



Using Systemic Awareness to Unlock Productivity— Revealing Hidden Limits

Productivity is important for success, but is also tricky to navigate. Many industry leaders have developed tools and guidelines with underlying systemic structures for increasing productivity.

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Have you got a productivity ~~problem~~ opportunity? Join the club. It turns out that many different things could be happening to impact a person's productivity, and there is no shortage of advice from those willing to share their personal tips or methods. As systemic thinkers, it is interesting to consider the structure of thoughts and emotions affecting our personal patterns of productivity, accomplishments, and perceptions. And as people who want to make a difference, figuring out how to be more productive is valuable indeed.

Big Picture Accounting

Some of us may be scrambling to fit more into our lives than may actually be feasible, so it is reasonable to start with the big picture. A Harvard Business Review article called, "[A Formula to Stop You from Overcommitting Your Time](#)," by Elizabeth Grace Saunders, pointed out that if we think we have a productivity issue, we might start with a simple accounting of our time.¹

To start, tally up all the things in your life that you do and include time estimates next to each. This can be

done on a daily basis, as well as on a weekly basis. If the total of all your commitments add up to more than 24 hours each day, or 168 hours per week, it's time to prune. We can't expect to change time itself!

Saunders recommends including external expectations as well as internal expectations. This can include work projects, meetings, commute, finances, travel, hobbies, personal development, self-care, eating, sleep, family and relationship maintenance, spiritual practices, volunteer, and community commitments in the list. Problems arise, in particular, for generous souls who like to help and tend to say yes when asked to take on additional responsibility. These individuals can easily become overcommitted which can undermine their success.

The Limits to Growth system archetype can provide some additional relevant systemic insight. As you commit more time than you have, your accomplishments may start to fall (Fig. 1). You will not be able to prepare adequately, or be fully present for each commitment. You may forego sleep, or miss important details.

Usually, the secret to managing a Limits to Growth dynamic is to manage your limit. But 24 hours per day is rather a hard limit. So in this case, the key to managing our commitments (R1 below) is to ask ourselves, “What do I need to stop doing?” I recommend Adam Grant’s book, [Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success](#) for more in-depth thinking that may help those of us who tend to overcommit.

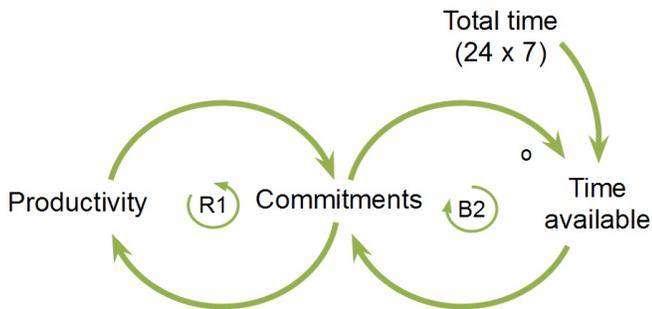


Figure 1. Our commitments and our productivity exist in a reinforcing loop: the more commitments we make, the more productive we can be. At the same time, our commitments impact the time we have available in a balancing loop - the more commitments we make, the less time is available. This is a classic Limits to Growth structure. Source: Leverage Networks

Psychology of Procrastination

For others, procrastination feels like the problem. Inc. magazine ran an article called “[Inside the Psychology of Productivity](#),” by Leigh Buchanan, talking about the psychology of productivity, which explored the underpinnings of procrastination.² They suggest that fear is an important underlying factor in procrastination. In some cases, that fear stems from the uncertainty of how to do something, which is something many of us face as we try something new.

Other times, the negative side of perfectionism can cause immobilizing fear, as seen in Figure 2. Clearly procrastination can reduce productivity, which then exacerbates negative thinking and further increasing fear (R3). Noted also is that perfection can play a role in procrastination. When perfectionists are afraid of not meeting standards, they procrastinate, which reduces their productivity, which increases the discrepancies between

their standards and the work actually accomplished. This can increase their fear and procrastination further. These are reinforcing cycles that can get

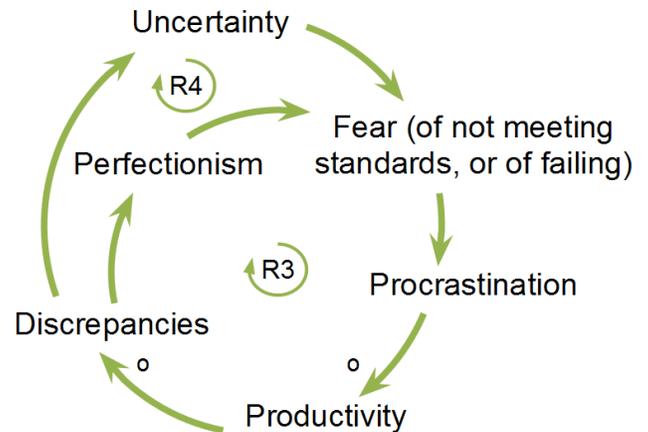


Figure 2. The impact of procrastination on productivity exists as a reinforcing feedback loop. If not broken, procrastination can reduce productivity, and lead to more discrepancies between desired goals and actual performance. These discrepancies exacerbate perfectionism, and lead to unfinished projects and dropped balls, which thus increase uncertainty. Both feed into the paralyzing fear. Source: Leverage Networks

worse if not broken.

Researchers in the Netherlands have identified a different type of procrastination practiced by those who tend to overwork. They push away the demands placed on them by their family, and are thus diverting their attention away from their family and their own health.³ This so-called ‘bedtime procrastination’ happens when people give up sleep, time with family, and time spent in leisure that would help to recharge their batteries. This can be thought of as a balancing loop with a delay, when the effects of not allocating time to things other than work, come around to reduce work productivity. We will revisit this idea later in Figure 5.

The Downside of To-do Lists

Another insight in the Inc. article has to do with our beloved to-do lists.² (I have long-term project lists, per destination shopping lists, house lists, car lists, work priority lists, daily lists, and several list apps, which contain lists of aforementioned lists.)

Apparently, there is a little problem with the lists, in



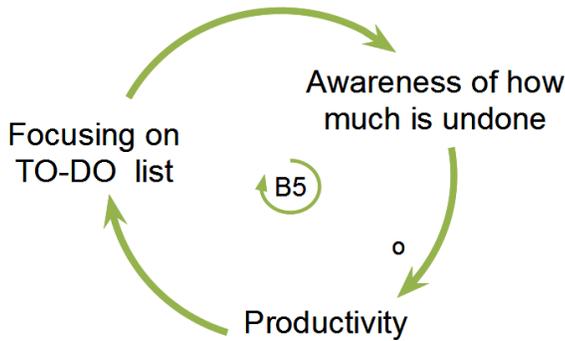


Figure 3. By creating to-do lists, we end up raising our awareness of how much is undone, which can have a negative impact on how productive we feel. Source: Leverage Networks

that if we don't finish everything on them, we tend to not feel successful. To combat these feelings of failure stemming from unfinished to-do lists, uber-productivity coaches suggest that we shouldn't focus on our to-do lists, but instead focus on our accomplishments each day, week, or year. Some coaches recommend a daily journal, and of course, there are apps for that (like iDoneThis.com).

Focusing on the accomplishments and progress we are making toward longer-term goals, in order to combat feelings of unproductivity, makes sense from a systemic point of view. As we reflect on our accomplishments, we feel good. We feel empowered to do more, which increases our productivity and gives us more to feel good about. This sets up a reinforcing process which provides more sustained energy to improve productivity (Fig. 4). Reflecting on our accomplishments creates positive emotions that fuel our productivity, providing the space to start reflecting on our accomplishments again. This reinforcing loop (R6) helps us stay on a positive track of productivity.

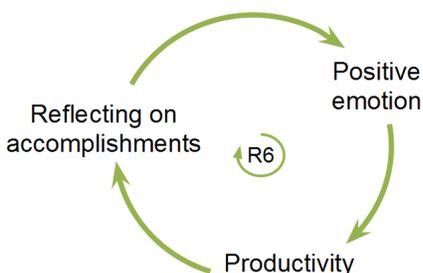


Figure 4. Creating a positive reinforcing loop where we reflect on our accomplishments can increase our overall productivity. Source: Leverage Networks

Exceptionalism and Uber-Productivity

In the United States, there is booming business in coaching as a way to amp up people's productivity. Speakers promise greatness or exceptionalism, and most share a focus on positivity as a foundational element.

If you are committed to this level of personal performance, there are a lot of tools and methods to work toward it. For one, [Robin Sharma](#), leadership guru, has a four step plan.⁴

1) He suggests creating a one-page personal vision for the year, including quarterly goals and a plan. That makes sense. Nothing great will be accomplished without having a goal, and making a goal explicit instantly creates a balancing feedback force.

2) He insists that getting up at 5 a.m. is crucial to providing the extra edge. He refers to 5 to 6 a.m. as the holy hour. In that time, he recommends exercising 20 minutes every morning as the first thing. Then spend 20 minutes reading to learn something new, then 20 minutes of journaling to record accomplishments the day before, or things you are grateful for, and/or what you have recently learned. Certainly, increasing physical activity will activate a number of reinforcing feedback loops (e.g. stamina, energy level, strength, confidence, and positive endorphin-related emotions). Reflective learning and positive thinking are reinforcing also, so Sharma is undoubtedly tapping into the power of reinforcing feedback.

3) Later each day, he recommends doing something that pushes your physical limits in order to encourage growth. He calls it a "second wind workout." He wants us to workout our bodies again, to transform our bodies, and reach the next level of fitness.

4) Last, he suggests we master time management. He even goes so far as to share his personal weekly schedule method with his followers, one 8.5 x 11 sheet with twenty-minute blocks of his time laid out in pre-specified activities. His life consists of many



back-to-back rituals.

To me, his schedule looks uncannily like bars in a prison, but this level of discipline could very well be the key to unleashing greatness. Putting something on your schedule is akin to establishing a goal to spend time on a particular activity, and it creates a balancing feedback force that is fulfilled when you do what you planned.

Tony Robbins is another guru promising greatness.⁵ He circumscribes his framework with a wider vision than an individual's productivity. At the highest level, Robbins articulates the psychological desires or goals that every person has to varying degrees: certainty, uncertainty, significance, connection or love, growth, and contribution to something larger than oneself. He notes that whether people are super-performers, or falling into a life trap, they are getting their psychological goals met somehow.

In addition to understanding our own desires, and their relative importance, he talks about beliefs, or maps as he calls them, and assumptions about how the world works. Robbins says our mental models affect how successful we are, and he identifies a number of beliefs shared by successful people.

Robbins subscribes to the positive thinking reinforcing loop in Figure 4 with his beliefs. He states, "Everything happens for a reason and a purpose, and it serves us" and "There is no failure." Like Sharma, Robin's statements convey that underlying both of these beliefs is a push to learn from everything. Robbins widens his scope beyond the individual with the belief that "People are your greatest resource," extending the learning to the group or organization level.

And lastly, like Sharma, Robbins notes that people who work often, hard, and continuously are the ones who are likely to succeed. He suggests adopting the maps: "Work is play," "There is no abiding success without commitment," and "Whatever happens, take responsibility." These offer similar guidelines for those of us

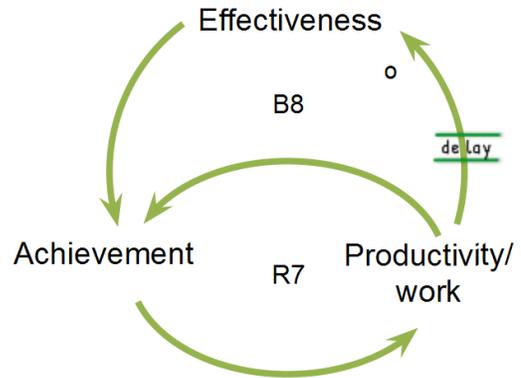


Figure 5. The higher a person's productivity, the higher their achievement, and the higher their achievement the higher their rewards and productivity, therefore creating a reinforcing feedback loop. Over time however, a person's effectiveness in their work will decrease, which will have a limiting effect on their achievement.

Source: Leverage Networks

who wish to be superlative in our work. Articulate and embed clear goals for yourself, and set yourself up for reinforcing feedback, through learning and positive thinking.

Leisure and Productivity or Creativity and Creation

As systems thinkers, though, we may be suspicious of the reinforcing loop driving exponential productivity, knowing that nothing increases forever. So we ask, "Is there more to the picture?" Well, from Europe, and many systemic thinkers in the US, the notion of burnout has been well documented.⁶

We may not all share Pablo Picasso's sentiment when he said, "When I work, I relax. Doing nothing, or entertaining visitors makes me tired." For many of us, sustained pushing can lead to a decrease in our effectiveness after a delay, a classic *Limits to Growth* dynamic. The notion of bedtime procrastination, discussed earlier, is just such a dynamic.

In fact many people, especially those who draw on creativity to do their best work, know the value of periods of rest and leisure. They know it helps them to recharge their batteries and do their work more effectively.

So the pattern, for them, as seen in Figure 6, is a sort



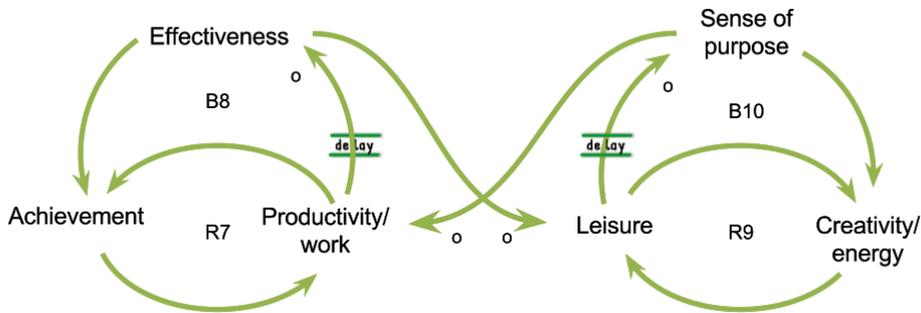


Figure 6. The polarity between Productivity and Leisure. Source: Leverage Networks

of ping-pong between times of intense productivity (R7), and then a shifting to a period of rejuvenation (R9). This may be more natural for some, and is the core structure observed by Polarity Partnerships, who note this cyclical dynamic caused by ping-ponging Limits to Growth structures are pervasive and natural.⁷ They note that many people (and organizations) tend to feel the full negative effects of one mode of operation before shifting to the other. The personal skill is to be more attuned to decreases in your effectiveness when working, so it does not develop into full-blown burnout, before you allow time for leisure and relaxation.

but from a longer-term perspective can show improvements in focus and effectiveness.⁸ Gaining clarity and perspective provides value beyond just getting things done. Similar to Covey's sharpening the saw concept, these activities should be a vital part of our work process.⁹

There are times in our lives when one or more of these approaches or observations may be helpful, and no one approach is likely to be a good fit for all of us. Let us know what works for you, or not, on our community blog.

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