



Whether you are a hard-charging company commander or battalion-level “Iron Major”, we all want to lead productive and effective organizations. We don’t want to work late hours, waste people’s time, or create unnecessary workloads and hardships. Often though, the crush of administrative requirements and last minute taskings, mixed with our own leadership flaws, produces what I call “Sisyphus Syndrome”.

If you recall, Sisyphus is the character from Greek mythology who was sentenced by Zeus to roll a boulder up to the top of a hill. With back-breaking effort, he pushed the large stone up the incline. Just as he was about to reach the top, the boulder gets away from him and rolls back to the bottom. His hard work was all for not. This tragic scene plays out for eternity.

Most of us know what needs to be done, but that is not the problem. It is how we go about doing it that is all wrong. We invest our energy, time, and intellect in the wrong areas. In

the end, we become a modern-day Sisyphus and our flurry of activity, long hours, and super-awesome power point presentations, end up at the end of a long week as a boulder sitting at the base of a hill.

In his latest book, [Smarter Faster Better](#), Charles Duhigg offers leaders insights into helping us figure out how to improve our organizations' levels of productivity and avoid turning our staffs and companies into the [trials of Sisyphus](#). He writes, "Productivity isn't about working more or sweating harder. It's not simply a product of spending longer hours at your desk or making bigger scarifies...Productivity is about making certain choices in certain ways." In the book, he offers eight ideas that when connected together can lead to a greater increase in productivity for our organizations.

1. **Motivation.** If we want to motivate the people who work for us to accomplish more, we have to give them opportunities to make choices that provide them with a sense of autonomy and self-determination. Research has shown that a prerequisite to motivation is feeling we have some level of control over our actions. I believe this is achieved when we put our leadership philosophy of mission command into practice. For example, instead of telling a 2LT exactly how to run a weapons range, give him or her intent and time and let them work through the problem. If you are leading a staff, make a subordinate a project manager and let them develop planning timelines, run working groups, and take ownership of the project or event. The key is to provide them with a certain level of autonomy.
2. **Teams.** We all would all love to have every member of our team be of the highest caliber, but that usually isn't the case. As, [Colonel Ross Coffman](#) observed a few months, we all want our subordinates to be Captain America, but the reality for most is that we end up with Captain Murica. Duhigg points out that good teams succeed not because of the all stars on the team, but because of the norms of the team. He writes,

“The right norms could raise the collective intelligence of mediocre thinkers.” If we want our organizations to be productive, we have to set the right culture and climate. Many leaders become frustrated by the caliber of leaders who work for them and instead of creating a positive organizational culture; they turn it toxic, furthering the problem of productivity.

3. **Focus.** It's easy to lose focus when we are trying to balance commanders' priorities, discipline issues, and training readiness. Many of us spend a majority of our time in leadership positions in “react mode” instead of being in control of the situation. Duhigg suggests that we develop mental models for how future events should play out. He argues, “Models help us by providing a scaffold for the torrent of information that constantly surrounds us. Models help us choose where to direct our attention, so we can make decisions, rather than react.” Think through different scenarios you may face in the near future, and the actions you should take to ensure a successful outcome. When they happen in real life, you will be able to better understand the problem and avoid the white noise.

4. **Goal Setting.** How many times have your best of intentions fallen flat on their face? Whether it's proper training management or a quality leader development program, he recommends that we develop SMART goals to aid us in accomplishing what we actually set out to do. The SMART system translates intentions into concrete plans by making us breakdown our goals into steps, developing a timeline to achieve them, and finally to measure the effectiveness of our approach.

5. **Managing Others.** When we talk about commitment, we usually refer to our collective commitment to the organization. Rarely, do we discuss it in terms of our commitment to our subordinates. If we want to maximize their productivity, we have to

show that we are committed to their personal successes. We do this by listening, to their ideas, allowing their mistakes to become the building blocks to experience, and having their backs when they fail.

6. **Decision-Making.** As a leader, decision-making is probably one of the greatest sources of stress that we encounter. A wrong decision can lead our organizations down the wrong paths, resulting in missed opportunities, extra work, and even quite a bit of back-tracking. To make better decisions, we have to make sure we start with the right assumptions. Duhigg suggests that the strength of our assumptions are based on our experiences. The more experiences we have, the better our assumptions will be. This is why self-development is critical to our overall growth as leaders. Reading and reflection can help us internalize our past experiences along with the experiences of others, which we gain through personal study.

7. **Innovation.** Many think you have to be creative and think of new ideas in order to be innovative. Duhigg says this is a myth. He argues that innovation is simply the combination of existing ideas instead of the development of something new. If you want to try and spur innovation in your organizations, look for ways you can borrow from existing practices to make a system more efficient. He also adds, that adding a little bit of stress and tension can also spur innovation. Over the years, I've learned that if you put a cap on the amount of hours subordinates are allowed to work in the day, they began finding innovative ways to become more efficient and make the best use of their time.

8. **Absorbing Data.** Finally, whether you're receiving an operations order from a higher headquarters or sitting in a command and staff, there is only so much information your brain can absorb before it shuts down. He calls this information blindness. He writes:

The quality of people's decisions generally gets better as they receive more relevant information. But then their brain reaches a breaking point when the data becomes too much. They start ignoring options or making bad choices or stop interacting with the information completely.

He recommends a couple of approaches to avoid information blindness. One such approach is to do something with the data. In other words, write it down. Take notes. Make charts in your green notebook. Don't just keep it on the slide or on the paper.

I highly recommend [Smarter, Faster, Better](#) along with his previous book, [Power of Habit](#), to anyone in a leadership position or to those who are just interested in improving their own levels of productivity. Unlike many of the books in this genre, his concepts easily transfer to military organizations. Many of us spend our weeks pushing boulders up hills, only to see them roll back to the bottom. Intentionally focusing on productivity is the only way to avoid Sisyphus Syndrome.

Have a good book or article that helped you improve your productivity? Please leave it in the comments section below!

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