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MANAGING YOURSELF

Reclaim Your Job

by Sumantra Ghoshal and Heike Bruch

Ask most managers what gets in the way of success at work, and you hear the familiar litany of complaints: Not enough time. Shrinking resources. Lack of opportunity. When you look more closely, you begin to see that these are, for the most part, excuses. What gets in the way of managers’ success is something much more personal—a deep uncertainty about acting according to their own best judgment. Rather than doing what they really need to do to advance the company’s fortunes—and their own careers—they spin their wheels doing what they presume everyone else wants them to do.

Over the past five years, we have studied hundreds of managers as they have gone about their daily work in a variety of settings, including a global airline and a large U.S. oil company. As we demonstrated in “Beware the Busy Manager” (HBR February 2002), fully 90% of the managers we observed wasted their time and frittered away their productivity, despite having well-defined projects, goals, and the knowledge necessary to get their jobs done. Such managers remain trapped in inefficiency because they simply assume that they do not have enough personal discretion or control. The ability to seize initiative is the most essential quality of any truly successful manager.

In most instances, the demands that managers accept as givens are actually discretionary in nature. We have repeatedly confronted in our research a curious but pervasive reality of corporate life: Most managers complain about having too little freedom in their jobs, while their bosses complain about managers’ failure to grasp opportunities. The truly effective managers we’ve observed are purposeful, trust in their own judgment, and adopt long-term, big-picture views to fulfill personal goals that tally with those of the organization as a whole. They break out of their perceived boxes, take control of their jobs, and become more productive by learning to do the following:

Manage Demands. Most managers feel overwhelmed by demands. They assume that the business will come to a crashing halt with-
out them and so allow real or imagined day-to-day work demands to subsume their own judgment. Effective managers proactively control their tasks and the expectations of their major stakeholders, which allows them to meet strategic goals rather than fight fires.

**Generate Resources.** By following what they believe are strict orders from the top, many typical managers tend to concentrate on working within budget and resource constraints—thereby developing a boxed-in, “can’t do” mind-set. By contrast, effective managers develop inventive strategies for circumventing real or imagined limitations. They map out ways around constraints by developing and acting on long-term strategies, making trade-offs, and occasionally breaking rules to achieve their goals.

**Recognize and Exploit Alternatives.** Average managers don’t have enough perspective on the company’s overall business strategy to present an alternative view. Effective managers, by contrast, develop and use deep expertise about an individual area that dovetails with the company’s strategy. This tactic allows them to come up with a variety of innovative approaches to a given situation.

In short, truly effective managers don’t operate in the context of individual tasks or jobs but in the much broader context of their organizations and careers. That approach sounds simple enough, but it is sometimes hard to act on because some organizational cultures that tout “empowerment” actually discourage volition among their managers. Young, high-tech companies, for example, sometimes hold their managers hostage to frenzy, thus inhibiting the reflective and persistent pursuit of long-term goals. Other cultures—particularly those ofold and established corporations with command-and-control hierarchies—can encourage people to go along with the status quo, regardless of the level of organizational dysfunction. In both kinds of environments, managers tend to fall into a reactive state of mind, assuming that any initiative they show will be either ignored or discouraged.

In most cases, however, it is not the environment that inhibits managers from taking purposeful action. Rather, it is managers themselves. We have found that managers can learn to act on their own potential and make a difference. Here’s how.

**Dealing with Demands**

Almost everyone complains about not having enough time to deal with all the demands on them, but, in reality, a highly fragmented day is also a very lazy day. It can seem easier to fight fires than to set priorities and stick to them. The truth is that managers who carefully set boundaries and priorities achieve far more than busy ones do.

To beat the busy habit, managers must overcome the psychological desire to be indispensable. Because their work is interactive and interdependent, most managers thrive on their sense of importance to others. When they are not worrying about meeting their superiors’ (or their clients’) expectations, they fret about their direct reports, often falling victim to the popular fallacy that good bosses always make themselves available. At first, managers—particularly novices—seem to thrive on all this clamoring for their time; the busier they are, the more valuable they feel. Inevitably, however, things start to slip. Eventually, many managers simply burn out and fail, not only because they find little time to pursue their own agendas but also because, in trying to please everyone, they typically end up pleasing no one.

Jessica Spungin found herself caught in this trap when she was promoted to associate principal in McKinsey’s London office. As an AP, a consultant is expected to take on more responsibilities of the partnership group, juggle multiple projects, serve as a team leader, and play an active role in office life. Spungin dove into all these tasks headfirst. While she was handling two major client projects, she was asked to jointly lead recruitment for U.K. universities and business schools, participate in an internal research initiative, serve as a senior coach for six business analysts, run an office party for 750 people, get involved in internal training, and help out on a new project for a health care company.

In her first round of feedback from the three project teams she oversaw, she was rated second from the bottom among her peers. Spungin realized that her desire to be indispensable sprang from a lack of confidence. “I never said no to a client who wanted me to be present at a meeting,” she told us. “I did what I thought was expected—regardless of what I was good at, what was im-

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important, or what I could physically do."

The first step in Spungin’s transformation from a busy to an effective manager was to develop a vision of what she really wanted to achieve at McKinsey: to be named a partner. In developing a clear mental picture of herself in that role, she traded in her habit of thinking in short time spans of three to six months to thinking in strategic time spans of one to five years.

This longer-term planning allowed Spungin to develop a set of long-term goals and priorities. Soon, she took control of her own development. For example, it became clear to Spungin that corporate banking—which her colleagues believed to be her area of expertise based on her past experience—did not hold any real interest for her, even though she had accepted one banking project after another. Instead, she decided to shift her focus to the organizational practice, something she really enjoyed. (McKinsey, like many companies, allows its consultants significant flexibility in terms of choosing assignments, but most managers do not avail themselves of this opportunity.) By claiming a personal agenda and integrating short-, medium-, and long-term responsibilities into her broader master plan, Spungin felt much more motivated and excited about her work than she had when she was merely responding to everyday demands.

Finally, Spungin took charge of her time. She realized that trying to be accessible to everyone made her inaccessible to those who really needed her. She began prioritizing the time she spent with clients and team members. With her personal assistant’s help, she streamlined her work. Previously, her assistant would schedule meetings in an ad hoc manner. Now, Spungin drove the calendar, so she could make the calls about which meetings she needed to attend. She began to recognize patterns of work intensity according to the time of year; for example, she travelled less in the fall, so Spungin set aside half a day each week to work on her long-term projects then. In the end, Spungin realized the irony of effective management: To quickly achieve the goals that mattered, she had to slow down and take control. To her surprise, the people who reported to her, as well as her supervisors and clients, responded well to her saying no.

Spungin was better able to respond to and shape the demands she chose to meet once she stopped trying to please everyone. She became more proactive—presenting her own goals and ideas to influence what others expected of her. By focusing on the most important demands, she exceeded expectations. One year after having been rated second from the bottom in her peer group, she scored second from the top. In June 2003, Spungin was named a McKinsey partner.

**Developing Resources**

In addition to lack of time, many managers complain about a shortage of people, money, and equipment, and a surplus of rules and regulations. They struggle with limited resources. While some feel frustrated and keep beating their heads against a wall to no avail, others just give up. Managers who develop a long-term strategy and attack their goals slowly, steadily, and strategically, on the other hand, can eventually win the backing they want.

Thomas Sattelberger faced all kinds of impossible constraints in 1994 when he left Daimler-Benz to join Lufthansa as the head of corporate management and human resources development. At the time, Lufthansa was in the middle of a strategic cost-savings program that required every unit to reduce its total expenditures by 4% each year for the next five years. Employees generally interpreted the cost-cutting directive to mean that investing in anything other than what was necessary to keep the lights on was verboten. Additionally, Lufthansa’s HR processes were a mess; responses to routine requests often took months, and contracts frequently contained typographical errors. These kinds of operational problems had existed in the department for years.

For most managers in Sattelberger’s position, the goals would have been simple: Get the HR department to a functional level without increasing costs, make sure it doesn’t backslide, and collect a paycheck. But Sattelberger had much higher aspirations. He had come to Lufthansa with the dream of building Germany’s most progressive corporate human resources organization, which would help transform the formerly state-operated company into a world-class airline. Specifically, he envisioned starting Germany’s first corporate university, the Lufthansa School of Business, which would extend far beyond traditional approaches to training and development. The
university would tighten the links between strategy and organizational and individual development. Its curricula, including master’s and nondegree management programs, would be designed, run, and evaluated by academics and leaders from global companies, so Lufthansa’s managers would learn from the best.

In pursuing his dream, Sattelberger chose a methodical, clever, and patient mode of attack. First, he created an imaginary blueprint depicting his university as a kind of leadership development temple. The architectural conceit—the temple being built by brick by brick and pillar by pillar—helped Sattelberger develop a long-term, strategic implementation plan. Cleaning up basic HR processes, he reasoned, was analogous to laying the foundation. With that accomplished, he would erect a series of development programs, each acting as a pillar that would hold up the “roof” of Lufthansa’s overall corporate strategy. Seeing his plan as a blueprint also helped Sattelberger separate the “must-haves” from the “nice-to-haves” and the “can-live-withouts,” which enabled him to focus on only the most vital and achievable elements.

Sattelberger understood that he had to be flexible and that building his temple would demand years of methodical work. He never spoke about his vision as a whole because its overall cost would have frightened most of the stakeholders. Instead, he secured their commitment for individual projects and programs and implemented the initiatives sequentially.

Step two was to lay the foundation that he had imagined. Over the course of two years, Sattelberger reorganized HR processes so that requests were met in a timely manner and operations made more efficient. Given the dismal state of Lufthansa’s HR systems, no one anticipated that Sattelberger could possibly meet, much less exceed, expectations. He showed them wrong.

Capitalizing on his new credibility, he next set to work on step three: building the individual pillars. One project, Explorer 21, was a comprehensive development initiative in which managers would learn from one another. A separate program, ProTeam, was designed for management trainees. And another large-scale program focused on emulating best practices from companies such as General Electric, Citibank, Deutsche Bank, Daimler-Benz, and SAS.

The spending cap was a significant hurdle. Sattelberger had persuaded top management to allow him to rent out some training rooms to other companies to raise money for these projects, but he needed more. He understood that there was a limit to how far and how fast he could push: If he pressed too hard, a backlash would ensue. So in petitioning for funds, Sattelberger made sure he was better prepared than his counterparts with arguments and facts. When the controller failed to give him the green light, he made his case directly to Jürgen Weber, the CEO. Weber agreed in principle that the corporate university project was worthwhile, although the conversation was not an easy one. “For God’s sake, do it,” he ended up telling Sattelberger, “but do it right and stick to your budget.”

Weber and the board eventually began to see how Sattelberger’s development programs fit together. Then, in March 1998—when he learned that Daimler-Benz was about to beat Lufthansa to the punch with a corporate university of its own—Sattelberger made his final move. Determined not to let Daimler prevail, he wrote a memo requesting the creation of the Lufthansa School of Business to the board of directors. It approved the request without a moment’s hesitation or debate, and Lufthansa opened Europe’s first corporate university the following month.

The whole process took time, something purposeful managers, as we have shown previously, claim for themselves. Sattelberger coped with many setbacks and accepted significant delays and even cancellations of different aspects of his initiative. He delayed his plans for the corporate university for the first two years so he could focus solely on putting HR in order. Then, slowly and progressively, he worked to relax resource constraints. Although he started with much less than he expected, he never allowed his resolve to wither. Lufthansa has never measured the precise payback from its school of business, but the subjective judgment of top management is that the return has been much higher than the investment.

**Exploiting Alternatives**

When it comes to making decisions or pursuing initiatives, managers also fall victim to the trap of unexplored choices. Specifically, they either do not recognize that they have choices or do not take advantage of those they know.
they have. Because managers ignore their freedom to act, they surrender their options. Purposeful initiators, by contrast, hone their personal expertise, which confers confidence, a wide perspective of a particular arena, and greater credibility. These managers develop the ability to see, grasp, and fight for opportunities as they arise.

Dan Andersson was a midlevel manager who worked for the oil-refining company ConocoPhillips in Stockholm. As a native of Finland, he brought to Conoco a precious managerial commodity: deep knowledge of the Finnish market. This knowledge enabled him to convey information about specific regional conditions to senior managers, who did not speak the language or understand Finland's business issues. Because he had been mentored by the managing director of Conoco's Nordic operations, Andersson quickly grasped how the managerial invisibles—informal rules and norms, decision-making processes, interpersonal relationships, and social dynamics—influenced the reception of new ideas. He intuitively sensed the right way to present a proposal and the extent to which he could push at a particular point of time.

Andersson was assigned to a team charged with exploring Conoco's possible entrance into the Finnish market, which involved breaking a 50-year monopoly in the region. The first task was to set up storage facilities in Finland, an estimated $1 million project that would allow Conoco to import its own petrol. After several months of intense searching, the team eventually found an existing tank terminal, located in the city of Turku, that Shell had abandoned decades previously. Built in the 1920s, the old tanks appeared to be clean and usable. The Conoco team thought the solution had been found. In the back of his mind, however, Andersson was already at work on contingency plans. Plan B was to build a new facility, plan C was to create a joint venture with a competitor, and plan D was to find an investor for the tanks.

After months of negotiation, Turku's officials approved Conoco's lease of the old tanks. Then came the fateful phone call from Conoco's laboratory: There was too much carbon in the steel; the tanks were unsuitable for storing petrol. Without its own storage facility, Conoco could not enter the Finnish market. There was no other facility in the country that Conoco could buy. Abandoning the project seemed the only choice. Everyone on the team gave up except Andersson, who proposed putting plan B into action.

With the support of the local authorities, he persuaded the Conoco senior team to visit Finland for face-to-face discussions about the possibility of Conoco building its own tanks at the site. Once Andersson's boss saw the land and sensed the opportunity, he grew enthusiastic about a ground-up approach. As it happened, however, the land was contaminated; cleanup would have cost tens of millions of euros. Still, Andersson persisted. Working with city officials, he discovered the original contracts clearly showed that Shell was responsible for the cleanup of the land. Once the cleanup was complete, Conoco began work on the new tanks. When the first Conoco ship arrived at the harbor, three years after the project had begun, city representatives, hundreds of spectators, Finnish television crews, and Conoco's top management were present to celebrate. Today, Conoco is the most efficient operator of automated self-service filling stations in Finland.

As a manager, Andersson's allegiance was not merely to a job but to accomplishing, one way or another, the strategic goals of his company. By scanning the environment for possible obstacles and searching for ways around them, he was able to expand his company's, and his own, scope of opportunity. Today, he is responsible for ConocoPhillips' retail development in Europe.

A bias for action is not a special gift of a few. Most managers can develop this capacity. Spungin's story demonstrates how focusing on a clear, long-term goal widened her horizon. Sattelberger and Andersson countered limitations with plans of their own and showed their companies what was possible.

In our studies of managers, we have found that the difference between those who take the initiative and those who do not becomes particularly evident during phases of major change, when managerial work becomes relatively chaotic and unstructured. Managers who fret about conforming to the explicit or imagined expectations of others respond to lack of structure by becoming disoriented and paralyzed. Effective managers, by contrast, seize the opportunity to extend the scope of their jobs, expand their choices, and pursue ambitious goals.
Once managers command their agendas and sense their own freedom of choice, they come to relish their roles. They begin to search for situations that go beyond their scope and enjoy seizing opportunities as they arise. Above all, effective managers with a bias for action aren’t managed by their jobs; rather, the reverse is true.

1. The framework of demands, constraints, and choices as a way to think about managerial jobs was first suggested by Rosemary Stewart in her book *Managers and Their Jobs* (Macmillan, 1967). See also Rosemary Stewart, *Choices for the Manager* (Prentice Hall, 1982).

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Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal
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