

“The Way We're Working Isn't Working”

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Kindle Notes by Dave Kraft

Too much of a good thing eventually becomes a bad thing. This furious activity exacts a series of silent costs: less capacity for focused attention, less time for any given task, and less opportunity to think reflectively and long term. More than a hundred studies have demonstrated some correlation between employee engagement and business performance. A growing body of research suggests that we're most productive when we move between periods of high focus and intermittent rest. The best violinists figured out, intuitively, that they generated the highest value by working intensely, without interruption, for no more than ninety minutes at a time and no more than 4 hours a day.

They also recognized that it was essential to take time, intermittently, to rest and refuel. Because the number of hours we work is easy to measure, organizations often default to evaluating employees by the hours they put in at their desks, rather than by the focus they bring to their work or the value they produce. If more of us were able to focus in the intense but time-limited ways that the best violinists do, the evidence suggests that great performance would be much more common than it is.

Human beings, on the other hand, need to meet four energy needs to operate at their best: physical, emotional, mental, and Spiritual. No amount of money employers pay for our time will ever be sufficient to meet all of our multidimensional needs. It's only when employers encourage and support us in meeting these needs that we can cultivate the energy, engagement, focus, creativity, and passion. We allow ourselves to be distracted by e-mail and trivial tasks rather than focusing single-mindedly on our most high-leverage priorities and devoting sacrosanct time to thinking creatively, strategically, and long term. We are so busy getting things. Perhaps no human need is more neglected in the workplace than to feel valued.

Feeling appreciated is as important to us as food. The need to be valued begins at birth and never goes away. The single most important factor in whether or not employees choose to stay in a job, Gallup has found, is the quality of their relationship with their direct superiors. The parallel challenge for leaders and organizations is to create work environments that free and encourage people to focus in absorbed ways without constant interruptions.

Encouraging employees to set aside sacrosanct time to think creatively, strategically, and long term is even more countercultural in most organizations, which are characteristically focused on immediate results and urgent deadlines. “How can I more intentionally invest in meeting the multidimensional needs of my employees so they’re freed, fueled, and inspired to bring the best of themselves to work every day? Most of us work long hours and feel a relentless sense of urgency. We juggle multiple demands without feeling we’re devoting sufficient time to the most important tasks. We arrive home in the evenings with little energy left for our families.

We spend too little time thinking strategically and long term, too little time taking care of ourselves, and too little time simply enjoying our lives. It’s nearly axiomatic that the more continuously we work, the less likely we are to notice how we’re feeling. For better and for worse, we are deeply creatures of habit. Fully 95 percent of our behavior occurs out of habit, either unconsciously or in reaction to external demands. We’re run by the automatic. Often, when we make a commitment to a new behavior such as exercising, we fail to recognize that unless we set aside a specific time to do it, it’s unlikely we will.

If you have to consciously think for very long about doing something, it’s unlikely you’ll end up doing it for very long. Reverse Parkinson’s Law. Work not only expands to fill the time allotted to it, but also contracts to fit within the time allotted to it. Predeciding should help a person protect goal pursuit from tempting distractions, bad habits, or competing goals. We know that people are exponentially more successful making changes when they undertake them at precise, scheduled times. The ethic of more, bigger, faster has prompted us to spend far more energy than we adequately renew. In a frenzied and largely futile effort we try to keep up with relentlessly rising demand. Maintenance and refueling are as critical to victory as racing itself. That’s because the higher the demand, the greater and more frequent the need for renewal. We lead increasingly linear lives, spending energy too continuously and renewing it too infrequently.

We’re more effective at work when we regularly renew, and we’re at our best when we alternate between active forms of renewal, such as exercise and play, and more passive forms, such as meditation and sleep. So how much sleep do we need? The National Sleep Foundation recommends between seven and nine hours. When researchers test subjects in environments without clocks or windows and ask them to sleep whenever they feel tired, approximately 95 percent of them sleep between seven and eight hours out of every twenty-four.

In effect, our bodies are asking us for a break every ninety minutes or so. More researchers have found that top performers in fields ranging from chess to sports to scientific research tend to work in approximately ninety-minute cycles and then take a break. Perhaps no single daytime renewal behavior more reliably influences performance—and is less common in the workplace—than taking a nap. The health costs from too little vacation are comparable to those from inadequate sleep. How much happier and more effective might we all become if we were taught how to effectively balance intense effort with deep renewal and became better at both? *The Way We're Working Isn't Working*:

There is also broad and compelling evidence that fitness improves cognitive capacity and emotional wellbeing. Regular exercisers in middle age have proven to be one-third as likely to get Alzheimer's disease in their seventies as those who didn't exercise at all. American College of Sports Medicine & the American Heart Association suggest at least three and up to six days a week of moderate-intensity physical activity for twenty to forty-five minutes a day. A paltry 15 percent of U.S. citizens regularly engaged in vigorous activity for twenty minutes a day at least three times a week. 25 percent of Americans are almost completely sedentary, while 60 percent are only sporadically active. Treating employees like adults by giving them freedom to decide how best to get their work done and holding them accountable for their results, not the hours they work.

I made it clear to my team that the key to getting better numbers wasn't more hours but more vitality, focus, passion, and positive emotion. Negative emotions may fuel action, but they don't inspire people. We think of leaders as "chief energy officers." The core challenge for leaders, we believe, is to recruit, mobilize, inspire, focus, and refuel the energy of those they lead. What sets leaders apart is their disproportionate influence on those they lead, by virtue of their position and power. Whatever they're feeling reverberates through the workplaces they oversee. After any conversation you're in, take a moment to ask yourself whether the person you were talking to walked away feeling better or worse than when the conversation began. Either way, how did you contribute?

Compulsions are not choices, and they rarely lead to a positive outcome. Too little encouragement, love, and protection—on the job or off—leaves us feeling unsafe, insecure, fearful, and unprepared to function effectively. Paradoxically two behaviors are common among leaders and managers when their own basic emotional needs haven't been satisfied in nourishing, enduring ways. The first is insistently calling attention to their own value; often through the arbitrary exercise of power. The second common deficit-driven behavior among leaders and managers is disparaging others to bolster themselves. Whether inflated self-regard is a thin cover for inadequacy or an inflated and unwarranted confidence, it's at least as dysfunctional as insecurity. Excessive self-importance, self-absorption, high need for admiration, and sensitivity to criticism—common traits of the grandiose—all undermine our capacity to learn, grow and take responsibility for our shortcomings and missteps.

The leader who is secure in his own value is free to invest energy in empowering others. Numerous studies have demonstrated that focusing on a positive outcome rather than avoiding a negative one typically leads to greater persistence, more flexibility in finding ways to reach a goal, increased creativity in solving problems, greater internal motivation, more satisfaction and better results. The limitation of the victim role is that it undermines our power to influence our circumstances. "Healthy self-esteem," writes Terrence Real, is the capacity to cherish oneself in the face of one's own imperfections. A leader's job is to mobilize, focus, inspire, and regularly renew the energy of those they lead.

In its 2007 study of 90,000 employees in eighteen countries, Towers Perrin found that the single highest driver of engagement was whether or not senior management was perceived to be sincerely interested in employees' wellbeing. Leaders and organizations must also intentionally spend time encouraging, recognizing, appreciating, rewarding, and celebrating people's accomplishments. How people feel might be the most important thing for personal and team success. Because gestures of appreciation are so rare in most organizations, a little goes a long way. It's about telling the truth, even when it's hard. That's how you build a culture of trust. It's incredibly liberating when people can feel safe saying the truth, no matter what it is.

Is there any doubt that our attention is under siege? More than two billion e-mails are sent every day. There were an estimated 75 million bloggers in 2009, and some 50 million Web sites. More than 500,000 new books are published each year, along with some 400,000 scholarly journals and 18,000 magazines. In 2005, when Google decided to stop updating the number of Web pages it regularly searches, the number had reached 8,168,684,336.

The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi named this kind of absorbed focus "flow" and defined it simply as the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. The ability to control our attention, he argues, is fundamental to optimal performance and also to the highest levels of satisfaction. Rather than setting and sticking to an agenda of our own, we cede our attention to the most urgent request or demand of the moment. To be busy and to be connected is to feel alive. But the consequence is we're over stimulated, over-wound and unfulfilled."

Multitasking sends an unmistakable message: "You're not worth 100 percent of my attention. David Meyer, widely viewed as the leading researcher in the field and the head of the Brain, Cognition, and Action Laboratory at the University of Michigan, is convinced that we won't ever find any advantages. "Training can help overcome some of the inefficiencies by giving you more optimal strategies for multitasking," he says. "Except in rare circumstances, you can train until you're blue in the face and you'd never be as good as if you just focused on one thing at a time. Period. That's the bottom line."

The ultimate consequence of juggling many tasks is not superficiality but rather overload. At nearly every organization in which we've worked, the work culture is characterized by the ADHD symptoms above, in large part because a short attention span and fractured focus are now so widely accepted as the norm.

We've failed to recognize that attention is a capacity that must be both intentionally trained and regularly renewed. At least a third of all workers say they check their e-mail constantly throughout the day. Early attentional control turns out to be at the heart of later success and satisfaction. If you want those in your charge to be effective at delaying gratification and focusing their attention effectively, it goes a long way to make them feel cared for and secure. It can also help to specifically teach attentional skills, which are rarely an explicit part of any school curriculum, much less of the learning agenda in organizations. Obvious as that may seem, the act of prioritizing—focusing on what's likely to add the greatest value over the longest term—doesn't come to us naturally. It requires both awareness and intentionality.

At a practical level, it means setting aside regular time to reflect on and define priorities, rather than simply plunging into the next task that comes into your mind or reacting to the next request that flashes up on your computer screen.

The capacity to stay fully present—to do one thing at a time—is a challenge contemplative traditions have been grappling with for thousands of years. Control your attention, and you control your life. I truly believe that. In the race to do more, bigger, faster, what gets sacrificed are boundaries, stopping points, and finish lines. It's essential for organizations to adopt countervailing policies and practices that encourage more absorbed focus.

We've worked with a number of companies to institute an organizational ritual banning e-mailing altogether during meetings. It's difficult to convince most leaders that meaningful change is possible only if they're willing to give their people the time to reflect on, discuss, and metabolize new ideas and to experiment with new practices.

People can systematically improve their skills, but only through deliberate practice: focused repetition at regular intervals over extended periods, accompanied by regular feedback. Coaching, for example, can be effective in organizations for the same reason it is in sports. It supports people's learning, holds them accountable to their commitments, and provides them with specific, ongoing feedback in the areas in which they're trying to improve.

The real measure of people's effectiveness in an organization ought to be based on the value they create, not the number of hours they work. Most leaders and managers we work with set clear expectations about the hours they expect their employees to work. Very few organizations take responsibility for defining in clear and specific terms what success looks like for any given job outside sales. Creating clear goals and deliverables is what makes it possible to truly hold people accountable. If your manager knows what you're doing all the time, you're not doing your job and neither is he. The employer's job is to create very clear goals and expectations for what needs to get done on a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly basis.

The simplest definition of a Results Only Work Environment is that each person is free to do whatever they want, whenever they want, as long as the work gets done. Everything else—when they come in, how much time they spend in their cube, how long their lunch lasts—is no longer the employer's concern. The point here is to always redirect focus back to the work. Perhaps no factor influences productivity more directly than people's capacity for absorbed attention. In a world rife with potential distractions, it's in the self-interest of organizations and their leaders to help their people stay focused on the priorities that have the potential to create the greatest value.

In one recent study of leaders, those with the highest opinions of themselves turned out to be the least receptive to criticism or negative feedback. As the character Princeton sums it up in the musical Avenue Q: "Purpose. It's that little flame that lights a fire under your ass. Purpose. It keeps you going strong like a car with a full tank of gas." We're trained through our education to accumulate knowledge, build skills, and seek a career. We're rarely taught how, practically and intentionally, to develop a sense of purpose.

Find work you love. It is hard to be happy if you spend more than half your waking hours doing something you don't. If you don't truly love what you do, simply being good at it will never be deeply energizing or satisfying. When we focus too narrowly on our short-term satisfaction, we're contributing to our long-term demise. The best evidence of an organization's values and mission is the behavior of its leaders. The most universally despised of all qualities among leaders is egocentricity—selfishness and self-absorption. People are more inspired by a compelling purpose, the research shows, than by a leader's personal charisma. "Transformational leadership" is a term coined by the historian James MacGregor Burns in 1970 to describe great political leaders. The core principle is value-driven attentiveness to the needs of followers: supporting, coaching and mentoring them; celebrating their contributions; pushing them to take risks, learn, and grow; and inspiring in them a strong sense of purpose around meaningful goals.

An organization truly is a living organism—a human community that can realize its highest potential only when each individual is fully valued and feels fully vested in a shared purpose. The way we're working isn't working, in our own lives or for organizations. The relentless urgency that characterizes most corporate cultures undermines thoughtful deliberation, creativity, engagement, and sustainable high performance. Organizations must create policies, practices, and services that support and encourage people to eat right, work out regularly, renew intermittently, and get enough sleep. We think of leaders as "chief energy officers." The core challenge for leaders is to recruit, mobilize, inspire, focus, and regularly refuel the energy of those they lead. The leader who is secure in his own values is freed to invest energy in empowering others and ultimately in fueling the organization's broader success.

The best leaders strike a balance between challenging their people to exceed themselves and regularly recognizing and rewarding their accomplishments. The most effective leaders are those who regularly recognize and show appreciation for the real accomplishments of their people. There is an inverse relationship between the increasing volume of information available to us and our ability to prioritize and make sense of it. We've lost control of our attention. We perform best when we're most singularly focused on a given task. Prioritization is critical in the face of urgent demands. Two kinds of distraction fracture our attention.

One is external—what's going on around us. The other is internal—the endless chatter of our own minds. We must learn to address both. Whenever possible, we ought to put our attention in the service of what's most important. At a practical level, this requires that we set aside regular time to reflect on and define our priorities and focus on the most challenging ones, preferably at the start of our days when our energy is typically highest.

Focus improves only when it becomes an explicit organizational priority. That requires creating policies and practices that support employees in focusing on one thing at a time. Most people focus better when they're given more freedom to choose where and when they do their work and are held accountable only for the value they deliver.

Transactional leaders focus narrowly on the “what”—how to get things done. Transformational and servant leaders are more focused on the purpose of their actions and on meeting the needs of their employees. The most admired and effective leaders are those with the most inspiring vision and the greatest humility about themselves.