

By Bill Guertin

The 800-Pound Gorilla

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The Four Thieves

Do you feel like you're running faster than ever, but staying in place?

The reason is that the Four Thieves are stealing your time and efficiency.

TIME Magazine reports that office workers are interrupted about 7 times an hour, or 56 interruptions a day. According to the time management experts quoted in the article, 80% of these interruptions are considered to be trivial.

The average office worker is now distracted for a total of 2.1 hours per day, according to Basex, a New York research firm. A study out of the University of California at Irvine found that once a worker is interrupted from a task, it takes him or her an average of 25 minutes to return to the original task, if they return at all.

The Four Thieves are: **Idle Conversations, Unfinished Business, Crisis Identification and Intervention, and Stress and Worry.** These Four Thieves are responsible for the majority of ineffective time management in most business and personal situations.

How can you keep the Four Thieves at bay? Let's look at each of them individually:

Idle Conversations

How can you limit mind-numbing idle chatter to a minimum?

- Hang out less with idle conversationalists. You know who they are.
- Limit chat times, or set a time limit before a conversation starts.
- Use legitimate excuses to move someone along. Things like "I've got another meeting" can work.
- Move your office somewhere that's NOT so inviting to chatter.

Unfinished Business

We flit from project to project without batting an eyelash, but leave a hundred threads dangling. This leads to other challenges like clutter, lack of focus, and increased time to "ramp back up" to the train of thought you left before.

How can we reduce or eliminate the unfinished business in our work lives?

- Shut out interruptions and distractions for a set period of time each day; no phone calls, E-mails, or drop-ins.

- Focus on your most important task, or a pre-set portion of it, until it is completed.
- Get others around you to help you.
- Reward yourself with five minutes of something you enjoy with every completed task.
- Decide that not every project needs to be finished. Is the book you're reading boring? Can it! Are you doing a project that ought to be killed? Don't be afraid to kill it.

Crisis Identification and Intervention

If your job involves putting out fires, it can seem as if that's all you do. It can drain you of the ability to move any of your projects forward.

How can you better handle the fires?

- Ask yourself: Is it really a fire? Ask questions and find out instead of jumping in right away.
- Ask: Do I have to do it myself? Who can help me?
- Consider the big picture, your goals, and/or the bottom line. Is this really a fire in light of those?
- Ask: What's the worst thing that can happen if I don't take care of this right now?
- Eliminate recurring fires from your life by assigning task forces to reduce or eliminate them.

Stress and Worry

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention now say that 80% of our medical expenditures are directly related to stress. Things we worry about rob us of the energy and focus we need to work on our most productive level. We make mistakes, and have to re-do things. We sit and contemplate all sorts of negative things, which rob us of the positive concentration we need.

Although we'll never stop worrying altogether, here are some things we can do to worry less:

- Acknowledge and honor your feelings.
- Understand that stress and worry are your psychological responses to what life is dishing out.
- Address things right away.

Gay Hendricks, a national business consultant, asks his executive clients what he calls the "\$10,000 Question." What he finds is that most people who worry a lot are facing something, and spending a lot of time worrying about it. Here's the question he asks:

What have you been avoiding facing? What is the thing you've been avoiding that would give you a quantum leap in energy and creativity if you faced it directly?

Make it a goal in the next two weeks to eliminate at least one of the Four Thieves from your work life. You may not totally get rid of them, but you'll be making an important positive step in your career... and sending a loud-and-clear message to the Thieves to get lost.

Bill Guertin is Chief Enthusiasm Officer of The 800-Pound Gorilla, a training and business development firm in Bourbonnais specializing in sales performance, customer service, and marketing. He can be reached at bill@The800PoundGorilla.com, or at (815) 932-5878.