

Time wasting behaviour: how to identify and address it as the team leader

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Introduction

Successful people, whether in business, sport, or life in general, differ from others in one key respect. They not only know something, they do something with that knowledge to help them succeed. According to research conducted for *The Telegraph* in 2015, the average worker wastes 60 hours a month, with the primary distractions being chatty colleagues and phone- or internet-related distractions (Huth, 2015). Management, inefficient use of technology, and low skill levels are cited as key reasons for low productivity rates in the United Kingdom (UK) (Bloom, 2015). According to *Forbes*, this epidemic is getting worse (Connor, 2015). Everyone engages in some time-wasting behavior, but when does it seriously get in the way of good outcomes and productivity? Time-wasting behavior is habitual and often occurs because “it’s the way we’ve always done it” or “it gets the job done”. Could things be done better and quicker though? Here are six of the most common time-wasting habitual behaviors, and some practical suggestions on how to stop them in your team.



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1. Thinking or talking about things which you cannot influence or control

If you were to monitor it, how much of your team’s energy is channeled into topics which come into this category? For every second spent thinking or talking about something they cannot control, they are taking time away from things which they can do something about.

Topics that could fall into this category include:

- gossiping or news sharing;
- complaining about something to someone who cannot or will not do anything to resolve it;
- dropping hints, making side comments and other undercover ways to try and influence someone; and
- arguing a view or position to someone who does not care or cannot validate it.

When your team are sharing news, catching up, talking about other people in any context, ask yourself why they are doing it? If they are discussing someone else to help them work out how to best engage with a problem or resolve a situation, this could be productive. If they are simply moaning and plan to do nothing with the information then it is wasting time.

As a leader, be careful not to let idle chat take up too much of your team’s time. Chatting and news sharing can build relationships, but there is a fine line between this and gossip, which is not only time wasting but also potentially toxic. Instead, gently steer the conversation onto something productive or distract them with something important to discuss, and over time the habit will shift toward a more productive environment.

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2. Going over, in your head or with others, conversations or situations that have already happened

Our brain has a tendency to bring up unsatisfactory situations repeatedly and make us remember them.

The positive intention of this is for us to learn from them and inform future behavior. If someone is used to ruminating in this way, their brain will keep reminding them, often in the middle of the night, when they want to sleep, or in the middle of a team meeting, when you want to discuss something else!

If someone in your team has a habit of bringing up things that have already happened (and cannot be changed) time and time again, there are two good ways to handle this. First in group situations, steer the spotlight away from the topic and in no way inflame it by allowing others to add to it – or even doing so yourself. Second privately talk to them about what it is that makes them keep bringing it up. Do this kindly, as the person is often not being difficult, their brain just would not let it lie – in which case, there is a development need that needs to be addressed. You need to get behind the specific situation and help them unpick what kinds of situations seem to play on their mind. Is it always confrontational situations in which they could have done better? Alternatively, situations where they were not as kind as they could have been? If there is something they can do differently, then they can go and learn how to do it. This will help quieten their mind and save you and the team endless retakes of past events.

3. Doing activity without a clear outcome

Unhelpful habits creep in over time and stop people from using their time well. Typical activity that has no clear outcome includes checking your phone or email every five minutes. When you are not clear on your purpose, your brain just gives you habits as the next best thing. People who procrastinate do this a lot, as their brain “freezes” and diverts to some habitual activity that makes them, temporarily, feel better.

If someone seems to obsess over something you do not consider to be important, ask them why it is so important to them or the project they are working on. Do this without criticism in your voice, as it may be that you do not understand the importance. Learning other people’s “why” they do things, will help you to lead the team, while appreciating their different styles.

4. Having too many open loops at one time

Open loops are ideas, activities, and decisions that people have started or opened but have not completed or closed (McLachlan and Meager, 2017). The minute you think about something you open a loop.

People often start things and do not complete them, or start a decision-making process and do not make a decision, or have an idea that they never take forward or close down. Having too many of these loops open is like having too many applications running on your computer; it drains the battery and affects processing. People get exhausted by having too much open in their minds.

Instead of getting frustrated, take some steps to help your team close them by:

- taking action;
- deciding when they will deal with the thing and closing the loop until then;
- deciding actively to stop something (and actually doing that!); and
- deciding actively to putting something off and starting it later. It helps to give yourself a date to pick it up again.

Some people are very creative, constantly coming up with new ideas and thoughts. For these people it is a good idea to keep an ideas book or somewhere they can log ideas to come back to when it is appropriate. This is an excellent way of preventing your team's creativity from driving you mad, and wasting your time in distractions, but also honors the ideas and finds a forum for them to be heard. Closing some loops will give your team much more energy and brainpower to focus on what is really important.

5. Over-thinking without taking action

If something runs around your head without taking you forward, then this is potentially a waste of time and energy. Over-thinking is often a product of believing that it takes big steps to move something forward and wanting to get the big step just right. Over-thinking rarely solves any problem, it just runs the same issue around and around in the hope of finding a solution.

If someone in your team is prone to over-thinking, or the whole team seems to over-debate or over-discuss, encourage them to take some small actions steps, like trial of a few options or run a pilot. Taking action will help to change their feelings about it, get new information and help them to think about it differently. Small steps forward make a big difference.

6. Believing “perfect” exists

Perfectionism is the enemy of success. Nothing is perfect, no relationship, job, or piece of work. When you talk about perfection, what do you mean? The definition is important.

There is nothing wrong with high standards. Why would you not want that if it motivates you and brings you joy in life and work? The challenge and the time wasting comes when “perfection” becomes an obsession, as then the obsession for perfection will stop serving you.

When people are waiting for the perfect – whatever it is – they waste time and lose the opportunity to grow something or develop something. Some will keep waiting for the “right” thing to come along before they get moving, and for others, they will keep on striving for the “perfect” rather than being content with what is needed for success.

If you are not sure whether this applies to you or your team, ask yourself whether your (or their) definition of perfect works for you (or them)? If it does, then you probably have a healthy definition of perfect; if you are still waiting for that perfect output or job to come along, then it probably does not. Supporting unhealthy perfectionists to accept “good enough” is not easy. Avoid getting frustrated because their attachment to their definition of perfect is real to them. Start them off on small, inconsequential things like arranging the

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team lunch or reformatting an internal document only you will see. They need time and focus to recalibrate their expectations and their perception of others' expectations. These people have high levels of integrity and work ethic and a dedication to quality, so be patient as it will be worthwhile supporting them and will pay dividends to them, you, and the organization.

Your teams' time-wasting habits are probably something they are unaware of; most people are not wasting time deliberately. As the team leader, you need to be able to:

- spot time-wasting behavior;
- give them appropriate feedback by discussing the specific behavior; and
- offer them some practical alternatives, or be clear about how you would like them to work instead.

It is also critical that you yourself demonstrate time-effective behaviors. For example, do not expect them to turn up to meetings on time if you are often late. Remember that people are very different and so your ways of working would not necessarily be effective for everyone. Having some alternative ways to achieve success will help everyone become more productive and improve their natural working style at the same time.

Keywords:
Training,
Management development,
Leadership development

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