

# The false economy of fire-fighting

Dr Angus McLeod looks at how habitual fire-fighting robs senior executives of the time to plan and manage effectively – and how coaching can help them

**A** huge workload and a perceived lack of time is the predicament of many senior executives today. What is also true is that, through coaching, this invariably changes in a remarkable way without loss of impact, success or esteem. How is that possible?

Kate was a comparatively young technology development director in a major electronics business and had numerous project heads reporting to her. Her position on the board now required a more strategic and holistic application of her knowledge and experience. Her private life was a mess and she was literally married to the business.

With coaching over a couple of months, Kate made progress. Her project heads were brought together to develop strategic networking opportunities for co-work and relationship-management with colleagues in the other countries. At the next level down, technical people were seconded in and out of the organisation to improve company-to-company relations and to make an impact on best practice.

Kate started to turn down corporate-representative opportunities at the many hospitality functions available to senior members in the

business and went back to her main sport. She developed far-reaching strategic plans for the integration of technology across the businesses and was promoted within three months to the international board.

She got her life back.

## Lock-in syndrome

Lock-in syndrome is a patterned response to pressure of work (often self-generated). As the demands go up, so we stretch the day.

Once the pattern has started, the intense focus on work and action means that strategic thought is rare. You are locked in. It takes a major catastrophe or critical, personal event to stimulate a re-evaluation of what we do and why we do it. As leaders, it is necessary not to follow the pattern blindly but on entering it, to exercise choice, review and back out.

To counteract the effect of lock-in, we need to get a wider picture of what is happening. For example:

- Recalibrate the relative importance of what I do in the greater context of my contribution in all my life's work.
- Prioritise my health and wellbeing to ensure I stay well and can contribute.
- Rethink the contribution I make

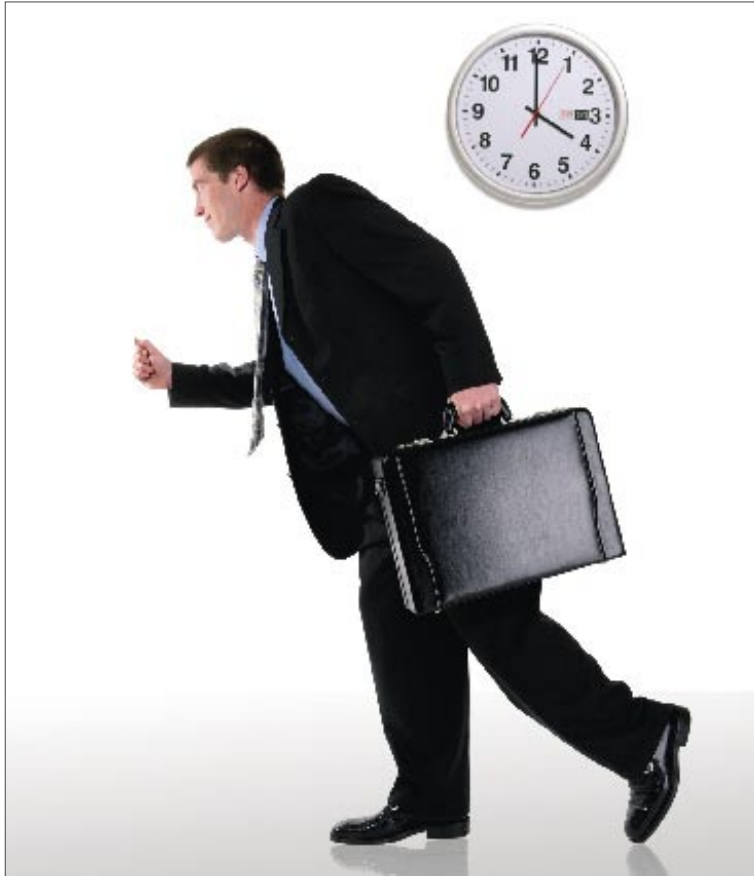
to my family or friends.

- Realise that, having trained my head to be busy, stillness demands effort of will to become re-habituated for creative thought.
- Break my workday habits – change the start of each working day as much as possible.
- Work out where my contribution is most essential, setting out areas of essential influence and delegating and withdrawing from non-essential functions/demands. Delegate more.
- Think about the skills and competencies of my immediate people (and therefore who is really best able to take over key tasks and when) and what level of support to offer them.

These actions are designed to gain wider perspective, generate calm and higher effectiveness. These are important because lock-in syndrome originates from patterned learning where we have lost full personal control.

## Fire-fighting

Fire-fighting is the precursor to lock-in syndrome (when the individual is no longer able to get back to a relaxed 'state of being' again).



Fire-fighting is not wrong *per se* if consciously chosen as a temporary need with a specific end, and provided one can regain one's composure after that need has passed. The danger comes when the 'high' associated with one episode is so exciting<sup>1</sup> that the person is unable to calm down again. Instead, they compulsively go to the next fire and, if there isn't one, tend to make a drama in order to create one!

Thus, lock-in syndrome is a patterned behaviour that arises when one starts to go from one fire to the next without a pause for reflection, perspective and the deliberate use of choice. Since patterns often develop sub-consciously, there are real dangers in being exposed to situations where multiple and sequential fire fights are the norm. Repeated fire fights may lead to lock-in syndrome, without you even noticing how you arrived there!

If most of our work is concerned with putting out fires, tactical decisions may be made but the strategic development of the business, in the myriad of areas in which this is essential for sustainability, must

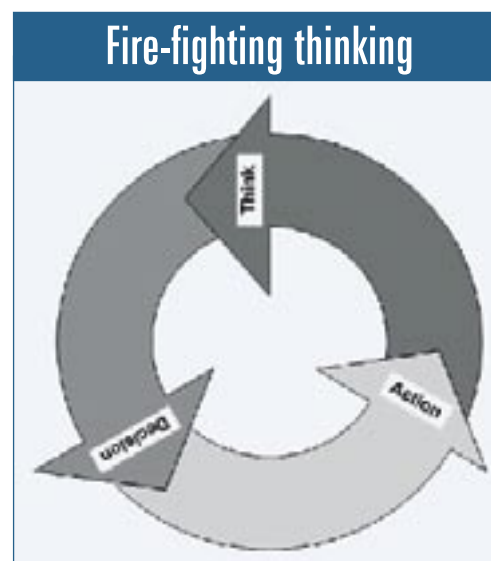


Figure 1

fall short. If fire-fighting characterises the bulk of your work life, what can you do?

I suggest changing the beginning of each day. This can start at home or hotel. The earlier in the day you make these changes, the greater the impact of the result. Patterns are triggered by psychological events that run rapidly and sequentially, usually out of conscious awareness or control. To challenge the pattern, break it at an early part of the sequence.

There are many things which can make a difference, including:

- Consider taking a morning walk;
- Stop the stimulants, caffeine, nicotine, beta-carotene (in fizzy, especially yellow and orange drinks, pastilles and lozenges);
- If you start the day by dealing with mail or email, schedule this activity for later in the morning. Mail requires a series of quick action loops – think-decision-action, think-decision-action – and these stimulate the mind into a fire-fighting pattern... tda, tda, tda... you get hooked into the cycle and a whole day can be lost.
- Start each day with a period of reflection. Thoughtful, strategic consideration will also get the mind to work in evolutionary processes rather than rapid decision-mode. With habit, your mind will be more able to return to this strategic work even if you are fire-fighting in between. The mind is like a muscle: use it differently and often and it becomes faster and more flexible.

The type of strategic thinking you could address may include:

- Who else is influential in supporting or undermining my function and what can I do to create a better environment for the success of my function?
- Which parts of my function could be managed elsewhere (in or outside the business), are any of these options viable and useful to the business and, if so, what

can I do to influence that change or protect that area from a less-effective option?

- Of the major things that need to be communicated in the next period, when would be the best time to communicate them, who should be involved in advance of that, and how should the communication strategy be planned and carried out?
- Who misunderstands me, the way I work or my motives, and what might I do to get them on my side?
- What are the strengths, weaknesses and perceived potential of my immediate reports and what can be done to test their potential and assist them in taking on more responsibility?

These are large-aspect questions that demand a period of thought and self-reflection. If you are creating your own, make sure they satisfy these criteria. They should not be urgent as this may encourage stress responses and periods of rapid judgment without thinking them through in significant depth. Urgency triggers fire-fighting.

If you think about your own needs for strategic thinking, how much should you be doing, when should you be doing it and what should you be turning your attention to? A typical answer adopted by the many people that I coach in senior jobs is to allocate two or more hours a week. The subjects for strategic thought are updated and planned as part of the process. Here are examples:

- Changing communication strategies
- Career plans
- Internal marketing
- Alliances
- Organisational development
- Support and resources for my team
- Succession planning

Many of the people I work with on a one-to-one basis leave our coaching sessions with diary entries

for the whole year blocked out for 'planning', 'strategic development' or other appropriate phrases that suit the culture. Their secretaries book appropriate spaces for this work and protect those spaces from being regularly captured by others.

### The step back

Stepping back is a quick method of gaining objectivity. It is a device for checking mental state and checking whether what we are doing is the best thing at that time.

When we notice the signs of fire-fighting, it is helpful to think: 'Step back'. If you can do this and literally 'step back', the physical act enhances the effect. In any case, the pause should be enough to provide a space in which to ask yourself questions and start some productive processing that will change the way in which you are working. Questions might include some like these:

- Is this the best use of my time now?
- Can I bring other resources to this?
- Is there a more effective way of achieving the actual objective?
- What is most important both now and after completing this task?

Devise your own questions to suit you or adapt these to have the same impact.

### Busy bodies

Some executives believe that looking busy makes them appear important. Sadly, this is not often true. In any case, being busy does

not have a relationship with good leadership. The executive who cannot flex the diary to meet with people is not doing his job. Being late for meetings, making and taking mobile phone calls at every opportunity, walking quickly from one appointment to another show high activity, but they do not raise confidence in those who know what leadership looks like.

Whether the reason for being busy is a misguided status thing or whether there is an inability to prioritise or manage adequately, the busy body needs to be slowed down – it's time to prioritise, to think where our contribution is most needed and effective, and how to support our role more adequately. Continuing the busy body syndrome is not a sensible option.

### Focus on impact

*"The misfortunes hardest to bear are those which never come"*

**James Russell Lowell**

I have adapted the circles of influence and concern from the work of Stephen Covey (1990)<sup>2</sup> and applied it successfully in my coaching and training work with managers and leaders (see Figure 2). The model suggests that mental activity is often wasted due to lack of focus and, further, that when that happens, the focus should be applied where it will have impact in the world of work.

When we concentrate on 'stuff' that just exists in our work culture but over which, on reflection, we have no chance of having an effec-

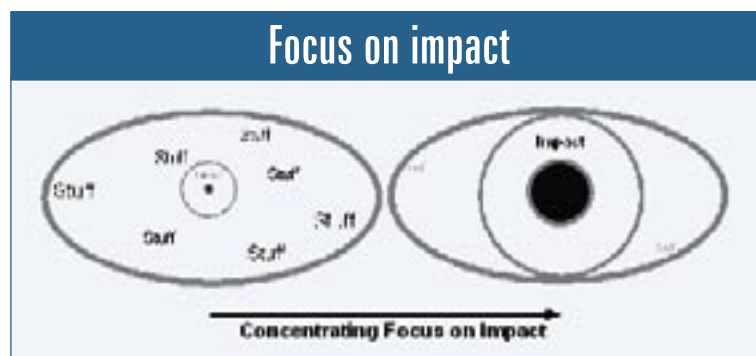


Figure 2

tive impact, we are not being effective. It is wasted time. When we notice ourselves and others doing this, we need to re-focus on an area where we *do* have impact. These simple acts of letting go and 're-focusing for impact' have a fantastic effect – within seconds the 'stuff' is no longer in the picture and we are suddenly being more effective again.

These two steps do depend on having done, at some time, some reflective work on whether the 'stuff' issue (however important emotionally) is something that you can sensibly change. And if there is a chance of doing that, will it be without diminishing your energy for productive work or damaging your status? These are important questions and the answers should advise your action.

In many organisations, there are groups of people who continually go over the same complaints and trigger other members of their kind to go into well-rehearsed expressions of helplessness and complaining. Phrases that trigger these unproductive conversations often include some of these:

- HR has no productive benefit at all, in fact the reverse;
- IT again, they can't fix anything without messing up something else;
- forget it, facilities management will just keep you waiting for a year or more;
- L&D haven't got a clue what they are doing.

When people spend their time repeating the same, familiar complaints, they are contributing towards a growing culture of *we can't* rather than *we can*. By wasting time on conversations without action and any intention of making a difference, each individual is reducing his own energy for success.

Focus on action and success and the complaints disappear.

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### Being and doing

Another influence on whether we firefight is our sense of our contribution to the organisation. If our sense of impact in the organisation is tied up principally with actions, to let go of responsibilities (and actions) can weaken our sense of work identity. If our sense of influence goes wider than that, we will be more resilient; we will be less likely to be affected (for example) by being given reduced scope for decisions and action. If we are to contribute more to the long-term health of the organisation in which we work, there has to be a tendency to be more active in other, strategic ways to create sustainable futures.

### Silent time for reflection

*"And in much of your talking, thinking is half murdered"*

Kahlil Gibran

There is another use of time that may sound counter-intuitive to productive working – it is that of still space, or silence. Reflective thought is enormously helpful and the benefits are obvious when we think about it – we become more strategic, we are able to see the wider, holistic implications of our actions.

Stillness is the opposite of the busy head state. There is a range of mental activity, from rapid, logical processing to quiet, low-level being (See figure 3): the psychological stillness-activity dimension.

What is your range? Would it be useful to extend the range? If we are to be able to use our skills flexibly from logical tasking (busy head) to reflective thought and even further than that, a quantum leap is obtained, even to the level of genius. To make that more likely, it is helpful to exercise our minds to their full potential: a physical workout for the mind. You can't be comfortable at any level of sustained physical work unless you have worked harder in training. It is the same with our minds; we need to flex and test them so that our range of competence is extended.

### Conclusion

Often we let time control us rather than the other way around. When we change our view of time and notice our own sense of urgency, we can have more control over the way we work. That should mean more planning, strategy and, ultimately, raised productivity. ■

*This article is an adaptation from Dr Angus McLeod's new book 'Self-coaching Leadership – Simple Steps from Manager to Leader'. He can be contacted at [ourinfo@angusmcleod.com](mailto:ourinfo@angusmcleod.com)*

<sup>1</sup> Highs are triggered by the release of adrenaline

<sup>2</sup> Habit #1 Be Proactive

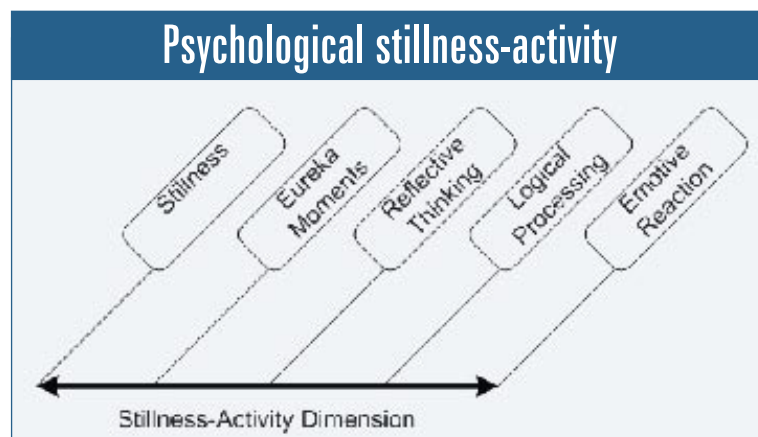


Figure 3