



TEMPUS FUGIT – Time to stop doing ‘good’ work



As summer is upon us and our thoughts turn to taking a well earned break, this leadership conversation looks at how leaders need to stop doing ‘good work’ and create the space and

time to do ‘great work’.

“I want to go ahead of Father Time with a scythe of my own.” H. G. Wells

Have you noticed how time flies when we are doing something we really enjoy? Work in which we are really engaged and from which we derive real joy is precious work indeed. When you experience this feeling, the chances are that you are doing ‘great’ work. This is work that you are uniquely (or at least exceptionally) good at doing.

There are 3 types of work that, as leaders, we can be engaged in:

- **Bad Work** – we all have to do some of this, but you know this type of work is not really for you: it saps your energy, does not play to your strengths and kills any passion you have. A lot of business administration work falls into this category, as do key activities for which we simply have no talent or desire.
- **Good Work** – we have the skills and capabilities to do this work well, but it is not future enhancing. Sure, it will keep the wheels of the organisation turning, and some of this is clearly necessary, but this work has the capacity to

trap us like hamsters on the operational treadmill.

- **Great Work** – This type of work plays to our unique strengths and talents and is future enhancing. It stretches, challenges and takes us and our organisations towards our long term goals.

In order to do more ‘great’ work we have to stop doing so much ‘good’ work.

For many leaders, letting go of ‘good’ work is a really tough challenge. We all know the urgency and the apparent importance of ‘good’ work. It is magnetic in its ability to cling to most leaders. Also, doing ‘good’ work is a well embedded habit in most organisations. Recognised and rewarded, it is built into the fabric of the organisation and appears in the day-to-day rituals and routines that fill most leaders’ schedules.

I notice this reality most when we try to find time to bring leaders together to discuss the future of the organisation, or to build the strength of the relationships in the top team. Try to get your senior leaders together for a one-off unscheduled meeting to talk about some future enhancing topic, and you will quickly expose the amount of ‘good’ work going on in your organisation, as the next available date retreats into the future.

*“Space and time are not conditions in which we live; they are simply modes in which we think.”
Albert Einstein*



There has been a lot of research that demonstrates a direct link between the feeling of time passing, our

enjoyment and the degree of engagement we have in the task we are doing. I was fascinated to read that, when Google placed the 'Google Doodle' guitar on their home page to mark the birthday of Les Paul on 9th & 10th June this year, visitors spent an average of 26 seconds more on the home page than normal, strumming away with their mouse or keyboard. This was estimated to have cost the world £166m in lost productivity!

What tasks were being done that enabled such an easy distraction to have such an effect, I wondered? Just think how many such distractions in a typical working day never get noticed, measured or sized. I am willing to guess that this is a large number on most days. We are easily distracted when we are engaged in 'Bad' or even 'Good' work, but never when we are doing 'Great' work.

We really do have to stop doing 'Good' work; after all, it is not that productive.

Don't just do something; stand there!

Like millions of readers of the Saturday Times, I am an avid follower of Melanie Reid's column in the Saturday magazine. Melanie is an inspiration to us all. She broke her neck and back after falling from her horse last year. Now at home after 12 months rehab, she has continued throughout to write her weekly column – clearly for her a piece of 'Great' work. This week she wrote about how the dramatic change in the pace of her life has reopened her eyes to the natural world.



She wrote: *"In the stillness you find a whole new world of colour and shape, of nuance and detail and meaning. You start to notice the quiet people where before you heard only the noisy ones."*

As I read her article I noted many parallels to the challenges faced by leaders in today's fast paced, action orientated, results driven organisations. We do need to slow down and notice the things that are around us, otherwise we are all in real danger of becoming worn out!

As the summer break looms large on the horizon, let's see if we can break free from the gravity of 'Good' work and set aside our 'Blackberries' and smart phones long enough to actually reconnect with what is important in life.

I recall lying on a sun lounger early one bright Monday morning a few summers ago, reading my holiday book in the grounds of a nice hotel in Portugal. Beside me was a 50 something year old man kicking a ball around with his young son. The problem was that he was on the phone at the same time. He was loudly telling his PA that he was having a great time and was playing football with his son. He wasn't. He was on the phone 'checking in' to see if there were any messages since he left the office on Friday!

The child kicked the ball, trying to get his attention, and was waved away to play...

Consider this – the day you die you will have e-mails in your inbox...

Don't be like this guy. Take a real break this summer. You need the time to rejuvenate, to consider what 'great' work you intend doing in the remainder of this year and what 'good' work and 'bad' work you need to stop doing to allow this to happen.

Have a great summer break 😊

Malcolm Follos, July 2011