

Do you need to improve your personal or team productivity. Do you need to know when to hire a Headhunter?



Strengthening Governments & Communities  
By Teaching Best Principles and Practices<sub>sm</sub>

## Leading Local Government

### ***Increasing Productivity In A Political Environment***

Our 33rd President Harry S. Truman said:  
"Whenever you have an efficient government, you have a dictatorship."<sup>[1]</sup> Yet Truman was no stranger to efficiency. He became famous while chairing the Truman Committee, which was created in 1941 to expose waste, fraud, and corruption in Federal wartime contracts.<sup>[2]</sup>

I think what Truman was really pointing out is that our form of representative democracy can create a lot of inefficiency. Our founding fathers built in inefficiency when they created a system of checks and balances and separation of powers in *The Constitution*. This system can slow down the decision-making process and can result in not achieving optimum effectiveness and efficiency on both an organizational and personal level. Nevertheless, I'm sure you'll agree that the pros of our form of government outweigh the cons. It keeps government leaders and others from abusing power. It can also prevent waste, fraud, and favoritism. And both the challenges and the benefits of this system also apply to local government.

Elected government leaders should be concerned with productivity, because they are setting an example for staff and other community leaders, while also being accountable to the taxpayers for

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their performance. Non-elected full-time government leaders fulfill a unique role in this system as well. They provide stability during times of change, such as during and after election transitions. They are charged with being unbiased and objective in supporting the policies, laws, ordinances, and regulations the elected leaders create. And of course, the elected leaders and taxpayers expect them to do all this productively.

So how can we reach peak personal productivity performance within a system that is structurally inefficient? Here are three suggestions:

**1) Know not only what but why you're procrastinating.**

I often do an exercise with public leaders where they write down what they are procrastinating. It doesn't take them long to come up with a list of significant tasks that are both urgent and important they are putting off. Next I share with them these six reasons most people procrastinate, most of which are psychological:

- i. The Task Seems Unpleasant
- ii. You Fear or Dislike Change
- iii. The Task Seems Overwhelming
- iv. You Fear Failure
- v. You're Addicted to Cramming
- vi. You Overcommit

Once they have matched their list of tasks they're procrastinating with the reasons for them, I teach them strategies for overcoming their tendencies. For example, one reason why a task seems unpleasant could be that they are trying to reconcile views of people who can't or won't agree. (Sounds like many of the City Council and County Commission meetings I've attended.)

Here are a couple of strategies I suggest they try:

- a. Make an advantage/disadvantage list.

This is for heavy duty kinds of unpleasantness. List all the positive things that will result from getting the task done, then list all the disadvantages to doing it. Just seeing it on paper may relieve your anxiety and, often, there are

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**Colin Baenziger, M.P.A.**

***When To Hire a Headhunter***

When hiring key positions, some local governments use an executive recruiter. Some do not. What path should you take?

First of all, it generally does not make sense to use a recruiter for jobs where candidates who have the right skill set are plentiful. It is also not necessary for low profile jobs - where if you make a mistake, no one is likely to notice.

The answer is often different for hard to fill / or high profile jobs. But there is no magic in using a recruiter. A city or county, if it is willing to allocate the time, energy and resources, can do virtually everything a recruiter can do. By way of analogy, I do a lot of my own home repair. I enjoy it and I save money. But it generally takes at least twice as long to get it right as it would if I brought in a professional. The reasons? I need

more advantages than disadvantages.

b. Do the unpleasant task first thing in the day.

Often, if you can do an unpleasant task before you have had much time to think about it, it will seem easier. Or, if you do want to spend some time thinking, why not think about how unburdened you will feel for the rest of the day when the task is done. So the night before, place the task where you cannot miss it. Put that report you must complete right in the middle of your desk or counter and, when you first walk into your area tomorrow, it will be hard to avoid.

c. Find somebody else to do it.

This might sound strange, but often what you find unpleasant, someone else might actually enjoy. The secret is finding that person!

One organization-wide tendency in government related to procrastination is looking busy doing unimportant things. Cyril Northcote Parkinson was a British naval historian who wrote a bestselling book Parkinson's Law, which led him to be also considered as an important scholar within the field of public administration. His Parkinson's Law states:

*Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.*

He derived the dictum from his extensive experience in the British Civil Service. [3] One of the best ways to eliminate this tendency is to become an expert at forecasting the time a project will take, adding in a little time for Murphy's Law (if anything can go wrong, it will), prioritize first what must be done soon, and intentionally dropping things off of your to do list. So many of us are perfectionists and like to check off our to-do lists. Many things on our list should not be done at all!

So we need to practice selective neglect. We and our employees often spend our valuable time looking busy doing unimportant tasks. Instead, we need to fill our time with important tasks aligned with our values. (I call them virtues

to learn the intricacies of what I want to do. I am likely to run into something I did not expect and will need to figure out how to work around it. Finally, I am more likely to make a mistake or two and they take time to correct.

That said, a successful recruitment has six components. Briefly stated they are:

(1) Read the Environment (that is, identify the factors that will determine what type of candidate will be successful in the position),

(2) Outreach (contact desirable candidates through networking and advertising and get them to apply.

(3) Screening (determine which of the applicants will likely be successful,

(4) Background Checks (as part of screening, conduct thorough and in depth background checks - nothing is more embarrassing than to hire someone and then find out they have an unsavory past),

(5) Interviews and Assessment (use the best process to determine who the best candidate is), and

(6) Negotiation and Acceptance (arrive at a suitable compensation package).

That seems straightforward enough but to do it right takes time and effort. Throwing an ad in the trade press works some of the time, but networking can make a huge difference. Then someone needs to interview the candidates and call their references -- we suggest you speak with at least eight per candidate. Human Resources Directors have fulltime jobs. Can they be freed up? Is there someone else with sufficient knowledge and ability?

The best time to use a recruiter is:

(1) when the position is hard to fill

instead of values.) I have found that the most unpleasant and overwhelming tasks, as well as the tasks we fear, are often the most urgent and important.

## **2) Reduce multi-tasking.**

Some people pride themselves in their ability to manage multiple tasks. Admittedly, studies show that women are better at multi-tasking than men. In fact, many job requirements list multi-tasking as a desirable skill for some positions. Nevertheless, productive multi-tasking is a myth! Don't fall for it!

I conduct a timed experiment in our productivity class that clearly demonstrates that multi-tasking actually wastes time and reduces quality. Without fail, when the class members single-task instead of multi-task they improve productivity as individuals by 100% or more!

The solution is to plan your time well in blocks and to do everything possible not to let interruptions keep you from completing high-priority tasks. Two of the most common technological interruptions are e-mail and text. If you check your e-mail or text or even take a phone call when you're in the middle of a project, you are immediately becoming more unproductive.

So next time you get interrupted during the day ask yourself: What is the best use of my time right now?

## **3) Find the weakest link that is keeping you from achieving your goals.**

There are many ways to prioritize your time and projects, but we have found only one priority management system that identifies the weakest link that is keeping you from success. We recommend that government leaders and employees try *The Review System*. This system, rather than applying values to tasks, is primarily results oriented.

*The Review System* assumes that a person learns the most by remembering how he or she handled the day and then applying what was learned to the

and/or

(2) you have to get the hire right. A professional recruiter knows where to go to find candidates, how to screen them, and can help you determine whom you should hire. He/she can also help steer you away from the articulately incompetent.

If you do decide to hire a recruiter, do not assume that, even if they have a national reputation, they will provide you with a quality product in a timely fashion. Check their references. You will be surprised what you will learn. Some recruiters read the environment and potential candidates better than others. Some do not do substantive background checks – they just say they do. Some do not keep the schedule and some will ask for more than the originally quoted fee. Some are much more customer service oriented than others. Your hire is a big decision for you. You need to know if something comes up, you can reach your recruiter 24/7/365. The actual experience of your lead recruiter / project manager matters. Many firms use retired city managers. They know how to work with elected bodies but they may not know anything about doing the previously listed components of a search.

The bottom line: Whether you are hiring a candidate or a recruiter, do your homework. Particularly, check references and check at least eight! That, more than anything else, is the key to a successful recruitment.

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next day's behavior. It argues that post-activity analysis represents a more realistic, behavior-changing, feedback-oriented approach to dealing with life than setting values to tasks and duties.

To use *The Review System*, answer the following questions:

a) What do I plan to accomplish today? I like to come up with a list of at least 10 daily tasks, then prioritize them with, making sure that only 2 of



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Principle which suggests that 20% of your items will yield you 80% of the benefit.)

b) What I actually did accomplish? At the end of the day, review your list and circle any top priorities you did not get accomplished, then start analyzing why you didn't get them done.

c) What surprises may have shoved aside today's duties/tasks/projects? Maybe you have a friend, manager, or elected official interrupting you. Think about what you could do to prevent it next time.

d) How would I rate my effectiveness today? Is there anything that was a complete waste of time.

e) How would I rate my efficiency today? Are there any repetitive and time-consuming processes that could be improved? Am I utilizing current technology to be productive?

f) What can you do to make tomorrow better? For me it could be anything from getting up earlier before the unexpected daily fires start interrupting me to investing a little more time learning more about my most frequently used software.

Try this system for 21 days and I am confident you will see patterns emerge. It's like doing continual process improvement on your own behavior. And it's focusing on results, not looking busy!

Miles Labs — the Alka Seltzer people — asked their total sales force to use this system for three months. As a result, sales increased by 25%. And the reason the sales representatives gave was they had more quality time to concentrate on their

was one of the top four qualities necessary for delivering exceptional customer service. When we usually think of responsiveness, it's in terms of measure that we use to determine the performance levels of our public safety personnel: response time. Of course, this is a quantitative measure that may or may not apply to other local government departments. One way we could apply it as a quantitative measure is the number of rings before our front-line employees answer the phone. Another way is how quickly we find the answers to their questions a citizen or resident may have about our services.

There are also qualitative measures to responsiveness that any department could implement. Some synonyms for responsiveness are: receptiveness, openness, sensitivity, awareness, approachability, and alertness. How receptive are we to a suggestion? How open are we to hearing a new way of doing things? How sensitive are we to someone who feels wronged by the way they were treated? How aware are we of what the citizen or resident on the phone or at the counter really needs and wants? How easy is it for others to approach us with a complaint? How alert are we to remembering everything the customer has just told us?

The key to improving responsiveness on your team is to identify both the quantitative and qualitative goals

jobs. They felt reviewing how they spent the day, even though it only took a few minutes each day, helped them eliminate time-wasting habits. They also commented that they felt more confident about their work, and less frustrated and stressed.

Another company, implemented *The Review System* — using these questions — and found their productivity increased by 19% after a few months of rigorous using it.

*The Review System* not only helps with your individual productivity, but can also help improve the organization. For example, with team projects, there is usually a weak link or bottleneck that is making everyone else unproductive on the project. It could be something as simple as a software upgrade that has not occurred. Just make sure you're not the weakest link, so you won't be voted off the island.

Peter Drucker said:

*There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all.*

To become more effective as a local government organization, we can also ask ourselves a question that I remember my Political Science Professor Doyle Backwater asking us MPA students:

"What is the proper role of [local] government?"

From a macro level we should define our core services, what we do best and better than anyone else in our respective communities. On a micro level, we should make sure that we teach each employee the productivity principles and practices (skills) they need to do their part. And of course, we can start by practicing them ourselves.

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[1] Lecture at Columbia University (28 April 1959)

[2] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry\\_S.\\_Truman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_S._Truman)

[3] See Cyril Northcote Parkinson, Wikipedia, 12/31/2012.

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Our goal is to help you improve your employees, who

and corresponding measures that will increase service levels. For example, a quantitative goal and measure could be to *respond* to all e-mails from customers within 24-hours. A qualitative goal would be to listen without interrupting the customers and the measure could be to do a follow-up survey with customers to allow them to give anonymous input on our level of openness and sensitivity.

We have observed that the managers who create the best customer service cultures ask their employees to come up with their own goals and measures. So ask your employees how they would best improve responsiveness to the citizens, residents, and businesses of your community.

improve their team, who improve their organization, and help you create a greater community. For more detail contact us at:

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Thanks for your time and consideration,  
Brian Muir, President

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