

# ***LeaderPerfect Newsletter***

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## **The Battle with Distraction**

**by Dr. Mike Armour**

Yesterday. I was training the executive team of a highly successful, fast-growing company. To a person they understand the critical leadership priorities that they need to fulfill. But each one freely admitted to ignoring these priorities for weeks on end.

The reason? Distractions. They face so many pressing deadlines and such constant intrusions from management, marketing, or production problems that they spend their days in a reactive mode, not a proactive one.

They fail to stay focused on what they know to be vital leadership priorities, because immediate urgencies are relentless and seemingly without end. Unfortunately, I hear this same story routinely from executives in businesses of every size.

My friend Bob Hendron used to say that life is sometimes like being nibbled to death by a duck. No one peck takes much out of you. But the constant nibbling eventually consumes you.

Most of us can relate to that feeling. And this team of executives was no exception.

### **Managing Distractions**

It would be naive to believe that we can eliminate distractions altogether. The best we can hope for is to manage our focus more effectively so that distraction takes a lesser toll.

To begin with, we must realize that the human brain is wired to be distracted. Unlike the mind of other creatures, ours has an unparalleled propensity for contemplating events from the past, speculating about future possibilities, and fantasizing about things that could never be.

We all realize that we do these things. What we may not realize is just how much time we spend doing them.

A recently-completed study at Harvard, using a clever iPhone app, tracked 2,250 people, ranging from 18 to 88, to see how much of the time they were engaged in one thing, but thinking about something entirely different.

They found that on average people's minds are "somewhere else" about 47% of the time. The only activity in which mind-wandering is less than 30% is love-making – and yet it is a common occurrence even there.

So we must begin our battle with distraction by realizing that, left to its own devices, the mind will not stay focused. Even without disruptions and pressing deadlines, we have to discipline the mind to keep it focused on what is truly important.

## **If It's a Leadership Priority, Schedule It**

With distractions, deadlines, and disruptions so rampant, we can't put off leadership priorities until we have nothing else on our schedule. That time will never come. Instead, we must force these priorities onto our calendar, then rigorously protect the time set aside for them.

Easier said than done, I know. But I am yet to find a successful executive leader in a fast-paced, demanding environment who does not maintain this practice consistently.

Some people are fortunate enough to be in positions that permit them to schedule a day at a time each month just to work on strategic priorities and leadership initiatives. They may even be able to do this by "holing up" at home or elsewhere, away from the interruptions to which they would expose themselves at the office.

Most people don't have this convenience. So they have to carve out the time for leadership priorities in smaller pieces. It may mean scheduling one hour per day, two days per week for the things that need undistracted attention. This may be time for mentoring a key worker. Or rethinking your longrange plan. Or toying with more effective ways to structure your organization and its workflow.

Where scheduling is done on a shared corporate calendar, simply mark this time on your calendar as already scheduled so that people do not intrude on it when planning their own meetings. Then spend this protected time working behind a closed door, if you have one, to prevent drop-in intrusions.

Where the closed door option is unavailable, retreat to another physical location – an unused conference room or vacant office on another floor or in another building, even the corner coffee shop down the street. Don't make it easy for unwanted distractions to find you.

As an alternative to this, many of my clients find the non-distracted time that they need by arriving at their office extra early one or two days a week and tackling their leadership priorities before the ducks show up and start nibbling at them.

And if a particular leadership priority entails interaction with others, they try to schedule the meeting first thing in the morning, so that it is behind them before the distractions set in.

Now you may say, "Well, I already arrive early most mornings." But the odds are that you use this time to deal with immediate tasks that have piled up, not on matters of longer-range or strategic importance.

Simply set aside two mornings each week in which you use your "early time" solely for leadership priorities that distractions will otherwise crowd off of your schedule. In fact, why don't you pause right now and put the mornings that you are going to protect this week and next on your calendar?

## Plan For Things To Go Wrong

While we must be proactive in scheduling time for truly important leadership issues, we also need to find ways to minimize the number of times that we are so crowded against deadlines that we are at their mercy. One of the smartest things that we can do in this regard is to assume that things will go wrong, and allow for this reality in our planning.

This is a lesson that I learned from my dad. As a youngster I often worked with him remodeling older homes. Most of these houses had been constructed before the First World War, or shortly thereafter, when wiring, plumbing, and construction standards were anything but uniform.

When bidding the job, Dad would first do a careful calculation of the materials required and the labor costs. Then he would add one-third to the total. Next he would map out how long the job should take, then add 20% to the time frame. These higher numbers and this longer time frame were the figures that went into his actual quotation to the home owner.

He would explain his strategy to me by saying, "Son, when you tear into old walls like that, you never know what you're going to find behind them. So you have to allow for it up front by assuming that the walls are hiding problems you could have never imagined." Time and again this approach to bidding a job turned out to be the deciding difference between making a profit and losing our shirt.

Most of us have a propensity to overestimate how quickly, smoothly, and efficiently we can get something done. Thus, when we look at upcoming commitments and how much lead time we need to accomplish them, we are unduly optimistic in our projection. We start too late, ramp up too slowly – and then when things go wrong, we must frantically push everything else aside to meet the deadline.

Thus, learning to be more realistic about how many commitments we take on and the amount of time that we project for fulfilling them will lessen the pressure our schedule puts on. In the process, it will scale back distractions enough to give us more time to devote to those critical leadership priorities that are so easily neglected.

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