

## Focus Is The Key

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Do you remember that in a commentary I gave a time or two ago, I asked you this question. Those who work in this particular area I am speaking on right now by giving counsel on how to manage one's time in order to be more productive, gave a figure on how often a person is mentally interrupted while attempting to get something done and is thus distracted, and thus productivity halts, at least temporarily, while one's attention is focused elsewhere for a period of time. How many times did this man say that somebody is interrupted in that little talk? Well, according to Dave Crenshaw, who titles himself as a "business chaos crusher," it's an astounding fifteen times per hour. On some occasions it is even higher, depending upon what the occasion is and who the person being interrupted is.

I was surprised to learn upon re-reading the article that very frequently many of the interruptions are made by the person trying to be productive by getting the job done—whatever it might be—finished; accomplished; a piece of history; out of the way. Did you hear what I said there, that most of the interruptions are made by the person doing the work?

Mr. Crenshaw compared each of the interruptions as being like small cuts, but each one is bleeding a small amount of blood from a poisonous dagger that is killing your productivity because the total amount of blood lost is larger than it appears to a quick casual, on-the-surface glance. In other words, he's saying the person being interrupted is not aware of how much time he's actually losing.

He said that one of the things about this problem is that there does exist a leading question that is the number one interrupter and burner-upper of time, and overall leads to the greatest loss of time, and therefore, productivity. It is what he titled "the dreaded double Q." "QQ" stands for "quick question." It is right here that we have to really do some critical self-examination. Since we are the one doing the interrupting, we are the one making the "quick question." The dreaded QQ doesn't have to be asked by a fellow co-worker; it can very easily be self-inflicted.

According to Mr. Crenshaw, more often than not, the dreaded "quick question" is often truly not about something important. Most often, it is something that we simply impatiently ask and want an answer to right on the spur of the moment, without giving

any thought about whether the question is slowing productivity. So we ask ourselves these questions throughout the day. They pop in quickly, make a brief appearance in the corner of our mind; we accept them without realizing how truly expensive they may be to our productivity.

Regardless of the source, whether it's the self or some co-worker, the switch in attention—and thus, in one's focus—is the problem. According to Mr Crenshaw, the solution is to gain control of your ability to focus, and then you will stay on top of your use of time because other people cannot be controlled; therefore, the solution lies in controlling yourself.

The first step is to really—this was his opinion here—and I mean *really*, appreciate an easily understood fact: Life is consumed within time and time never stops for us or anybody else. This is a reality. It is a fact that cannot be refuted. Time waits for no one. Use it judiciously because it never stops. Do we realize that? It never stops. If we are the one doing all the interrupting, we are the one that's causing the loss of time.

The second step is another easily understood principle, he says. He says some people talk about goal setting. Well, he says, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with that, but Crenshaw takes issue with the term *goal*. It's too vague. He believes it's too broad and allows one to easily make adjustments because the word *goal* frequently has no psychological impact on a person's mind. It's just so common. He made a simple suggestion for people who are interested in a good use of time. He suggests that you call it your *finish line*. *Finish* has more psychological impact to it than the word *goal*. An even better one is *deadline*.

Do you know where the term *deadline* came from? It actually came out of the Civil War from the Andersonville prison in Georgia. They drew a line within about ten feet of the fence that was holding the Union soldiers, and if they stepped across that line, they were dead. You did not have to get near the fence. Just stepping across the line did it.

There are two terms that he suggested that we use rather than *goal*: *finish line* or *deadline*. No, why? He said he believes it must be clearly defined as an unchanging boundary in your day where your productivity starts and ends, and you allow yourself no room by saying, "I'll work as long as it takes." See, you've already given yourself an out so that your focus is broken. That's a boundary that has a strong tendency to keep moving—a goal. That attitude perpetuates a lack of real focus.

Instead, time must be viewed as precious, scarce, and to be preserved because it is limited. It keeps on moving, and focus becomes a priority. Only you can determine it

use.

You might recall that I mentioned in the previous commentary on this subject that email have a tendency to be the biggest burner of non-productive use of time in an office environment. Well, I have found, personally, that I do best regarding time when I devote the beginning of each day in the office to answering emails right off the bat. I strive hard to not let them hang over, day after day.

Incidentally, Crenshaw mentioned regarding productivity that if your computer has a warning signal that you've just received another email, that for the sake of productivity that you shut that thing off. That sound, or that little notification, already has broken your focus. Its alerting creates a time-burning destruction of focus, and his suggestion was to create your own schedule for checking emails.

His final suggestion came from a study conducted by the magazine *Harvard Business Review*. It was that as you finish one job, rather than jumping right into the next one, you spend time creatively thinking about how you want to process [the next one] to its completion. That study found that those executives who did that were the most successful people on the staff because even before they literally began, they were already working on the project, were already step-by-step focused, even though they had just begun tackling the process. I found that little article really helpful.