

# A Bias for Action

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*Often managers spot a chance to do something valuable for their company, but for some reason, they cannot get started. Even if they begin the project, they give up when they see the first big hurdle. The inability to take purposeful action seems to be pervasive across companies. Managers tend to ignore or postpone dealing with crucial issues which require reflection, systematic planning, creative thinking, and above all, time. Instead, most managers are happy dealing with operational activities that require more immediate attention. Daily routines, superficial behaviors, poorly prioritized or unfocused tasks make unproductive busyness the most critical behavioral problem in large companies. This fascinating book is about how to promote purposeful action in organizations. This book, the last by Sumantra Ghoshal, before his untimely death is a must read for all middle level and senior managers.*

## **Energy & Focus**

People who exhibit purposeful action possess two critical traits: energy and focus. Energy implies a high level of personal involvement and effort. Purposeful action, is self-generated, engaged, and self-driven behavior. Purposeful action also requires focus. It requires discipline to resist distraction, overcome problems, and persist in the face of unanticipated setbacks. In other words, purposeful action is different from impulsive behavior. It involves thought, analysis, and planning.

The authors identify four kinds of managerial behavior, according to the levels of energy and focus that managers display.

- ✂ The Frenzied:* They are highly energetic but very unfocused and appear to others as frenzied, desperate, and hasty.
- ✂ The Procrastinators:* They postpone the work that really matters to the organization because they lack both energy and focus. They often feel insecure and fear failure.
- ✂ The Detached:* They are disengaged or detached from their work altogether. They are focused but lack energy and often seem aloof, tense, and apathetic.
- ✂ The Purposeful:* They get the job done. They are highly focused and energetic and come across as reflective and calm, amidst chaos.

Organizations must be particularly wary of the frenzied managers who are busy people, often highly motivated and well intentioned. They are enthusiastic about their work and, identify strongly with their jobs. But because of lack of reflection and focus, they end up achieving little.

Continual, unreflective activity is costly for the individual. Because these managers identify so strongly with their jobs, they tend to get frustrated or hurt more easily when confronted with setbacks, criticism, or mediocre performance.

Frenzied managers also act in extremely shortsighted ways. As they do not take time to reflect, they typically deal with immediate problems while neglecting long-term issues. They underestimate the time needed to implement a strategy. They begin activities without analyzing the risks and long-term implications.

### **Motivation and Willpower**

The authors draw an important distinction between motivation and will power. Motivation might suffice in helping managers sustain organizational routines. But the more important tasks are usually complex and require creativity and innovation. When dealing with ambitious goals, high uncertainty and extreme opposition, managers have to rely on a different force, the power of their will.

Willpower goes beyond motivation. It enables managers to execute disciplined action, even when they are disinclined to do something, uninspired by the work, or tempted by other opportunities. Willpower gives managers an insatiable need to produce results. They can overcome barriers, deal with setbacks, and persevere to the end. Willful managers resolve to achieve their intention, no matter what.

Every manager is capable of engaging willpower. Willpower is neither limited to a certain set of personality traits, nor to a person's particular work situation. Willpower flourishes when people develop a clear mental picture of their intention, make a conscious choice to pursue that intention, and develop strategies for protecting their intention against distractions, boredom, or frustration.

Rather than simply motivate their people, leaders must create a desire for action without encouraging superficiality. Leaders must ignite people's dreams while preventing them from making hasty promises. Leaders must make commitment more difficult instead of trying to get quick buy-ins. They must force their people to consider conflicts, doubts, anxieties, and ambivalence. They must discuss the difficulties, rather than paint rosy pictures of the necessary tasks.

Willful leadership is not easy or intuitive. But as the authors emphasise, it is more effective and ultimately less risky than just motivating managers and counting on their halfhearted acceptance. Moreover, leadership that activates people's willpower involves more than simply influencing others personally. Leaders must also create an organizational context that does not suppress people's inner drive and, instead, gives it a reason to flourish – and some space in which to do so.

### **Energy and Focus**

Energy is vigor fueled by intense personal commitment and involvement. Managers do many things, but they put energy only into those projects that mean something to them

personally. Energy also implies that managers take proactive action and initiative. Their need to act comes from within. Energy is what makes managers put in exceptional efforts when tackling heavy workloads or responding to tight deadlines.

Focus is essentially energy channeled toward a specific outcome. Focused managers can concentrate even amid the many distractions that flare up every day. Instead of merely reacting to developments as they arise, or meeting routine requirements, focused managers are goal oriented. They are clear about what they are striving for. Focused managers channel all activities toward achieving the desired goal. That means taking the time to reflect regularly on one's own behavior, and being willing and able to choose what one does and does not do each day. Focused behavior does not emerge by chance. Focus requires personal discipline. That means protecting oneself against the usual noise of everyday demands that will inevitably tug at his attention and emotions.

The authors point out some pitfalls associated with a high level of focus. Determination can degenerate into stubbornness. Focused managers can become blind to the consequences of their own actions – and insensitive to others' goals. Too much focus – without a high level of energy to balance it – can lead to inflexibility, narrow mindedness, or mental inertia. It can also harm people. Managers really focused on particular goals but lacking the energy to pursue them are candidates for burnout. Notwithstanding these pitfalls, the fact remains that without focus, little can be achieved.

### **Marshaling Energy and Developing Focus**

Executives who have high energy levels find a clear, ambitious goal that they feel confident about achieving. They then actively manage their emotions relating to the tasks needed to achieve that goal. This involves both eliminating counterproductive behavior and reinforcing positive task-related behaviors.

Focus begins when managers simplify their goal or intention into a vivid mental picture. The clearer and more vivid the picture, the stronger their passion and personal attachment to the goal. Crafting a vivid mental image and a model for action, however, will not alone maintain the steely focus needed for purposeful action-taking. Managers must also develop the courage to commit to their intention.

Ultimately, managers who want to cultivate a bias for action must take full responsibility for the intentions or goals. Without this kind of personal commitment, they will easily go astray or else blame others for setbacks.

### **Moving Beyond Motivation to Willpower**

Willpower enables managers to act in a disciplined way even in situations when they feel unmotivated or feel tempted by alternative opportunities.

Willpower manifests itself in three ways. First, it feels easy to begin taking action toward the objective. We know what we want, and we do not need further information or external stimuli to get started.

All our attention, energy, and preferences will focus on our intention. We will constantly look for information that will help us realize it, block out contradictory information and will not feel distracted by routine disruptions – or tempted by alternative opportunities.

We will respond in new ways to obstacles. In the face of negative feedback, lack of interest from (top) management, resistance from colleagues, or any of the other impediments to purposeful action-taking, our effort and commitment increase. Abandoning our task will simply not feel like an option.

We can have no free will, no volition. Making a real choice involves weighing options, becoming aware of the pros and cons of our intention versus alternative options. That means resolving all our doubts and conflicts.

Managers who summon their willpower and decide to go ahead with the action, share some common experiences. First, they discover their deepest, innermost feelings about their goals. Second, their thoughts about their goals assume a new clarity. They become confident of achieving their objectives. Third, they align their emotions and thoughts with their goals.

Aligning goals and emotions can challenge even a seasoned manager. But people can align their thoughts and emotions by relying on one or more of three strategies. The first strategy attempts to strengthen goals primarily through harnessing emotions that support those goals. The second strategy is to manage emotional impulses that might hinder the pursuit of those goals. A third strategy is achieving the state of flow, when a person's rational goals and emotions naturally overlap, or flow, concurrently.

### **The Three Traps of Nonaction**

The first is the trap of overwhelming demands. Day-to-day jobs are so absorbing that many managers have difficulties reflecting on their goals, asking themselves what really matters and making sure that they make certain things happen. As a result they do not take willful action but remain busy doing many things that actually do not make a significant difference. Managers who fall into this trap take demand for granted and simply respond to them, rarely questioning whether they actually make sense or whether one could reshape them.

Purposeful action-takers deal very differently with demands than their busy colleagues do. They do not respond to any request that gets thrown at them. They manage their demands by

- ~~✍~~ developing an explicit personal agenda
- ~~✍~~ practicing slow management
- ~~✍~~ structuring contact time
- ~~✍~~ shaping demands and managing expectations.

Managers who complain about having too little time often thrive on the sense of importance that their busyness generates. They enjoy being at the center of frantic activity where people continually ask them for help, information, or advice. If they were honest, then they would really not want more time – especially time to reflect.

The second is the trap of unbearable constraints. Many managers feel squeezed in by rules, regulations, or budget restrictions and believe that they have no space for autonomous action. While these constraints may be real, they are not as unsurmountable as managers make them out to be. To unshackle themselves from this trap, purposeful action-takers adopt strategies like these:

- ✍ Mapping relevant constraints
- ✍ Accepting trade-offs
- ✍ Selectively breaking rules
- ✍ Tolerating conflicts and ambiguity.

The third trap of nonaction is unexplored choices. Many managers concentrate on immediate needs and requirements. They do not perceive or exploit their freedom to make choices about what they would do and how they would do it.

### **Unleashing Organizational Energy for Collective Action**

It is useful to classify organizations in terms of two characteristics: intensity and quality of energy. Organizational energy can be positive (e.g., enthusiasm, joy, satisfaction) and negative (e.g., fear, frustration, sorrow). Intensity refers to the strength of organizational energy as seen in the level of activity, the amount of interaction, and the extent of alertness and emotional excitement. The intersection of intensity and quality determines an organization's energy state, which usually falls into one of four categories: the comfort zone, the resignation zone, the corrosion zone, and the productive zone.

#### *Comfort Zone*

Corporations that have succeeded for long periods in a relatively stable environment often settle into the comfort zone. Characterized by weak but favored emotions such as calm and contentedness, they lack the internal vitality, alertness, and emotional tension necessary for initiating bold, new strategic initiatives. Over time, these companies become inert. Positive feedback and other signals of success lead them to perceive themselves as doing well. So they only incrementally strengthen their historically successful management systems. But, when the environment changes significantly, these companies become victims of the comfort trap, unable to muster the required energy for bold, radical change.

#### *Resignation zone*

Companies in the resignation zone have the same low-energy intensity as those in the comfort zone. But these people find themselves in the grip of weak emotions, such as frustration and disappointment. Typically, they suffer from low levels of emotional commitment, alertness, and effort. Persistent mediocrity makes people lose their

confidence in dealing with problems or challenges. Believing that nothing they can do would make any difference, they passively resign themselves to their fate. Unlike companies in the comfort zone, whose inertia stems from the belief that they have found the ultimate success formula, companies in the resignation zone believe that they are simply not good enough to succeed. Threats or significant problems only reinforce the negative spiral of hopelessness.

#### *Corrosion Zone*

Companies in the corrosion zone show a high degree of energy, intense levels of activity and emotional involvement. They draw that intensity from strong emotions, such as anger, fear, or hate. The interplay of high energy and destructive responses is one of the most debilitating energy states in which a company can find itself. With much of the company's energy dedicated to internal conflicts, rumors, micropolitics, or other destructive activities, the effort needed to cope with fear, suspicion, and rivalry drains people's vitality and stamina, leaving little left for productive work.

#### *Productive Zone*

Unlike companies in the corrosive, resignation and comfort zones, those in the productive zone display high emotional tension, alertness, and activity. Employees work with a sense of urgency, driven by enthusiasm, positive excitement, joy, and pride in their work rather than anger, fear, or internal rivalry. Typically, these companies strive for challenges that surpass the routine, the obvious, and the normal. While low-energy companies look for standardization and institutionalization, avoiding surprises and risks whenever possible, companies in the productive zone thrive on surprises, the excitement of the unknown, and novel opportunities. A sense of urgency and alertness, allows them to process information and mobilize resources rapidly. Inevitably, these organizations also have leaders who direct their people toward shared purposes, channeling the company's potential by aligning its collective perception, emotions, and activities to pursue business-critical activities.

Positive energy is essential for driving corporate performance. But the energy must be managed with insight and wisdom. Otherwise, it can degenerate into severe pathologies. The greatest danger is falling into the acceleration trap. Seeing what companies can achieve in stretching phases of intensive energy, some CEOs assume that the exceptional can become the routine. They drive their organizations hard all the time. This effort to achieve a state of permanent acceleration ultimately leads to organizational burnout. The company and its people simply become exhausted, dealing with one major change initiative after another, without finding time for organizational regeneration or recovery.

#### **Slaying the dragon and Winning the princess**

Companies that achieve truly radical change have leaders who adopt one of three approaches for focusing the energy of their organizations and moving them into the productive zone. Some adopt the slaying-the-dragon strategy, driving their people out of the comfort zone by focusing their emotion, attention, and action on a crisis or a threat to overcome. Others pursue a winning-the princess strategy, moving their organizations into the productive zone by building people's enthusiasm for realizing a specific,

motivating dream. In rare cases, companies adopt a third strategy of combining the first two. Companies without either a dragon to kill or a princess to win inevitably fall into one of the energy traps. They gradually decline to mediocrity and eventually face a full-blown crisis.

Slaying the dragon requires high-energy, brave, and commanding leadership. This strategy relies on mobilizing often intolerable emotions and channelising them into productive energy for short-term problem solving. One danger in slaying the dragon is that, when the perceived threat subsides, complacency might return. Believing that they have fought and won a hard battle, people and the organization want to rest and relax for a while. Too often, they then fall asleep.

In the winning-the-princess strategy, leaders create a vision for the future, for example, a new product, a new market, or a new acquisition. In the process, they unleash organizational energy. This strategy works particularly well for moving companies from the resignation zone into the productive zone. But winning the princess is often less effective for reenergizing companies in the comfort zone, since such companies usually require a perceived threat (rather than a desired vision) to jolt them from their complacency.

Winning the princess needs gentle, inspiring, and empathic leaders who can unleash passion. It needs leaders who can create an environment of curiosity, excitement, and ownership. Winning the princess focuses on unleashing and leveraging energy in pursuit of a joint vision for the future but can detract needed attention from short-term problems such as efficiency and productivity.

As the authors point out, an ideal strategy would combine the immediacy, decisiveness, and discipline of slaying the dragon with the light-heartedness, joy, and pride of winning the princess. In practice, however, leaders find it difficult to combine a top-down, planned strategy focused on survival needs with the experimentation, creativity, and playfulness of pursuing a long-term vision. Indeed, the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in such an approach can lead to the worst of both worlds, in which neither form of energy mobilization actually works.

The only effective way to combine slaying the dragon with winning the princess is to create a long-term vision that inevitably requires dealing with short-term threats and problems.

While a few chief executives can indeed create both princesses and dragons, most cannot. A company stands a relatively better chance of success when its strategy for mobilizing energy matches its leader's intrinsic style. Slaying the dragon requires a command-and-control-style leader: brave, disciplined, and uncompromising. Winning the princess, on the other hand, calls for a leader who has an encouraging, empathic, and cheerful style.

Slaying the dragon is easier to implement and more effective for unleashing energy in companies caught in the comfort zone. The state of relative satisfaction in such

companies hinders creating excitement and sustainable energy by calling for a better future. Companies trapped in the resignation zone, on the other hand, already perceive a discrepancy between the real and the ideal. Winning the princess is more likely to transform latent desire into productive energy.

### **Mobilising will power**

People engage their willpower only when they think that they have personal control over their situations. They must believe that they have discretion in terms of, for example, decisions on their work goals, content, and processes. They must perceive a sense of autonomy, of being able to choose and decide, of being in charge. Essentially, they must have a sense of personal ownership of their specific work domain.

Garnering willpower is a very personal, almost intimate process. There are six strategies that leaders can use to help managers unleash that force and engage the power of volitional commitment.

#### *Strategy 1: Help managers visualize their intention*

Managers often have trouble committing themselves because they have only a vague idea of what they wish to accomplish. To build commitment, managers must have a clear and vivid picture of what they wish to achieve. They must visualize not only their intention but also the process of enacting their intention.

#### *Strategy 2: Prepare managers for obstacles*

To engage managers in a particular assignment, most leaders paint as rosy a picture as possible, downplaying potential obstacles and risks and highlighting the potential payoffs. Much of the superficiality in organizations arises from this attitude. Leaders who foster deep commitments in their managers must ensure that they fully understand the potential costs and benefits of an engagement before they commit to it.

#### *Strategy 3: Encourage managers to confront their ambivalence*

A leader must force managers to confront their ambivalence before deciding to engage in a project. True commitment requires that managers confront their emotions and reflect on whether they can personally stand with their head and heart behind an intention. To unleash such commitment, people must be encouraged to ask themselves, “Does this project feel right to me?” and “Do I really want it?”

#### *Strategy 4: Develop a climate of choice*

Most managers have limited opportunities to exercise choice and, therefore, slim chances for developing their will. To create managers who act from their personal willpower, top management must offer them choices, make them perceive and develop the courage to use those choices – and then step back. Top management must find new ways to support the action of managers while not defining and determining what they do.

*Strategy 5: Build a self-regulating system*

The flip side of choice is discipline. If managers have the right to choose, they must also have the discipline to stop and rectify a wrong choice. Indeed, one fundamental problem with willpower is that it can blind people, making disengagement extremely difficult and painful. Volitional commitments must at some time or another end after the intention proves to be undesirable, undoable, or simply done.

*Strategy 6: Create a desire for the sea*

A leader must create in managers the capacity to dream. Many managers are prisoners of routines. They find it difficult to visualize an exciting future and the opportunities that may lie there. Others may dream but kill those dreams immediately because they cannot imagine stepping outside their daily habits.

To engage willpower, managers must not only have the freedom to act but also feel that they have it. Leaders must provide managers that space and freedom in which to act and convince their managers to use that freedom. Managers must be given difficult and stretching tasks. Easy problems do not seduce or excite people. They activate neither the intellectual nor the emotional levers of willpower creation. Difficult challenges do. Goals or objectives must be personally meaningful to managers. As the authors point out, goals such as “maximizing shareholders’ value” can never lead to volitional action. To inspire managers, a “desire for the sea” can’t be abstract or mundane. Leaders must make the challenge meaningful and emotionally captivating.

Should leaders build their people’s commitment to the company overall, or to specific projects or goals? The authors feel that broad loyalty to an organization is increasingly difficult to achieve and sustain. Besides, such general commitment, even if achieved, does not necessarily lead to purposeful action on specific tasks. A diffused sense of organizational loyalty often creates a taken-for-granted kind of relationship between managers and the company that actually dulls the edge of execution. The best way leaders can build effective organizational commitment, is through a bottom-up style that emphasizes the personal ownership of and commitment to specific initiatives and goals.