



We have the best of intentions, wanting our teams to be engaged and motivated to do their best at work, yet we may in fact be sabotaging their success. Here are three mindsets which are likely draining energy and output, and actions you can take right now to turn that around.

## 1. Allow Time to Thoughtfully Respond to a Request

When you ask team members to take on a new task, do they immediately say “yes” ... only to later miss the mark? Perhaps they are pleasers, in the habit of agreeing. Perhaps they really believe they can get it done. Or, could it be that they are afraid to voice any concerns about being able to accomplish the task, for fear of displeasing leadership.

As a leader, it is worthwhile to cultivate a culture of respect for people’s time and energy. To be thoughtful in this means you will encourage the employee to take time to consider and understand the new request and determine how it fits in with their current load. It takes time to reflect and in our hustle culture, this can often feel like someone is deliberately slowing things down. And they may well be, but isn’t it better to consider existing commitments and priorities carefully before rushing to the next new thing?

In Daniel Pink’s book, *When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing*<sup>1</sup>, he tells the story of a hospital that has invoked a special procedure when starting surgeries to go over key information and make sure the team is aligned. This commitment of slowing down to give

focused attention at the start of a task dramatically reduced human errors. This kind of presence is good practice for any activity.

My daughter, 15, recently finished a summer school course, and more than once during the program lamented that she had done *more* work than prescribed. She had failed to make sure she fully understood each “ask”. I think shyness to discuss her questions with the teacher may have been at play. It cost her time and energy which she needed to devote to other deliverables. She would have benefitted from a pause button.



### Insights

When faced with a new task, it's critical to

- take time to assess what's required
- make sure the request is fully understood
- review one's priorities, commitments and calendar to be sure the new task can be accommodated
- raise concerns early if there is an issue so that decisions can be made to make sure the right things get done and stress is minimized.

### Self-Reflection Questions

1. How do you react to a new task request?

2. How will you encourage employees to reflect?

### Tools

A useful tool is a simple reminder to pause. I made the “pause button” above for my office bulletin board to remind me to take time to carefully consider my responses. This is never more important than when you have an emotional gut reaction to something. The pause permits time for the amygdala to calm down and let the pre-frontal cortex and its reasoned decision making get back in the game. The pause button has been a game changer for some clients.

Allow employees, colleagues and service providers time to consider their current commitments and priorities before affirming their response to your request.

In fact, show them respect for their time by asking if this is a task they can fit in, or if they must reprioritize to be able to get it done. Watch for signs of stress or overwhelm. Great leaders will provide assistance in reprioritizing deliverables if there are too many plates spinning and objectives need clarification. Help your team members stay in control of their workload and keep excessive pressure at bay.

Your sensitivity will not only make them feel valued, it will be role modeling positive time management techniques and the respect you will want to encourage them to give to others.

## 2. Remember that human beings are animals

As animals, humans must have basic needs met to keep performing physically and cognitively well. Rest, hydration, fuel, movement, social interaction, light, physical comfort (including temperature and humidity, as well as ergonomics) are some of the critical ingredients I refer to as Productivity Table Stakes™. You need these to show up and play your best hand.

Put someone under pressure by not allowing for the above, and they will find it more difficult to make decisions, have greater challenges managing relationships, and suffer cognitive distraction. Ultimately these stresses diminish performance.



### Insights

Treating yourself and your team with compassion is the key to driving engagement, commitment and performance. With commutes for many increasing in duration, the work day can be extremely tiring. As well, we are all starting the day with a different level of energy based on our home lives.

One trick to foster compassion for yourself is to think of yourself at three or four years of age. How would you treat yourself as a child? You would take care to make sure you had what you needed and you would likely assume you were doing your best. Once you can be

compassionate to yourself, there is a greater chance you can be more compassionate to those around you.

Here are some suggestions to help empower personal productivity:

- Promote real lunch breaks, including time to socialize.
- Encourage physical breaks during the day for movement and exposure to nature.
- Promote taking rest. A 15 to 20-minute power nap can be redefined as a “brain reboot”. Role model taking rest when you need it. This will encourage others to do the same. There is no point in having a wellness room if people are afraid to use it.
- Consider the demands made on employees who travel or work over time zones. If you’re going to ask an employee to take a call at 5 a.m., or manage a red eye flight, allow them time to recover as well.
- Allow employees to sculpt the day around their personal rhythms. People are pretty evenly split 25% as either morning people (larks) or night owls. The other 50% lie somewhere in the middle. If you can support autonomy in when work is attended to, your workers will accomplish more.
- Some employees prefer to work in dark environments, while others prefer bright, natural light. Be curious to understand which environments work for your team. You might find you can keep everyone happy.
- Provide filtered water and healthy food options.
- Allow for blinds to control heat from the sun, the use of fans and blankets to help employees manage their comfort. When I worked in Japan, it was very common for office workers to have blankets on their laps in the winter.
- Pay attention to the quality of light provided. Fluorescent lights, though inexpensive, can be fatiguing to contributors. Encourage the addition of task lighting. Watch for poor lighting. I just saw an office which has ceiling fans positioned in between the fluorescent lights and one worker’s desk. The constant flicker will be an unexpected source of fatigue for her, and those visiting her desk.

Self-reflection

1. Do you know what makes you thrive at work?

2. What will you do to foster the comfort and performance of your group?

### 3. Allow your team time to rest and recharge

Being “always on” and very responsive may look like loyalty and dedication, but it comes at a cost. To be sustainably productive not only do our brains need time off, we can actually be more creative if we broaden our experiences, allow for a variety of stimulation, a healthy dose of mind wandering and some deliberate single point of focus time to calm the mind. It’s not just vacation time I’m referring to, it’s about taking regular breaks from being responsive and cognitively absorbed in work.

To use a familiar analogy, let’s call this putting yourself into “airplane mode”.



With technology being absolutely pervasive, it is increasingly rare to find an employee who is not within arms' reach of their phone. Well, it's closer than arms' reach these days as more and more people are wearing a connected watch. Whether it's a ding or a vibration, we need to have time off from the cortisol provocation of continual notifications. Some of my clients claimed to be distracted by just the thought of the red flashing light on their Blackberry devices (this has been going on for some time!). We have become addicted to checking our incoming streams in search of the next dopamine hit. Improving productivity isn't rocket science, but it sure is neuroscience. We need to better understand and manage our neurotransmitters.

In an article in *Men's Health*<sup>3</sup> magazine, David Greenfield, Ph.D., and founder of the Center for Internet and Technology Addiction suggests that our smartphone use puts us into a state of "hyper-vigilance", which in turns taxes our bodies.

Couple this with almost any experience on the internet (with increasing flashing videos, pop-ups and other intrusions), watching the news (with busy backgrounds, moving cameras and mobile hosts) or even retail environments such as a technology store I visited for some assistance. It was a cacophony of students gaming, a man testing out a sound bar, piped in music and massive video screens. All this while the service agent and I were trying to dig deep into an anxiety inducing tech problems. We practically had to shout at each other. The level of stimulation out there is at an all-time high... leading us to believe more is better, and that we can't be satisfied with slowing down and concentrating on one thing.

The challenge is two-fold.

- First, we need to minimize external demands.
- Second, we need to interrupt our own patterns to check for new incoming messages.

We need to reclaim our minds and the ability to think straight.

## Insights

So, what can you and your team do?

- Create a pattern in the day for focused, uninterrupted, notifications-off work and engaged work for responses incoming requests. As Cal Newport states in his book *Deep Work*<sup>2</sup>, the ability to focus without distraction on a cognitively demanding task is like a superpower in our increasingly competitive economy.
- Practice the ability to focus. Get conscious about how much time can spent attending to a specific task without feeling distracted. Build up this skill by practicing.
- Think of meditation as exercise for the mind.
- Put phones out of sight.
- Turn off notifications on the computer.
- Put a sign on the door or desk letting people know as the cartoon strip Peanuts' Lucy did, when she proclaimed the "psychiatrist is in".
- Communicate your availability to your colleagues and clients in advance. Let them know when they can reach you.

## Self-reflection

1. What helps you thrive at work?

2. What will you do to foster the comfort and performance of your group?

## Resources

1. Pink, Daniel. *When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing*. Riverhead Books, 2018.
2. Fowler, Paige. "New Study Reveals Even More Ways Your Smartphone Is Stressing You Out." *Men's Health*, Men's Health, 25 May 2018, [www.menshealth.com/health/a19530834/how-smartphones-stress-you-out/](http://www.menshealth.com/health/a19530834/how-smartphones-stress-you-out/).
3. Newport, Cal. *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*. Grand Central Publishing, 2016.



# pause

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KUMAR