

CHANGING OUR RELATION TO TIME



Rigorous re-patterning can stop the energy drain caused by concern about time.

Betsy saw a whale on her way to work one day. Living north of the Golden Gate Bridge, about 15 miles from San Francisco's Financial District, she has the option of commuting via a ferry that crosses San Francisco Bay. On a late spring morning, about halfway across, she heard a boatman cry out, "Look there's a whale!" Sure enough, off the starboard side, Betsy spied the tell-tale spout, once, then twice. It turns out that whales venture fairly often into San Francisco Bay; but for Betsy and her fellow commuters, this was an extraordinary experience.

As work responsibilities increased the pressure on her schedule, Betsy gave up the ferry. The ride across was 50 minutes; with an added 15 minutes to drive to the embarkation terminal and another 20 to walk to the office after landing at San Francisco, she felt it just ate up too much time.

A lot of other commuters felt the same way. The ferry boats had to move at slow speed because if they speeded up, their wake damaged the shoreline. The transit system began to buy new boats that could go faster without churn, cutting the time of the trip by 40%. Over a handful of years, they replaced all the old boats with the faster models. And then something interesting happened: riders complained. There was something special about the slow boat to San Francisco. The length of time and the steady engines had a soporific effect. The ferry was conducive to reading, to reflecting on work documents or decisions, to staring out the window, even to sleeping. It was a place out of the routine, almost out of time; when the ferry reached its destination, riders felt...different.

And so, responding to popular demand, the transit system returned one lumbering old boat to its schedule: a 5:40 special for folks who want to de-compress on their way home.

Which would you choose: fast or slow? Before you answer, let's look at some related facts.

About 15 years ago, when the Japanese economy was at full boil, young Japanese workers were asked what they wished for. The #1 thing on their list: more sleep. And #2 was: 'not to have bad dreams.'

Now that sense of regret is much closer to home, as shown by Newsweek's devoting the cover of its August 9 issue to "The Mystery of Dreams." A sidebar noted that nearly 40% of Americans now sleep fewer than seven hours on weeknights; nearly 60% experience some kind of insomnia at least several nights a week.

The National Sleep Foundation, source of the data that appeared in Newsweek, links Americans' sleep patterns with their behavior, mood, and performance. The NSF's 2002 "Sleep in America" poll provided the first "direct correlation between more sleep and heightened daytime alertness with positive feelings that include a sense of peace, satisfaction with life, and being full of energy. Shorter sleep periods and greater indications of daytime sleepiness were related to negative moods such as anger, stress, pessimism, and fatigue."

Regular readers of this column know that productivity is harmed by negative moods, and that we can become more productive as we learn to de-fuse such moods by choosing which thoughts we dwell on. But now that we see scientific evidence of the importance of sleep in our mood equation, what can we do? The answer lies in a new "theory of relativity" changing the way we relate to time.

Step one: take off your watch

Bob never fails to get a gasp from a crowd when he tells them how he changed his relationship to time: he stopped wearing a watch. One reason that's not a problem: he can always steal a glance at someone else's. But he's found that his time sense is always close to the mark.

He did get rattled, however, the day that his internal estimate was more than an hour behind the time on an associate's watch. It turned out that this fellow, like so many of us, routinely set his watch ahead. But instead of pushing the hands forward by five or even 10 minutes, his difference was one hour and 25 minutes. He had his reasons: "I tend to run late, usually about 10 minutes. But I actually like to be places about 15 minutes early. And, of course, So, of course, I need to set my watch one hour and 25 minutes fast."

Whew. What a complicated construct, and how much mental room is the subject of time taking!

Where do you stand in relation to time? How tightly wired are you to your watch? And does that point to a concern about time that drains your energy? Do a self-diagnosis simply by taking off your watch for a couple of days, once during the week, once on a weekend. And then notice what feelings and thoughts arise.

How many times do you find yourself looking at your wrist? Is it easier or harder to focus on this moment vs. anticipating something in the future?

Do you feel more/less hurried, or more/less anxious about how much you have to do vs. how much time is left in the day?

When you do get a bead on the time, passing a clock, perhaps, or checking your computer screen or even asking someone else -- what kind of change does that effect in your body or emotions?

Step two: schedule "no" time

When the CEO of a global communications firm hired a consultant to help him be more productive, he was amazed at the first piece of advice. "Schedule 10 minutes a day to do nothing," the consultant said. No appointments; no phone calls; no emails; no checking messages; no reading reports; no sorting the inbox. Just 10 minutes to stare out the window, to sit quietly, even to close your eyes."

Taking the edge off number of hours clocked may actually lead to greater productivity." The irony is that by focusing on time, managers tend to slow things down. The focus on hours worked almost always undermines the productivity of individual contributors," observes Bruce Tulgan, who has made himself an expert on Generation X workers (JustInTime Leadership, HRD Press, 2000). "Managing time instead of performance is the biggest impediment to empowering contributors to achieve results with speed, quality, and innovation."

In addition, some psychologists contend that however our minds engage all day, that's the way they run all night. Have you ever awakened feeling just as tired as when you went to bed, six or seven or even eight hours earlier? That's because your mind kept working with as much effort as it used all day.

So do some rigorous re-patterning. Carve out time, even a few minutes, during the day for your mind to slow down, setting the pattern it can follow as you sleep.

And if you have the chance, find a "slow boat" home.

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