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Productivity Is About Your Systems, Not Your People

Personal Productivity | by Daniel Markovitz

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Summary *The pursuit of individual productivity is healthy and worthwhile. However, unless you work independently outside of an organization, the benefits of most “tricks” will be limited. To make a real impact on performance, you have to work at the system level. The author recommends four ways to improve productivity and efficiency by making changes at the organizational level. Create a system of tiered huddles that allow issues to be escalated to the next level of responsibility in a timely manner. Use systems that visually represent where work is so that collaborators have visibility into where a project stands. Make it clear how people should communicate depending on the complexity and urgency of the issue. And, make sure that people responsible for getting tasks done also have the authority to make necessary decisions.*

Leaders are always seeking to improve employee productivity (including their own). All too often, that quest goes no further than time management training provided by the HR department. Those classes cover the pros and cons of Inbox Zero, the Pomodoro technique, the Eisenhower matrix, Getting Things Done, and countless other approaches that tantalize us with promises of peak productivity. Given that people are still overwhelmed by work, buried in email, and unable to focus on critical priorities, it's safe to say that these productivity hacks just don't hack it.

The problem isn't with the intrinsic logic of any of these approaches. It's that they fail to account for the simple fact that most people don't work in isolation. They work in complex organizations defined by interdependencies among people — and it's often these interdependencies that have the greatest effect on personal productivity. You can be an email ninja, but with the explosion of email (not to mention instant messages, Twitter, LinkedIn, Slack, and countless other communication tools), you'll never be fast enough to deal with all the incoming communication. Similarly, your personal urgent/important Eisenhower categories fall apart when the CEO asks you to do stop what you're doing and handle something right away.

Source: <https://hbr.org/2021/01/productivity-is-about-your-systems-not-your-people>

As legendary statistician and management consultant W. Edwards Deming argued in his book *Out of the Crisis*, 94% of most problems and possibilities for improvement belong to the system, not the individual. I would argue that most productivity improvements belong there as well. Personal solutions can be useful, but the most effective antidote to low productivity and inefficiency must be implemented at the system level, not the individual level.

Here are four countermeasures that will help:

Tier your huddles.

Many highly productive organizations have instituted a system of tiered daily huddles, with a clear escalation sequence for all problems. The first huddle, consisting of front-line workers, begins at the start of the workday. The next huddle, consisting of supervisors, follows 30 minutes later. Managers meet 30 minutes after that, followed by directors, VPs, and finally the executive team. Problems are addressed at the lowest possible level. If a decision can't be reached, the issue is escalated to the next level. This system improves the linkage between the C-suite and the front lines; it accelerates decision making; and perhaps most importantly, it improves productivity by reducing the number of scattershot emails about a variety of problems.

Make work visible.

Most of the work in an office environment is invisible — it's buried in people's computers or their heads. As a result, it's difficult to know what people are working on or whether they're overloaded and unable to take on more tasks. Physical or virtual task boards (such as Trello, Asana, Airtable, Zenkit, etc.), where every task is represented by a card specifying who is handling it (and its status) enables a more equitable distribution of work. It also eliminates both countless status check emails and the need to cover that topic in meetings. The principle investigator of a medical research lab I worked with instituted just such a system, and found that work got done faster and with dramatically less effort.

Similarly, making *downtime* visible is equally helpful. In working with the Boston Consulting Group, Harvard Business School professor Leslie Perlow found that implementing “predictable time off” (i.e., afternoons or evenings totally disconnected from work and wireless devices, agreed-upon email blackout times, or uninterrupted work blocks) led to greater job satisfaction and better work-life balance without compromising client service. In this case, “predictability” serves the same purpose as “visibility” — it allows workers to see what colleagues are doing, and to react accordingly.

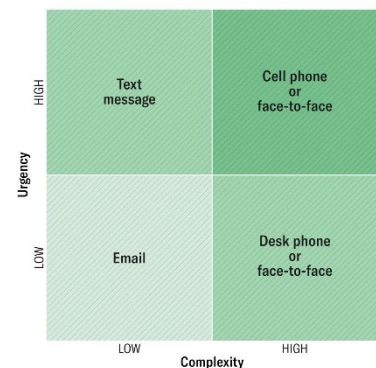
Define the “bat signal.”

Batman fans will remember that the police summoned Batman with the image of a bat projected in the night sky. The bat signal was reserved for times of crisis, like when the Joker was on the loose, not when a scofflaw failed to pay a parking ticket. As Marshall McLuhan argued, the medium was the message. Unfortunately, most organizations don't have a similar way of indicating an issue is a true emergency. With no agreement on what communication channel to use, workers are forced to check all digital messaging platforms to ensure that nothing slips through the cracks. That's toxic to productivity. Companies can make work easier for people if they specified channels for urgent and non-urgent issues.

A medical device manufacturer I worked with set up the following communication protocol to clarify what tool to use in each situation. The benefit was dramatic, as they were liberated from the need to check all incoming emails for urgent issues. They could focus on work requiring deep, uninterrupted thought, secure in the knowledge that they only needed to pay attention to text messages or phone calls. Note that it's not important what communication protocol they chose; it's simply important that they had a system.

What's the Best Medium for Your Message?

Clarify which channel to use depending on the urgency and complexity of the issue.



Source: Markovitz Consulting

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Align responsibility with authority.

Too often workers are made responsible for tasks but aren't given the authority to deliver results. This misalignment leads to frustration, stress, and overburden. For example, at a \$500M footwear company I worked with, the founder and CEO — long removed from his role in product development — decided that he didn't like a particular shoe style his product team had designed. He diverted a container that was en route to the U.S. with \$400,000 worth of shoes to Africa, where he had everything unloaded at a financial loss. The VP of product development was not only demoralized, he had to scramble at the last minute to adjust for the CEO's decision. The rule is simple: if an employee is responsible for an outcome, they should have the authority to make the necessary decisions, without being forced into an endless string of emails, meetings, or presentations.

The manufacturing company W.L. Gore & Associates' "lattice" structure of management is an excellent example of an organization that has implemented this idea. The \$3 billion company broadly distributes leadership responsibility throughout the organization, allowing employees to make "above the waterline" (i.e., low-risk) decisions on their own, and only requiring approvals for "below the waterline" (high-risk) decisions. Gore has spent decades developing and refining the culture, systems, and processes to support their unique organizational structure, so it might be difficult for another company to copy their model. Nevertheless, it's an example of the kind of thinking that can improve individual — and organizational — productivity.

The pursuit of individual productivity is healthy and worthwhile. However, unless you work independently outside of an organization, the benefits of most "tricks" will be limited. To make a real impact on performance, you have to work at the system level.

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