

# The Overscheduled Professional: Why 24/7 Won't Get You Where You Want To Go

*By Suzanne Bates*

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Not a day goes by when you ask someone how they're doing, and they say, "busy!" We are overloaded and in serious danger of letting busyness get in the way of our success. When you are overscheduled, and can do nothing more than block and tackle through your day, you are not making time for what matters most in your career.

Successful people learn to make the leap from overscheduled professional to strategic leader. The leader's job is not to do the work of the organization. It is to inspire others to accomplish the goals of the enterprise. The leader must articulate the vision and strategy and motivate others to accomplish clear goals. If you don't make that your priority, you will never be as successful as you deserve to be.

## Why Multi-Tasking Fails

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Many people believe they can multi task their way to success. Sheryl, the senior vice president of a firm, won kudos from her team with her enormous capacity to take on projects and get things done. She was a consummate multi-tasker. Not only that, she was available to her team. She answered e-mail within minutes. Of course that meant she worked into the wee hours of the night.

The feedback from her bosses was that she needed to become "more of a leader." What they meant was she needed to delegate activity and set a direction for the organization. They said she had the potential to run the firm someday if she could communicate this vision and drive results.

Even her team recognized that Sheryl needed to become more of a leader. They wished, for example, that she would make time for presentations and tout their great work to senior management. Sheryl said she was too busy to put together a presentation, and she felt it was practically impossible to carve out time. She mistakenly believed it was impossible to change the way things were.

## The Big Myth: You Cannot Multi-Task Your Way to Success

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Multi-tasking and busyness will only take you so far in your career. Yes, it's great to be a hard worker, and everyone loves a boss who is responsive. But fill up your day with the routine, mundane tasks and you miss your real job.

Time and time again, when the company says that someone in their organization is high potential but not "strategic", that's a danger sign. It means that person is in danger of hitting a glass ceiling and getting stuck.

Fortunately Sheryl took this to heart. She finally realized she couldn't "do" her way to success. She cleared her calendar and started delegating to her direct reports. She delayed some activities and actually deleted things she didn't need to do. Then we worked on creating and articulating her vision and strategy. She also delivered presentations to senior management. It took time, but she was able to change her habits and therefore alter perceptions.

## Case Study: Why Your Own Comfort Zone will Kill You

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Tom had a very different challenge. He always took time to speak to groups inside and outside his company. In fact, he was promoted to president of his division because he was good at standing up and speaking.

However, after his promotion his focus remained on speaking and he was failing to communicate with his own team. Eventually a mutiny began to unfold in Tom's department. He was away so often that his employees would ask, "Tom who?" His absentee style meant he rarely scheduled meetings with his team, and even when he did, he was known to cancel, because, you guessed it; he was "too busy."

## **Danger Signs—You Are Not Spending Time Wisely**

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Tom was making a common mistake---doing what he enjoyed doing most, which meant not communicating with another very important audience. When he was promoted he failed to develop new work habits that would help him be seen as a leader in his organization. This was compounded when he started blaming busyness. It was obvious he wasn't making good use of his time.

Tom was never able to come to grips with this time management challenge. He never set his priorities straight. One year later he was moved to an individual contributor role where he could continue his public speaking role.

## **How to Avoid the Busy Trap and Do What's Important**

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How do you know you're spending time wisely, doing the things that will make you successful in the long term?

- ◆ Get feedback on your communication strengths and weaknesses, as well as your time management. Ask a trusted advisor how you are doing.
- ◆ If the feedback shows you need to improve, don't blame others. Managing your time and communicating at the leadership level is up to you.
- ◆ Be aware that if you have 500 emails in the inbox and 35 meetings on next week's calendar you are in danger of drowning in the day to day.
- ◆ Block out strategic time. Think, write and develop your own, strong viewpoint.
- ◆ Write, present, and speak regularly. You will save time by communicating to your important audiences what needs to be done and encouraging them to do it.
- ◆ Develop your skill at delivering your message in a clear, powerful way. Nothing is a bigger time waster than having to go over the same messages again and again.

## **Case Study in Leadership Communication: Charlie**

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Charlie, the CEO of a troubled organization, was in a turnaround situation. He had to get the entire organization to see his vision and execute his strategy. Nothing would happen unless he convinced people to change. They had to be on board.

Charlie took a risky step. He decided to write a candid, forthcoming weekly email to update everyone on the strategy and let them know whether the news was good or bad.

Every Friday afternoon, Charlie took the time to sit down and write. He put a lot of time and thought into this communication. Something amazing happened. People not only read the email, they loved it. They forwarded it to other stakeholders who had a role in making change happen.

Good things started happening. The company turned around. People got behind the effort. Charlie credits those messages for his success in overcoming a very difficult situation.

## 5 Steps to Success

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Managing your calendar and focusing more time on leadership and communication is a matter of thinking differently about your role in the organization. These five R's can help you set priorities, manage your time and effectively communicate with all of your important audiences.

### Think of these 5 R's as Steps to Success:

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- ◆ Recalibrate
- ◆ Rethink
- ◆ Retreat
- ◆ Reprioritize
- ◆ Release

### Recalibrate

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Recalibrate how you think about your role. Remember, your job is to lead. Instead of getting mired in the minutia of day to day business, take three hours, close your door, and brainstorm on strategy. When you start by taking small steps such as setting aside three hours of strategic thinking time on your calendar every week, you'll find you want more. The only way to "find" time is to put it on your schedule.

### Rethink

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Rethink by analyzing and synthesizing information as you go. In all of your daily meetings and conversations, listen with a critical mind. For example, take time to encourage debate in a meeting so you refine your viewpoint. Ask questions. Challenge assumptions. This is a time saver because you more efficiently gather information, can make decisions more quickly and move on to the next issue.

### Retreat

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Retreat regularly, in the office and on the road, in order to consider what's important now. Your business is changing all the time, so you need to stay on top of it. These private retreats can happen anytime of day. For example, if you want to prepare for a meeting, close your door, close your eyes, and think about the outcome you want. Jot down ideas. Even five or ten minutes of preparation in a retreat can make a difference.

### Reprioritize

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We all get trapped in our own routines. We believe we have to attend certain meetings or oversee certain projects. We believe we are being productive. Yet if we are honest, there are high priority activities that we are not doing. Be honest with yourself about how you are spending your time and get your priorities aligned with your major goals.

## **Release**

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Release your ideas to the world. Don't waste time thinking, reviewing, or revising once you have a direction. For example, I often speak to CEOs who know exactly where they want to take the organization, yet people in the company haven't heard it. This may be one of the biggest time wasters. Set up meetings and presentations, formal and informal, and deliver your messages.

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Linkage is a global organizational development company that specializes in leadership development. We provide clients around the globe with integrated solutions that include strategic consulting services, customized leadership development and training experiences, tailored assessment services, and benchmark research. Linkage's mission is to connect high-performing leaders and organizations to the futures they want to create.

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