

Protect the “Vital Few”

Whether we are aware of it or not, leaders live in a constant battle between the important and the unimportant or between the immediate, close-at-hand, easily done task and the long-term, strategic effort. Leaders especially need to be mindful of “time eaters,” because of how they drain resources, especially those of your team members.

The challenge lies in how you use your own time and, more importantly, how you help your team members make great choices about how they use their time and effort. The tyranny of the unimportant is a sneaky killer!

Ideas for Action

Try this exercise. Within the context of your organization’s goals, list the top two to four things critical to the success of your organization and your team. Now, study your calendar. How does your use of time match with what is really important? Sit down with your team members, one by one and inquire similarly: How does their time usage map against what’s most important? Your job is to help your team members use their time well.

When he coached the Los Angeles Lakers to four NBA championships, Pat Riley attempted to shield his teams from distractions he called “peripheral opponents”—the media, the hangers-on, and even the team’s front office, at times. Instead, he wanted his players to focus solely on their task-at-hand: Winning NBA championships. What do you need to shield your team members from? What are you doing to help them stay focused?

Make a list of all the peripheral opponents you can think of and ask your team to do the same. Figure out how you can collaboratively counter these.

Two years ago, one of our clients—a relatively young manufacturer of medical products—was just beginning to adopt a number of new processes and systems. There were multiple ideas and projects competing for attention. In fact, there was so much that nothing was really getting done. In response, the company’s senior team began to distinguish between the “vital few” ideas and projects and the “great many.” The company began doggedly and persistently focusing only on the “vital few.” Within a year, the company began to progress, including increased employee satisfaction.

Expanding on this, be clear with your own team about the difference between “vital few” and “over-the-top” effort tasks. When you delegate a new task, encourage your team to ask you where the task fits in your list of priorities and what should go off the list if they take it on. Over-the-top effort tasks are those where you want someone to give 120%. There are other tasks where 80% really is good enough. Let them know the difference.

The ability to discern between what’s really needed and what’s merely nice was what author William Faulkner was getting at when he said, in reference to editing your own writing, that you must be willing to “kill all your darlings.” While I don’t normally use such extreme expressions, I believe you have to be willing to get rid of all your peripheral opponents to protect the vital few.

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