

## Where There Is Nothing

*Stephen R Balzac*

*Therefore just as we take advantage of what is, we should recognize the usefulness of what is not.*

- Lao Tzu

The recent NY Times article, “*Driven to Distraction*” discussed the practice of turning cars into mobile offices. The dangers of this practice I will leave to others to debate, although I will mention that the Car Talk Guys are definitely Not Happy about it. What I found particularly fascinating in reading this article was the justifications that managers and senior executives were giving for staying connected all the time:

- They felt that they were being more productive, making use of otherwise wasted time.
- They felt that their teams couldn't function without them, which certainly begs the question of what would happen to the team and the company if the distracted driver got himself killed.
- Instant response is necessary in today's economy.

And so it went. Each of these excuses, for that is what they are, sounds very good. Certainly being busy every possible minute does create an illusion of productivity. Does it create real productivity? That depends on what you're doing.

When focused on a single task, or set of related tasks, working without distractions can be extremely productive. Indeed, such total focus is also extremely enjoyable and is often when people do their best work.

Alas, that's not the case when the tasks are unrelated, such as driving and attempting to manage a team back at the office or discuss problems with a client. In that



*Stephen R Balzac*

case, the brain must constantly switch from one task to another, a process that is extremely tiring and highly error-prone.

A possibly more serious problem, at least from the point of view of making good decisions, is that our brains need relative quiet to do their best work. “Relative quiet” varies from person to person, in that one person may need actual silence while someone else might find loud music helps them relax. No matter what form it takes, our ability to have sudden intuitive leaps, to have that “eureka!” moment if you will, depends on our not filling every instant of our time with the task at hand. Trying to be productive every instant denies us the time to stop and reflect. As Lao Tzu wrote centuries ago, “*form comes from what is there, but usefulness from what is not.*” In other words, if there's no silence between the beats, there's no music.

What about the argument that the team cannot function if the manager is not in constant communication? I'm reminded of the old saying about graveyards and indispensable men, but let's not go there. Instead, let's unpack the statement.

When a manager says that their team cannot function without them, they are saying some variation of at least one of the following statements:

- My team doesn't really understand what it's supposed to do, so I have to constantly direct them, or
- I don't trust my team to do its job in my absence, or
- I don't think anyone but me knows how to do it right, or
- I'm afraid I'll look useless if my team can function without me being there all the time.

Looked at in this way, having the manager constantly in contact with the team doesn't sound so hot.

If the team really doesn't understand what it's supposed to do, why not? Most frequently, it's because the members of the team haven't really learned to work together effectively. They're spending too much of their energy managing interpersonal interactions and not enough attempting to understand the goals. Fundamentally, they care about the outcome only insofar as they want a paycheck. In this case, the manager would be well served to build up the team and help them become a more cohesive unit with each member understanding and appreciating the contributions brought by the others.

What about the case where the manager says he doesn't trust his team to do the job in his absence? Well, why doesn't he trust them? Is this a case of a manager that can't delegate or a team that can't accept delegation? Or is this a manager who has never taken the time to develop a strong relationship with the team, forcing him to constantly push them to work instead of

having a highly motivated team? If he doesn't trust his team, odds are, they don't trust him either. This can be corrected and will result in a far more productive team than one in which trust is lacking.

As for the manager who doesn't think that anyone else knows how to do the job correctly, that manager is not taking advantage of the brains of her team. She's assuming that there is only one solution and that's the one she knows. In fact, she's cheating herself and the company by not taking full advantage of the creativity and massed brainpower of her team. Focus on objectives and give the team the freedom to figure out the best ways to get there. Encourage them, coach them, but don't sit there and treat them like little

children by solving all the problems for them. Build their sense of competence and autonomy and you'll have a far more motivated and productive team.

Finally, what of the manager who thinks he'll appear useless if he's not running around doing stuff all them? There is a big difference between motion and progress. The manager's job is not to create motion but to enable the team to make progress. If you're lucky enough to have a team that's so strong that it looks like they

don't need you, enjoy it! Be their coach, keep them at that peak level of performance. Your job now is to keep them from burning out. The last thing they need from you is having you constantly metaphorically peering over their shoulders via your cellphone.

That mobile office can create a great deal of activity, but most of that activity only serves to mask the weaknesses in the team or the manager. Sometimes, the secret to success is to know when to do nothing at all.

***A possibly more serious problem, at least from the point of view of making good decisions, is that our brains need relative quiet to do their best work.***

*Stephen Balzac is a consultant and professional speaker. He is president of 7 Steps Ahead, an organizational development firm focused on helping businesses to increase revenue and build their client base. Steve is a contributing author to volume one of "Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values Through Play," and the author of "The 36-Hour Course in Organizational Development," due out from McGraw-Hill in Fall 2010. Contact him at 978-298-5189 or [steve@7stepsahead.com](mailto:steve@7stepsahead.com).*