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Ron Ashkenas' blog post on Harvard Business Review
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Help Your Team Spend Time on the Right Things

This post was coauthored by Amy McDougall.

What is the most common resource that's always in short supply? The answer, of course, is time. This applies not only to your time, but to your team's. It's the one organizational resource that is neither expandable nor renewable. Therefore, making sure that time is spent in ways that will have the biggest impact is a critical determinant of organizational success.

Unfortunately, many managers don't think about time as a finite resource in the same way that they consider the limitations of headcount and budget. Therefore they don't hesitate to give their teams more assignments without taking any away. The consequence of this is that their people work longer hours – and it's often not clear what's actually important and what can wait. This cascades through the ranks so that almost everyone feels overstressed and overworked. As one senior executive sadly said to me, "There is no time in the year anymore when things quiet down."

But steps can be taken by managers to overcome this dynamic and better leverage organizational time. The first is to sharpen their vision of what their unit needs to do better in the next year or two, so that the priorities are clear. The second step is to free up time to move towards that vision by consolidating, eliminating, or streamlining current activities. The third step is to reallocate the newly liberated capacity to short-term experiments that will help them learn how to get to the vision quicker and with greater impact.

Let's look at the Americas Field Marketing organization for Cisco Systems, as an example of this three-step process. For two years, this nearly 130-person unit had worked hard to drive customer relevance, generate demand, and increase loyalty in partnership with its sales teams across North, South and Central America. They had organized tradeshow, delivered direct marketing, generated leads, and provided useful customer insights – the basics of a successful marketing organization.

During this time, however, Cisco's customers were beginning to purchase and use technology in new ways. Increasingly, tech-savvy business managers, instead of just IT professionals, were making buying decisions; user-generated applications were being added on top of the basic technology; cloud computing was becoming prominent; and digital media was becoming a key influence in deciding which technologies to



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purchase. Customers were self-educating and researching buying decisions in new ways – not just with a sales person.

In the face of this new reality, the marketing leadership team realized that many of their traditional face-to-face activities were no longer sufficient. So at an offsite, they began to develop a vision for Marketing 2.0 – with a focus on data analytics, cloud marketing, more targeted use of Cisco.com, 3rd party websites, and social media, and better identification of organizational buyers – all in support of generating better leads (and better tools to build customer relationships) for the Cisco sales teams.

While all of this was very exciting, the reality was that there were no new resources to dedicate to this work. Sales was still dependent on them to do the traditional marketing activities. As a result, the Americas Field Marketing leadership team shaped “capacity creation” projects to get the current work done with fewer resources or less time. This allowed them to redeploy time to new initiatives.

For example, one project was to consolidate similar types of marketing support across several sales groups. Another was to identify low payoff events and stop supporting them. In addition, the marketing team was encouraged to avoid low priority requests from sales. For activities with no demonstrable impact, they were told to answer with a polite “no,” followed by suggestions for more impactful options.

With extra time available, the leadership team commissioned several new pilots that would move the marketing organization towards vision 2.0. To make sure that the pilots wouldn’t become time sinks and would actually get finished, each one was designed to be narrowly focused on a particular aspect of the new vision, involve a limited number of people, and to be completed in 100 days or less. One of these “rapid results” projects was aimed at learning how to take advantage of data analytics. It achieved its goal of integrating digital behavioral data about customers in one country in order to increase their engagement by 20% in 60 days. Another successful project focused on increasing the collaboration between sales and marketing in one market to improve lead conversion rates by 16% in 100 days.

Naturally, this kind of transformation is not a one-time effort, but rather an ongoing process that needs to be continually refreshed and refocused. In the case of the marketing group, the leadership team now considers the portfolio of capacity creation and rapid results projects every quarter, as they move toward their Vision 2.0, so that they can continue to learn, build on what works and what does not, and make adjustments.

There also are skill challenges involved in pulling this off. At Cisco, for example, it became clear that some people did not necessarily have the skills needed for the new kinds of marketing work. So the marketing leadership team had to figure out how to



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create a more dynamic staffing model for their work through a combination of training, new hires, temporary assignments, and natural attrition.

New initiatives are necessary to move an organization forward. But without a conscious ongoing strategy for managing the time involved, the chances of success may be limited and short-lived.

[Ron Ashkenas'](http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/10/help-your-team-spend-time-on-the-right-things/) blog post on Harvard Business Review
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