



## TIME, GRAVITY AND TREADMILLS – OR HOW ORGANISATIONS SQUANDER TIME

Compared to our parents, and certainly compared to our grandparents, we live in a cash-rich and time-poor age. Yet many of us still insist on running our lives as if money is the scarce resource. In this leadership conversation I will explore some of the more insidious ways people and organisations have dreamt up to waste time and how the gravity of our 'urgent' operational activity has trapped most of us on a treadmill that is hard to escape from.

***'Time wastes our bodies and our wits, but we waste time so we are quits' Anon.***



We all share a feature in common with the most successful person on the planet: we each have 24 hours in every day and 7 days in every week. Sadly, there will come a day when this is not true, but until

that day we really cannot use 'not enough time' as an excuse for our inaction. When you hear yourself producing the excuse 'sorry, I haven't had the time', what you are really saying is that you found other things to be more important and urgent, so you did them instead. If we get into the habit of actually admitting this, we would perhaps stop and reflect; are we squandering our time on operational trivia, are we using our time wisely or do we have to learn the art of saying 'No' more gracefully and productively?

### ***The gravity of operational work***

In those rare moments when we are in reflective mode most of us will admit to being trapped by apparently urgent and important tasks. Without a higher purpose and clear plan of what we are trying to achieve with our time on this planet, it is all too easy to be grabbed by the gravity of day to day tasks, leaving no time to think beyond our seemingly relentless and never ending 'to-do' list.

When coaching leaders and senior executives it surprises me how many have no clear picture of what they are trying to do with their lives. They usually have some sense of their career progression but their focus is nearly always on the short and near term. Their tendency is to try to solve the problems they face now, or at best try to realise opportunities that appear on the near horizon. A very wise boss once told me, thankfully very early in my career, that the door marked 'Opportunity' also had the word 'Push' next to the handle. To steer a course that leads to success, we have to find ways to craft a higher purpose and then ruthlessly grab control of our precious time and use it wisely to filter out activities that do not contribute. To do this well, we each need a clear sense of purpose and some plan that extends beyond the end of the week! This is the starting point of good time management.

There are many excellent authors and trainers in the time management space and it is not my intent to begin to compete with their undoubted wisdom.

## **Email chatter - the search for meaning**

The internet and email are revolutionary, clearly life changing phenomena that are slowly infiltrating more and more aspects of our daily lives. If you are in your twenties or early thirties it is probably impossible for you to really imagine how business ran without it. It is, however, responsible for one of today's more worrying addictions. The distraction of leaders pecking away at their internet enabled mobiles as if the secrets of the universe are about to be revealed, and if they are off line for more than a few minutes they will miss the announcement!



To bring this issue into a more general time wasting context, I often ask groups to tell me how many emails arrive in their inbox that they find really useful, tailored for their attention and clearly communicating something of real value. The answer is usually somewhere between 15% and 30%. I then ask them how many of the emails in their outbox are carefully designed for the recipient and, once opened and read, they will find really valuable. The answer is always higher, but interestingly rarely more than 60%.

## **Meetings - habitual behaviours and courage**

It fascinates me how almost everyone I meet has the capacity to moan about some of the meetings they attend, yet they seem to lack the capacity or courage to do anything about them. It's as if the habits and rituals found in most meetings are



sacrosanct and owing to some unwritten law they cannot be challenged or changed. In my experience meeting rituals are indeed part

of the fabric and closely linked to the prevailing paradigm, DNA and Dominant Logic of the organisation. On the face of it, changing these habits and rituals seems pretty straightforward, as everyone knows how to run a good meeting. However, in reality they are linked to a more complex web of habitual behaviours, ingrained

relationships and leadership styles that, like all habits, take time and persistence to change. The most common behaviour I have found is collective denial that any real problem actually exists! Sure our meetings could be better, but they are not that bad and are all of course really necessary... so the moaning continues...

## **Tools and techniques – help is available**

When we are asked to support leadership teams we often import what we consider to be pretty straightforward tools and techniques to improve the quality of the conversations, levels of engagement and therefore the productivity of the team. The participants often find these simple tools quite revolutionary. We find that if you help people to do something in a way that they find easier, quicker and more productive, they usually jump at the chance to adopt a new way of working.

For example, I was working with a leadership team recently and at the end of long and pretty intense day we had to discuss the problem of lack of space in the facility: a potentially tricky problem as everyone had their own view of who had too much space already and they knew it was not them! I deployed 'Silent Brainstorming' as the tool of choice. For the first 10 minutes we worked in open session with the question '*Space, the final frontier – what is the real problem we are trying to solve here?*' writ large on the flipchart. In the resulting 10 minute discussion we began to flesh out the problem using a simple mind-map diagram capturing the key headlines. This showed everyone that this was a broader problem than any one person first thought.

We then each got a sheet of A4 paper, wrote the headline – 'Suggestions to solve the Space problem' at the top and then spent 1 minute in silence listing our ideas. We then passed our sheet to the person on our right, read their ideas and then added further ideas to the sheet, being careful not to repeat any idea we had already written down. We repeated this process for 12 minutes, passing the sheet around after each minute, all done in total silence. We then numbered the ideas on the sheet in front of us (we had generated over 120 ideas in the room which, even allowing for c50% duplication, was still an impressive effort in 12 minutes). We

then quickly discussed some criteria for selecting the best ideas and landed on 'Speed of Implementation' with quick being the best; and 'Cost of Implementation' with cheaper being the best. Then each individual filtered the ideas on the sheet they happened to have in front of them. This process identified c25 ideas that were both quick and relatively cheap to implement. Finally, I gathered the sheets in, asked for a volunteer to lead the implementation work and in 30 minutes we had a way forward. One of the participants afterwards confided in me that in normal circumstances that topic could have easily consumed the whole afternoon and produced very few ideas!

I share this idea generation tool as an example not to expound the virtues of this particular tool, but to show how easy it is to dramatically improve productivity in meetings. The only thing that stops us is the fear of tackling prevailing behaviours, including our own. The tactics and tools are tried, tested and relatively straightforward. Being able to

implement them, and having the courage to try, now that is where the real skill lies!

The treadmill of day to day activity will encourage us to keep on running unless we do something about it. In Sensei we help leaders tackle this pervasive problem: we help them to get some time to think as well as to do and to import time-saving, productivity-enhancing tools and techniques that begin to release the grip of the gravity of day to day activity.

### ***But beware - act now, as 'Tempus Fugit'!***



*'The Future is something which everyone reaches at the rate of sixty minutes an hour, whatever he does, whoever he is'. C.S. Lewis*

**Malcolm Follos, September 2010**



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We focus on areas where companies can raise the bar on performance, productivity and profit. We ensure that any work we do has clear line of sight to specific business outcomes of value to the organisation, so that a solid return on time, energy and investment is realised.

We are experts in the process of unlocking potential and focusing this in the right ways on the right aims; and we excel at emotionally engaging leaders and teams to own the change, take accountability for it and deliver it. In short ...  
**'We do the really hard part of the soft stuff.'**