

# WANT TO BE A GREAT LEADER? HIT THE PAUSE BUTTON

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# For the past decade or so, I have spent a lot of time in organizations getting to know their leaders and how they work.

That inside look has given me a firsthand account of what they are dealing with on a daily basis. Suffice it so say: this is not your father's organization anymore.

For example, the amount of incoming communication is staggering. The average knowledge worker in the U.S. is interrupted every 11 minutes by some form of communication. Every 11 minutes! That kind of distraction takes an unseen toll on us as leaders. Add to that the mountains of data we are generating and the inability to keep up with it, let alone make real sense of it.

Today's leaders are being asked to both do more AND think more. Is that even possible? I'm a fan of multi-tasking but this seems unreasonable. Expecting leaders to succeed in the context of a constant act-more, think-more, produce-more world is self-defeating, at best. At worst, it could be disastrous for our projects, for our teams, and for our health.



So, how do we keep pace and, at the same time, get better as leaders. We do so by questioning—even defying—conventional wisdom.

Let me explain:

As humans we are wired to get things done. The natural bias for action is in our DNA. It's strongly valued by our society. It's heavily reinforced by prominent leaders.

It's an incredibly powerful influence, and I've seen it firsthand. I'm a doer, and so I know how difficult it is to stop and not do something when faced with a challenge. But an experience I had a few years ago offered plenty of evidence for what I call the strategic pause. A major tech company brought me in to coach their top execs during an outdoor business simulation at a leadership retreat. The challenge was a complex scavenger hunt that involved a collaborative, problem-solving session in a natural trail setting.

One more thing: It was also a timed competition. Imagine these extremely driven, highly ambitious executives competing for bragging rights.

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The participants were divided into several small groups, and each team was provided with a map, a compass, and a set of clues (“trail hints”). The objective of the challenge was to follow the clues and earn points based on the level of difficulty in reaching the destination.

My role was to observe the communication patterns and behaviors within one of the groups during the event. I was only allowed to observe and couldn’t provide any type of assistance.

Before the challenge started, my team of executives had two hours to discuss the most productive and efficient way to complete the task. As part of their operation plan, they defined roles, established responsibilities, and set outcome goals to satisfy the key stakeholders. They even elected a “map guru” and a “hint interpreter” to take the lead in solving directional challenges on the trail.

Without getting into the weeds, I can tell you that one element of their strategy involved the team members staying together when they received a clue to leverage the combined brain power of the group.

As all the executives gathered anxiously at the starting line, the whistle blew, and the clock began ticking. My group quickly huddled up to read the first clue. Before most of the team members even finished reading the last line, one executive was convinced that his instincts were correct and darted off to the trees on the left. Another raced toward a dense set of bushes on the right, fully believing that her interpretation was accurate. The rest of the team followed suit and scattered frantically.

Immediate action. No brainstorming. No communication. Needless to say, abandoning the strategy (and the compass) was probably the least effective way to compete.

This was a key topic of discussion during our debriefing session. In hindsight, they could see how the competitive adrenaline rush and the time pressure ignited their natural bias for action. In the heat of the moment, they felt compelled—even obligated—to DO SOMETHING. To dive in and make it happen. Forget the strategy. Ditch the plan.

The need to act was like an uncontrollable reflex they couldn't stop, even though it wasn't according to plan and it was sabotaging their performance.

One by one, they tried to explain this overwhelming urge to take action, and the underlying theme was the same: **They just didn't feel like they were making a contribution to the team by standing still.**

But here's the real lesson: In the quiet before the competition began, they came up with a really smart plan. The quiet time allowed them to think and really hone their idea to a fine edge. When the heat was on, they abandoned it, but to their credit, came back to it and found that their plan was a good one.

So how often do we as executives and leaders take a strategic pause to get quiet and really think through what we should do next? Or spend time letting everything we've consumed in a day or week to marinate, so that we can begin to see connections or opportunities that otherwise might pass us by? Do we even value such a thing in our always-on, stay-busy world?

For most of the past 100 years, we have seen people who take action as strong, disciplined, respected, and successful. Those who don't? They are quickly classified as lazy or lacking in drive and ambition. The undeniable message comes through loud and clear: If we want to succeed, we need to act.

The reinforcement goes even deeper. As professionals, we are often rewarded for our ability to take action and get things done. It's a habit that organizations cultivate in their high potentials and reward in their top executives. At any level of the organization, corporate action-takers are considered valuable assets.

So, why is it so difficult to put the brakes on this acquired habit? Let's take a look at a couple of possibilities:

**1 | First of all, the pressure to “do more” is quickly intensifying.**

The natural tendency for action has been unnaturally elevated in today's fast-isn't-fast-enough business environment. Greater competition. Increased market complexity. Shorter product life cycles.

The expectations associated with action as a catalyst for success have exponentially increased. Leaders are now feeling pressure in unimaginable ways, as the bias for action has morphed into a bias for frenzy. Think about how that happened: The 24-hour news cycle has amplified the impression of incessant busy-ness. Social media has created the perceived obligation to be perpetually connected.

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The promises of greater efficiency that came with our technological breakthroughs have actually fed an addiction to constant accessibility. At the end the day, all of us are left with the distinct impression that action isn't enough. To keep pace with the rest of the world, we need continuous action...and continuous acceleration.

But let's be honest: That's completely exhausting and, at some point, impossible. Action for the sake of action doesn't produce results.

## **2 | Secondly, leaders are expected to produce more innovation more often.**

At the same time leaders are feeling the pressure to take action at the dizzying pace of business, they are also expected to be more innovative and visionary. Organizations are feeling the heat of intense competition, so they push their leaders to rev up everything related to planning and strategy development. All the time. The foot never comes off the gas.

The dilemma is apparent. All these big-picture-thinking activities require the time and, more importantly, the "mental space" to ponder the alternatives and envision vastly different solutions. Essentially this establishes starkly competing goals and there's a high probability that more action will lead to less thinking. Which is a significant business problem when innovation is at a premium.

And while constant motion might look like success on the outside, it could actually be undermining our leadership efforts in enormous ways.

Neuroscientists at Washington University tested this theory by collecting brain-scan data from people who were busy doing mental tasks like math problems and word games. While the intense focus of these tasks caused spikes in some parts of the brain, it also caused declines in other parts.

These researchers ultimately found a background activity in the brain that, oddly enough, is much more active when people are sitting quietly in a room doing nothing. That's a pivotal finding.

They discovered that the "resting brain" is actually quite busy with absorbing and evaluating information, but we curtail that function when we allow the "active brain" to hijack all the mental energy. If we want creativity to flourish, we need to deliberately pause on occasion and allow that background process to take priority.

Maximum effectiveness and innovation start with...STOPPING. Pausing to rest and think and just "be." Surprising? You bet! Profitable? Absolutely!

Top organizations worldwide are tapping into this wisdom, including the Walt Disney Company, General Mills, and Google. Instead of trying to push employees to do more, they regularly give them time to stop and think.

That decision isn't just about creating a cool corporate culture or reducing employee stress. Executives within these organizations have seen bottom-line benefits from this practice, ranging from higher performance and productivity to more innovative ideas. Greater mental space is an approach that pays off in dollars and cents.



So, how do we as leaders do this? Let me suggest some ways:

### 1 | **Deliberately hit “pause.”**

Set time aside every day (or at least every week) to give yourself the mental space you need to percolate, to reflect on all the information you have consumed, and connect it in unusual ways. It can help you gain remarkable clarity and think about challenges on a bigger, broader level.

Become intentional about BEING rather than just DOING. More specifically, seek out the perfect balance between acting and thinking. Not procrastinating or delaying without purpose. It's about pausing to strategize before moving forward at full speed. Find the equilibrium that provides your short-cut to success. Commit to it, and make it happen.

Yes, I know that will feel awkward at first. Your calendar is probably jam-packed with meetings and commitments, so it might seem unnecessarily selfish to mark off some “me time.” Don't let that stop you. Consider this an unbreakable appointment with yourself. Make this a habit.

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## 2 | **Model this practice.**

You already know that “doing nothing” has developed a bad reputation, so you can become one of the trailblazers who changes that perception. Remember: Your team members are closely watching how you act and react to every situation.

Demonstrate the value of having both a bias for action and a bias for thinking.

Be transparent with your team members about the need to step away and contemplate the alternatives.

Openly share with your employees the insights you gain from taking that downtime, explaining how those can benefit the team and the organization overall.

The added benefit to modeling the strategic pause is reinforcing your executive presence. Great leaders are known for thoughtful, measured consideration rather than knee-jerk reactions and uncontrolled emotions. Taking time to think adds to the impression that you have the composure and confidence to make thoughtful, well-reasoned decisions.

## 3 | **Encourage your team to pause.**

As a leader, you have the power and influence to help your team members develop new habits that can make them more productive. Make sure they also have time in their schedules to stop and think. That’s tricky when deadlines are tight, but the long-term benefits will be worth it. Give them the calendar space that encourages them to give it a try.

You'll probably discover that leaders aren't the only ones fighting the emotional tug to act rather than think. Just help your employees understand that it's a priority, and an important part of meeting their individual achievements. It's up to you to guide them, insisting they occasionally hit the brakes to reflect on their progress and goals.

Leaders who can smash the age-old bias for action and perfect the unconventional art of the strategic pause will reap a multitude of rewards. Mastering this ability—the nuanced judgment call of knowing when to pause and when to act—leads directly to greater productivity, improved performance, increased innovation, and measurable benefits.

## Still Much Work to Do

As hard as it may be to believe, the world is getting better in almost every way. The number of people living in extreme poverty has plummeted from 75% in 1950 to less than 10% today. Over the past two hundred years the number of people who could read and write went from just a fraction of the world to almost 80% in the modern era. More than half of the world lives in democracy. We are living longer and healthier lives, and primarily because of innovation and industrialization, the future looks bright.

But there is no guarantee that these encouraging trends will continue. It will take continued diligence and great leadership. It behooves us as leaders to get even better at what we do to meet the new challenges that face us going forward.

The problems of poverty and illiteracy are still not solved—and democracy is not guaranteed. Strong economies and strong businesses can keep the needle moving on these issues and many others only if organizations both big and small have leaders who are at their best, who can develop evolutionary ideas, and can lead others into the future. The scavenger hunt we are on is a much more serious one.

**Yes, it's time to do something. And that something is making an unbreakable appointment with ourselves to take a strategic pause. 📌**



# Info



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