



Stepping Up to Strategic Focus

Article # 3, *Synchronistically Speaking™* series, May 2009

*This article corresponds with Webinar #3 of the Integrated Leader Program ~
"Raising Your Sights: Making a Strategic Impact"*

When was the last time you got a really great idea that ended up turning into something big?

Chances are it wasn't when you were rushing around from one thing to another consumed by adrenaline and an overwhelming urge to get to the bottom of your to do list. And yet many of us find ourselves in this state more often than not. Why is that? I think there are several reasons. In this briefing I'd like to address four of them that I have seen loom large in many of the leaders I've worked with (and that I've personally grappled with as well) along with recommendations for rising above them to be more strategic:

- (1) A need for closure (and a deluded fantasy that someday we might actually get to a point where we can check that last box and collapse for a moment in the ecstasy of finally completing everything).
- (2) Conditioning to respond immediately to emerging challenges and issues, which often supersedes our ability to determine and respond accordingly to the relative level of importance of each thing that demands our attention.
- (3) The comfort of engaging in tasks we are already good at which require little or no brain power and give us the satisfaction of getting things done and doing them well.
- (4) An underlying belief that the busier we are, the more productive and/or important we must be.

Let's start with the first one: A need for closure (and a deluded fantasy that someday we might actually get to a point where we can check that last box and collapse for a moment in the ecstasy of finally completing everything).

I'm really sorry to burst your bubble, but I have to tell you that you will not break free of the delirium that keeps you from truly being effective and strategically focused until you realize that you will NEVER finish all those things on your proverbial "to do" list. But - the good news is that to be a really great leader, you never really should! Admit it - chances are half the things on your to do list are things that were taking up brain space, which you felt you needed to write down somewhere so that you wouldn't lose them. (This is a very good practice, by the way, because it allows you to let go of things that are distracting you and really focus on what you need to do.) My guess is that once you wrote those nagging tasks down, you could relax a little (until you happened to go back to that multi page to do list and experienced a sinking feeling.) That sinking feeling is connected to a belief that you need to get it ALL done. What if you were free of that?

I challenge you to look at your "to do" list with new eyes, and think of it as more of a "not to do" list, or perhaps a "maybe I'll do" list. Ask yourself, what on this list is truly aligned with what is most important right now? You will need to weigh these things against your own personal vision and values as well as the strategic direction of your organization. Then select the areas that will have the greatest impact. I recommend you identify three high payoff activities each day that must be done by the day's end. Filter the remainder of your list by using these three classic questions: (1) What can I delegate? (2) What can I defer? and (3) What can I dump? And schedule blocks of time to do important things that require multiple steps.

Let's move on to the next one: Conditioning to respond immediately to emerging challenges and issues, which often supersedes our ability to determine and respond accordingly to the relative level of importance of each thing that demands our attention.

This is the grown up equivalent of playing whack-a-mole. Remember that old arcade game where you have 120 seconds to bop small rodents with a large hammer as they emerge from their holes? If you don't think this applies to you, think of what happened the last time an email came in and you heard the little melodic alert that has a way of perking up many people's ears the way Pavlov's bell got dogs to salivate. And it doesn't just stop at email. We succumb to this dynamic every time the phone rings. Did you ever stop to ask yourself the question of whether you actually have to answer it? At times you may not have a choice. But often we pick up the phone without thinking, half distracted and potentially annoyed at an interruption that took us from something we were really making headway on. As a result, we risk missing out on the opportunity to truly engage with the person calling, and also lose ground on something that truly merited our attention and focus in that particular moment.

The danger of this conditioned response is that it compels us to engage our time ineffectively. Rather than stopping to identify the level of urgency and importance each task or request has, we unthinkingly whip into action. We may get a lot done, and pat ourselves on the back for being able to handle so many tasks with agility. But it is often at the cost of things that merit our time far more than what we ended up filling it with. As a result, we end up feeling as though we are at the mercy of a frenetic pace that never seems to let up and we don't seem to be able to accomplish anything of any real importance. **You will never be free of this until you realize what you are personally doing to contribute to this state and take action to deliberately and mindfully turn it around.** You can start by paying attention to the way you handle emerging issues and challenges and ask yourself what you could do to be more focused, effective and strategic. Then, shift your patterns by acting on your insights and continuing to observe and make adjustments accordingly. As an example, try setting a certain time (or times) of the day for looking at your email or returning phone calls and see if that boosts your productivity and effectiveness.

The third detractor from strategic focus is probably one of the most compelling and career derailing for leaders: the comfort of engaging in tasks we are already good at which require little or no brain power and give us the satisfaction of getting things done and doing them well.

There is a cyclical pattern that we all engage in every time we learn something new. We start out as beginners – curious, anxious, uncoordinated, and somewhat incompetent. And as we learn, we become a little more confident and surefooted, until finally we can perform skillfully without having to give things all that much thought. And then we get comfortable, until low and behold there is something new to learn that allows us to start the cycle over again. The trouble is that the comfort zone is intoxicatingly alluring. Our egos get a boost every time we do something well that requires minimum effort. We get to feel that rush of accomplishment and often bask in the praise of others. But if you stay there too long, you will be like the frog that relaxes in the warm, bubbly water of the pot it sits in and slowly croaks (sorry, I couldn't resist).

You are a leader. And leaders must adapt to changing environments, both inwardly and outwardly. **Leaders succeed by bringing out the best in others to accomplish something for a greater good, and they must start with themselves. You will not succeed in bringing out the best in others if you insist on doing everything yourself. And you will not bring out the best in yourself if you continue to insist on doing things you are already good at.** You must move out of your comfort zone and be willing to experience the exhilaration and anxiety of not knowing, once again. Many of the tasks leaders are really good at are things they did very well before they became leaders, which they should really be delegating to others. And I'm convinced that the primary reason people don't delegate is not that they don't know how, but rather that they are not willing to - because of this very dynamic.

When you begin to let go of having to do everything that you are good at, you will begin to build the capacity of others who will be instrumental in taking you and your organization to the next level. And you will not be in a space to conceive of that next level until you **free up the time to connect the dots between where you are and where you want to go, where your organization is and where it needs to go, and what you can set into motion to bridge those gaps.**

This brings us directly to the fourth and final challenge I'll address in this briefing: An underlying belief that the busier we are, the more productive and/or important we must be.

This belief is engrained in us from an early age through several different inputs. Many of us are brought up to believe we are lazy if we are not constantly doing something. We look around and see successful people and equate their prestige and power with their achievements and number of engagements. And we equate the rush of accomplishment we feel every time we check off a box on our list with productivity and high performance. We are taught to use every moment of time in the most effective manner and somewhere along the line we associated

productivity with busyness. **But the most effective of leaders are those who not only allow time for reflection and renewal, but actually insist on it.**

This takes us back to the question I began this briefing with: When was the last time you got a really great idea that ended up turning into something big? **Creativity and innovation bubbles up in a mind that is not encumbered with frenetic activity and conditioned responses.** Just as most people have more trouble listening than they do talking, we also seem to be more challenged with receiving inspiration than acting on it. And just as listening requires us to stop talking, becoming inspired requires us to stop doing – if only for a few moments. In these moments, whether they be sitting at your desk, taking a stroll, enjoying lunch with a friend, listening to music or engaging in whatever allows you to relax and reflect, **you have the opportunity to truly be strategic – to contemplate answers to the bigger questions of how through your leadership you can accomplish something truly remarkable, meaningful and satisfying for you, your organization, and everyone that comes into contact with it.**

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