April 2010

Where There Is Nothing

Therefore just as we take advantage of what is, we should recognize the usefulness of what is not.

- Lao Tzu

The recent NY Times article, “Driven to Distraction” discussed the practice of turning cars into mobile offices. The dangers of this practice I will leave to others to debate, although I will mention that the Car Talk Guys are definitely Not Happy about it. What I found particularly fascinating in reading this article was the justifications that managers and senior executives were giving for staying connected all the time:

- They felt that they were being more productive, making use of otherwise wasted time.
- They felt that their teams couldn't function without them, which certainly begs the question of what would happen to the team and the company if the distracted driver got himself killed.
- Instant response is necessary in today's economy.

And so it went. Each of these excuses, for that is what they are, sounds very good. Certainly being busy every possible minute does

create an illusion of productivity. Does it create real productivity? That depends on what you're doing.

When focused on a single task, or set of related tasks, working without distractions can be extremely productive. Indeed, such total focus is also extremely enjoyable and is often when people do their best work.

Alas, that's not the case when the tasks are unrelated, such as driving and attempting to manage a team back at the office or discuss problems with a client. In that case, the brain must constantly switch from one task to another, a process that is extremely tiring and highly error-prone.

A possibly more serious problem, at least from the point of view of making good decisions, is that our brains need relative quiet to do their best work. “Relative quiet” varies from person to person, in that one person may need actual silence while someone else might find loud music helps them relax. No matter what form it takes, our ability to have sudden intuitive leaps, to have that “eureka!” moment if you will, depends on our not filling every instant of our time with the task at hand. Trying to be productive every instant denies us the time to stop and reflect. As Lao Tzu wrote centuries ago, “*form comes from*

Publications

Reality from Fantasy: Using Predictive Scenarios to Explore Ethical Dilemmas in “Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values Through Play.”

[The Procrustes Method](#) in the CEO Refresher

[Communicating With Retention in Mind](#), in the Journal of Corporate Recruiting Leadership



Subscribe

Quoted in

[Masonic Teambuilding: A Group-Dynamics Approach](#)

what is there, but usefulness from what is not.” In other words, if there's no silence between the beats, there's no music.

What about the argument that the team cannot function if the manager is not in constant communication? I'm reminded of the old saying about graveyards and indispensable men, but let's not go there. Instead, let's unpack the statement.

When a manager says that their team cannot function without them, they are saying some variation of at least one of the following statements:

- My team doesn't really understand what it's supposed to do, so I have to constantly direct them, or
- I don't trust my team to do its job in my absence, or
- I don't think anyone but me knows how to do it right, or
- I'm afraid I'll look useless if my team can function without me being there all the time.

Looked at in this way, having the manager constantly in contact with the team doesn't sound so hot.

If the team really doesn't understand what it's supposed to do, why not? Most frequently, it's because the members of the team haven't really learned to work together effectively. They're spending too much of their energy managing interpersonal interactions and not enough attempting to understand the goals. Fundamentally, they care about the outcome only insofar as they want a paycheck. In this case, the manager would be well served to build up the team and help them become a more cohesive unit with each member understanding and appreciating the contributions brought by the others.

What about the case where the manager says he doesn't trust his team to do the job in his absence? Well, why doesn't he trust them? Is this a case of a manager that can't delegate or a team that can't accept delegation? Or is this a manager who has never taken the time to develop a strong relationship with the team, forcing him to constantly push them to work instead of having a highly motivated team? If he doesn't trust his team, odds are, they don't trust him either. This can be corrected and will result in

a far more productive team than one in which trust is lacking.

As for the manager who doesn't think that anyone else knows how to do the job correctly, that manager is not taking advantage of the brains of her team. She's assuming that there is only one solution and that's the one she knows. In fact, she's cheating herself and the company by not taking full advantage of the creativity and massed brainpower of her team. Focus on objectives and give the team the freedom to figure out the best ways to get there. Encourage them, coach them, but don't sit there and treat them like little children by solving all the problems for them. Build their sense of competence and autonomy and you'll have a far more motivated and productive team.

Finally, what of the manager who thinks he'll appear useless if he's not running around doing stuff all the time? There is a big difference between motion and progress. The manager's job is not to create motion but to enable the team to make progress. If you're lucky enough to have a team that's so strong that it looks like they don't need you, enjoy it! Be their coach, keep them at that peak level of performance. Your job now is to keep them from burning out. The last thing they need from you is having you constantly metaphorically peering over their shoulders via your cellphone.

That mobile office can create a great deal of activity, but most of that activity only serves to mask the weaknesses in the team or the manager. Sometimes, the secret to success is to know when to do nothing at all.

About 7 Steps Ahead



Stephen R. Balzac is a consultant, professional speaker and president of 7 Steps Ahead, specializing in helping businesses increase revenue and grow their client base.

Steve has over twenty years of experience in the high tech industry and is the former Director of Operations for Silicon Genetics, in Redwood City, CA.

Steve is a contributing author to *Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values Through Play* and the author of *The 36-Hour Course on Organizational Development*, due out later this year from McGraw-Hill. He writes the monthly business column, "Balzac on Business."

He serves on the board of the New England Society of Applied Psychology (NESAP) and is the president of the Society of Professional Consultants (SPC). Steve is a member of the Operations Committee of the American Judo & Jujitsu Federation. No stranger to the challenges of achieving peak performance under competitive and stressful conditions, he holds a fourth degree black belt in jujitsu and is a former nationally ranked competitive fencer. Steve is an adjunct professor of Industrial/Organizational Psychology and has been a guest lecturer at MIT and WPI.