

Foreword

By Ryan Olson

Some time ago I flew to the UK to do some work with Howard for a client that had a scary safety record. They needed help, and the big boss needed to be paying attention to the problem. At our first meeting with the leadership team, guess who was missing: The big boss was too busy to see me after paying for my plane ticket across the Atlantic. Later, as Howard and I reflected together on the lack of safety leadership at the site, he said to me “Clearly, being too busy is NOT an effective strategy.”

That comment stuck. It’s also literally stuck to the left hand speaker of my desktop computer at the office. Since hearing it, the credo has inspired me to say no to things, put important stuff first and less important stuff last, delete dumb stuff from my life, and find clever ways to take better charge of my environment.

Not surprisingly, like most antecedents (prompts), the sticky note hasn’t solved all my too busy problems. In this book Howard writes about the difficulty of “stepping out of the ongoing stream of activity” in order to get a proper perspective on what you are doing. Recently I was swept away by the white-water. I was just reacting to stuff (and over reacting). I was stressed and anxious, and had trouble sleeping. I know my wife and daughter did not enjoy this period, and the people I led at work probably felt uneasy and on their own. Being too busy is a special kind of misery for the person who is stuck in it, and for the people who have to deal with a person who is overwhelmed.

If you aren’t on your toes, your workplace will pull you into the too busy trap. Everyone is vulnerable – did I mention I specialize in self-management research? I work hard to get my environment right so I am on my best behavior. However, during the worst of my crisis, I felt like a total victim. I felt almost righteous in my victim-hood, because I was too busy after winning several new projects. Now with some perspective, and especially after reading Howard’s book, I can see lots of missed opportunities for keeping my life under control so I could actually enjoy the new and exciting work.



Hollin Publishing
21 Ashbrook Rd
Bollington
Macclesfield
Cheshire
SK10 5LF
www.hollinconsulting.co.uk
www.bmtfed.com

First published by Hollin Publishing Nov 2011
Hollin Publishing is a division of Hollin Consulting Ltd
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Graphics by Creative Hero
ISBN 978-0-9563114-7-4

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Are you currently feeling overwhelmed with your job or family life? Do you work with someone who deflects work, or makes excuses for sloppy behavior, with the too busy excuse? Throw a rope ashore, pull yourself out of the stream of busyness, and pause to read this book and reflect. It's a short read, so even if you're too busy you can do it. It is loaded with simple ideas for shaking up the status quo and taking more control of your life.

You can easily track how you spend your time (and with whom); you can map your high-activity, but low-value tasks; provide better social consequences for too busy bosses or office bullies; working one day a week from home; and more.

Come on! You owe it to yourself to prove that, in Howard's words; you can "manage yourself out of a paper bag".

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*Chapter 8 is called motivational traps. This is Dr Ryan Olson's material; I have seen his talk 'motivational traps' a few times. I have also seen Allison Reynolds do a great job of the presentation too. This chapter was produced by Allison from Ryan's material, many thanks to both of you.

“My favorite things in life don't cost any money. It's really clear that the most precious resource we all have is time.”

Steve Jobs.

4. What does too busy look like?



Too busy is hard to detect from above, its best observed from below. Someone recently said to me “we have no time for leadership, we are all too busy” and I responded “if you could all stop being ‘sunflowers’ then you could use all that time for leadership.” Too busy, to most passive observers looks like disorganised, ignorant, sad, stupid, cruel and insecure.

In a recent course, a group of directors commented that being too busy and having a jam packed day which started early and finished late was just the way it was in their industry; a self-fulfilling rationalisation if ever there was one

I am sure no-one sets out to look like any of these descriptions but it’s very common indeed. It’s so common that when you observe someone who organises their time really well, they stick out as calm and approachable, take a look around, how many ‘calm and approachable people do you see’?

Too busy also causes very strong feelings of uncertainty amid the victims lower down or outside the organisation. You can observe the person who isn’t returning your calls or email walking in and out of the building, and as you do this the feeling of anger increases day by day. Of course they are completely unaware of your anger and frustration. You can deal with this extinction experience in many ways but the most effective method will be using a shaping plan and face to face. Your quest right now is to change the personal consequences of your subject from ‘I can ignore this/I am oblivious’ to ‘I can’t ignore this/I am aware’.

“The victims of too busy are unlikely to believe that they are the problem.”

We are talking about two separate worlds here, the world of the too busy person and your world (not forgetting that you may well be too busy also). You are vying with others I suppose for the attention of the person in question; it’s a competition for time, which the subject apparently allows random discretionary time for random people. It might appear random but it’s not, it’s really them aligning themselves to the reinforcers in their environment. Yes I know what you’re thinking now, ‘aren’t we trying to run an effective organisation here’? Yes, someone’s lost the plot.

The victims of too busy are unlikely to believe that they are the problem, “I get all this stuff from my boss, and he’s on my back all the time, when am I supposed to be answering the 100 emails a day that come in.” This screams ‘learned helplessness’, ‘I am a victim and I can’t do anything about this’. It looks and sounds sad and pathetic.

Of course, a predictable downstream impact of too busy is the bottleneck it creates – the person who has become so disorganised is likely to be creating paralysis within their teams. Imagine working for this person; they have known they needed to get the report written for the last five weeks, with 2 days to go they wake up from their coma and try to pass the monkey to you. It’s possible to take a side step if this person is a peer or colleague, but harder to do if they’re your boss.

One of the other by-products of too busy is observing the too busy person wasting time on jollies or even worse, you discover they are susceptible to the temptations of corporate entertainment or on the pointless pursuit of additional qualifications or certificates with educational establishments. If this is the case then you can observe frequent phrases laced with cynicism about the ‘bosses’. It’s a slippery slope, the corporate world is peppered with tempting opportunities for people to fall by the wayside and many people do, it takes integrity and self discipline to avoid these traps.

Another common trap is for people to be trapped in the ‘too corporate to be honest’ trap. EG “You want my honest opinion? I am sorry but my future wealth is far too tightly dependent on me saying what has to be said, not the truth, does it say stupid idiot on my forehead?”

“Why don’t you stop telling me how busy you are and just get on with your work?”

Janet Slater.