

Timeout:

9 Things You Can Do to Improve
Business in Turbulent Times

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About the authors:

Jon, Pete, Michael and I are founders of our respective companies and partner up regularly to improve how work gets done in organizations. As a collective of deep marketing, account management, and sales capability specialists, we are unsatisfied with typical capability-building approaches. We are leading an insurgency to help companies get to the bottom line, faster.

As the world takes what executive coach DJ Mitsch calls a “global timeout,”¹ busy strategic leaders and business executives like us are finding new ways to get the work done.

As we adapt to what we hope will be a temporary situation, we are bombarded with advice about how to optimize working from home, as well as tips and webinars from companies to help us convert our training into virtual formats. As we reflect upon the state of work, I can't help but wonder if we're missing the value of this timeout. More than a holding pattern, this moment provides us with a rare opportunity to reset how we do our jobs, permanently.

The pandemic is revealing who we are as a society. As self-help guru Dr. Wayne Dyer used to say, “Circumstances do not make a man, they reveal him.” While these past tragic weeks have revealed our compassion, commitment, ingenuity, and grit as humans, they have also revealed that many of our systems and institutions are broken. Business life—executive work, it would seem—is one of them.

Just look at the some of the advice given thus far: *With offices closed, you now have the time to focus on what's important for your business; Enjoy reconnecting with family at home; Spend time getting to know your customers better, examine your strategies and plans, find new ways to improve the quality of your implementation; Hang out with your kids, cook together, exercise, get things done around the house.*

I can't help but ask:

Aren't these some of the same foundational work and life things we are supposed to be doing in the first place?

Why are these things, elements critical to success and satisfaction, instead considered a luxury? Why do we feel like we're playing hooky because we're not wrapped up in the office grind?

It may be because we hold tightly to the "devoted worker" ideal, where we are emotionally embedded to the work we do and the company we work for. This ideal goes beyond a sense of commitment to a task or obligation. Instead, our work has become inextricably linked to who we are, and we pursue it as our calling, our passion, and a big driver of meaning in our lives. This devoted worker ideal has led to great economic success for our country, the companies we've worked for, and ourselves. In many ways, it embodies the American way of life. But, for where we are today, is being this devoted worker actually useful to each of us? Does it allow us to create the type of good life we dream of? Do we need to fix business life to be better suited to the times, our needs, and our desires?

Before we can answer these questions, it's important to take a quick look at how we got here.

The cult of the devoted worker

Many believe that being a devoted worker is a biologically driven, immutable human truth. You may be surprised to learn that across natural and social science research, little evidence exists to support this. Instead, all things point to the concept of the devoted worker being something our culture constructed to achieve a societal goal. When you look across the millennia in human history, the devoted worker ideal is a relatively new human concept. It came about in the late 1800s during the Industrial Revolution as companies sought new ways to drive production, meet growing demand, and maximize profit.² The devoted worker ideal helped companies extract more commitment, risk-taking, and discretionary effort out of individual workers. For the everyday laborer, you could say it's a bit of a ruse. Since then—for over a century—the advanced use of organizational psychology and scientific management has helped employers, owners, and corporations cultivate and maximize the devoted worker employee as their core asset.

These efforts were successful, no doubt. A steady supply of devoted workers fueled the capitalist work machine and helped secure America's dominance in the 20th century. Being a devoted worker is a value most of us hold deeply today. We seek to work with a company that has purpose and principles aligned to our own. When we join, onboarding programs indoctrinate us with corporate mission statements and company-branded gear. Throughout our tenure, internal programs use the promise of professional development to foster ongoing affinity and work identity, keeping us engaged. We abide by unstated rules about what we should believe and what actions we should take, particularly when it comes to balancing other home and life demands. We accept the constraints, burden, and sacrifice associated with being a successful executive, and proudly display being present, busy, and always "on" when it comes to work.



These hardcore beliefs don't stop at the workplace. When looking at more recent decades, we see how the devoted worker ideal has spilled over into our personal lives. As Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Brigid Schulte writes in her 2014 book, *Overwhelmed*, contemporary American culture views being busy as a badge of honor. Schulte describes that busyness is not just a way of life, but a currency to attain higher social status, whereas leisure makes one irrelevant.³ Technology made this spillover exponential and has left us disassociated with our own self. Recent research is telling: *in 11 experiments involving more than 700 people, the majority of participants reported that they found it unpleasant to be alone in a room with their thoughts for just 6 to 15 minutes.*⁴

This history makes me question: Are we business executives...or busy-ness executives?



Where do we need to go?

In our work, my colleagues Jon, Pete, Michael and I continue to see that the devoted worker ideal is outdated, and worse, is impeding the exact type of work needed for business success in turbulent times. Across our four capability practices, we have become very interested in how people work, because we continue to see the impact to employees' ability to develop and implement novel commercial strategies and tactics that drive sustainable growth for companies:

- Marketers cannot find new ways to create relevant, competitive value when they don't have the time to evaluate how customers differ from each other and to hone deep, segment-specific insight;
- The best sales and account teams are ineffective if they don't have time to understand their local customers and craft long-term approaches over short-term targets;
- Best-in-class commercial frameworks are useless if people just fill out templates without taking the time to apply them thoughtfully, analytically, and creatively to their own business;
- No commercial leader will be able to implement plans, let alone inspire change, if they don't have time to rally and prepare internal teams to deliver flawlessly for customers;
- And for sure, customer experience fails if marketing and sales don't have the time to build a symbiotic working relationship with each other.

As a former manager once lamented, **"When people are so busy putting out fires, they have no time to start their own."** The devoted worker ideal is stealing our business growth engine from the inside.

When it comes to our global timeout, we need to figure out how to do more than jam the same work and content through a virtual channel or stay busy from a desk in a home office. We need to focus on moving critical initiatives forward and being business outcome oriented. Like what's done in an effective timeout at a sporting event, we need to examine our strategy and plays, and rethink some of the fundamentals of what we do as executives. We need to fix our broken business life system once and for all. Here are 9 things you can do to get started...

A Call to Action:

9 Things You Can Do Now to Improve Business

1. Be on a mission to bust up the three unstated rules of a devoted worker
2. Make in-person the exception, not the default
3. Kill the all-day meeting
4. Weave things into the normal flow of work
5. Destroy the shield of activity
6. Turn off the static noise
7. Challenge the cult of the devoted worker
8. Take stock of what's useful
9. Be fearless

1. Be on a mission to bust up the three unstated rules of a devoted worker.

Whether it's said or not, there is an underlying expectation that when it comes to work, we must be (1) in-person, (2) busy, and (3) always on. These rules emerged as a byproduct of presenting our selves as devoted workers. Unfortunately, these rules create unnecessary barriers to doing to the work we really need to be doing, and in enjoying our personal, relational life without perpetual tension and guilt. Across our four practices and from decades-long experience in corporate and non-profit settings, Jon, Pete, Michael and I have neither experienced nor seen research indicating that adherence to these rules leads to better customer and business impact. In fact, the opposite seems true. So, why do we continue to follow these outdated rules? **Why not consider yourself a rule-buster in your own scope of work and inspire others to do the same?**

2. Make in-person the exception, not the default.

Before the Industrial Revolution, most work did not happen at the same time. A shoemaker worked on one shoe from start to finish, irrespective of what the other shoemakers in the shop were doing. As work transformed into industrial manufacturing, shoemaking became a collective, interdependent effort. One shoemaker had to make only one part, while another made only a second part, and their two parts were joined up together by yet another shoemaker. As such, it became critical that workers performed their work together, doing the same thing at the same time.⁵ Eventually, the notion of working together in-person at the same time became the way of office work, too.

As business executives, though, we aren't in an industrial factory. Not all of our work requires us to be in-person doing the same thing at the same time as others. We are in the midst of a grand rule-busting experiment as we are forced to work from home and engage in distant socializing (a better term than "social distancing"), so it's a perfect way to disrupt the in-person default. As you are assessing your priorities and tasks, do what Jon, Pete, Michael and I regularly do: **challenge the habit to be in-person, and examine the value being in-person brings before agreeing to do so.**





3. Kill the all-day meeting.

Executives tend to like all-day and multi-day meetings because it makes working together on an important topic seem efficient, suggesting that a mission has been accomplished. *Let's get cross-functional team members together to set strategy for the next year. Bring in the entire sales force to launch the new promotional campaign.* Sounds familiar? Yet, from a content perspective, meaning and impact often get lost in favor of efficiency. It's unreasonable to think we can solve the strategy, garner support for a new promotional approach, or build deep critical skills all in a day or two. Many of these complex things can only happen gradually, iteratively, or in progressive steps over weeks or months.

One of the aspects of this temporary remote work situation is that all-day workshops and multi-day meetings have become simply untenable. We are now forced to think about what needs to be gained, rather than how to forge through an efficient agenda. As you consider converting large-scale, live meetings into a virtual setting, start with what you hope to achieve, and then work backwards to map out building blocks to get you there. Each building block can become a different small engagement to meet that particular goal: maybe an email, a small set of modules, a task to comment on a document, etc.

**A few simple techniques well presented, an aim clearly seen, are better than a tangled maze of data whirling in disorganized educational chaos
—Bruce Lee**

In our consulting projects, we prefer to package events, content, and learning in small portions over time. Think nourishing snacks versus one grand, seven-course meal. This approach helps people do the thinking, connecting, or internalizing before moving on to the next step. Here are a few examples:

- Pete has conceived a virtual Plan of Action (POA) approach to eliminate the need for large, live sales meetings. The POA occurs in short virtual and on-demand blocks spread over a few weeks, allowing for leaders to assess comprehension along the way and make modifications to ensure sales teams are aligned and ready to sell. It leads to deeper sales team understanding and advocacy for the strategy.
- Michele has developed ways to do strategic planning without multiple, live, cross-functional in-person workshops. By doing planning in mini bites over time via small, informal exchanges, teams are able to gather information in response to emerging questions, remain flexible to uncertainty, as well as better synthesize complex issues and ideas.
- Michael's account management program stages learning over time, building skills incrementally and entrenching important habits and practices that won't go away when training is done.

Across these examples, we see how teams are able to do the thinking rather than feel pressured by an agenda, and leaders are able to deepen cross-functional advocacy and genuine alignment for new initiatives. Forcing too much content and too much activity because it's more efficient when everyone is together prioritizes the venue and location, and not the desired purpose. **By chunking content, strategic readiness becomes a work-in-progress, not a one-off event.**

4. Weave things into the normal flow of work.

Business executives' work is fluid and changes daily; there are often seasons or cycles to the work. Yet, special projects or training often appear as disruptions to these flows. We require people to pause their work to attend a meeting another person is leading, or to step away from work to complete training. Oftentimes, the topic isn't related to our own immediate focus of work. As project or learning leaders, we need to consider how what we want people to do or contribute to fits into the other person's daily work. Can people really focus on strategy when they're up to their ears in budget planning, for instance?

In our consulting work, our approach is to understand and then leverage interventions where they make sense in an employee's individual work:

- Jon developed collaborative tools that allow teams to connect on an important effort in the normal flow of work at a time that works for each of them.
- Michael tackles account planning in real time, including compelling peer and leader exchanges and skill building in step with each phase of the account planning process. Account managers bring their real-world customers and market situation, and engage in guided practice to improve plans they will then use in their day-to-day job.
- Pete developed a program that enables employees in different time zones to work together on a project to reduce operational inefficiencies. Rather than have weekly, two-hour standing calls, the team leader prepares a key topic and content, allowing team members to engage at a time that makes sense for them. The leader later synthesizes their input for the next step.
- Michele is working on a strategic leadership program that will include the use of collaborative tools to foster a women's networking component in a more relevant and authentic way, rather than having to commit to an evening event after a long day at the office.

We can approach our work like judo, taking advantage of natural momentum, rather than like karate, which disrupts natural momentum. We need to make it as easy as possible for employees to make changes in the beliefs, knowledge, and behavior necessary for success. It has to be done with them as opposed to something being done to them.



5. Destroy the shield of activity.

As executives, activity—not impact—often holds our attention. After all, it's what's right in our face and it's straightforward to measure. When we focus on activity, however, people are no longer accountable for the impact. It's easy to hide behind activity when the results aren't good: *We held weekly team meetings on the topic... I met with all the cross-functional stakeholders and showed them my plan... I held a development discussion with each of my direct reports... We had 94% participation in the training course.* Activity becomes a convenient shield for suboptimal outcomes. Yet, holding weekly meetings doesn't mean we came up with something to meet customer need. Showing stakeholders our plan doesn't mean we gained advocacy for it. Holding discussions doesn't mean our direct reports feel engaged. High participation in training doesn't mean our people will use the new skills. For sure, executive work can be detracted by activity.



Performance intelligence is critical for focusing attention on the things that make the biggest difference, as opposed to the things that are just the easiest to measure. Jon, Pete, Michael and I follow former UCLA basketball head coach John Wooden's advice: "Don't mistake activity with achievement." One thing Coach Wooden did was identify the spot on the court where each player shot best, and then designed plays that would get each player into these areas. In our own work we have found that building in creative ways to gather data along the way is essential, whether it's to pinpoint needs before designing solutions or ensuring impact later on:

- We look for demonstration, which means being able to show how you are applying tools, skills, and techniques before putting them into action. For example, we have had participants turn in their strategic plans so they can get feedback and refine them before running off and implementing them. This focus helps us monitor success and adapt when more resources are needed.
- We prioritize job application, making sure new concepts can be readily implemented. We might have participants report back with specific examples of how they are transferring a concept, tools, or skill to the job, and share any challenges or positive outcomes. This focus gives leaders visibility as to where additional support or barrier removal is needed in order to put new concepts into action.

As we pursue our work as executives, we must create circumstances where people cannot hide behind just the activity they do. **We must place impact into our crosshairs.**

6. Turn off the static noise.

Leadership experts and successful leaders themselves agree: high performing executives require a regular practice of stillness for reflection and thought. The fillers of static noise—the addictive allure of being busy and always on—can be soothing, but it gets in the way of what executives need to do to be successful. Idling the brain gives us space to make new observations, form new patterns, and allow new conclusions and ideas to emerge. We are knowledge workers and intellectual workers, not manual workers. As such, we need to keep our minds fit by designating reflective time free of devices and the drone of busy-ness. **We need to be able to be alone with our thoughts.**

In our consulting projects, we create opportunities for stillness and reflection, showing the value of making time for thinking and learning and guiding executives in creating new habits. Techniques can be simple. In a strategic planning effort, send participants some brief information and provide a guided notetaking worksheet to encourage people to engage in fresh observation and ideation before team discussion. Include journaling as part of training programs for learners to internalize content before moving on to the next topic. Allow for silent reflection periods in meetings to disrupt busy-ness and create new thought constructs. We also coach individual leaders in creating reflective structures for themselves, and in encouraging and supporting their teams to do the same.



7. Challenge the cult of the devoted worker.

Be cognizant of the devoted worker ideal that propels our beliefs and actions. That's not suggesting we abandon our American way of life – a timeout doesn't mean leave the field and find a new game altogether. Rather, it means having a break to rest, get water, make substitutions, and go over and potentially revise game strategy and play.

Observe which devoted worker beliefs and actions are being put on hold now due to the current work situation. Evaluate what beliefs about the devoted worker are useful to you and assess what you are getting from these beliefs. Be mindful of what you are thinking and doing, versus plowing along in rote, blind oblivion. Remember, when companies began deploying this concept back in the Industrial Revolution, the devoted worker in turn received a devoted company who ensured long-term stability and job security. We all know how that is no longer the case. So, what's in it for you today?

8. Take stock of what's useful.

Ask yourself, what am I gaining—and what am I losing—as I hold tightly to these devoted worker beliefs? Is what the company gives me in return a fair exchange? What three things are must-do's for success in my business? How might my work priorities and tasks then change? How does keeping work and home separate (versus blended) actually make it more challenging to live the life I truly want? As an interesting historical aside, during the Industrial Revolution, engaging in leisure—not hard work—was the predominant way one displayed high social status.



9. Be fearless.

Experiment now with what happens when the devoted worker rules get busted. What are the consequences to business impact and outcomes, if any? Try a lot of different things out. This global timeout gives us all some air cover—no one will really fault you if something goes wrong, as everything is in turmoil. Make it a point to retire a few plays that simply no longer work and start practicing a few new plays you want to incorporate when you get back on the field.

This global timeout offers us a tremendous opportunity to reset how we do work as executives. If all we do is repackage the same stuff via all-day, online Skype calls, or force ourselves and our teams to sit through extra training just to keep us busy, we've gone from bad to worse. Moreover, we've missed a chance to toss out ineffective strategies and plays that are getting in the way of winning the type of good life we crave for ourselves and our families. Instead, let's reset how work is done in the first place.

As the world of business life slowly gets back to normal we might even find ourselves wondering, **Why would we ever go back to the way it was?**

Notes

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