

The New Busy: From Stressful To Strategic

By David Irvine, Best Selling Author, Speaker, and Cultural Advisor

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I grew up in a generation where saying you were “busy” was a badge of honour. This was especially true for an external consultant and speaker as “busyness” was equated to competence, productivity, and worth.

But we now live in a different world. People take their Blackberries on vacation to keep up with the daily barrage of emails. Overwhelmed is the latest status symbol. In an age of instant messaging with the expectation of immediacy, we have created a workplace that is overworked, undervalued, and exhausted. We need to discover a new way of “busy”. Don’t expect your organization to do this for you. Everyone is too busy.

It’s no longer about merely working hard. Burnout will diminish the quality of your work and the value you bring to others. Being strategic is the new ethical responsibility. By learning to be deliberate and tactical in your work you will not only earn credibility and become an influential leader, regardless of your position; you will gain self-respect, freedom, and peace of mind. Here are six strategies for being strategic:

1. **Be committed to service.** If people who depend on you do not believe you have their best interest at heart, you will be distrusted, isolated, and frustrated. There is a difference between “serving” and “pleasing.” Service is about meeting their *needs*. Pleasing is about trying to make them happy by meeting their *wants*. Sometimes you have to work overtime to meet those needs, but remember you are here to serve, not please.
2. **Set priorities.** One of the real stressors of work is all the incomplete “stuff” in your inbox and having more piled on before you can finish what is already overwhelming. You can solve this by having a list of clear goals and a weekly review of how all the “stuff” fits into your goals. It’s not about getting everything done, it about getting the right things done. It’s also about doing what you enjoy, what you’re good at, and what matters most to your work. The key to being strategic is to say no to the wrong opportunities.
3. **Complete cycles.** Once you know your priorities, be sure to complete the projects that are most important. Finishing tasks will give you self-respect and make room for creative energy to flow through you.

4. **Push back – respectfully and gracefully.** Never let someone else’s lack of planning become your crisis. It isn’t easy to start saying no to others. But if the resources and priorities aren’t there, then start by at least saying yes more slowly. The key is to be clear and respectful. Instead of being career limiting, tactfully saying no will make you more credible and capable in the workplace.
5. **Turn off technology.** Technology is a tool, not our master. Sometimes we need to turn off the laptops and cell phones. After watching our two teenage daughters text each other while in the same room, I realized we are losing the art of being in touch *without* technology. When you take your dog for a walk at the end of a busy day, try leaving your phone at home and just be with your dog. In a world out of balance maybe we need to resist more multi-tasking and simply be a little more present to the beauty and wonder that surrounds us.
6. **Maintain perspective.** No one wants inscribed on their headstone, “She got through her inbox.” When it comes down to what really matters in life, it is ultimately about connections and contributions, supporting others and making a difference. Enjoy your work while you are there, and enjoy your life when you are away from work, but always keep in mind what matters most.

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