STUMBLING ACROSS THE OBVIOUS

HENRIK GRUBER
CO-AUTHOR: ALEXANDER BIRKE

CONTENTS

02 | **WHY ARE WE HERE?**

Wʜʏ ᴀʀᴇ ᴡᴇ ʜᴇʀᴇ? ꜰᴏʀ ᴀɴʏᴏɴᴇ ᴇxɪsᴛɪɴɢ ᴏɴ ᴛʜɪs ᴇᴀʀᴛʜ, particularly those of us who are involved in a project, this is the question of ultimate importance. Many of the situations memorialised in these pages were times of existential despair. In these particular projects, I didn't know what I or anyone else was doing there. It felt like we had reached the end of the proverbial road. Somehow, we had all ended up in a ghost town that had been abandoned years ago by most of its inhabitants. We were the last survivors, clinging on for dear life, having long forgotten why we were there.

> 66
> Each person should be able to tell you exactly why he or she is on the project.

IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT WE DO. WE'RE ALL GETTING PAID.

It's time to introduce our next character, Dillon. Dillon is a somewhat disgruntled but nevertheless valued employee. In his youth, he was driven, full of ideas, and eager to learn. Over time,

Dillon became somewhat disillusioned. He stopped dreaming of making his mark in the world. Nowadays, he just does his job. The wellbeing and prosperity of the company is no longer his priority; his focus lies elsewhere.

Dillon Disillusioned - 9-5 employee without ambition. Working-life disgruntled him. He is just in for,   well he forgot.

The title of this chapter can be attributed to Dillon, who has what I call Busy Person Syndrome. The busy person says: *I need to be busy. I'm on the team, but don't ask me why. It's all so frustrating, because no one is accomplishing anything at all. Something around here really has to change, but don't ask me what that is or make me be the one to change.* Dillon cannot tell you what motivates him or what purpose he serves. He simply needs a place to be, and your team happens to be that place.

Dillon brings home the bacon. He gets very frustrated and has regular outbursts, during which he rails against the very inflexible organisation and the status quo. At the end of the year, he typically compiles a long list of his excellent achievements. Occasionally, he receives a raise. Dillon believes his skills are not being appropriately used, as he should have been promoted into management a long time ago, so he often will bully others into letting him play the unofficial team lead, thus revealing his lack of experience. Once Dillon finds that he is in over his head, instead of admitting his shortcomings and trying to acquire the skills he is lacking, he will instead flaunt his incompetency for all to see. Dillon blames his failure on the company, the system, his co-workers—everyone except himself. Dillon is always busy. Partly what keeps him busy is

his constant complaining. One has to wonder how much longer he'll be able to keep this up. His behaviour benefits neither his company nor himself.

WHAT TO CONSIDER OR TRY NOW

■ **Activity** is not synonymous with output and output is not synonymous with outcome. Instead of asking yourself what you are doing, ask yourself what you are actually producing. Is there an outcome?

■ **Ask** yourself whether you are focused on a few key topics or whether you are trying to do ten thousand things in parallel. Narrow things down to the essentials instead of juggling too many balls.

■ **While** being seen to be busy conveys a picture of efficiency, staying active is not your target within itself. Taking a smart and lateral approach provides the base for efficient and effective way of working. That's the best way to produce not only output (deliverables) but real outcomes (the bottom line you wanted to affect with the deliverables). Ask yourself whether you fully understand your objectives. Are you working in the smartest and most effective way?

■ **Keep** in mind that doing everything the "right" way does not guarantee success. How output translates as an outcome is most often decided by a number of factors, including the environment, the market, and the competition. Sometimes it's just luck that gets you there.

MY JOB CONSISTS PRIMARILY OF PRODUCING PAPERWORK.

Whenever I hear such a statement, I'm surprised. I find it peculiar that someone would ever say the above sentence to another human being. My mind starts to swirl with questions. *Instead of wasting your breath on a sentence that tells me precisely nothing, why wouldn't you describe your company's amazing new product? Is it a tweak of something that already exists or makes it far less complicated to use? Why don't you talk about that instead? Do you truly believe that you go to work every day just to write stuff down? Why wouldn't you search for meaning in what you do?*

Whenever I ask Dillon why he has to carry out so much paperwork, he doesn't talk about communication or record-keeping, as you might expect. He tells me he's doing it because he is required to file x number of words or pages every week. I can appreciate

"

Everything
you do should
have a purpose.

that it is necessary to have a paper trail, so that any issues that may arise can be traced back through the documentation. However, it seems to me that unless one bears this specific purpose in mind, one is merely engaging with busywork and fulfilling quotas for their

own sake. In this age of software development, the scope and definition of a project is constantly in flux. It seems like a waste of time and energy to devote so much time to nailing everything down. And, especially as much of this paperwork will eventually be stored in separate formats and applications, you have to wonder whether anyone will ever consolidate and utilise all of this information.

Dillon once told me in earnest: *My co-workers and me hardly have time to talk to the development department, because we have so much work to do in order to meet our writing specifications. We have to prioritise this, because this is how the company measures success. With* x,

y *and* z *documents still outstanding, we can devote only a few hours per week to working on the product itself.* Hearing this sent shivers down my spine.

Wouldn't it make more sense to record the data as succinctly as possible, instead of padding it out with the sole purpose of satisfying an arbitrary word or page count? Someone in the company has decreed that more is better, and everyone unquestioningly follows this rule, especially people like Dillon, who have stopped questioning things. It appears that most people are more concerned with protecting their job security than with enhancing the efficacy of the process.

In his book *The Primes*, Chris McGoff explains that you can change a system only when you work on the system as well as within it.[4] This applies as many things being discussed in the current culture, especially also for learning organisations. These can be seen as investments to future. While this may sound important and reasonable, the tyranny of urgency often exerts a stronger pull.

[4] McGoff, Chris. *The Primes: How Any Group Can Solve Any Problem.* Wiley, 2012. Kindle.

WHAT TO CONSIDER OR TRY NOW

■ **Dedicate** space and time for reflecting, learning and working on the system. As set out in the Eisenhower Matrix,[5] if this undertaking must compete against your daily workload, in terms of urgency, it is bound to lose. But while this may not be of the utmost importance at present, in the mid- or long-term, it will be. That's why you need to reserve time for it.

■ **Take** a deep dive into Eric Ries' Lean Startup[6] approach or learn about the process of one of the most innovative and award-winning design firms in the world, IDEO[7], if you are interested in modern methods of new product development (often referred to as NPD).

■ **Check in** with someone you trust if you feel that a project is floundering. Do they feel the same way? Create alliances to brainstorm the best plan of action. Most likely, the situation is too complex for you to handle alone.

---

[5] "Introducing the Eisenhower Matrix." *Eisenhower.* ® FTL3 Accessed 16 June 2020. https://www.eisenhower.me/eisenhower-matrix/

[6] "The Lean Startup Methodology." The Lean Startup (website). Accessed 24 July 2020. http://theleanstartup.com/principles

[7] "IDEO's Human-Centered Design Process: How to Make Things People Love." User Testing. 4 December 2018. https://bit.ly/3fTTiGQ

I'M JUST FOLLOWING ORDERS.

From my perspective, it is crucial to manage supply and demand. The relationship between supply and demand, and how this is managed, are the sources for many of the problems we have at work.

Let's say you and a friend are making tortellini. Your friend is preparing the dough and squeezing it through a funnel. The dough represents demand. The amount of dough you have available, plus any dough created in the meantime, is to be transformed into pasta by you. You are the supply. As the rate at which you can produce tortellini is limited by the flexibility and speed of your hands, squeezing more dough into the funnel will not speed up the process. The rate of production will increase only as you acquire practice and skill. Your friend must keep feeding the appropriate amount of dough into the funnel. Without enough demand, your funnel will be empty.

> Demand typically outweighs supply. Demand creates the pipeline for innovative products.

In business, demand is the concept of requirements, ideas and work that has to be implemented. Demand typically outweighs the realisation capacities (or supply) of a company. Generally speaking, this is a positive thing. New ideas, products and requirements that have not yet been implemented are the reason companies employ us. Work exists, and people then manifest this work into products customers love. There is a restricted amount of capacity at hand, because people can work only for a certain amount of time each day.

Here we come to the root cause. Phil Abernathy described this very precisely when interviewed for a podcast.[8] Though it may seem simpler to ask people to mindlessly follow orders, we should

[8] "Three Key Capabilities for Agile Leaders." Business Agility Series. *Accenture SolutionsIQ.* https://bit.ly/310c0bw

strive to separate demand from supply, prioritise appropriately, and give people the freedom to implement something that will make a difference.

People need to be aware of their surroundings, to understand the tasks and the logic underlying how they are to be carried out, and to discover solutions by themselves. Simply telling them what needs to be done creates a situation in which they will need to work faster to keep pace with the ever-growing demand. When forced to work above capacity just so they can deliver faster, people become narrow minded and they try to find shortcuts. In this scenario, it isn't possible to keep an eye on the bigger picture or to keep tabs on the whole system; it is possible only to focus on one's personal goals.

At this point, the ambition is simply to deliver as much and as quickly as possible, since everyone is under stress anyway. There's little to no possibility for creativity or innovation when employees are under time pressure to simply get the job done. As the demand pipeline will (one would hope) never run empty, just pay forward all of the demand and leave others to worry about it. The problem is solved for you as soon as it becomes someone else's problem, so all you need to worry about is clearing your workload. Once it's out of sight, it's out of mind. This kind of behaviour erodes respect within the organisation and is harmful to the collaborative spirit, as people elsewhere in the company will always have the nagging feeling that they may be left holding the bag. Therefore, when you have many people working on specifications and requirements, there should be a proportional number of people assigned to incorporating these into great products.

WHAT TO CONSIDER OR TRY NOW

■ **Find** the demarcation line between your demand and supply. It may be worth noting that if you have committed to doing something, you are already in the supply phase.

■ **Organise** and manage your demand via a prioritised list.

■ **To facilitate** prioritisation, you'll need to understand your economic framework or your value system. To help you identify the big things in life or for the next time, first define what value means to you. Then you'll be able to understand which tasks bear the most importance for you and are allowed to consume your time.

■ **Supply** is managed by you or by a team you lead. If this team consists of knowledge workers, it's time to do your research on intentional leadership[9] and situational leadership. As a leader, it's essential to strike a balance between the personality (see DISC or MBTI[10]), acquired and potential competencies, and current knowledge and circumstances of people you're working with. There is no such thing as delegation, self-organisation or happy knowledge workers in your team, unless the leader applies these concepts.

■ **Beyond** managing people in supply, there are a few roles to manage the flow in the smartest way possible. Research lean manufacturing system principles, including how to limit parallel work, focus on reducing waste, and so on.

---

[9] "David Marquet: Intent-Based Leadership." The ArmyLeader.co.uk. Accessed 27 July 2020. https://bit.ly/3at9IoD

[10] DISC and MBTI are distinct personality assessment tools. MBTI assumes a stable and continuous personality, while DISC accounts for environmental and experiential impacts on behavior. For more information, see "Using the Myers-Briggs® Instrument with the DISC© Instrument." Psychometrics. https://bit.ly/2Fn5qDv

IT'S FIVE O'CLOCK; TIME TO GO HOME.

Imagine you and your colleagues are engaged in a project that is really coming down to the wire. You and some of your team members are waiting for a particular delivery or handover to take place, so you can start doing your part. You are tying yourself in knots, preparing as much as you can and trying to think of ways to start the work even before you have the parts you need. Then Dillon, the colleague responsible for the aforementioned essential piece of work, utters the words everyone dreads hearing: *Well, it's almost five o'clock. I have to leave.* You stand there in disbelief.

At any other time, this would be a perfectly harmless statement. Under the current circumstances, it harbours resentment and disrespect for others. What Dillon is really saying is: *I don't care. You will find a way. Whatever. See you tomorrow.* When I hear something like this, I am always disappointed and offended. Dillon is telling you bluntly that he has come to work just to punch a clock. He is not your teammate or collaborator. For him, this project has no deeper meaning.

Think back to your college days. I remember studying with my friends in the university library at the weekend. It was fun, working together, firing off questions and answers, collaborating on projects, and experimenting with ideas. We didn't watch the clock. We considered it time well spent, because we understood we were learning something new.

One could argue that work is different from school or university. But, if you love what you do, shouldn't you consider it a kind of freedom to spend time with people who share the same interests, working towards a shared purpose or goal?

WHAT TO CONSIDER OR TRY NOW

In his book Flow: *The Psychology of Optimal Experience,* Hungarian-American psychologist Michael Csikszentmihalyi uses Flow to refer to a personal state in which we are completely absorbed and focused on one dedicated task. This highly focused mental state is the most conducive to efficiency and productivity. He defines the key elements for achieving this state of flow[11] as follows:

- **Clarity** of goals

- **Receiving** immediate feedback, which is intrinsically rewarding

- **Striking** a balance between challenge and skills (similar idea as within situational leadership and intentional / intent-based leadership which were mentioned in the previous chapter)

- **Privacy** with no disturbances and autonomy; feeling in control of the task. When you lack a sense of control over what you do and how you do it, it feels as being controlled by external forces, which commonly leads to frustration and burnout.

[11] Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.* Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008.

I'M PAID JUST TO WORK; I'M NOT PAID ENOUGH TO CARE.

I recently watched *American Factory,* a documentary film about a Chinese businessman repurposing a defunct General Motors plant in Ohio to manufacture car windows. Doing so requires bringing in experts from Southeast Asia to retrain some of the local workforce. We see the ambitious, relatively young outsider coming into town with his team of experts, who are prepared to do whatever it takes to make it work. The local recruits, who are slightly older and have more life experience than the people who have come to train them, have to learn to start over. Many of them have families to support; some of them are also pursuing other life goals. Only a few of the locals seem to understand that their town has been given a second chance, and that they have the opportunity to be part of something new and extraordinary. The majority are primarily invested in the workers' union, regular working hours, and anything that might make their lives easier. On the whole, we see a clear division between the Chinese workers, who are prepared to work all night, and the locals, punching out at five o'clock sharp. It's quite uncomfortable to watch.

This reminded me of a project I worked on, in which the team members who were the very last ones to join the project ended up doing most of the work. The team members who had been working longer on the project used the newcomers as the first line of defence by sending them to all of the meetings and workshops and assigning them the most challenging work. By the

> "
> If a few individuals are doing most of the work, eventually this system will tilt.

time the newbies figured out what was happening, it was too late, as they had already spent a considerable amount of time on the project. It wouldn't have made any difference if they had realised sooner, as

they were external to the company. There were no internally hired employees, and this encouraged a culture of blame. Some individuals contributed very little, knowing they would benefit from the work put in by others.

Where are the checks and balances or guardrails to prevent this from happening? How can we ensure that everyone contributes to the team and no one is riding on the coattails of others?

WHAT TO CONSIDER OR TRY NOW

- **Assign** roles and responsibilities to all members of your team. I recommend using a responsibility assignment matrix, such as a RACI matrix or linear responsibility chart. Although this doesn't manage personal commitment, it does go some way to set some parameters for equal, transparent and defined distribution of the work.

- **Incorporate** a system that creates transparency for each task, status and outcome. Allowing team members to see how others are performing creates peer pressure, thereby encouraging more engagement. Read up on how best to conduct and facilitate daily standup meetings and obeya rooms and integrate these in your workplace. Collaboration and exchange among team members is key. Be aware that establishing transparency too fast or to much of it at once can put people under stress.

- **Apply** a peering system that connects a rookie to a more experienced team member. The rookie, who sees things with fresh eyes, may spot issues that are not apparent to those who have been there for longer. The more experienced member can provide teaching and guidance, prevent mistakes, and finetune decisions.

I JUST NEED TO HANG IN THERE FOR X
MORE DECADES UNTIL RETIREMENT.

The general retirement age in Europe is sixty-five.[12] Given that most people enter the workforce by their mid-twenties, most of us will pass the halfway point during our early forties. After this point, some people may become less eager to learn, change, experiment and innovate in their careers.

❝

So much can be accomplished in just a few months. And so little in a decade.

If you found out you had only six months left to live, you might learn to snowboard, cycle across South America or climb to base camp at Mount Everest.

Why doesn't the same apply in our professional lives? Why do many of us become complacent instead of feeling inspired to take risks and explore new horizons? Do we, as individuals or as a culture, simply have the wrong attitude to work?

I think it is due to a combination of factors. There is often a shift of focus due to other life goals which become apparent. A person who is raising children or building a home will want to protect their job security, so that they can provide for their families and plan for the future.

Fear is a primary contributing factor. We are afraid of compromising our job security, of failing publicly, or simply of sticking our necks out. Why isn't it worth the risk? Why would we choose stasis and inertia over the possibility to feel excited and create something new? This may be due to deep-seated anger or sheer indifference, or a mixture of the two. Perhaps earlier in our careers we have taken risks and been punished for it or have struggled to gain support from our managers. Perhaps every time we showed some initiative,

[12] "Ageing and Employment Policies: Statistics on Average Effective Age of Retirement." OECD. Accessed 16 June 2020. https://bit.ly/2E9x32A

we found ourselves running into walls. Eventually, we learned that such attempts resulted only in dissatisfaction and frustration.

Is something inherently lacking in our work environments? Have companies failed to incentivise—have they even actively discouraged—creativity, engagement and innovation? Are the organisations we work for to blame?

> So much of the child we were is present in the person we've become. Every person should have a life coach to learn about themselves.

As life expectancy increases, we continue to redefine the concept of ageing. Of course, there is less flexibility in the career spans of professional athletes and dancers practising forms that emphasise raw physical power and brute strength. Those engaged in contact sports, racquet sports, gymnastics and some dance forms (such as ballet) can expect to peak during their twenties and move into coaching, commentating, judging or another career soon afterwards. Meanwhile, long-distance runners, triathletes, golfers, ballroom dancers, yoga practitioners and martial arts experts may peak at any age and are able to extend their professional careers till later in life. Writers, composers, artists, designers, auteurs and academics often see their careers reaching fruition during mid-life and carry on working well into their golden years.

Steve Jobs had accomplished much before he reached the age of twenty-five, but he was past forty when his career reached its prime. In his commencement speech to the graduating class of 2005 at Stanford, he quoted the sign-off message from Stewart Brand's *The Whole Earth Catalog:* "Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish."[13] This was something he had always wished for himself and he wished it for the students, too. It certainly served him well.

[13] Steve Jobs' 2005 Stanford commencement Address. 12 June 2005. Stanford News. https://stanford.io/2E9FECo

Does our culture undervalue learning? We should strive to be eternal students, who keep building knowledge and seeking out new experiences. We should be prepared to take risks, even if it means we might fall on our faces. That's better than standing still. The late John Wooden, a basketball player, three-time All-American, and head basketball coach at UCLA, said: *If you're not making mistakes, you aren't doing anything*. Much can be accomplished later in life. In many cases, this is when one finally has acquired the requisite wisdom, experience, practice, time, and resources to truly excel.

WHAT TO CONSIDER OR TRY NOW

- **Ask** your employer how the company proposes to assist you to keep learning throughout your career. As well as standard training sessions and programmes, there may be internal evening schools. Since you'll be investing your time, the company may be willing to cover the expense.

- **Seek out** timed project jobs, taster weeks for teams or departments, internal apprenticeships posted on notice boards or advertised within the internal job market.

- **Search on** LinkedIn, Twitter and Instagram for people with the same role as you. See what they are reading and whom they are following. Find their topics of interest and look for books, podcasts, training courses, workshops, newsgroups and internal focus groups on these topics.

- **Over** the course of the book we will introduce several ways to find out what's truly important in life. Let's start with a list of questions: How would you live your life differently, if money were no object? Where is your money spent today? What or who would you be if you knew you couldn't fail? What makes you forget to eat and sleep? Who is doing what you want to be doing?

NO ONE TOLD ME WHAT TO DO.

Dillon is often heard making this statement. Loosely translated, this means *I have absolutely zero initiative.* There are so many other things Dillon could be doing instead of sitting there, twiddling his thumbs. Dillon could ask someone what to do. He could try to find out what others in his position have done. He could brainstorm by himself or with a team member to come up with some ideas and try out a few of them.

I would like to say to Dillon: *Where is your entrepreneurial spirit? Even though your work contract doesn't say anything about being motivated, empowered and proactive, how about doing that just for the fun of it?*

Think of school or university where you sat with others long into the weekend, because you believed in it. This is an opportunity to prove yourself as someone who's not afraid to speak up, whose ideas are of value, and who is a keen creative and collaborative spirit.

WHAT TO CONSIDER OR TRY NOW

■ **Accept** that you can't change other people. Work on yourself instead. Some of the limitations of your team members stem from longstanding attitudes and patterns, the seeds of which were planted by people they had company with long before.

■ **Commit to** investing a certain amount of time and energy toward engaging your less proactive team members and inspiring them to realise their potential. You can do this even if you are not their manager. Think of yourself as a friend, an active listener, a coach. Try to understand what makes

them tick. Draw out their best qualities. Start creating a personal bond by asking them about their hobbies, aspirations, dreams, and travel plans. Challenge yourself to learn something new about the person each week.[14]

- **You** can organise your conversations or considerations around a set of questions[15] that support you and others in defining what you value most for yourselves.

- **Ask** the people you are working with or leading on a project whether they truly understand why they are here. Ask them: What is your mission? What is the vision you are working towards? And what do you need from me as leader? A more dimensional approach is found in Gallup's 12 essential questions[16] on employee engagement. If you can work on these, it's a proven game-changer for productivity, sales and creativity.

- **Team** members should not compensate for such a person's lack of drive or contribution. The situation should be handled by a supervisor, who can first try to support the person by finding out where their competencies lie and assigning them to a more suitable area or task. This conversation must include clear messaging indicating a certain urgency (e.g., "Consider this a second chance").

---

[14] Question topics can include work, place of residence, news, and sports. See *Conversation Starters World.* "Topics to Talk About." Accessed 24 July 2020. https://bit.ly/35Z4wsm

[15] A checklist of values can help a person determine what he/she finds important, meaningful, and pertinent to one's career and life choices. See "What Are Your Values? Deciding What's Most Important in Life." Accessed 24 July 2020. https://bit.ly/3iTXPLN

[16] "The 12 Questions from the Gallup Q12 Employee Engagement Survey." Social Reacher. Accessed 24 July 2020. https://bit.ly/343GWJK

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for coming on this journey with me. If you loved the book and have a minute to spare, it would mean a lot to us if you could post a short review on Goodreads, Amazon or any other fine review sites.

Reviews from readers like you make a huge difference to authors. Help us to spread the word about solving #TheRiddleOfChangeInOrganisations.

Direct link to the book's Amazon Review page:

Thank you!
Henrik Gruber and Alexander Birke

P.S. If you'd like to receive occasional updates, you can sign up for the newsletter here:
http://www.stumblingacrosstheobvious.com/