

# Don't Confuse Activity with Progress



When managers and employees can't see the difference between activity and progress, a business can be a veritable beehive of activity while treading water or going backwards. Unfortunately, the inability to see the difference is not at all unusual.

Activity is a good thing. We want our coworkers to be engaged in their work and to be willing to put in an extra effort. We value people who come to the office early and stay late. But coming in early and staying late, providing more time for more activity, does not necessarily translate into progress.

Two former coworkers come to mind. Both would come in at least an hour early every day and stay at least an hour late. They often came to the office on Saturday mornings. It was very admirable behavior. There was just one problem – both of them were extremely ineffective. They weren't coming in to complete extra projects or to move the business forward in any way. They were coming in to keep up with a workload others were handling easily in an eight-hour day.

There was a lot of activity, but no real progress. However, they were rated to be at least the equal of their peers if not superior. Their managers were placing a high value on an extreme level of activity without paying attention to the overall lack of progress.

Activity and progress can be confused in many ways. For example, meetings should be a source of progress, but more often than not merely provide participants with a time-wasting activity.

By the end of a good meeting, one of three things should have happened: A problem should be solved, a decision should be made, or an assignment should be given to one or more participants that will result in a problem being solved or a decision being made by the next meeting. These things should be documented so that everyone leaving the meeting knows what was decided. That is progress.

Instead, many meetings are nothing more than a series of reports and discussions that lead nowhere. Participants enter the meeting with no clear purpose or outcome in mind. They leave the meeting with no decisions made, no problems solved and no assignments given. Often they can't remember what was discussed by the time the next meeting comes around and the same aimless discussions are repeated.

It is striking how often I'm told that managers can't get things done because of all the meetings they must attend. If meetings aren't helping the business make progress, they should be eliminated or reconstituted in a format that leads to decisions being made or problems being solved. Why continue to waste so much time? The root cause is usually a manager or managers who confuse a lot of activity with progress.

Gathering data and publishing metrics is another activity that may not have anything to do with progress. I am a great believer in business metrics, but only when they are used to make decisions or to solve problems so the business can be more profitable or competitive.

It does no good to measure efficiency, on-time delivery, cycle time or any other metric if there is no effort to use the information for improvement. Many businesses make a great show of displaying charts and graphs but have no systematic effort to use this information. The chart-making and posting is all activity and no progress. Every effort to gather and analyze data should be given a simple test; if posting a metric is not going to result in decisions being made or change being driven, it is pure activity. Spend your time on something else.

One way of confusing activity and progress that I find particularly annoying is when a person believes that they have done an adequate job solving an important problem by sending an email. It is as if clicking on “send” somehow moves things forward. It reaches a new level of annoying when the sender has no plan to follow-up to ensure a timely response. The email has been sent, and now it’s someone else’s problem.

My annoyance reaches a critical mass when it turns out that the email was sent to a coworker who sits within shouting distance of the sender. Heaven forbid we get up and solve a problem today face-to-face.

Sending emails, measuring and posting data, attending meetings and working extra hours are all activities that may or may not lead to progress. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that a lot of noisy and visible activity will lead to great things. Unfortunately, it can often lead nowhere. Take the time to ask the question, “What progress are we getting from this activity?” If the answer isn’t obvious, it is probably, “None.” Spend your time making progress.

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