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### Overcoming the Dangers of Task Saturation - 05/02/2005

When fighter pilots approach a mission, they take steps to ensure flawless execution, such as planning and briefing. This is a part of the routine that keeps them alive. The same should be true in business.

*By Jim Murphy*

When business leaders take the same steps before each mission, they can improve their execution results as well. However, even preparation and planning cannot eliminate the biggest stumbling block to flawless execution: task saturation.

Task saturation comes from not having enough time, tools and resources to get your mission accomplished. Essentially, it means you are overworked. Unfortunately, most people and companies wear task saturation like a badge of honor. Perhaps it makes them feel wanted or valuable.

You may hear a weary business traveler at the airport say, "I've been on the road for five days, made nine presentations, wrote up specifications for a new bid in the hotel room, missed lunch, went into the office Saturday, got caught up on my paperwork, and now I'm heading to New York." The surprising thing is that most people are proud that they're overworked. In truth, task saturation is not good for the company. It can effect all your operations and create irreparable mistakes.

What fighter pilots know about task saturation should worry every business manager and safety manager. As task saturation increases, performance decreases and execution errors increase. Task saturation is a silent killer, and in these days of layoffs and asking people to do more with less, task saturation is a major threat to corporate America. Rather than wear it like a badge of honor, businesses need to deal with it now. The correct action to take is to acknowledge that it exists, acknowledge that it creates problems, identify the symptoms, and then work to eliminate it.

Everyone responds differently to task saturation, but measured over time, individual coping mechanisms tend to be the same. People either quit, compartmentalize or channelize. In any of these "states," your performance degrades and trouble brews. So how can you recognize these coping mechanisms? Look at these three types and their symptoms in detail.

#### 1. Shutting Down

When the faced with task saturation, the first coping mechanism is to shut down. You quit. You stop performing. Some people literally go blank. When you shut down, you may look at all the papers on your desk and decide it's too much, so you spin your chair and start staring out the window.

Have you ever just said, "It's time to go take a gym break," or, "It's time to go outside and talk to my coworkers," or, "I've just had enough? I'm leaving for the day." That's a very obvious way of dealing with task saturation. In

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moderation, these behaviors are fine. In the extreme, they bring a company to its knees.

Quitters don't say much, don't do much, and often leave the office. "Happy" quitters are always at the water cooler, in the bathroom checking their tie, or stopping by your office for a rather pointless chat. Shutting down is the most harmless of the coping mechanisms. When you leave your desk or amble around the office, people at least know you're not executing your mission; you're not on task. You may get a bad reputation for leaving early or not pulling your weight, but at least you're not masking your mental collapse.

## 2. Compartmentalize

Compartmentalizers, on the other hand, are risky people because they act busy, but do little, and kill you while they're at it. Have you ever let yourself get compartmentalized? Have you ever wanted to put everything in a nice, neat, linear format and arrange things just so-all the while things are really backing up and pressures outside your compartmentalized little world are rising?

Compartmentalizers start making lists, organizing their projects, and shuffling things around as if these tasks are akin to doing the work. Then they start going top-to-bottom, ticking off one item, and then the next item. They become obsessively linear, first-things-first, one project at a time.

The Compartmentalizer operates in a mode that is extremely dangerous to the company. For example, think about the swirl of activity in a hospital emergency room. Patients are arriving, others are waiting; some patients are getting restless and irritable, and others are stalking the nurses' station. The hospital staff members all have an intricate roll that keeps the chaos moving.

But if someone reaches task saturation and compartmentalizes, the environment starts to get dangerous. Why? Because compartmentalizers look busy. Therefore, they are hard to ferret out. You can't tell they're not getting anything done, and that hurts the system. In this case, no one knows a problem is building. No one knows a weak link has entered the chain.

## 3. Channelize

Finally, other people cope with task saturation by channelizing. Channelized attention is when you focus intensely on just one thing and ignore the others. Some people call this target fixation.

This starts when you arrive at the office with more to do than anyone can possibly get done in a day, and then unplanned events kick in and start to task saturate you. For example, you get a call: "Honey, the kid is sick at school. Can you pick him up?" Then your biggest client calls: "You need to deliver a document to me by one o'clock today." Have you ever been there before? Of course you have; everyone has.

You're task saturated. You're sweating this overload of priorities and you start to channelize. What's the most important thing to accomplish? Get that report out by one o'clock. What do you do? Turn off your phone, close your door, and dig into the deadline. You dig and dig and dig and put everything into that report, but guess what? No one picked up your sick child. Another client called with an urgent question and you missed it. Then a simple problem flares up into a major problem, and the error chain begins.

Channelizers are easy to spot. They shun eye contact when they take a bathroom break. They wave people off with a flip of the wrist. "Can't you see I'm busy!" is a common answer when you interrupt a channelizer. And their body language says: "Don't ask." But channelizers are almost as dangerous as compartmentalizers. They can get so absorbed in one thing that everything else falls apart.

## How Can You Combat Task Saturation?

To avoid task saturation from limiting your success, hold meetings and explain the coping mechanisms. Tell people about task saturation and the common symptoms – shutting down, compartmentalizing and channelizing.

Describe these symptoms fully and use illustrations from your own life to make the picture as vivid as possible. Then have everyone list the three things they do to cope. More often than not, properly trained people will then recognize task saturation when it starts to hit them and they will adjust as they see themselves reverting to an inappropriate coping mechanism.

Next, try to eliminate task saturation in your workplace. In other words, kill the weeds before they choke the grass. This doesn't mean lightening the work load; rather, build into your company standards three simple processes to keep task saturation at bay: checklists, crosschecks and mutual support.

When you understand the warning signs of task saturation and the three ways people cope with the stress it creates, you can eliminate it before it becomes a problem and achieve better execution results in your organization.

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