



The Distraction Epidemic

By David A. O'Brien, WorkChoice Solutions

"The main thing is keeping the main thing, the main thing". This powerful observation from author Steven R. Covey offers a multitude of insights into one of today's most pressing leadership challenges. On one level, it reminds us of the constant need for a keen, unwavering focus on things that matter most. On another level, it offers an inspiring guidepost for helping us to discover our full leadership capacity both in and out of work.

With very few exceptions, leaders today are stretched (and in many cases stressed) to a level that borders on unhealthy. Add to this the accelerating demands of life outside of work and most leaders would agree that it's a huge challenge to keep the main thing, the main thing with a high degree of consistency.

Over the last several months, I have had numerous conversations about this universal leadership challenge with clients and colleagues at all levels and across many industries and sectors. Again and again, I hear that the

increased demands of work and life result in leaders and teams feeling distracted at an epidemic level.

It doesn't matter where you work or what you do, you probably deal with a multitude of distractions on a daily basis. And these distractions are costly: A 2010 study by consulting firm Workplace Options, estimates that distractions cost U.S. businesses \$650 billion per year in lost productivity. The cost may very well be higher if the *less than optimum decision making* associated with being distracted is factored into the equation.

Not surprisingly, many of today's workplace distractions are driven in one way or another by the pursuit of competitive advantage, higher productivity or increased profit margins. While none of these factors are unreasonable, they often create a paradox worth considering. Simply put, the distraction by-product of

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these pursuits can at times create an impediment to recognizing these desired outcomes. A further irony is that meaningful success or achievement in any of these pursuits demands that we have a razor sharp focus on what matters most at all times.

While the business impact remains high, the personal impact may be even higher in large part because leadership excellence applies to all areas or aspects of our lives. Additionally, the stress that often results from being distracted can have far reaching implications beyond the workplace. By my estimation, the most compelling reason for managing my distractions is that in doing so, I get to spend more time being the leader that I want to be not just at work, but in life too. Another important motivation that most leaders can relate to is that our best work comes from being well grounded and fully present. Both of which are impossible if we don't deliberately manage our distractions.

What's a leader to do? As a beginning point, it helps to acknowledge that workplace distractions in all of their forms are both a real and an inevitable part of today's do-more-with-less business climate. It might also help to acknowledge that as leaders, we are the role models for the behavior that we expect or desire from others. To be sure, an important part of our work as leaders is to set the right example while helping our teams and ourselves to keep the main thing, the main thing.

10 More Things You Can Do Now:

1. Invest the time to assess the most common distractions in your day and consider ways to limit or minimize your exposure to these distractions.
2. Initiate a conversation with your team to assess their most common distractions and identify actions that you can take to remove or limit their daily distractions.
3. Focus on your short-term goals. Consider why you want to achieve these goals and redirect your attention and energy to getting back on track.
4. Remember your purpose and what truly matters to reduce the distractions and re-energize your focus and motivation.
5. Remember, you have some control over what distracts you. When you re-focus your attention to what is in your control and re-adjust your focus on your goals, the distractions diminish.

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6. Schedule email and phone time. Minimize these distractions by scheduling specific times to check and respond to email and phone calls.
7. Take short breaks to clear your mind. Even 5 minutes away from the distraction can help you to refocus and prioritize.
8. Talk to interrupters. Consider having a candid conversation with habitual interrupters about the impact they have on your daily productivity.
9. Resist the urge to allow distractions to put you in the panic mode.
10. Invest 10 minutes to consider "the main thing" in all of your roles as a leader.

About David A. O'Brien

David is President of CT based WorkChoice Solutions, a trusted provider of leadership and team effectiveness consulting services that was founded in 2000. He works with a wide range of corporate and nonprofit clients to help bring about sustainable improvements in organizational effectiveness. He is also an in-demand keynote speaker on the topic of leadership excellence. His first book, *The Navigator's Handbook, 101 Leadership Lessons for Work & Life* is available on-line and in bookstores nationwide. Additionally, his many articles have appeared in a variety of local, regional and national publications. To learn more, please visit WorkChoice Solutions on line at www.workchoicesolutions.com or contact him directly at 860.242.1070.

