

OCTOBER 11, 2013, 1:50 PM

Activity Does Not Always Equal Productivity

By **TONY SCHWARTZ**

In all likelihood, you get more done today than you ever have before. That's mostly because you can do so much more, so much faster, wherever you are, through e-mail, texting, instant-messaging, Twitter and posting.

The real issue is whether you are getting the right things done. That was the most frequent complaint I heard during the three days I spent this week with 200 chief executives at the [Conscious Capitalism C.E.O. Summit](#) meeting — more on that in a coming column — and in the conversations I've had with leaders over the last year.

So what stands in the way of your being truly productive? By that, I mean finding the right balance between attending to what is truly urgent and focusing on what is less pressing but will most likely add the most enduring value.

You need more sleep than you think, and maybe much more

We live by a persistent myth: that one hour less of sleep will give you one more hour of productivity. Instead, what it gives you is one more hour awake, and you are less rested. The near guarantee is that you will be progressively less productive over the course of the day.

Even small amounts of sleep deprivation take a powerful toll on our cognitive capacity. A vast trove of research suggests that 95 percent of us need at least seven to eight hours of sleep to feel fully rested, while 2.5 percent need more than eight hours. The final 2.5 percent — or about one out of 40 people — require less than seven hours.

In other words, you are not likely one of them, even though you may well think you are. According to a sleep researcher, Tom Roth, for example, the percentage of people who require five or fewer hours of sleep to feel fully rested, rounded to a whole number, is zero.

If you get sufficient sleep, the strong likelihood is that you will accomplish more, in less time, at a higher level of quality. It is the last thing you ought to be sacrificing, not the first.

Do the most important thing first

The pull to e-mail is powerful and Pavlovian. That's especially so after a night's worth of new messages have filled your in-box (assuming you weren't sleeping with your

smartphone, and sneaking a peek in the middle of the night).

The vast majority of the messages that accumulate do not truly demand your immediate attention. Instead, they take up your time and consume your attention at precisely the time of day that most of us have the most energy and the fewest distractions.

By checking your e-mail first, you effectively turn over your agenda to others. It is far better to decide what your agenda ought to be the night before and make that the first thing you focus on at work, without interruption, for up to 90 minutes.

If you must check e-mail when you get up because there are urgent messages, scan quickly for anything that truly cannot wait an hour. Answer those, ignore the rest, and then do what is truly most important.

Stop pushing through

Human beings are designed to operate in 90-minute cycles. At night, we move through the five stages of sleep in that time — the Basic Rest Activity Cycle. During the day, we are guided by our ultradian rhythms, and we move from high physiological alertness toward physiological fatigue in 90-minute intervals.

The consequence is that we operate best when we take intermittent breaks to renew and refuel. Here is a simple way to think about it: Imagine you are challenged to do the maximum number of situps you can over 30 minutes. You are given the choice of doing them continuously until exhausted, or doing them in sets of 5 or 10 with a short period of rest between each one. Do the latter and you will generate more situps, keep better form along the way and feel less tired at the end.

Work in the same way and you will be able to focus more intensely for the same reason a sprinter can go all out: you have a finish line in sight. By focusing more intensely for shorter periods, you will get more done, in less time, at a higher level of quality, more sustainably.

Get it off your mind

With so much coming at us all the time, it is hardly surprising that our instinctive default is to do whatever feels most urgent and easiest to address. The consequence, of course, is that we often keep putting off what is most challenging and then lack the energy to do it by the time we finally get to it.

I believe in lists, first and foremost as a means of downloading everything that is on your mind to get it off your mind. We each have relatively small working memories and they are easily overloaded. The less you try to keep straight in your head, the more space there is for you to think clearly and deeply about any given subject that demands your attention.

With that in mind, I keep all my lists in one place. They include what I want to do that

day, over the next week, and in the longer term. I also keep a list of e-mails I need to send; calls I intend to make; ideas I want to explore further; issues I want to discuss with specific colleagues; and even things that are making me feel anxious. Once I've written something down, I know it will be there when I need it, and so it usually stops preoccupying me. Many times it ends up taking care of itself.

The other value I derive from detailed lists is that they help clarify what I ought not to be focused on. By having everything in one place, I can much more easily decide what is truly important and what is not. Half the value of having a list is to make it more obvious what not to do. I might have 50 to 100 items on my lists, but I typically give explicit priority to three or fewer in any given day.

Make it matter

Finally, and simply, ask yourself a simple question before you begin any activity: "Is this the best way I could be spending my time?" If the answer is no, don't do it.