

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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What Gives You Clout?

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The Pareto Principle is named for a nineteenth-century Italian economist who discovered an interesting 80/20 ratio that seems to prevail throughout human affairs. He found, for instance, that over several centuries of British history, despite immense shifts in social structure, at any given time 20% of the populace controlled 80% of the wealth. That ratio held constant, no matter how many social revolutions the British experienced.

Since Pareto's discovery, other researchers have identified scores of other arenas in which this same 80/20 ratio prevails. When fund-raisers start a capital campaign, they know that 80% of their contributions will likely come from 20% of the donors. For most businesses 80% of their profits come from 20% of their inventory.

Pareto In The Work Place

Jobs, too, tend to manifest the Pareto Principle. For most of us, 80% of our potential impact comes from only 20% of our job description. Take a few moments and think over the entire sweep of what your job calls for. If you were to focus solely on those functions that combine to give you 80% of your potential clout, what would they be? More than likely, the lion's share of your impact derives from no more than 20% of your roles and responsibilities.

A key objective in time management, therefore, is first to identify those functions and duties that give us our 80% impact, then to discipline ourselves so that nothing deters us from our highest-impact activities.

Recently I was coaching a senior executive in a demanding new position in his corporation. After explaining the Pareto Principle, I asked, "What elements of your job cumulatively give you 80% of your potential impact?" He immediately responded, "Developing my people and delegating appropriately."

"And how much time are you currently giving to those functions?" I responded. He dropped his head. "A few hours a month at best," he muttered. The clutter and disruptions of his schedule had crowded out the very things that give him his greatest clout.

Before we finished our time together, we were developing a plan of action that would see him devoting a more appropriate percentage of his time to people-development and delegation. As his coach, my next job is to be sure he holds to his plan.

Undermining Influences

In this case he had allowed a cluttered schedule and constant disruptions to consume the time he should have been giving to high-impact responsibilities. Perhaps you can relate to his struggle. I know I can. But disruptions and cluttered schedules are not the only things that keep us from the activities richest in potential clout. Here are some others I commonly find when coaching clients.

The first is having never applied a Pareto analysis to our job. The executive I was coaching the other day could readily identify where he gets 80% of his impact. In many ways, however, he is an exception. I frequently ask people where they derive 80% of their impact, only to receive a blank stare by way of response. They don't have a clue. They've never thought of their job in those terms.

Second is pursuing the "fun part" of the job rather than the things that create an 80% impact. All of us prefer having fun to not having fun. So it's easy to be drawn sub-consciously to those aspects of our job that we enjoy the most. Unfortunately, for many of us the very activities that give us our 80% clout are not part of the job we particularly enjoy. We can always rationalize why we need to give the "fun part" of our job an undue portion of our attention. Then we can blame being overworked and our busy schedule for our failure to give first priority to our truly critical tasks.

Third is perfectionism. If you're landing a space shuttle, a near-perfect touchdown is essential. If you're splitting an atom, a perfect alignment of equipment is necessary. But most things in life don't have to be done perfectly to be genuinely effective. Time given to doing jobs of lesser importance "perfectly" is time taken away from attending those duties that will give us 80% of our clout.

Fourth is procrastination. "I know I need to be giving more attention to my highest-impact roles, but I'll have more time for that later." Or, "It'll be easier to get to that next month." Another client, new to a management position over a division of 200 workers, confessed to me recently that he had been in his position for six months and had met fewer than a fourth of his people. Yet he believed that to overcome a host of morale and trust problems he had inherited, his greatest impact could only come from building a strong relationship between himself and the people reporting to him

As we analyzed why he had been so negligent in getting to know his workers, he said, "I keep telling myself I'll have more time for that in a few days." So we stopped right then and reworked his schedule to MAKE TIME that very week to be "out among the workers." A few days later I got an email from him, excited about what all he had learned and how energized he felt from his eye-to-eye conversations over the previous few days with the members of his division.

We could go on building this list. The key thing is to analyze your own situation.

- Do you know where you're 80% impact lies?
- Are you giving adequate focus to the activities that create that impact?
- And if not, what are the obstacles or excuses you're letting stand in your way?

If you've not done that kind of analysis lately, use your next coffee break to give it some thought. Be particularly ruthless with the excuses you've used for not giving your high-impact functions their proper priority. Remember, success is not so much about doing things right. It's about doing the *right things* right.

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