

Breathing Space



The critical measure of executive success is not how much money you make, but how much breathing space you have in your life.

BREATHING SPACE IS THE ABILITY to experience a sense of peace and calm despite your surroundings—knowing that you have the room to be, explore, and choose.

Few people today have a sense of breathing space in their lives. Leisure time, if they manage to eke out any at all, is forced in between periods of frenzied activity. We all need breathing space to ensure that we have the energy, creativity, and resolve to meet the challenges we face.

Virtually all of us frequently feel pressed for time, failing to see the big picture and blaming ourselves for being ineffective time managers. We believe that if we could just get "caught up," once and for all, everything would be okay. But the truth is that time management can no longer provide the benefits that it did when the world was far less complex—characterized by clearly defined roles, linear progression, and producers verses consumers.

Five Mega-Realities

Today five "mega-realities" impact each of us: population growth, expanding knowledge, mass media growth, the paper trail, and abundant choice.

1. Population growth. The world is becoming more crowded all the time. Each day, world population increases by more than 260,000 people. Every 33 months, 257 million people, the current population of North America, is added to the planet. Since 1960, the U.S. population has increased from 180 million to 257 million. And our growing population is not dispersed over the nation's 5.4 million square miles. About 97 percent of the U.S. population resides on 3 percent of the land mass. Predictably, more densely packed urban areas suffer from a gridlock of the transportation system. Some 86 percent of American commuters still get to work by automobile, and 84

percent of inner city travel is by automobile. The average American now commutes 157,600 miles to work during his life, equal to six times around the earth. Even suburban areas will face unending traffic dilemmas. Shoppers, air travelers, vacationers, even campers—everyone in motion—will feel the side effects of population growth.

2. Expanding knowledge. Over-information wreaks havoc on the receptive capacities of the unwary. More words are published or broadcast in a day than we could comfortably ingest in the rest of our lives. By far, America leads the world in the sheer volume of information generated and disseminated.

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Increasingly, there is no body of knowledge that everyone can be expected to know. In its 140th year, for example, the Smithsonian Museum added 942,000 items to its collections. Since 1966, more than 60,000 words have been added to the English language—equal to half or more of the words in some languages. Harvard Library subscribes to 160,000 journals and periodicals.

Too many legislators, regulators, and others intentionally add to the information glut. We are saddled with 26-page laws that could be stated in two pages, and with regulations that contradict themselves. Impossible VCR manuals, insurance policies, sweepstakes instructions, and frequent flyer bonus plans all contribute to our immobility.

3. Media growth. As we spend more hours tuned to electronic media, we are exposed to thousands of messages and images. In America, more than three out of five television households own VCRs, while the number of movie tickets sold and videos rented exceeds one billion annually. There are now 339 full-power independent television stations. Many cable TV subscribers receive up to 140

channels that offer more than 72,000 shows per month. The average American spends more than eight years watching TV.

To capture overstimulated, distracted viewers, television and other news media increasingly rely on sensationalism. Media are furnished with an endless supply of turmoil for mass transmission. At any given moment, somebody is fomenting revolution somewhere. Such turmoil is packaged daily for the evening news, whose credo has become, "If it bleeds, it leads." We are lured with images of crashes, hostages, and natural disasters. With its sensationalized trivia, the mass media obscures fundamental issues that do merit concern. Meanwhile, broadcasters regularly imply that it is uncivil or immoral not to tune into the daily news.

Being more selective in what you give your attention to and controlling how long you give it make more sense. For example, tomorrow morning, quietly envision how you would like your day to be. Include everything that's important to you. Envision talking with others, making major decisions, having lunch, attending meetings, finishing projects, and walking out in the evening. You'll experience a greater sense of peace.

The notion of "keeping up" with and "controlling" everything is illusory, frustrating, and self-defeating. The sooner you give it up, the better you'll feel and function. Keen focus on a handful of priorities has never been more important. Yes, some compelling issues must be given short shrift. Otherwise, you run the risk of feeling overwhelmed by more demanding issues, and feeling overwhelmed always exacerbates feeling overworked.

4. Paper trails. Americans annually consume more than 660 pounds of paper per person; by contrast, the Japanese consume about 400 pounds per person; people in Europe, Russia, Africa, Australia, and South America consume far less. Americans today are consuming at least three times as much paper as 10 years ago. The long-held prediction of paperless offices, for now, is a laugher.

In the last decade, growth in the volume of third-class bulk mail (junk mail) was 13 times faster than growth in the population. The typical executive receives more than 225 pieces of unsolicited mail each month, or about 12 pieces daily.

For the foreseeable future, you're likely to be up to your eyeballs in paper. Having too much paper to deal with is going to make you feel overwhelmed and overworked. Start clearing the in-bins of your mind and your desk. Regard each piece of paper entering your personal domain as a potential mutineer or rebel.

Each sheet has to earn its keep and remain worthy of retention.

5. *An abundance of choices.* In 1969, Alvin Toffler predicted that we would be overwhelmed by too many choices. He said that this would inhibit action, result in greater anxiety, and trigger the perception of less freedom and less time. Having choices is a blessing of a free market economy. Like too much of everything else, however, having too many choices leads to the feeling of being overwhelmed and exhausted.

Periodically, the sweetest choice is choosing to actually have what you've already chosen. More important is to avoid engaging in low-level decisions. Whenever you catch yourself about to make a low-level decision, consider: does this really make a difference? Get in the habit of making fewer decisions each day—the ones that count.

A Combined Effect

Lacking a balance between work and play, responsibility and respite, "getting things done" can become an end-all. We function like *human doings* instead of *human beings*. Executing the items on our growing "to do" lists has become linked with feelings of self-worth.

We seem poised to accommodate a frenzied, time-pressured existence, as if this is the way life is supposed to be.

I have a different vision. I see Americans leading balanced lives, with rewarding careers, happy home lives, and the ability to enjoy themselves. Our ticket to living and working at a comfortable pace is to not accommodate a way of being that doesn't support us, and address the true nature of the problem head-on.

The combined effect of the five mega-realities will continue to accelerate our feelings of pressure. The good news is that forging a more palatable existence can occur person by person. You, for example, are whole and complete right now, and you can achieve balance in your life. You are not your position. You are not your tasks. They don't define you, and they don't constrain you.

Each of the five mega-realities will proliferate. You can't handle everything, nor is making the attempt desirable. You cannot indiscriminately take in the daily deluge that our culture heaps on each of us and expect to feel anything but overwhelmed. It is time to make choices about what is best—what merits your attention and action. EE