



by abhishek chhikara

Productivity

in the midst of a pandemic

Right thinking

As leaders of teams come to grips with the challenges of remote working, they appear to be increasingly engaged in thinking about the productivity of their teams. Productivity means getting things – the right things – done. A productivity habit requires a three-step approach. Applied consistently, this relatively simple formula can help leaders galvanise their teams, focus the organisation's effort on the most important priorities and 'get stuff done'.

COVID-19 shines a spotlight on productivity

'Stay safe, stay well, stay productive'. That's how one of our clients signed off at the end of a recent teleconference. COVID-19 has upended the way we live and work. Our lives have been temporarily reduced to the single site of the home. Home is now office, school and café whilst still being a place for rest and to reset. The challenges of this transition have been wide ranging, and in the realm of work, many are experiencing difficulties with productivity.

At Right Lane, the safety and wellbeing of our colleagues is our principal concern. We firmly believe that maintaining 'productivity' is also important – as an end, and as a driver of wellbeing in work.

But proselytising about personal productivity is a little like dispensing parenting advice: some of us think we have deep insights about it, but we are worried that people won't want to hear

them. Perhaps that's changed as we deal with the impacts of COVID-19. As leaders of teams come to grips with the challenges of remote working, they appear to be increasingly engaged in this important topic.

Productivity is a habit not a hack

Productivity means getting things – the right things – done. A defining trait of nearly all successful individuals, productivity has also been linked to happiness at work and in life – happier people are generally more productive, and productive people are generally happier (Bellet, Neve, & Ward, 2019).

Most executives will readily admit that their workforces could be more consistently productive, and each of us have at some point asked ourselves how we can be more productive. Why is productivity so elusive for so many?

The answer probably won't be found in downloading a time management app or in reading about the next best 'productivity

hack'. Rather, it has to do with making productivity a habit, and habits need to be cultivated and attended to over time. A productivity habit requires a three-step approach: first, constantly reinforce priorities; second, make it easy to start and hard to stray away from them; and finally, build in rewards to sustain the habit.

Applied consistently, this relatively simple formula can help leaders galvanise their teams, focus the organisation's effort on the most important priorities and 'get stuff done'.

1. Constantly reinforce priorities

Now, more than ever, it is critical for individuals and teams to have clearly defined priorities – daily and over the next three to six weeks. For planning over the longer term, we have long favoured the approach of renowned executive coach Peter Bregman who suggests using a 5+1 approach to setting priorities – that is, setting five major priorities to which you dedicate about 95% of your time, with everything else – the 'plus one' – shoehorned into the remaining 5% (Bregman, 2013).

The challenge is making sure that in this virtual setting, the team remembers to focus on these priorities.

At a day-to-day level, it is important to clarify daily priorities, anchored in the longer term priorities, and to encourage your team members to plan days in blocks, in advance – even going to the extent of encouraging them to put tasks and the required time commitments in their calendars. We've found the practice of daily check-ins on individuals' priorities, coupled with one- and six-week planning sessions, to be an effective way of to make sure that we remain focused.

2. Make it easy to start and hard to stray

So your team knows what the organisation's priorities are and what needs to be done today, but how can you make sure your team members get things started and done, with nothing getting in the way?

A quote often attributed to Mark Twain said that 'the secret of getting started is breaking your complex, overwhelming

tasks into small manageable tasks, and then starting on the first one'. We'd add to that by suggesting that your team members do one thing at a time and do the most challenging one when they have the most energy for it.

We don't have to look far for things that hijack our focus: emails, instant messaging, phone calls and texts. Making it hard to stray from priorities is about being deliberate with how we allocate time and attention. Encourage team members to allocate breaks and times to return calls and 'batch process' emails into their daily schedules. For anything new that may land on their desks, help them to prioritise ruthlessly, so that they address only the tasks that are truly urgent and important, set a suitable time for tasks that are important but not urgent, delegate tasks that are urgent but not important, and minimise or eliminate ones that are neither urgent nor important.

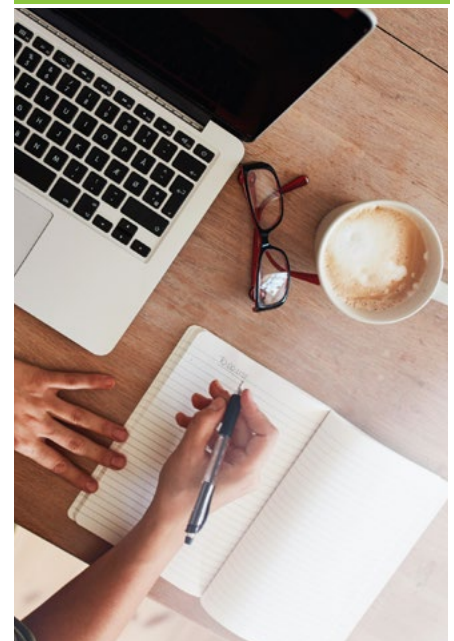
3. Build in rewards to sustain the habit

Cementing productivity as a habit requires a motivating reward. Rewards make habits easier to adopt because they drive an underlying chemical reaction, releasing the neurotransmitters such as dopamine and encouraging your brain to continue the habit (Schultz, 2015). Each of us will be motivated by a different reward. It helps some to think about the impact they want to have on their colleagues or clients. For others, it is about the dopamine hit that you can get from ticking things off before taking a break or going for a walk.

It is understandable that productivity may be a challenge during these uncertain and unprecedented times. Supporting your teams to build their productivity habit, and thereby feel better about their work, might just be the panacea for the disruption to work caused by the pandemic.

Stay safe, stay well, stay productive and wash your hands.

Mark Twain said that 'the secret of getting started is breaking your complex, overwhelming tasks into small manageable tasks, and then starting on the first one'. We'd add to that by suggesting that your team members do one thing at a time and do the most challenging one when they have the most energy for it.



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want to know more?

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We employ our distinctive ideas and processes, and our absolute commitment to delivery, to help clients we care about pursue their inspiring missions.

We work alongside clients who do great work within the sectors they operate, and we are excited to be involved in creating outcomes that truly make a difference.

We are an ethical consulting firm with a strong belief in the work we do, and with a passion to give back to the broader community with the skills and expertise available within our walls.

Right Lane was established in 1997 to help private, not for profit and public sector clients to clarify and accelerate their future plans. Over the past 23 years, we have helped the executive teams and boards of around 300 organisations to define and adapt their direction and strategy, identify and clarify their priorities, align their efforts with their aspirations, get their major projects started and finished, and measure and improve their performance.



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