

Avoiding the Tyranny of the Immediate

By Russ Linden

Managing an enterprise
requires keeping the
focus on “the main thing”
and not being distracted
by the daily tasks and
deadlines that always
seem urgent.

Some years ago, I was consulting for a federal government client of about 30,000 employees on an ambitious organizational change effort. The prospects for this effort appeared good. Its external environment was changing quickly, its senior leaders seemed quite committed to the change effort, and most employees thought that change was long overdue, as did many of its key stakeholders and customers.

Yet, after six months and an excellent start, our project slowed down. I asked the people leading various change task forces what was going on, and the most frequent explanation was this: “Oh, that was OBE” — overtaken by events.

I was struck by the demeanor of these people. They were all eager for change, but they talked about the project being OBE in a very matter-of-fact manner, as though they never expected it to succeed. Some had invested hundreds of hours in their project; surely they felt a lot of disappointment. Yet they might as well have been reporting on the weather. Why was that? When I asked one of them (a savvy veteran of the agency), he paused, smiled and said, “Think of it this way. Our deputy director starts the daily senior management team meet-

ing by discussing what he just heard on NPR an hour earlier. So it’s no surprise that they get distracted. In this organization, ‘short term’ means this week; ‘long term’ means this month.”

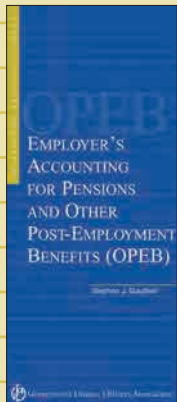
This organization’s leaders, like so many, were victims of what some call “the tyranny of the immediate.” What pops up in the e-mail inbox becomes the current priority. Everything seems to be due by close of business today. Work life is a series of urgent (but not necessarily important) tasks and deadlines.

The tyranny of the immediate has many causes. One of them, sadly, is that some people get hooked by the rush to meet endless and urgent deadlines, by feeling constantly in demand and terribly important. But for those of you who aren’t impressed by 16-hour workdays and a BlackBerry that never pauses, there are ways to avoid this condition. Here’s a starter list:

- **Turn off the visual and audio alerts made by incoming e-mails.** They only reduce your productivity.
- **Consult periodically with a diverse set of important stakeholders and customers.** Ask them about their priorities and expectations of your organization. This allows you to be proactive in keeping your finger on the pulse of your immediate environment. If you don’t seek out feedback from the groups you’re most interested in, you’ll

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by Stephen J. Gauthier

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continually be in a reactive mode — responding only to those who are complaining or have an ax to grind.

- **Practice “managing by wandering around.”** Visit operational units to learn about their successes and challenges. Visit partner organizations to see how they’re dealing with trends that are affecting you. And take one or more members of your team with you on these trips, so you have a shared experience to examine together.
- **Take some quiet time.** The tyranny of the immediate, by definition, provides no time to reflect. But reflection and analysis are especially important when we’re paddling in turbulent waters. And quiet time only occurs away from the action of daily operations. Whether it’s a formal staff retreat, a book on a very different topic, or a long walk with a trusted friend, be sure to give yourself time to reflect and rejuvenate.
- **Create a “kitchen cabinet.”** Gather a small group of trusted people whose judgment you respect and use them as a sounding board. Share your ideas and concerns, and ask for their candid reactions. It helps if they bring different perspectives. And they must be people who want you to succeed and expect nothing in return.
- **Perhaps most important, remember this: “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.”** This advice comes from Jim Barksdale, a wise and super-smart high-tech leader who served as a senior executive at companies including FedEx and Netscape. Barksdale preached this over and over; everyone in his companies knew he was serious about his mantra.

Keeping the main thing the main thing may sound a bit cutesy or simplistic. But it’s incredibly important and equally hard to do. It requires knowing what the “main thing” is for your organization, namely what the key objective or principle is that you’ll always embrace and protect. At 3M, the main thing is to continually foster innovation; 3M people never badmouth a new idea. At the U.S. Government Accountability Office, the main thing is neutral competence and credibility.

In their book, *Great by Choice*, Jim Collins and Morten Hansen describe private-sector firms that have excelled in turbulent and chaotic environments. Every one of them has maintained a fanatical consistency, even during the most trying of times. They act consistently with their values, with long-term goals, and with performance standards. They don’t overreact to great times or depressing ones. They eagerly support innovation when its potential is supported with evidence. They understand and protect their main thing.

The tyranny of the immediate is as much a threat to our public agencies as it is to private firms. Our work world isn’t about to slow down, technology will continue to bombard us with more information, and customers and managers will keep reacting to multiple issues they regard as urgent. But we can prevent the tyranny of the immediate from controlling us. We have to, if we’re to focus on our main thing. ■

RUSS LINDEN is a management educator and author. His major areas of expertise include change management, performance improvement, and collaboration.