5 WAYS TO BE MORE PRODUCTIVE WITH A FOCUS ON STRENGTHS

Strategies from a global coaching company

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INTRODUCTION

Whether you are trying to make a major impact in your career, accelerate a current project or turn around a situation, being productive and making the most of your time and energy should be top of mind. Easier said than done!

We are all human and therefore procrastinate, don't know how to get going or tend to go off on tangents causing us to fall short of our desired outcomes.

Churchill Leadership Group, Inc. wants to provide you effective strategies that are practical to implement to get you going and speed you up.

“It’s not enough that we do our best; sometimes we have to do what’s required.”
- Winston Churchill
STRATEGY #1
KEEP YOUR SMART GOALS CLEAR AND VISIBLE

The reason and basis for your productivity should be super clear and remain in your line of sight. We know what SMART goals are, yet few of us have them. “Common knowledge is not common practice!” as we often say at Churchill, to remind ourselves and the corporate leaders and teams we coach.

Whatever goal or outcome is important to you, make it SMART:
- Specific – goals should be simplistically written and clearly define what you are going to do.
- Measurable – so that you have tangible evidence that you have accomplished the goal.
- Attainable – they should stretch you in order for you to feel challenged, yet attainable.
- Realistic – you can meet any goal when they are realistic; realistic goals motivate people.
- Time bound – goals should be linked to a time frame that creates a practical sense of urgency.

Making your goal(s) SMART means you have to write them down and that is the magic. When we write a goal down it becomes more real and permanent. There is powerful data about writing down your goals, including that quoted in the book “What They Don’t Teach You in the Harvard Business School” by Mark McCormack. In the book, we hear of a study where students were asked, “Have you set clear, written goals for your future and made plans to accomplish them?” Just 3% had written goals; 13% had goals, but not in writing; and 84% had no specific goals at all. Here’s the “persuading” point...

Ten years after that study, those students were interviewed again. The 13% who had goals were earning an estimated 2x more than the 84% who had no goals at all. Yet, the 3% who had written goals were earning, on average, 10x as much as the other 97% all together.

OUR RECOMMENDATION

At Churchill, we recommend making sure your goals are front and visible as the business of life will distract you. When we coach clients on the importance of effective goals, setting this simple strategy keeps them focused.

The moral of this strategy is to make your goal(s) SMART, write them down and keep them in front of you!
STRATEGY #2
PRIORITIZE IMPORTANT VS URGENT TASKS

Ever felt at the end of a busy day you didn’t get much achieved? We all experience days like this, and we hear this complaint often from new Churchill clients. Great time management means being effective as well as efficient and spending your time and energy on things that are important and not just urgent. What is the difference between an “Urgent” task you have and an “Important” one? To minimize the stress of having too many “to dos” and tight work deadlines, it’s important to understand this distinction:

- **IMPORTANT** activities have an outcome that leads to the achievement of your goals (professional or personal).
- **URGENT** activities demand immediate attention and are often associated with achieving someone else’s goals.

Note: Based on the definition of “important,” it is key to have your clear SMART goals defined.

Unfortunately, urgent activities are often the activities we concentrate our time on; they demand attention because they are calling you from your inbox or pile up from your many meetings. These urgent tasks are top of mind and often the consequences of not dealing with them are immediate.

Plot your tasks on paper or mentally using the Eisenhower grid. Using it helps you overcome the natural tendency to focus on urgent activities, so that you can keep clear enough time to focus on what’s really important. This is the way you move from “fire-fighting” into a position where you can grow your business and your career.
STRATEGY #3
USE THE 80/20 RULE

Strategy #3 can help you prioritize in #2. The Pareto principle, commonly known as the 80/20 rule, tells us that some things are going to be more important than others. This is used in the sales world when targeting the right customers. Simply put, it is based on the principle that 20% of effort/targets yield 80% of the result (or problem). Fundamentally, here is what happens:

- 20% of our input give 80% of our output
- 20% of the causes give us 80% of the consequences
- 20% of the effort give 80% of the result

For example, by focusing your efforts on the 20% of customers who give you 80% of your business, your returns will be significantly higher than chasing customers in the 80% group who only give you 20% of your income. This approach helps you select and invest time, energy and valuable resources in customers.

To apply the 80/20 rule, consistently review your calendar and tasks to prioritize your time. Plan forward using the 80/20 rule by day, by week, even month and quarter depending on your role and personal style. Reflect back on each day through the lens of the 80/20 rule and observe how well you did. Observe what helped you do well and feel good about it. Identify what you might need to tweak going forward.

Go a little further using 80/20 plus delegation: Don't throw away your time by doing non-highly productive work. Determine your hourly rate, then identify tasks in terms of the 3 Ds:

- **DO**: Worth your hourly rate for you to do it - so take it on!
- **DELEGATE**: Needs to get done but you can pay someone less than your hourly rate to do it.
- **DON'T**: What you need to stop doing because the return is no longer worth the time and energy.

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USE YOUR TIME WISELY.
START TO PUT A CLEAR VALUE TO EACH TASK.

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STRATEGY #4
USE THE POMODORO TECHNIQUE

The Pomodoro Technique® was developed by Francesco Cirillo and it is all about taking regular physical and mental breaks. Cirillo named it after the tomato shaped kitchen timer he used to take his own regular 25-minute scheduled breaks. The Pomodoro Technique is simple and includes the following:

- Each 25-minute session of focused work = 1 Pomodoro.
- When you complete 1 Pomodoro, take a 5-minute break before starting the next.
- When you have completed 4 Pomodori, take a longer break to rest and recharge.

IT MIGHT SEEM COUNTER-INTUITIVE TO TAKE SO MANY BREAKS, BUT RESEARCH SHOWS THIS ACTUALLY ENHANCES OUR FOCUS.
At first, it might seem counter-intuitive to take so many breaks, but research shows that this actually enhances our focus when we return to the task we’re working on.

During these 25-minute timed sessions, focus your full attention on your chosen priority. Because it is only 25 minutes, it is easier than you think. Don’t allow yourself to become distracted if ideas or thoughts pop into your head. Write these ideas down on a notepad if you must so you don’t forget them, but then set the notepad aside. If this notepad list keeps distracting you, consider adjusting your schedule to devote your next Pomodoro session to it. If you complete your work before your timer goes off, use the remaining time for other short tasks.

When your timer goes off, take your 5-minute break. Be sure to do this even if you are “on a roll” because these regular breaks will restore your mental energy and improve productivity greater than the five minutes.

During breaks move around, take a short walk, climb stairs, get a glass of water or visit a colleague across the office. This regular activity is sufficient to avoid the ill-health issues that arise when your large muscles are inactive for hours sitting at your desk.

After 4 Pomodori sessions, take your longer 25-minute break. Go for a walk, practice mindfulness, get a healthy snack, network or read a book. Consider doing whatever activity gives you the best break from your desk and clears your mind. Listen to your body.

Experiment using the Pomodoro technique to see if it works better for you in the morning or afternoon (or both!). Once you have found your ideal pattern you will be amazed at what you can achieve in a day.
STRATEGY #5
A FOCUS ON STRENGTHS

Not every productivity best practice will work for every person, simply because each person is unique. At Churchill Leadership Group, one of the foundations for our executive coaching and leadership development workshops is helping individuals and teams realize and leverage their strengths every day. Your strengths are your natural and inherent talents that can be applied very productively at work. We know, based on research conducted by the Gallup organization, that people and teams who use their strengths every day outperform those who do not:

- Teams who receive strengths feedback have **8.9% greater profitability**.
- Employees who use their strengths are **6x more likely to be engaged** on the job.
- Teams who focus on strengths every day have **12.5% greater productivity**.

In addition, people who focus on using their strengths...
- are **three times** as likely to report having an excellent quality of life
- are **six times** as likely to be engaged in their jobs
Many of Churchill’s Executive Coaches are also Gallup Clifton StrengthsFinder® certified and have years of successful experience helping clients maximize their strengths using inspirational insight and practical application strategies. Are you and your team playing to your strengths? Here’s an example of what is possible:

Diane, a product manager, took over a team of eight product developers, each responsible for various creative development tasks and measuring the customer experience. When Diane began, team members had been in their current roles for a minimum of 2.5 years, performance was mediocre and engagement was average. Diane was intent on making a positive difference in performance and engagement; she just sensed there was more to this team and needed a way to unleash its potential. She spent two months observing team members and building trust. She noticed one team member, Bill, who was responsible for the reporting and analysis of team deliverables was producing regular reports but it was taking much longer than necessary and he often felt frustrated. Diane used her coaching skills to explore further and realized this part of Bill’s role, that kept him on his laptop for hours a day was literally draining for Bill. There were other similar examples across the team. When Diane asked the team members what changes they would like to see, they offered ideas, but nothing concrete. Diane decided she needed a strategy to make positive and sustainable changes. So, she reached out to Churchill Leadership Group, Inc. and decided to invest in Strengths.

**EMPLOYEES WHO FOCUS ON THEIR STRENGTHS ARE SIX TIMES MORE LIKELY TO BE ENGAGED ON THE JOB.**
After a 1-day “Discovering Your Strengths” workshop and ongoing strengths accelerated Executive Coaching, Diane quickly learned a lot more about her team and their potential. She saw the confidence of team members increase almost immediately and they started providing specific tweaks the team could implement to make them more productive and collaborative.

For example: Bill’s top 5 strengths were Ideation, Communication, Connectedness, Relator and Significance. With relationship and influencing themes, Bill wanted to interact with the end user more, instead of all the screen time, so he took on the role of interviewing customers to understand their current and desired user experience. This change provided valuable insight for the team to tweak product development and built trust with users. Diane also discovered that Julie, also on the team, had Analytical and Discipline in her top 5 and had a desire to take on the analytical reporting and did so with ease and efficiency, speeding up reporting by four hours and improving the quality of recommendations from the data.

Diane made multiple changes like this over a matter of months and with the resources and coaching Churchill provided her she saw the team start to thrive. They had a strong common language that helped build their confidence to take on more of the right responsibility for their unique strengths and they learned how to more effectively rely on each other. Diane weaved strengths into her individual and team meetings to make them more “forward” moving with a focus on “what is possible” and greater customer focus. In six months, Diane’s team increased engagement five points and the team’s performance increased from “meets” to “exceeds.”

“EVERY HUMAN HAS TALENTS THAT ARE JUST WAITING TO BE UNCOVERED.”

-Tom Rath, Strengths Finder 2.0
APPLY THE STRATEGIES
IMPROVE YOUR PRODUCTIVITY

WHAT IS YOUR BIGGEST OBSTACLE EACH DAY?
Think about your day and what prevents you from being more productive.
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ARE YOU PLAYING TO YOUR STRENGTHS?
Are some tasks exhausting and overwhelming because they do not fall within your top strengths?
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APPLY IT!
Go ahead and try the strategies you have learned throughout this e-book in your organization or team now!

To learn more about applying strengths to improve productivity and engagement, email us at Solutions@ChurchillLeadershipGroup.com.

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REFERENCES