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Changing Our Relation to Time

BETSY SAW A WHALE ON HER WAY TO WORK

one day. Living north of the Golden Gate Bridge—about 15 miles from San Francisco’s financial district—she has the option of commuting via a ferry that crosses San Francisco Bay. On a late spring morning, about halfway across, she heard a boatman cry out, “Look...there’s a whale!” Sure enough, off the starboard side, Betsy spied the telltale spout—once, then twice. It turns out that whales venture into San Francisco Bay fairly often, but, for Betsy and her fellow commuters, this was an extraordinary experience.

As work responsibilities increased the pressure on her schedule, Betsy gave up the ferry. The ride across was 50 minutes. With an added 15 minutes for the drive to the embarkation terminal and another 20 to walk to the office after landing at San Francisco, she felt it just ate up too much time.

A lot of other commuters felt the same way. The ferry boats had to move at a slow speed because their wake damaged the shoreline if they went too fast. The transit system began to buy new boats that could go faster without churn, cutting the time of the trip by 40%. Over a handful of years, they replaced all the old boats.

Then something interesting happened: Riders complained. There was something special about the slow boat to San Francisco. The length of time and the steady engines had a soothing effect. The ferry was conducive to

reading, reflecting on work documents or decisions, staring out the window, and even sleeping. It was a place out of the routine, almost out of time. When the ferry reached its destination, riders felt...different.

The transit system, responding to popular demand, returned one lumbering old boat to its schedule—a 5:40 p.m. special for folks who want to decompress on their way home.

Which would you choose: fast or slow? Before you answer, let’s look at some related facts.

When the Japanese economy was at full boil about 15 years ago, young Japanese workers were asked what they wished

for. Tops on their list was *more sleep*. The next item on their list: *not to have bad dreams*.

Today that sense of regret is much closer to home, as shown by *Newsweek* devoting the cover of its August 9, 2004, issue to “The Mystery of Dreams.” A sidebar noted that nearly 40% of Americans now sleep fewer than seven hours on weeknights, and nearly 60% experience some



kind of insomnia at least several nights a week.

The National Sleep Foundation (NSF), source of the data that appeared in *Newsweek*, links Americans' sleep patterns with their behavior, mood, and performance. The NSF's 2002 "Sleep in America" poll provided the first "direct correlation between more sleep and heightened daytime alertness with positive feelings that include a sense of peace, satisfaction with life, and being full of energy. Shorter sleep periods and greater indications of daytime sleepiness were related to negative moods such as anger, stress, pessimism, and fatigue."

Regular readers of this column know that productivity is harmed by negative moods and that we can become more productive as we learn to defuse such moods by choosing which thoughts to dwell on. But now that we see scientific evidence of the importance of sleep in our mood equation, what can we do?

The answer lies in a new "theory of relativity"—changing the way we relate to time.

Step one: Take off your watch

Bob never fails to get a gasp from a crowd when he tells them how he changed his relationship to time: He stopped wearing a watch. One reason that isn't a problem is because he can always steal a glance at someone else's, and he's found that his time sense is always close to the mark.

There was one day he did get rattled, however, because his internal estimate was more than an hour behind the time on an associate's watch. It turned out that this fellow, like so many of us, routinely set his watch ahead. But instead of pushing the hands forward by five or even 10 minutes, his difference was one hour

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and 25 minutes. He had his reasons:

"I tend to run late, usually about 10 minutes. But I actually like to be places about 15 minutes early. And, of course, it helps when I remember a meeting well in advance. So, of course, I need to set my watch one hour and 25 minutes fast."

Whew! What a complicated construct. You can see how much mental room the subject of time takes up!

Where do you stand in relation to time? How tightly wired are you to your watch? Does it point to a concern about time that drains your energy? Do a simple self-diagnosis by taking off your watch for a couple of days—once during the week, once on a weekend. See what feelings and thoughts arise.

How many times do you find yourself looking at your wrist? Is it easier or harder to focus on this moment vs. anticipating something in the future? Do you feel more/less hurried or more/less anxious about how much you have to do vs. how much time is left in the day?

When you do get a bead on the time—passing a clock, checking your computer screen, or even asking someone else—what kind of effect does it have on your body or emotions?

Step two: Schedule "no" time

When the CEO of a global communications firm hired a consultant to help him be more productive, he was amazed at the first piece of advice. "Schedule 10 minutes a day to do

nothing," the consultant said. "No appointments, no phone calls, no e-mails, no checking messages, no reading reports, no sorting the inbox. Just 10 minutes to stare out the window, to sit quietly, even to close your eyes."

Taking the edge off the number of hours clocked actually might lead to greater productivity. "The irony is that by focusing on time, managers tend to slow things down—the focus on hours worked almost always undermines the productivity of individual contributors," observes Bruce Tulgan, who has made himself an expert on Generation X workers (*Just in Time Leadership*, HRD Press, 2000). "Managing time instead of performance is the biggest impediment to empowering contributors to achieve results with speed, quality, and innovation."

In addition, some psychologists contend that however our minds engage all day, that's the way they run all night. Have you ever awakened feeling just as tired as when you went to bed six, seven, or even eight hours earlier? That's because your mind kept working with as much effort as it used all day.

Do some rigorous re-patterning. Carve out some time during the day—even if it's only a few minutes—for your mind to slow down, setting the pattern it can follow as you sleep.

And if you have the chance, find a "slow boat" home. ■

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