The Activity Trap

Every manager should be aware of the Activity Trap. As a manager, you have a twofold responsibility: (1) to manage your own time well and (2) to assist your staff to manage their time well.

George Odiorne, the well-known expert on management by objectives has given considerable attention to the enigma of the Activity Trap. In his book, *MBOII*, he highlights these problems:
1. People get so enmeshed in activity that they lose sight of the purpose of their work.
2. People caught in the Activity Trap diminish the capability rather than growth.
3. The Activity Trap originates at the top of the organization and extends to the lowest levels.
4. Organizations that have become Activity Traps kill motivation of people working in them.
5. Most problems don’t get solved in the activity-centered organization, and some problems get worse.
6. Activity-centered managers avoid reality by converting it into something else.

Getting caught up in the Activity Trap has serious implications all of which lessen one’s own productivity as well as the productivity of the organization as a whole. Here are some of the obvious implications:
1. Primary attention is given to “doing things right” rather than “doing the right things.”
2. There is a lack of useful framework for establishing priorities and sorting out activities.
3. Long-term goals are given a back seat (or no seat at all) to immediate activities.
4. Little thought is given to innovation and how to do things better, to reduce the gap between the “is” and the “should be.”
5. The problem is simply exacerbated when managers attempt to work harder than work smarter.

Is there a way out of the Activity Trap? The specialists in time management have provided a procedure for escaping the tentacles of the Activity Trap. It is a straightforward exercise consisting of the following steps. You will need to be completely honest with yourself and others to accomplish this goal.
The Activity Trap

State the goal of your department for the following year:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Write 3-5 objectives for the following year:

1. We Will______________________________________________________________
2. We Will______________________________________________________________
3. We Will______________________________________________________________
4. We Will______________________________________________________________
5. We Will______________________________________________________________

Systematically record how you spend your time in a given week. In 15-minute increments, keep tally of the things that you do in each day. Be honest, if you socialize with others, write it down. You will be using this information to increase your time and to assure yourself that you are working toward your goals.

The next step is to align your daily routine with the objectives of your department. Using a pack of 3x5 cards, write the goal of your department and then write one objective per index card. You will then use the grid that follows to place the 15-minute increments under the appropriate objectives.
You may find that you have a number of items that are not related to any of your objectives. Or you may discover that the time allotments with certain activities are not consistent with relative importance of the objectives that these activities support. Any of these findings should give you reason to ponder over how you are spending your time. Think about how you invest your time in the “Activity Trap” and how you can better utilize those increments of time to have more time to achieve your goals for your department.

Action Steps

Once you have objectively evaluated your time and your “time management” consider investing in an action plan to better invest your time into achieving your goals. Where can you better utilize your time to dedicate more time to your goals as a department or personal goals?

Step:
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
________________
Step:
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
________________
Step:
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
________________
Step:
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
________________
Step:
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
__________________________________
________________
Plan of Action

Write up a plan of action for you to accomplish your goals. Also use a “to do” list to assist you in accomplishing your department goals and personal goals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TO DO</th>
<th>TO DO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ____________________________</td>
<td>1. ____________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ____________________________</td>
<td>2. ____________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. ____________________________</td>
<td>3. ____________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ____________________________</td>
<td>4. ____________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. ____________________________</td>
<td>5. ____________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. ____________________________</td>
<td>6. ____________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. ____________________________</td>
<td>7. ____________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. ____________________________</td>
<td>8. ____________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. ____________________________</td>
<td>9. ____________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. ___________________________</td>
<td>10. ___________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. ___________________________</td>
<td>11. ___________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. ___________________________</td>
<td>12. ___________________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>