

## **Incompletion: An Obstacle to Productivity.**

We live in a time of great challenge in business. The Chinese want to eat our lunch, the Malaysians are making our shirts, Wal-Mart is so big and powerful it can dictate terms with vendors that put them over a barrel. It is not easy as a small business to make it in such a tense environment.

Our survival and our prosperity as entrepreneurs depend on living up to the challenge. And the challenge in any business is to gain customers and satisfy their needs. A key ingredient in this demanding process is productivity. I define productivity as the ability to take action that generates intended results. These outcomes also need to be realized without expending too many resources- money, time, and spirit. I have seen business owners waste lifeblood energy on fancy brochures, advertising and attending expensive meetings to attract customers. Reaching out to customers is only one part of the selling equation; the other parts are getting customers to come to you, and then delivering the goods.

I will recommend some practices that will help you make solid connections with clients and meet your own expectations, and theirs. But first, we need to recognize that the world of work has changed dramatically. In earlier times on the farm and on the assembly line, work was more taxing physically, but it was easier to tell what was already done and what was still left to do. Either the pile of wood was an even cord or it wasn't. Nowadays, the workplace is like a traffic circle with many feeder lanes and not enough exit points, so the amount of tasks keep accumulating and the pressure to manage them all intensifies.

One of the biggest impediments to success is the gap between the number of tasks that are done compared to those undone. The modern condition in business is to be overwhelmed. There is too much work to do in a given time. In addition, the line between personal and professional is so thin that it is indistinguishable. Trips to take, movies to see, books to read, weight to lose, technical skills to learn, a yearning for improvement that gets thwarted from being too tired. There are so many things that one would like to do that never get done. Some of my clients get 250 e-mails a day. I consult to businesses which operate under such severe deadline pressures that even a slight interruption in workflow means trouble. We have so many projects to do that there is not a lot of space left on the backburner.

If the difference between done and undone is too big, undue stress is created and the mental energy that is needed for concentration and follow through is lost. Relaxation is the key to productivity, but the mind will not rest easy if it knows that there are too many open-ended obligations in one's life. The human mind is funny, it can't quite remember all the commitment details and at the same time, it won't let you to forget them altogether. So, the sense of incompletion generates more stress than people realize, and it is often hard to tell what needs to be done next and whether the work already done is complete.

I define incompleteness in a number of ways:

- ⌚ An incompleteness is a task that is not being performed because the actor has not clarified his/her thinking to the point where action can be taken.
- ⌚ An incompleteness is a commitment that is not being observed because it gets crowded out of the schedule by matters that appear to be more pressing. An example of this might be a commitment to exercise and maintaining one's health and strength.
- ⌚ An incompleteness is a long range opportunity that is not being realized because it is hard to see how it could be accomplished in light of the fact that there is no plan with specified action steps laid out to make the goal more achievable.

Here are some practices to help you manage your mind and reduce the stress of loose ends.

1. **Cultivate a beginner's mind.** A garden needs to be weeded so that the plants have a better chance of producing a harvest. The mind boggles when it is overburdened with information that gets in the way of the thinking process. David Allen, an expert in productivity says, "the more something is on your mind, the less it is usually getting done." Therefore, it is advisable to park information in places where it can be retrieved, such as in calendars, notebooks, files and computer databases. I call those places an "existence system." An existence system keeps commitments and plans alive, and relieves the mind of the burden of carrying around "stuff." When the mind is clear, there is a greater chance for creativity.
2. **Clarify your commitments and write them down.** It is useful from time to time to write down everything you are worried about or thinking about doing. This process helps you to see it all in front of you on a piece of paper so that you can distinguish your "ought to's" and "wouldn't it be nice to's" from your commitments. Your commitments need to be converted into action with time lines and tasks outlined. Some projects take priority, but clarifying the things that are important enough for you to take seriously will enable you to move into action more readily. I also recommend working with a partner in this process because sometimes it is not so easy to know how to calibrate a priority.
3. **What's next?** The whole point to this discipline is to free up the mind. What is often called procrastination is the result of an overburdened mind that cannot identify the next step that needs to be taken in a problem solving process. A mind that is hung up trying to determine what is next is like a computer trying to run a program with insufficient memory. To be productive one needs to be in motion, acting on a specific and manageable task that will generate more of an opportunity for progress to be made. The next step to be taken to move things

along comes when the mind catches a clearer look at the goal. Mental energy is released at the point when thought and discussion concentrate in sufficient intensity around the question: what is the next action to be taken to reach the goal? However, the thinking process does not have enough of chance to succeed if it appears to the mind that the gap between current reality and the goal is too wide.

Most of all, I recommend that business people conduct a periodic review of their entire game plan, taking their personal life and outside interests into account as well. We live a whole life, and it takes careful thought and discussion with associates, partners, and family members to create focus and a sense of coherence. Retreats are useful for this purpose, as well as family meetings. It is easy to lose sight of the big picture when your head is so full of stuff you can't distinguish the forest from the trees.

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