



Personal Effectiveness - The Continuing Challenge

By Hal Johnson

I was recently going through my notes, preparing to give one of my workshops on the subject of Personal Effectiveness. In preparation for the workshop each participant is requested to read some background material so all who attend have a passing understanding of (1) what the Best Practice looks like in action, (2) what it contributes to the business, and (3) if it's truly beneficial, how a business team would put it to work. The material I pondered that caused me to start writing about it in this article is a Harvard Business Review article *Beware the Busy Manager* by Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal. The authors ask an intriguing question – **Are the least effective executives the ones who look like they are doing the most?** Hmmmmm..

Of course, being seasoned scholars, the authors backed up their observations in their article with some impressive research. For about a ten year period they studied the behavior of busy managers in companies in the US, UK, Germany and Switzerland, interviewing hundreds of managers. Their findings were not particularly encouraging. They report fully 90% of managers squander their time in all sorts of ineffective activities. In other words, a mere 10% of managers spend their time in a committed, purposeful, and reflective manner. Okay, what does that look like?

It seems the highly effective 10% had these common traits: (1) concentrated attention - focus, (2) vigor fueled by intense personal commitment, and (3) selecting a manageable number of projects for early contribution. From both my CEO days as well as consulting experiences, these patterns are absolutely what I have observed in highly productive executives. Of the three, I want to elaborate a bit more on the last one, the number of projects currently under management.

In our consulting practice I have facilitated a significant number of strategic planning sessions. As part of preparing an annual Strategic Plan, one of the very significant by-products is the Action Plan, which schedules accomplishment for all the projects that enable the achievement of the Strategic Plan. Most companies struggle with the above three traits – focus, commitment and scope in the Strategic Plan implementation process (the Action Plan). In fact, I would say just about 10% really do it well. Of the traits, the scope (number of initiatives) seems most troubling.

We urge clients approaching the Action Plan for the first time to limit the number of goals / projects / activities to a critical few, get them accomplished as soon as possible, then select some others and do the same. The tendency is to select way too many initiatives and then get bogged down, get discouraged and abandon a potentially powerful process. In support of simplifying the focus and reinforcing vigor and commitment, I developed the Law of Three. Applying this principle, you are encouraged to pick three high-impact projects and work like heck to get them accomplished in the next three months. Variations on this theme are encouraged as long as it supports the accomplishment of the critical few projects that will have the greatest impact. This is where strategy and personal effectiveness team up for high performance. It is effective!

Hal Johnson has been CEO of eight companies and has authored three books on business performance. He is Chairman/Co-founder of LeadershipOne, a business transition consulting firm.

He may be reached at (916) 391-3042 or at hjohnson@leadershipone.net.