



Spontaneity

By

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*Insights on Productivity: Ideas from Industry Professionals
on Getting More Done in the Workplace*

What:

It's amazing what a new day can bring. Just when you think you have the day all planned out, something unexpected happens. Living in upstate New York, winter brings many of those unpredictable moments, and today was no exception. I awoke to discover that there was more snow on the ground; a blanket of white fluff covered the landscape. Earlier this week spring was in the air—new streams and puddles had formed in my yard, birds chirped excitedly including the squawking of the geese returning north, and a lone crocus eagerly popped its head out of the damp soil ready to add color to the dreary winter palette. As I write this, the fluffy white blanket is back, and I am heading out with my trusted old shovel ready to tackle my driveway yet again! One minute it is a perfect spring day, the next temperatures return to single digits—how quickly it all can change. Oh, how I so enjoy the spontaneity of it all!

I certainly hadn't planned to shovel the driveway this morning, a 45 minute task at least! The interesting thing is that I feel wonderfully refreshed and rejuvenated. I was able to accommodate this blip, an unexpected event—although one would argue that snow in March could never be considered unexpected! It's not going to throw my day off, if anything I'm more excited about facing the tasks in front of me. Why? Because I did something unplanned, something that was fun and energizing and something different from the ordinary daily routine. Yet, I can quickly get back to my priorities for the day, without missing a beat.

So What:

How many times have you had the opportunity to take advantage of something different or something that you love to do only to find you had to turn it down because you already felt so overloaded? Or, worse yet, you are presented with the opportunity and you are *expected* to do it; to add it to an already huge pile of responsibilities. For most of us the ability to do something new or something we enjoy is just what we want, a change of pace. How sad is it that this sense of excitement is accompanied by such a draining feeling?

Unfortunately, I see this “let down” all too often in my clients' lives. Something new comes in and it triggers a feeling of foreboding, instead of excitement...just one more thing to do—when it should be viewed as an exhilarating release from the monotony of our daily lives. We begin to ask ourselves, “*Will I ever get a break from this routine?*”

Take the senior executive that I work with. We began working together because she wanted to stop feeling so overwhelmed. She was looking for a better way to manage her responsibilities so she would have time for “other” things. We implemented a number of



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strategies including a new paper management process, a tickler file, effective use of e-mail and improved delegation skills for administrative tasks. She understood that changing habits was what it was all about. She also realized that changing habits isn't always easy and opted for ongoing "check-ins" to keep the new habits "in-check".

We had been working together for several months, and she was making great progress. Then I arrived one morning for our work session and sensed that something was a little off. There were a few piles on her desk, and the work table that she used for her project work was completely covered. Clearly she was in the midst of something big. Well...you know the feeling when the boss gets up from the desk, walks to the door, closes it, turns, sits back down and pauses... you know something is up, you can feel it in the air. This was one of those moments.

Client: As she points to her tickler system she says, *"I don't think that this is working for me. I've got this 80 hour project that came in and it will demand all of my time. In the meantime none of that (again pointing to his tickler system) is getting done...it's just sitting there, staring at me...what good is that?"*

Me: *"This 80 hour project is your top priority?"*

Client: *"Yes, it's a great business opportunity."*

Me: *"Before we worked together, how would you have handled your work load and this opportunity?"*

Client: *"My regular work would have taken a back seat, it would have waited."*

Me: *"And now, you take the time to gather up everything that has come in, assess what the next step is, when it needs to be done, and integrate it into you process, correct?"*

Client: *"Yes."* (Showing a faint smile)

Me: *"With this strategy, you then know where everything is. That's different than 6 months ago isn't it?"*

Client: *"Well... yes."* (A sense of calm begins to return)

Me: *"So, what I'm seeing is that you have clarity about what needs to be done. Prioritization has happened, there is a sense of order and your ability to focus has improved dramatically. Now, for the first time these new habits are being challenged by a spontaneous event."*

Client: *"Correct."* (A quizzical look comes over her face)

Me: *"I think that you've done an excellent job! You immediately focused your efforts on your top priority, this key business opportunity. It seems to me that the processes we've put in place have allowed you to do just what you wanted to do—be responsive to business opportunities as they arise, and then get back on track, pick up where you left off, without missing a beat. And, (gesturing to the tickler system), you know exactly*



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where everything is and in what priority you will need to tackle it once business gets "back to normal". It looks as though your new strategies are working just fine."

Client: After a long pause to contemplate, that look of, "Okay wise guy, you were right!" is given. With a smile on her face, she says, "Yea, ok...let's get to work."

This was the first time that she had encountered spontaneity since changing her work habits. She was befuddled as to how to handle it. Having created a work environment that was organized, focused, and productive she was startled when she was thrown a curve ball. Startled in a different way however. In the past, when something "popped up" chaos would ensue. That was how she was used to reacting and she immediately kicked into that mode of...*my new system isn't working, just like my old system didn't!* In reality, this was a test of the new system; could it handle an unexpected event?

The good news is she quickly saw how the environment that we created served as an automatic "reboot". It allowed her to return to her responsibilities with a sense of control and confidence, knowing what her next steps would be. When I returned a few weeks later, the 80 hour project was complete and business had returned to normal. As I entered her office, she was prioritizing her workload. When she finished, she picked up the pile of paper, slammed it down on her desk and exclaimed, "*This is all a pile of poo!*" (a polite way of saying...well, you get the drift) and tucked it back into that day's file.

She shared with me several observations that she had made:

- It was easy to get back on track after the unexpected project. In fact, major progress on a number of other items had been made since then.
- She could successfully and confidently incorporate spontaneous opportunities into her every day workload.
- Those things that gave her comfort—the paper calendar, the occasional small pile on her desk, the ability to spread-out on her work table to tackle a project, did not have to be given up.
- A lot of the things she thought she should do really weren't important.

There was an air of energy and excitement in the office that day!

Now What?

So how does one go about being able to accommodate (and enjoy) spontaneity without spiraling out of control? Interestingly enough in the case of this senior executive, it boiled down to two key habits. Let's take a look at what worked.

Habit #1: Establishing a "command post" for all of the information coming her way was crucial. Whether it was e-mail, voice mail, paper, verbal requests, or her thoughts, they are all captured in one centralized location. Bottom line, she knew where everything was; items were no longer scattered on multiple lists, sticky notes, or bouncing around in her head like popcorn.



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Habit #2: Anything new that came her way was greeted by one of five decisions:

- Can this information be discarded?
- Who can I delegate this to?
- Can I take immediate action and move this item out?
- Does this information belong in a reference file?
- If action on my part is required, what is the next action I need to take, and when will I take it?

Once she has answered the last question, the item would be added to her command post. It could end up in today's file or sometime next week, or even next month or next quarter...she knows that it is safe. Now when a spontaneous opportunity presents itself, she turns to her command post, assesses the next several days workload, asks those five questions again, reprioritizes accordingly, begins work on that new opportunity (now the number one priority), and returns to the command post upon completion—confident in the fact that she knows where everything is and what comes next.

Indeed she has accomplished her objective of being able to handle everything coming at her. She is ready to take on the next spontaneous event!

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