

MANAGING PEOPLE

Your Team's Time Management Problem Might Be a Focus Problem

by Maura Thomas

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“My team has a time management problem,” leaders often tell me. For example, an executive might say that their teams aren’t moving the needle on important projects, yet staffers seem busy and stressed. “Time management” becomes a catchall solution to this problem, and they want to hire me to offer tips and techniques on things like prioritizing and using their calendars better.

What we soon uncover, however, is that the root of their team's problems is not managing time, but managing *attention*. And these attention management issues are due not to a skills gap on the part of the employees, but to a wider cultural problem unintentionally reinforced, or at least tolerated, by senior leadership.

Distraction is one of the biggest hurdles to high-quality knowledge work, costing almost 1 trillion dollars annually. The first step to addressing this problem is to treat it as a company culture problem that deserves the attention of senior executives.

In my experience, many leaders inadvertently allow or even actively promote the following four situations that impede their team's ability to focus and produce their best work.

They create an environment that undermines focus. The products of knowledge work are creativity, ideas, decisions, information, and communication. All of these require extended periods of sustained focus. However, many offices have a culture in which all communication, regardless of the subject or source, *carries the same level of presumed urgency and is expected to produce an immediate response*.

Sometimes this happens out of a customer service requirement: Leadership mandates that customers or clients should receive timely responses to all communication. But if "timely" isn't specific and realistic, the assumption grows that faster is better – and immediate is best. Since workers never know whether incoming messages are from customers or from someone else, they must monitor messages constantly. Therefore every *other* task is tackled intermittently, in increments of 30-120 seconds, around the handing of messages.

Saying, "Just acknowledge the message and let them know you'll get back to them soon" does not alleviate the problem, since workers still have to monitor their messages to know that this response is required. This problem is exacerbated when employees are issued a second computer monitor, which they use to have their email open on one screen, while whatever work they are trying to get done is on the other screen. This is a recipe for constant distraction, seemingly endorsed by the leaders who provide the hardware.

To solve this problem, divert customer- or client-facing issues to dedicated customer-service personnel, whose role is more geared toward reactive tasks. Free up high-impact employees to have more uninterrupted time to focus on their responsibilities. If you can't designate employees

for specific customer-response roles, then create a realistic response window, such as four hours or one business day, perhaps with an auto-responder instructing clients to call when a timely response is required. Will your customers really leave you if you don't respond to their emails immediately? When considering customer response times, think of it this way: If your customer were sitting across from one of your employees, you wouldn't want the employee checking email. So even when the customer isn't present, the work your company provides to them deserves the same amount of respect and undivided attention, correct? If so, then your team has to have time away from incoming communication. And an added benefit is that, as studies show, this work will get done faster and better.

They don't offer clear instruction on which communication channel is appropriate in which situation. Email was not designed for urgent or time-sensitive communication. Instant messaging can be a better vehicle, but it is typically used for trivial issues, critical issues, and everything in between. When every communication tool is used in every circumstance, there's no way to vet incoming communication except to check everything as it arrives. This, too, ensures constant distraction.

Consider using an auto-responder or a line in your email signatures that directs customers how to communicate with you on urgent matters. Also ensure that internal communication doesn't carry an expectation of immediate response. Staff, especially Millennials, increasingly avoid the phone and in-person communication, yet sensitive information and urgent information are better suited to these channels. Offer guidelines that are flexible yet specific regarding how to make effective use of all company communication channels.

They assign the same workers to receive and solve customer issues. Even if you designate specific staff to be the front line to customers, you will have a problem if those staff members have to both *receive* the problems and *solve* them. After all, they won't be able to bring their full attention to solving the problem if they can't take a break from receiving more problems.

Try organizing the days of your support staff so that each person has time away from phone and email to thoughtfully address problems and get other meaningful work done. Another option would be to appoint a "triage" person, who only handles intake and assigns problems to others for solutions. Either option gives support staff opportunities to devote their full attention to solving problems. This will likely result in happier customers. When staff members have a chance to reflect on issues, they are better primed to recognize systemic problems and opportunities for

product and policy improvements. Train your staff to understand that good customer service means not only responding to customers in a timely manner but also solving their problems in a thorough, attentive, and satisfactory way.

They don't realize that monitoring internal systems is still work, even if there is rarely an emergency. I have this experience in almost every training session I deliver: I introduce the idea that downtime and vacation are critical for knowledge workers' success, and then the head of IT or another system-monitoring department speaks up and says that they can never be out of touch in case of a system failure. This is followed by a member of leadership jumping in to say, "But it's OK, because those kinds of emergencies rarely happen."

It's *not* OK, because monitoring work for emergencies is still working. If you have a staffer who is expected to be available 24/7/365 in case of an "emergency," then this person essentially gets *no* time off, because they still have to monitor their work communication "just in case." Even if there is no emergency, there's still other work happening that this staffer will see. Even if they choose not to respond, their mind will be engaged in work all the time, and there's never a time when they can truly unplug.

To address this, every role in your organization needs to have a trusted backup. When an employee has no backup, there is risk to the business whether that employee stays or leaves. If she leaves and takes all of that business knowledge with her, it could take your company years to recover. If he stays, he is likely to experience high stress (which is not good for his output) or burnout (causing you to need to replace him anyway, temporarily or permanently).

If you are a leader and think your employees might be struggling with "time management," examine these issues first. Your first step may be to address your culture problem around attention management. While many employees do struggle with time and attention management, the solutions won't stick unless leaders address the underlying culture issues.

Maura Thomas is an award-winning international speaker and trainer on individual and corporate productivity, attention management, and work-life balance. She is a TEDx Speaker, founder of RegainYourTime, and author of *Personal Productivity Secrets* and *Work Without Walls*. She frequently appears in major business outlets, and was recently named one of the Top Leadership Speakers of 2018 in Inc. Magazine. Follow her on Twitter at @mnthomas, or sign up [here](#) to be notified when a new article is published.

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BRETT MCGUIRE a year ago

"...many offices have a culture in which all communication, regardless of the subject or source, carries the same level of presumed urgency and is expected to produce an immediate response."

This is the core problem with email, particularly where there is a tendency to treat the inbox as your to-do list. It would be interesting to know if alternative platforms such as Office365 Teams are an effective alternative, or do they just add another communication channel that has to be managed and therefore exacerbates the situation...

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