

# Beware the Busy Manager

By Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal

**“Our findings on managerial behavior should frighten you: Fully 90% of managers squander their time in all sorts of ineffective activities. In other words, a mere 10% of managers spend their time in a committed, purposeful, and reflective manner.”** (pg. 64)

## Focus and Energy

Bruch and Ghoshal have studied the behavior of managers in almost a dozen companies over the last ten years. Sony, LG Electronics, and Lufthansa were among those included. Lufthansa was especially interesting because during the ten years included in the study the company went from the brink of bankruptcy to a record profit of DM 2.5 billion. This was accomplished by the leadership of Lufthansa trusting their managers to use a combination of energy and focus to reach goals the managers themselves set.

- \* How does a manager use time effectively and efficiently?
- \* How do phone calls and emails fit a manager’s daily work?
- \* How can creative approaches to complex, messy problems be devised in the midst of “do it now” time frames?
- \* How can one avoid “active non-action” (pg. 63) and nonproductive busyness?

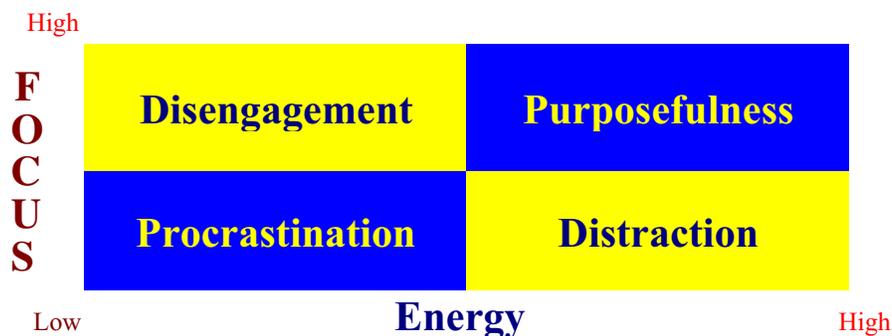
This article uses two traits to look at how managers make things happen: focus and energy.

- “Think of *focus* as concentrated attention – the ability to zero in on a goal and see the task through to completion.” (pg. 64) Managers that are focused choose what to respond to. They are not sidetracked by life’s variables and clearly understand what they want to accomplish. These managers commit to a manageable number of projects and are more able to give those projects the attention needed to successfully be completed.
- “Think of the second characteristic – *energy* – as the vigor that is fueled by intense personal commitment.” (pg. 64) Managers that possess energy are the ones that can follow through even with impossible deadlines or a heavier workload than anticipated.

Both *focus* and *energy* are necessary and valuable traits in a manager. “Focus without energy devolves into listless execution or leads to burnout. Energy without focus dissipates into purposeless busyness or in its most destructive form, a series of wasteful failures.” (pg. 64)

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“The following exhibit “The Focus/Energy Matrix” identifies four types of behavior: disengagement, procrastination, distraction, and purposefulness.”



## The Procrastinators

“Of all the managers we studied, some 30% suffered from low levels of both energy and focus; we call these managers the procrastinators.” (pg. 65) They may do what is required at work, communicating and going to meetings but no initiative is taken, performance is stagnant and creativity is lacking. Some of the ways this can happen is just non-action; sometimes fear and insecurity can sabotage moving forward or some people are just passive, a state that psychologist Martin Seligman called “learned helplessness.”(pg. 65) This procrastinator title goes to those who do not act, either from personality type or being defeated by organizational factors.

At Lufthansa, fewer managers were procrastinators during the chaotic and difficult restructuring time period. After circumstances returned to a more normal keel and more formal procedures were re-established, many managers lost both focus and energy and became more passive. They also stopped setting goals for themselves. To Bruch and Ghoshal, this reinforced the idea that organizational factors can play as important a role as individual personality.

## The Disengaged

“Roughly 20% of managers fall into the disengaged category; they exhibit high focus but have low levels of energy. Some of these managers are simply exhausted and lack the inner resources to reenergize themselves. Others feel unable to commit to tasks that hold little meaning for them. Disengaged managers have strong reservations about the jobs they are asked to do; as a result, they approach them halfheartedly.”(pg. 65)

There is a “defensive avoidance” in this group, a form of denial. The manager may believe that the problem doesn’t exist; therefore, there is nothing to be done. Other managers may just refuse to take action, whether to maintain the status quo or to avoid discomfort.

“Disengaged managers tend to be extremely tense.... They are often plagued by feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, anger, frustration, and alienation... Despite their low levels of energy, these managers suffer from burnout far more frequently than their colleagues do. And they are easily overwhelmed by unexpected events.” (pg. 66)

Managers at Lufthansa that were in the disengaged mode refused to take action when needed. One manager fully understood the threat of bankruptcy but felt his first job was to protect his

workers. He did not take the steps necessary for the health of the organization and did not commit to the needed changes. His actions did not contribute to the turnaround, but did stand in the way of a healthy recovery.

## The Distracted

“By far the largest group of managers we studied – more than 40% – fall into the distracted quadrant: those well intentioned, highly energetic but unfocused people who confuse frantic motion with constructive action.” (pg. 67) These managers are distracted and do not take the time for reflection on the current situation. Distracted managers may bind themselves to traditional functions and miss what would, in reality, have worked much better. These managers may also be shortsighted and overcommitted with multiple projects. They may have good intentions that fade or get done poorly.

Some of these managers are reacting to the pressure in the work place to just be busy. Some companies reward frantic activity and this is reflected as the MO from the senior executives all the way down.

One HR executive the authors observed enthusiastically took on three major projects while doing his usual responsibilities. As time went on his distracted state became obvious: he totally let go of one project, gave one project to another manager and did finish one project, but did a poor job.

## The Purposeful

“The smallest proportion of managers we studied – around 10% – were both highly energetic and highly focused. Not only do such managers put in more effort than their counterparts, but they also achieve critical, long-term goals more often.” (pg. 67). Purposeful managers understand themselves better than the normal person. They proceed on a project clearly with a singular purpose. Their interim choices are carefully made.

Purposeful managers do not lose their focus and energy when the crisis is passed. They are able to maintain what it takes to “welcome opportunities and pursue new goals.” (pg. 68) These managers know how to protect their energy and focus. Time is valued and planned. Some limit communication (emails, visitors, and phone calls) to specific time periods. Other managers value and schedule “think time.” Finding ways to reduce stress and reenergize are important. It may be through exercise, sharing thoughts and concerns with friends or participating in a hobby like gardening.

There is a very defining factor behind the actions of all managers. Purposeful managers make decisions on how to manipulate the environment around them – what resources can be used to meet their goals. Less effective managers are limited by their environment because of lack of imagination, money or manpower.

**“Personal volition – the refusal to let other people or organizational constraints set the agenda – is perhaps the subtlest and most important distinction between this group of managers and all the rest.”** (pg. 68)

One of Lufthansa’s managers took on the responsibility of improving the relationship between the corporation and labor. He set up regular meetings to build trust for the hard negotiations that needed to take place. Many thought this a waste of valuable time. In the end there was an extraordinary high level of consensus reached, a strike was avoided and the agreement achieved was unique in German history.

### **Challenge and Choice**

**“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to go to the forest to gather wood, saw it, and nail the planks together. Instead, teach them the desire for the sea.”**

**Antoine de Saint Exupéry**

Success, improving the purposefulness of managers, comes from offering “meaningful challenge and

personal choice. Lufthansa’s turnaround began by utilizing these very concepts. In June, 1992, CEO Jürgen Weber brought 20 senior managers, and the entire executive board together. He told these people the bottom line: Lufthansa was on the brink of financial ruin. Weber said he did not have the solution and that the managers would have three days to develop ways to save the company or to decide that it was not possible. Then he and the board members left the room.

Chaos reigned for a short time, the managers moving quickly from shock, denial and finger pointing to settling down to real work. They found their own commitment and set far-reaching goals. “They eventually embraced 130 radical changes and implemented 70% of them during the transformation.” (pg. 69) Lufthansa recouped a DM 750 million loss and went on to achieve a record profit. What worked was the combination of challenge and choice.

Crisis does not have to be the only stimulus for creating a place for challenge and choice. Sony created its Vaio computer by this very process – a target was set and managers had the freedom to figure out how to give “digital dream kids” what they wanted. Because of this, the employees could fully commit to the project, were willing to be innovative and worked long hours.

**“When corporate leaders make a sincere effort to give managers both challenge and choice, most managers can learn to direct their energy and improve their focus – and ultimately find their way to the sea.”** (pg. 69)

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**How purposeful are you? We invite you to challenge your assumptions by completing the brief questionnaire that follows.**

**To order a copy of the complete article entitled “Beware the Busy Manager,” by Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal, Feb. 2002, Harvard Business Review, pgs. 63-69 or to download an electronic version, visit the Harvard Business School Publishing web site at <http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu/products/hbr/> and search by author name or article title**

## Becoming More Purposeful

This short questionnaire is designed to aid you in reflecting upon and improving your own purposeful use of time.

### In taking an honest self-assessment of your current and past practices...

1. How focused do you tend to be in terms of your ability to zero in on a goal and see it through to completion?

1	2	3	4	5
Little Focus	Some Focus	Moderately Focused	Mostly Focused	Very Focused

2. How much energy do you bring to your work that is fueled by intense personal commitment that pushes you to go the extra mile when tackling heavy loads and meeting tight deadlines?

1	2	3	4	5
Very Low Energy	Low Energy	Moderate Energy	Medium High Energy	High Energy

3. What type of manager of your own work and time do you tend to be as illustrated in Figure 1:

- Procrastinator?
- Disengaged?
- Distracted?
- Purposeful?

Does this change if you are in crisis mode or smooth sailing?

4. In what ways could you become more purposeful?

- Get clearer about your intentions and impact – become more self-aware?
- Take responsibility for important work?
- Reduce the number of projects you are working on?
- Build more “think time” into your day?
- Set and keep to clearer boundaries about inefficient interruptions (phone calls, email, etc.)?
- Develop more effective strategies for recharging your batteries away from work?
- Reach out and tap into resources, build networks, hone your skills and broaden your influence and knowledge?
- Does your work environment help you focus and energize? What changes would help you?
- Other ideas?

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