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## BEWARE THE BUSY MANAGER

Highlights from Ghoshal and Bruch, Harvard Business Review, Feb 2002

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If you listen to executives, they'll tell you that the resource they lack most is time. Every minute is spent grappling with strategic issues, focusing on cost reduction, devising creative approaches to new markets, beating new competitors. But if you watch them, here's what you'll see: They rush from meeting to meeting, check their e-mail constantly, extinguish fire after fire, and make countless phone calls. In short, you'll see an astonishing amount of fast-moving activity that allows almost no time for reflection.

No doubt, executives are under incredible pressure to perform, and they have far too much to do, even when they work 12-hour days. But the fact is, very few managers use their time as effectively as they could. They think they're attending to pressing matters, but they're really just spinning their wheels.

The awareness that unproductive busyness—what we call “active nonaction”—is a hazard for managers is not new. Managers themselves bemoan the problem, and researchers such as Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton have examined it (see “The Smart-Talk Trap,” HBR May–June 1999). But the underlying dynamics of the behavior are less well understood.

For the past ten years, we have studied the behavior of busy managers in nearly a dozen large companies, including Sony, LG Electronics, and Lufthansa. The managers at Lufthansa were especially interesting to us because in the last decade, the company underwent a complete transformation—from teetering on the brink of bankruptcy in the early 1990s to earning a record profit of DM 2.5 billion in 2000, thanks in part to the leadership of its managers. We interviewed and observed some 200 managers at Lufthansa, each of whom was involved in at least one of the 130 projects launched to restore the company's exalted status as one of Europe's business icons.

Our findings on managerial behaviour should frighten you: Fully 90% of managers squander their time in all sorts of ineffective activities. In other words, a mere 10% of managers spend their time in a committed, purposeful, and reflective manner.

### **Focus and Energy**

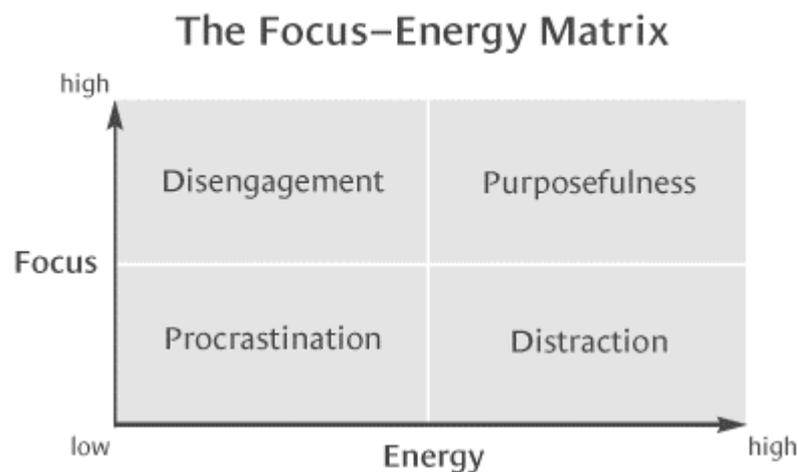
Managers are not paid to make the inevitable happen. In most organizations, the ordinary routines of business chug along without much managerial oversight. The job of managers, therefore, is to make the business do more than chug—to move it forward in innovative, surprising ways. After observing scores of managers for many years, we came to the conclusion that managers who take effective action (those who make difficult—even seemingly impossible—things happen) rely on a combination of two traits: focus and energy.

Think of *focus* as concentrated attention—the ability to zero in on a goal and see the task through to completion. Focused managers aren't in reactive mode; they choose not to respond immediately to every issue that comes their way or get sidetracked from their goals by distractions like e-mail, meetings, setbacks, and unforeseen demands. Because they have a clear understanding of what they want to accomplish, they carefully weigh their options before selecting a course of action. Moreover, because they commit to only one or two key projects, they can devote their full attention to the projects they believe in.

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Think of the second characteristic—*energy*—as the vigor that is fueled by intense personal commitment. Energy is what pushes managers to go the extra mile when tackling heavy workloads and meeting tight deadlines.

While both focus and energy are positive traits, neither alone is sufficient to produce the kind of purposeful action organizations need most from their managers. Focus without energy devolves into listless execution or leads to burnout. Energy without focus dissipates into purposeless busyness or, in its most destructive form, a series of wasteful failures. We found that plotting the two characteristics in a matrix offered a useful framework for diagnosing the causes of nonproductive activity as well as the sources of purposeful action. The exhibit “The Focus–Energy Matrix” identifies four types of behaviour: disengagement, procrastination, distraction, and purposefulness.



A mere 10% of managers are purposeful—that is, both highly energetic and highly focused. They use their time effectively by carefully choosing goals and then taking deliberate actions to reach them. Managers that fall into the other groups, by contrast, are usually just spinning their wheels; some procrastinate, others feel no emotional connection to their work, and still others are easily distracted from the task at hand. Although they look busy, they lack either the focus or the energy required for making any sort of meaningful change.

Before we look at each type more closely, we should note that these behaviors have both internal and external causes. Some people are born with high levels of energy, for example, and some, by nature, are more self-reflective. But it is important not to overlook the organizational context of these behaviors. Some companies foster fire-fighting cultures; others breed cynicism and, hence, low levels of commitment in their workers. To change the behaviors of your managers, it may be necessary to alter the organizational landscape.

### **The Procrastinators**

Of the managers we studied, some 30% suffered from low levels of both energy and focus; we call these managers the procrastinators. Although they dutifully perform routine tasks—attending meetings, writing memos, making phone calls, and so on—they fail to take initiative, raise the level of performance, or engage

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with strategy.

### **The Disengaged**

Roughly 20% of managers fall into the disengaged category; they exhibit high focus but have low levels of energy. Some of these managers are simply exhausted and lack the inner resources to reenergize themselves. Others feel unable to commit to tasks that hold little meaning for them. Disengaged managers have strong reservations about the jobs they are asked to do; as a result, they approach them halfheartedly.

### **The Distracted**

By far the largest group of managers we studied—more than 40%—fall into the distracted quadrant: those well-intentioned, highly energetic but unfocused people who confuse frenetic motion with constructive action. When they're under pressure, distracted managers feel a desperate need to do something—anything. That makes them as dangerous as the proverbial bull in a china shop.

### **The Purposeful**

The smallest proportion of managers we studied—around 10%—were both highly energetic and highly focused. Not only do such managers put in more effort than their counterparts, but they also achieve critical, long-term goals more often. Purposeful managers tend to be more self-aware than most people. Their clarity about their intentions, in combination with strong willpower, seems to help them make sound decisions about how to spend their time. They pick their goals—and their battles—with far more care than other managers do.