

When It Comes to Time Management, It's All about Energy

This brain-based approach will boost efficiency throughout your organization

By Brady Wilson

Leaders often send their employees to time management courses in the hope that the training will increase engagement and productivity. Many times, those same leaders show bewilderment when the training doesn't seem to have any impact—or worse yet, results in employees being *less* engaged and productive.

Why is this happening?

Traditionally, organizational leaders have believed that, to create higher-performing workplaces, employees must:

- be more committed and dedicated to the cause
- stay later and come in earlier
- make more of an effort (as by learning new skills).

In other words, leaders seem to think that sheer determination is the key to employees performing their absolute best.

It's true that time management courses can be helpful. But when people are depleted of energy, all the skills and know-how in the world won't help them, especially when it comes to managing their time. That's why it's so important to view time management through the lens of brain science.

Understand the executive function

Within the brain lies a remarkable central processing unit called the “executive function” (EF). Capable of astonishing levels of value creation, the EF enables you to:

- **process:** analyze, predict outcomes, and problem-solve
- **focus:** memorize, pay attention, and verbalize
- **self-regulate:** maintain impulse control, self-monitor, and cognitively flex
- **initiate:** prioritize, plan, and decide.

“Wherever you see high performance, you'll see the efficient management of energy.”

But wait, there's more! The EF also helps you:

- **think strategically:** addressing systemic issues, uncovering root causes, and predicting the downstream implications of decisions and actions
- **collaborate broadly:** influencing and aligning stakeholders across the organization
- **communicate clearly:** providing context, making meaning, harmonizing competing priorities, and resolving conflict
- **execute decisively:** drawing out the best information possible, making a call, and closing the loops to ensure complete follow-through has been achieved.

Directly or indirectly, every one of the above capabilities is related to your ability to (1) manage time and (2) be productive.

The brain is an energy guzzler

The brain is one of the most fuel-hungry organs in the human body—which makes sense, given that it houses the very important EF.

The body's use of fuel is judicious. It considers safety a necessity and self-actualization a luxury. When the body's energy tank runs low, the brain prioritizes the use of fuel: giving first dibs to things like autonomic responses (blinking and breathing), immune and digestive systems, balance and locomotion, and flight-or-fight safety features.

When you're low on energy, your base-level thinking continues to function. However, the mind's “power tools” fail to operate: those tools that enable you to think strategically, collaborate broadly, communicate clearly, and execute decisively. In other words, when you're depleted and your brain isn't well-fueled, you lose the ability to properly manage your time.

And these results are amplified on an organizational level. Knowledge workers without well-fueled brains are unable to think creatively about how to get to root causes and fix systemic issues. Lacking energy, they may let unaddressed concerns fester. Or they may resort to quick fixes,

“Try looking at time management through the lens of brain science.”

workarounds, and reactive firefighting that only provide band-aid solutions. This can lead to ongoing depletion for everyone in the organization, eventually requiring multiples of additional energy, time, and mind-space.

You can jump-charge the brain

Here are three ways organizations can reinvigorate the executive function and make time management easier for their employees.

1. Minimize distractions.

Like any technology, the brain has a limited amount of “RAM”—and will become bogged down if too many “applications” are open at the same time. As a result, when people’s focus is continuously split between multiple responsibilities, the impact is intense mental exhaustion.

Minimizing distractions that interrupt employees in the middle of “flow” can make a positive difference on employee performance. If reducing the number of employee tasks is impossible, consider holding fewer meetings—or at the very least, holding fewer impromptu meetings.

2. Combat negative thinking.

The emotional part of the brain is much more powerful than the rational part. In fact, your brain won’t allot you the resources to do something unless you’re convinced it’s possible. When you feel negative, this depletes your energy and makes you much less productive. But according to science, it’s not your capability but your *belief* in your capability that makes you effective.

The good news is that negative thinking and unhelpful beliefs can be overcome by strengthening the anterior cingulate (the “clutching mechanism”) between the emotional and rational parts of the brain. Leaders can pave the way toward more positive thinking by offering mindfulness training and encouraging employees to meditate regularly.

3. Make meaningful connections.

Science shows that when you have meaningful, face-to-face conversations that demonstrate value, respect, and care, this releases three high-performance hormones in the brain: dopamine (which enhances pleasure, cuts pain, and increases creativity), oxytocin (which increases bonding and trust, and decreases stress), and serotonin (which reduces fear, tension, and worry).

Within just two minutes of talking, conversation can stimulate the executive function—forming a feel-good energy cocktail of connection, calm, concentration, creativity, and curiosity. Quality conversation requires being present in the moment, so leaders must ensure they focus closely on the



person they’re speaking to, show genuine curiosity, and not appear distracted by other things or thoughts.

It’s time to look at time management differently

Without energy, the ability to manage one’s time is simply not possible. But by understanding and honoring how the human brain works, leaders create efficiency and equip employees to be more productive. 

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