

# Productivity

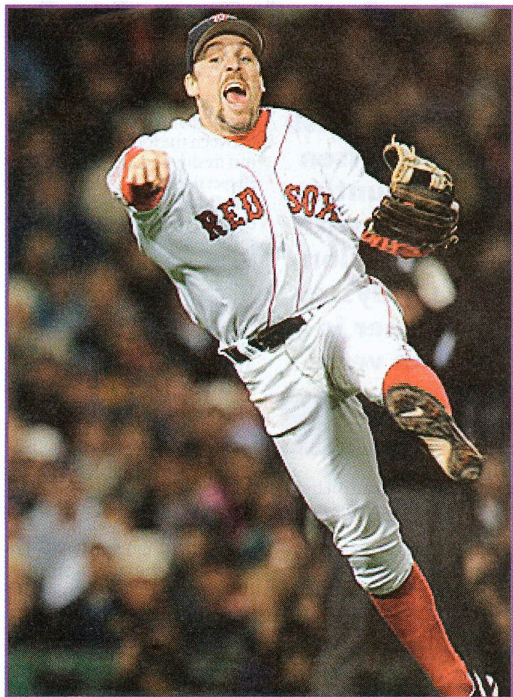
Annette Moser-Wellman

**N**EW TECHNOLOGIES lure us with promise of increased productivity. Yet as innovation becomes a necessary core competency for the manager, we rarely ask, "Am I really going farther, faster with less effort? Are my ideas better? Am I pressing on what's most important?" As an innovation consultant working with some of the world's leading companies, I see the following five Productivity Myths in action everyday. Each myth is a deeply ingrained belief whose usefulness has expired in business today.

**Working in a good team can be rewarding, but your anterior cingulate cortex really lights up when you accomplish something on your own**



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## MYTH 1: I WORK BEST WHEN I'M REALLY BUSY

Multiple cognitive requirements at one time tax the executive function of the brain. Synapses fire in the pre-frontal cortex – scanning, prioritising and trafficking tasks. Many administrative chores at once are dispatched here. Creative activity however, happens in the associative cortices of the brain. These are the same regions that measure high levels of gamma synchrony in meditating monks. When you relax, daydream or enter a state of "flow" – that sense of losing track of time – your ideas flow best and most abundantly.

Every manager should have a ritual in which they schedule time to let their mind flow – time to ponder problems, think through creative solutions. This must be an "alone" experience and should be 15-20 minutes minimum. If it doesn't become a pattern or a ritual, you won't do it and your creativity competency will suffer.

In 2005, the most job growth in Silicon Valley came from the

category: Creative and Innovation Services. A portend of what's in store for most of us. The work of the future requires mastery of the creative resources of your brain.

## MYTH 2: LET'S SKIP LUNCH AND GET THIS DONE OR LET'S SKIP WORKING OUT AND GET THIS DONE

The synapses between our neurons are chemical processes fuelled by glucose and oxygen. When the quality of your thinking fades and your brain becomes fatigued, the best thing you can do is either snack (get glucose) or move (get oxygen). How many of us, when trying to get a project done, hunch over a keyboard and pound it out? We mistakenly believe if we power through lunch or our workout, we'll get out of the office faster. We are often more productive if we get fix of glucose and oxygen. Our ideas come more quickly. We gain a new mental clarity. We may even get out of the office faster because of a great

inspiration. So working out or going to lunch is not just OK. It's imperative for creative ideas.

Most confess they pass up these breaks because others around them aren't taking them. We worry about what it will signal to co-workers and colleagues. In this business climate, it's time to stop worrying about form and start worrying the ideas you contribute. Besides, working out produces an opiate - endorphins that may make you seem extremely happy. And we all know Debbie Downer never gets anything accomplished.

## MYTH 3: MULTI-TASKING IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS

Multi-taskers believe themselves to be more productive than they really are. We reason that if we juggle a lot at one time we can still do quality work and more of it. But have you ever talked to someone on the phone while they are tapping away at e-mail? Or surfing the web? Have you noticed their listening suffers?

The brain's working memory can process a discreet number of items at one time. Some researchers estimate between 7-10 items. While you may feel you are getting a lot done, no unique problem solving is taking place. Multi-tasking drains the attention functions of your brain. Mostly, you are just moving more quickly with more subtle internal stress. And there is a deeper problem: chronic low-level stress artificially increases cortisol levels in the bloodstream.

Increased cortisol has been linked to many disease conditions – not the least of which is memory loss. Long term elevation of stress hormones attack the hippocampus - one of the key structures in which memory resides. Post-traumatic stress sufferers as well as Alzheimer's patients show dramatic reduction of the size of the hippocampus.

## MYTH 4: I SUCCEED BECAUSE OF MY STRATEGIC THINKING SKILLS

"Strategic thinking" in prac-

tice can be a foil for critical or reductionistic thought. (And can lead to one of the most useless products of the corporation – a PowerPoint deck.) It's a temptation for those who consider themselves "strategists" to have a low threshold for uncensored thinking or creative cognition. Productive people, in strategic functions or otherwise, are optimistic, promote open-ended thinking and frankly, are just plain "up".

Optimism is a function of serotonin in the brain. This neurotransmitter occurs naturally and regulates mood and anxiety. Many anti-depressants influence serotonin levels in the brain. The research of Martin Seligman from University of Pennsylvania reveals that most leaders are highly optimistic. They demonstrate positive emotions in the face of adversity and don't excessively ruminate about issues.

Some believe you can regulate your serotonin level through diet and even positive thought. Howard Behar, former President of Starbucks often demonstrates the power of positive psychology with this exercise. "Say "No" ten times. Now say "Yes" ten times. Which feels better? "Yes" is the most powerful word." Be sure your strategic thinking is optimistically productive.

## MYTH 5: A TEAM CAN ACCOMPLISH ANYTHING

There is a unique structure in the brain called the anterior cingulate cortex. This area is commonly understood to be the "self-will" cortex – the part of the brain that transmits the feeling of "I" or personal

consciousness. Responsible for a sense of agency, this place lights up when we act of our own volition. Interestingly, depressed individuals show limited activity in the anterior cingulate cortex of the brain. Scientists believe reduced function in this area creates a lack of interest, purpose and meaning in a person's life.

Being part of a team of people working toward a goal can be a meaningful experience, but even greater reward comes from personal agency. Making a creative contribution. Philosophers throughout history remind us that this sense of generative accomplishment is one of the pinnacles of human experience. Be sure team pursuits aren't burying the productivity of your personal genius. Activate your anterior cingulate cortex. Know your interests. Create your intellectual capital. Make your imagination your mentor.

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by invitation