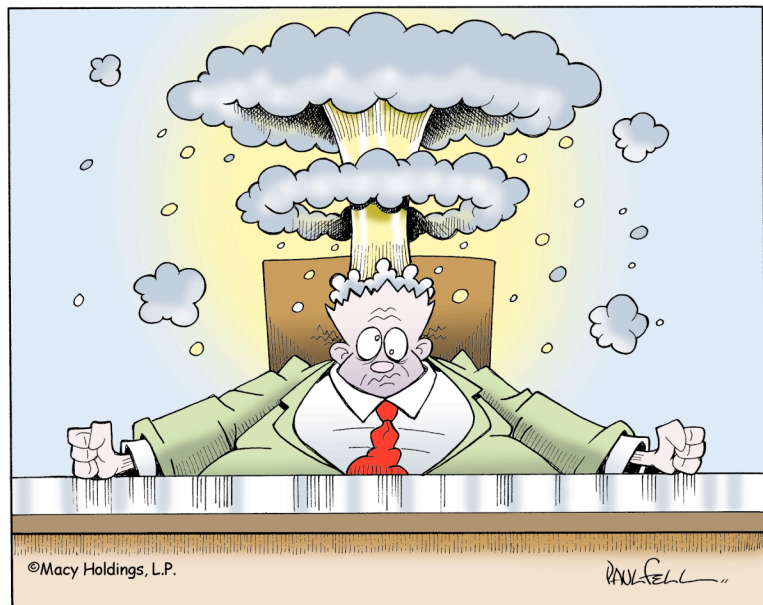


Corporate Attention Deficit Disorder (CADD)

*Managers and leaders are pelted with so many demands for attention that it can be hard to hold fast to the important ones. The flood of urgency competes with leaders' essential intentions of guiding their groups to high performance. As a result of the flood, leaders face a highly contagious condition – **Corporate Attention Deficit Disorder** – a condition that further spreads and institutionalizes the disease of urgency.*

What do highly effective leaders do in the face of the barrage of demands? How do they inoculate themselves against CADD? Take a look at some examples from real leaders and from the cinema.

You've just come back from a frustrating leadership team meeting where the planning department unveiled yet another 81 column spreadsheet, due next Monday. You quickly scan your e-mail before you dash to the meeting you're already ten minutes late for, noticing four items marked with the dreaded red exclamation point, two from HR and one entitled 'Please Read Now.' Should you risk checking them, knowing your boss is expecting you to support his proposal at the meeting that you're already late for?
... . *A moment of indecision.*



Sound familiar? Perhaps you need to fill in your own blanks, but few managers or leaders today find they are able to concentrate on one specific issue for more than a minute without interruption. Often the interruptions appear to be at a high level of intensity and urgency, demanding immediate focus. The life of the manager revolves around constantly selecting which high intensity issue to work, realizing as a result of that choice, many others are devolving while sitting in the queue.

I remember going on a vacation many years ago. I had just been appointed to a leadership position, succeeding an individual who had left the organization in disarray. The budget was due in a month, several staff were fighting about priorities, multiple clients were posing serious complaints about the quality of services we offered. It was going to be a Gordian knot to untie, and the pressure was on. What did I do while my husband fished till he dropped on that beautiful Minnesota lake? I wrote the business plan. Some vacation!

This constant pelting of demands upon managers leads to a condition that I call ***Corporate Attention Deficit Disorder***. Attention Deficit Disorder is a label given to kids in the school systems who have particular learning issues, but also it is suspected that about 5% of adults also carry this disability. I'm stretching the definition of disorder for the sake of making a point.

The Attention Deficit Disorder Association's description of ADD in the Workplace includes the following:

- Distractibility
- Impulsivity
- Hyperactivity
- Memory problems
- Boredom
- Time management problems
 - Hyperfocusing
 - Running late
 - Over-commitment
- Procrastination
- Paperwork
- Interpersonal difficulties
 - Monologuing
 - Interrupting
 - Being blunt

What about the origin of ADD? Most MD's and researchers consider ADD to come from chemical imbalances in the brain or from genetic causes. Some behavioral psychologists think that the environment conditions children to be hyper vigilant, constantly scanning for the stimuli most significant to the moment, thus overdeveloping their scanning capacity. At the same time they under-develop their capacity to shut off those cues and effectively focus on any one of them. In effect, children with ADD have difficulty shutting off incoming information and then are overwhelmed by too many options constantly in front of them that compete for attention.

I'm suggesting that the conditions in which managers and leaders work on a daily basis cause a *pseudo* form of the same symptoms. Check the symptoms again. Look like anyone you know? We experience constant excessive external simultaneous stimulation demanding our attention: High volume, simultaneous, multi-foci, urgent demands for our attention. In this case, the cause is environmental, not genetic, and I'm not supposing that the symptoms are life-long as in the case of true ADD but rather that it is situational and habitual.

I've watched any number of leaders decompress from CADD after leaving a position which had required frequent trips to other parts of the world in which they dealt with jet lag, multiple time zones, cell phones going off all hours of night and day, in addition to the ongoing constant over-demand. They all say it takes months before they sleep well, can shut off their PDAs over the weekends, and slow down enough to be able to enjoy time with friends and family without being anxious about work issues.

One of the most negative impacts of this constant over-stimulation is the impact it has upon a manager's or leader's "intention." Most people who hold management jobs start out with clear intentions for what they want their work unit to accomplish. They aspire to lend their unique capacities in a way that will lead their group to a high level of performance. But, battered by the constancy of demands, importance gives way to urgency. Holding to that original sense of intention and aspiration becomes more and more difficult. When too much attention is invested in urgency, the function of "leading" ceases and the organization becomes addicted to reactivity. That's when CADD has set in. A reactive organization is afloat, at the mercy of the voices of urgency with the loudest demands.

How do really impactful leaders and managers deal with the urgency-importance dichotomy and avoid CADD? Here are some really valuable lessons from them.

- A highly successful marketing entrepreneur has written out her vision/intention in exquisite detail. She can see, hear, feel, taste and smell her intention. Every morning, her first conscious act is to recite to herself that intention as a way of setting her attention for the day on the small acts which add up to its accomplishment. Throughout the day she constantly evaluates requests against their importance to her intention. As opposed to having it framed on her wall or in the front of her planner, actually taking time to read it at the start of each day keeps her intentions alive and acts as an urgency-buster.
- An upper level leader in a large global company cites his success to his practice of requiring that any administrative requirements coming from outside his domain have his approval before any of his employees comply. HR and Finance were outraged at first.

Now, at the first of each fiscal year he invites in all of the support organizations and requests their administrative procedures for the year. Some he accepts and some he quibbles with. But, after he's agreed on what their joint procedures will be, he refuses to accept any further changes for the rest of the fiscal year *and* holds his direct reports and the support groups to those agreements. Nothing more, nothing less than the agreed procedures. The amount of time gained by his staff for strategic work is huge.

- Coming to be more common is 'taming the Blackberry.' Who says you have to be 24-7? How about setting some specific times when you will turn on your PDA and respond to or take calls? How about a ground rule that all electronic equipment is turned off during meetings? Not only is it rude to take calls during meetings, it wastes time, concentration and confidence in you as leader.

- A senior VP uses the *quality of attention* as one criterion for annual performance bonuses. What does that mean? His idea is that the quality of work and of decisions made is based on the quality of attention the manager is paying to the issue at hand. If someone is multitasking while making decisions, the outcome is likely to be similarly multi-flawed. Input equals output. His guideline – pay attention once and totally. If you’re in a negotiation, deal only with it and keep everything else excluded for the allotted time. Do a fantastic job at what is in front of you, and then take on the next item with equal concentration of attention.
- How about putting more focus on what shows up on your calendar? On the downside, a senior leader gives his scheduler no guidelines. Due to the importance of his position, many people want to be on his agenda. His scheduler has no capacity to evaluate the how importance of requests for his time, so she totally fills his calendar ten hours a day with appointments. First come, first served. He’s over-whelmed and never has time to think.

His superior complains that his organization rarely makes good on commitments. Perhaps a better strategy would be to give the scheduler some clear criteria about the types of issues that warrant time on his calendar. Maybe he could also review his calendar a week or so in advance and make sure that the scheduler’s judgment matches his.

What’s the underlying theme on all of these strategies for avoiding CADD? All rely on a clear articulation of the manager/leader’s intention and then using that intention to guide, challenge and direct his/her activities as well those of subordinates. Recently as I was watching one of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, I was thinking of Captain Jack Sparrow as a good model of a leader’s intention. In the midst of all the swashbuckling traumas and dramas that he experiences, never does he let go of his basic intention.

In the midst of great storms, he pulls out his trusty compass (that never points exactly north) and checks his direction towards his intended destination. Never do you hear him say, “Sorry, crew, the waves were too high and there were too many of them. There was no way I could guide the ship to port.” That’s why he demands to be called “*Captain Jack Sparrow!*” No CADD for him! He stays in control, guiding his ship and crew to his intended destination.

About D. Beth Macy, Ph.D. – *The common thread throughout Dr. Macy’s work history has been change. Throughout most of her work life, she has been a manager or leader dealing with organizations experiencing difficult issues. The types of organizations she has lead, managed or consulted with have varied from small to large, private to public, non-profit to profit, health care to manufacturing. Early in her career, Dr. Macy’s curiosity about effective change lead her to achieving masters and doctorate degrees in management focusing on organizational behavior and organizational theory. Developing her own competencies first as a manager and as a leader, she then shifted to her long-time aspiration of coaching and consulting other organizational leaders.*

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