Your boss is extremely busy in a meeting

If you listen to executives, they will tell you that the resource they miss the most is time. Every minute is spent with strategic issues, focusing on reducing costs, developing creative approaches for new markets, beating new competitors. But if you follow them, here's what you'll see: they rush from meeting to meeting, check their email constantly, put out fire after fire, and make countless calls. In short, you will see an amazing amount of fast activity that allows almost no time for reflection. No doubt directors are under incredible pressure to perform, and have far too much to do, even when working 12 hours a day. But the truth is that very few managers use their time as efficiently as they can. They think they're dealing with pressing issues, but they're actually spinning their wheels. The awareness that unproductive occupation – what we call active nonaction – is a danger to managers is not new. Managers themselves deplore the problem, and researchers such as Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton examined it (see Smart-Talk Trap, HBR May-June 1999). But the basic dynamics of behavior are less well understood. Over the past ten years, I have studied the behaviour of busy managers in nearly a dozen large companies, including Sony, LG Electronics and Lufthansa. Managers at Lufthansa have been particularly interesting to us since over the past decade, the company has undergone a complete transformation-from teeting on a bankruptcy threshold in the early 1990s to earning a record profit of DM 2.5 billion in 2000, thanks in part to leading its managers. We interviewed and observed about 200 managers from Lufthansa, each of whom was involved in at least one of the 130 projects launched to restore the company's exalted status as one of Europe's business icons. Our findings on managerial behaviour should scare you: 90% of managers waste their time in all sorts of inefficient activities. In other words, only 10% of managers spend their time in a dedicated, intentional and reflective way. This article will help you identify the managers in your organization. Moreover, it will show you to improve the efficiency of all managers and maybe even your own. Focus and energy managers are not paid to make the inevitable happen. In most organizations, ordinary business routines chug along without much managerial oversight. The job of managers, therefore, is to do more business than chug-to advance it in innovative, surprising ways. After observing dozens of managers for many years, I have come to the conclusion that managers who take effective measures (those who do difficult – even seemingly impossible – happens) to rely on a combination of two traits: concentration and energy. Energy. concentration as focused attention - the ability to scratch in on a goal and see the task until completion. Concentrated managers are not in reactive mode; they choose not to immediately respond to every problem that comes their way or get sidetracked from their distraction goals like email, meetings, obstacles, and unforeseen requests. Because they have a clear understanding of what they want to achieve, they carefully weigh their options before selecting a course of action. In addition, because they only commit to one or two key projects, they can pay full attention to the projects they believe in. Consider the steely goal of Thomas Sattelberger, currently Lufthansa's executive vice president, product and service. In the late 1980s, he was convinced that a corporate university would be an invaluable asset for a company. He believed that managers would sign up to learn to challenge the old paradigms and give new life to the company's operational practices, but his former employer resisted the idea. After joining Lufthansa, Sattelberger again prepared a detailed business case, which carefully aligned the university's objectives with the company's larger organizational agenda. When he made his proposal to the executive committee, he was met with strong skepticism: Many believed lufthansa would be better served by focusing on reducing costs and improving processes. But he kept to it for another four years, chopping away at the objections. In 1998, the Lufthansa School of Business became Germany's first corporate university and an engine of change for Lufthansa. Think of the second feature – energy – as the vigour that is fueled by intense personal commitment. Energy is what drives managers to do extra pity when addressing heavy workloads and meeting strict deadlines. The team that created the Sony Vaio computer – the first PC that allows users to combine other Sony technologies, such as digital cameras, portable music players and video cameras – showed a lot of energy. Responding to CEO Nobuyuki Ideas' challenge to create a technologically integrated playground for a thriving generation of digital dream kids, Hiroshi Nakagawa and his team put in 100-hour weeks to create some kind of breakthrough Product Ideas hoped. One manager, Kazumasa Sato, was so dedicated to the project that he spent every weekend for three years, doing consumer recognition in electronics stores. Sato's research into consumer purchasing models has helped Sony develop a store layout that has improved traffic flow and, by extension, sales. Finally, Vaio captured a significant share of the Japanese PC market. Over time both focus and energy are positive traits, neither alone is enough to produce the kind of intentional action organizations most need from their managers. Focus without energy turns into apathetic execution or leads to exhaustion. Energy without without dissipates into a purposeless agglomeration or, in its most destructive form, into a series of wasteful failures. We found that tracing the two characteristics in an array provided a useful framework for diagnosing the causes of non-productive activity as well as the sources of intentional action. The Focus-Energy Matrix exhibition identifies four types of behavior: disengagement, procrastination, distraction, and purpose. Focus-Energy Matrix Before we look at each guy more closely, you should note that these behaviors have both internal and external causes. Some people are born with high levels of energy, for example, and some, by their nature, are more self-reflective. But it is important not to overlook the organizational context of these behaviors. Some companies promote firefighting crops; others breed cynicism and therefore low levels of commitment in their workers. To change the behaviors of your managers, you may need to change the organizational landscape. Procrastinators The managers I studied, about 30% suffered from low energy and concentration levels; we call these managers procrastinators. Although they perform routine tasks with respect — attending meetings, writing notes, making phone calls, and so on — they fail to take initiative, raise performance or get involved in the strategy. Some postponers hesitate, hamlet-like, until the window of opportunity for a project has closed. In Lufthansa, for example, the manager who was tasked with compiling an internal survey postponed the start of the project until the deadline expired. I could have done [the work], he admits, but for some reason, I couldn't get started. The closer the deadline was, the more it intertwined with other projects, rationalizing that it could not resort to this task until it cleaned its office of less important jobs. People often delay when they feel insecure or afraid of failure. A young lawyer, appointed a key role in a major merger project, was initially delighted with the prospect of making a presentation before the executive committee. But as time went on, he found the challenge of pregnancy overwhelming. He began to imagine horrible scenarios: to lose his train of thought, to say the wrong thing, to see the muffled yawn and the suppressed grin of his audience. He became so obsessed with the notion of failure that he was almost paralyzed. Other coast-long postponers in chronically passive state that psychologist Martin Seligman called the learned helplessness. At some point in their lives, they were punished or suffered negative consequences when they took the initiative. Now, as managers, they believe that any effort they make will be brought down. They think they have no control over so they do nothing, which in the end they can debilitate their companies. Surprisingly, in the early stages of Lufthansa's things were chaotic and leadership jobs were relatively unstructured—fewer managers than we expected were procrastinators. But when circumstances returned to normal and formal procedures were restored, many managers lost focus and energy. They stopped setting goals and became passive. This reinforced our feeling that procrastination does not entirely depend on personality; may be influenced by organisational factors. About 20% of managers at Decoupled fall into the decoupled category; they have a high concentration, but have low energy levels. Some of these managers are simply exhausted and lack of internal resources to re-energize. Others feel unable to engage in tasks that make no sense to them. Disconnected managers have strong reservations about the jobs they are required to do; as a result, they approach them with half a heart. Many managers in this group practice a form of denial that we call defensive avoidance: Instead of recognizing a problem and taking steps to correct it, they convince themselves that the problem does not exist. A lot of denial was at stake when Lufthansa was on the brink of bankruptcy in 1992. Even though the entire industry was facing a severe recession and Lufthansa was losing revenue, these managers ignored or reinterpreted market signals, convincing themselves that the company's expansionist strategy was correct. Many of them continued to hire new employees in the face of massive operating losses. Instead, some uncut managers refuse to take action, even when it is obviously necessary. A manager responsible for ground services at an important airport, for example, fully understood the threat of bankruptcy and the need to make radical changes. He enthusiastically participated in all change management meetings and provided ideas for improving operational productivity. However, deep down, he believed that his job was to protect his area and his people. He was convinced that his department was a core group and should be spared redundancies. Later, when it became clear that cuts in all areas were inevitable, he agreed to the redundancies in principle, but his personal discomfort prevented him from really engaging with them. He delayed the decision and invested little energy in the correct reduction. As a consequence, its results were less than stellar. Out-of-date managers tend to be extremely tense. That's not surprising, because they are often affected by feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, anger, frustration, and alienation. They deal with these emotions by withdrawing and making the minimum, which makes situations worse. In their low energy levels, these managers suffer from burnout much more frequently than their peers. And they're slightly overwhelmed by unexpected events. While some managers are inherently more likely than others to distance themselves from disengagement is often a result of organisational processes. In a large American oil company, for example, I witnessed a dedicated and enthusiastic manager gradually becoming listless. It specialist, was assigned to an interdisciplinary working group for strategy development, tasked with creating a new business model for an upstream division. The team came up with several radical proposals, but were met with lukewarm responses from senior managers. After a few months, the team's ideas were diluted to the point where even the IT manager didn't find them interesting. What was once an interesting task became a hoax, from his point of view. Believing that no one was interested in new ideas, he came to the conclusion that he was stupid to have been as engaged as he was. I knew none of our innovative ideas would ever reach implementation. So I continued to work on concepts and ideas – but no skin in the game. To be fair, even the best organizations, occasionally, create cins from enthusiasts. But some organizations seem to make a practice of it by constantly sabotaging any flickers of creativity or initiative. Distracted by far the largest group of managers I've studied-more than 40% -- it fits into the distracted quadrant: those well-intentioned, extremely energetic, but unfocused people who confuse frantic movement with constructive action. When under pressure, distracted managers feel the desperate need to do something – anything. That makes them as dangerous as the proverbial bull in a china shop. Distracted managers feel the desperate need to do something – anything. That makes them as dangerous as the proverbial bull in a china shop. In 1992, for example, when Lufthansa's senior management stated that the company would have to reduce spending, managers in this category fired first and targeted later. Everyone knew we had to do everything to cut costs, and I was frantic, admits one. We gave up on people who were vital to our future. We had to recruit them again and hire them back later, with higher wages. He acted too fast because he felt something had to happen quickly. He didn't take the time to consider what, exactly, that something should be. Because they don't stop to reflect, distracted managers tend to have trouble developing strategies and adapting their behaviors to new requirements. A manager in the working group in charge of Lufthansa's change strategy has assigned responsibilities according to functional categories, rather than deliberately choosing the best person for each job. I made the technical guy responsible for the problems. and the type of marketing for marketing issues, he says. You do so many things just because you're used to doing them. He later realized that if he was less related to traditional traditional silos, the work would have progressed much faster. Moreover, because distracted managers tend to be shortsighted, they often find themselves overcommitted. They get involved in several projects with the best intentions, but eventually their interest fades, and they end up either constantly fighting fires or abandoning projects altogether. Within two months, an HR director whom I enthusiastically observed enthusiastically undertook three enormous projects – redefining the role of the HUMAN RESOURCES department, renewing the 360-degree feedback system and creating a leadership development program – beyond its daily requirements. Eventually, he abandoned one project, passed on responsibility for another, and did a bad job on the third. Managers are more likely to feel distracted during a crisis, but behavior is by no means limited to troubled times. Even in stable business situations, many managers feel enormous pressure to be busy. Of course, part of this pressure is internal: Many insecure managers try to impress others with how much work they have. But the pressure to perform can be amplified by the organizations themselves. Indeed, many companies encourage, and even reward, frenetic activity. We have observed, for example, that in organisations whose CEOs and CEOs exhibit aggressive, non-reflective behaviour, other managers are more likely to be distracted. With the aim The lowest proportion of managers I studied-around 10%- were both extremely energetic and very focused. Not only do such managers put more effort than their counterparts into it, but they also achieve critical, long-term, more often. Goal managers tend to be more self-aware than most people. Their clarity on their intentions, in combination with strong will, seems to help them make the right decisions about how to spend their time. They choose their goals – and their battles – much more carefully than other managers. Making deliberate choices can be a difficult and sometimes painful process. Think about the difficult situation of a mid-manager at Lufthansa. He was given the difficult task of implementing 130 do-or-die operations projects that will be supervised by managers taller than him. If he failed, a board member told him, he would probably have to leave the company because he would have upset so many people during the return effort. I even fought for a few days, he says. Making this huge decision was this manager's personal rubicon: After going through this process, I was sure I really wanted to do it. Lufthansa's successful return proof of his conviction. A sense of personal responsibility for the company's fate also contributes to the goal. Convinced that the organization needs them, goal managers feel responsible for the significant contribution. When When is responsible, I am responsible, says a Lufthansa manager. I hold a problem and do what I think is necessary- unless and until [CEO] Jürgen Weber pulls me back. Interestingly, many Lufthansa managers refer to their contributions to returning to Stark's vocabulary of life and death. As warriors, they were fighting for survival, stanching blood loss, or providing first aid to the corporate body. While it might be inferred that managers become intentionally only when faced with a crisis, managers we have studied have not lost their energy or focus once the turbulence has passed. Rather, they continued to welcome opportunities and pursue new goals. Even after the turning success was reported in the press and people were ready to celebrate the victory of Lufthansa, a manager with purpose, for example, led an extensive cost management program. Watching the costs, he believed, Lufthansa will not survive, but will prosper. One of the reasons that goal managers are so effective is that they are adept at increasing energy. Aware of the value of time, they manage it carefully. Some refuse to answer emails, phone calls or visitors outside certain times of the day. Others build think time in their programs. An executive, for example, frequently arrived at the office at 6:00 a.m. to ponder the issues before his colleagues showed up. In the busiest times, I slow down and take time off to reflect on what I actually want to achieve and sort out what's important from irrelevant noise, he says. Then I focus on doing what's most important. One of the reasons that goal managers are so effective is that they are adept at increasing energy. Goal managers are also qualified in finding ways to reduce stress and refuel. They are usually based on what we call a personal fountain – a defined source of positive energy. Some work at the gym or get involved in sports. Others share their fears, frustrations and thoughts about working with a partner, friend or colleague. Still others refuel their inner reserves through hobbies would be gardening. Perhaps the biggest difference between goal managers and other types is how they approach the workplace. Other managers feel constrained by external forces: their bosses, their colleagues, their salaries, their job records. They take all these factors into account when deciding what is feasible and what is not. In other words, they work from the outside. Managers with purpose do the opposite. They first decide what to do and then work to manage the external environment – tapping resources, building networks, skills, extending their influence – so that they eventually achieve their goals. A sense of personal will – the refusal to let other people or organisational constraints set the agenda – is perhaps the most subtle and the distinction between this group of managers and all others. Indeed, this sense of will allows managers with a purpose to control the external environment. A major drain on the energy of most managers is the perception that they have limited influence. Managers with a goal, on the other hand, are extremely aware of the choices they can make and systematically expand their freedom to act. They manage the expectations of their bosses, find ways to independently access the necessary resources, develop relationships with influential people, and build specific skills that broaden their choices and ability to act. Therefore, goal managers can place long-term bets and follow them. Think about the achievements of one of Lufthansa's goal managers. During the overthrow, he was responsible for negotiating the difficult relationship between the corporation and the demanding German airline unions. To develop the confidence needed for the difficult changes agenda to work, he initiated a series of meetings between board members and union leaders. Every two weeks, representatives of each cautious camp met for three hours and discussed critical response steps. Board members had reservations because the meetings ate up their time - the only thing they didn't have during this phase. They complained that the meetings were not producing immediate results, nor cost cuts, nor revenue increases. But the executive persuaded board members that a focus on short-term performance would not take them far in building trusting relationships with union members, which would be crucial if Lufthansa returned. We told them that we could not hope to transform [Lufthansa] without the help of employees and that it did not make sense to try to speed up confidence building, he explains. Over time, the two sides have come to trust each other and reach an extraordinarily high level of consensus. Not only did the company avoid a strike, but the wage concessions made in agreement with the union were unique in German history. Challenge and choice Can we imagine readers winning as they ask themselves, are only 10% of managers in my company really effective? The number may be higher in your company, but probably not much. High-ranking managers can raise the energy and focus levels of their teams - of which we have no doubt. However, trying to prevent managers from losing energy or focusing (or both) is an ambitious proposition. This involves paying much more attention to how individual managers perceive the broad significance of their work, the challenges they face and the degree of autonomy they Enjoy. This cannot be done by pulling small-scale HR levers; can only happen with vision, surveillance, and engagement from the beginning. In a striking metaphor, the French pilot of World War II and the writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry pointed out in the right direction: If you want to build a ship, don't raise people to go into the woods to gather wood, see them and catch the planks together. Instead, teach him his desire to sea. In managers, the desire for the sea springs from two sources: significant challenge and personal choice. If you combine challenge and choice with a deep sense of urgency, you've come a long way to creating a recipe for success. Think of the starting point for Lufthansa's return. On a weekend in June 1992, CEO Weber invited about 20 senior managers, as well as the entire executive committee, to the company's training center. He wanted to create a network of managers to lead the process of change throughout the company. At the meeting, he revealed the unhappy facts: Lufthansa was facing a massive deficit. It was obvious that if things didn't change, the company would be in financial ruin. Weber made it very clear that he did not have the solution. It gave managers three days to develop ways to save Lufthansa. If he determined that she could not be saved, he would accept their termination and the bankruptcy would be insured. Then he and the executive committee left. If you want to build a ship, don't make people go into the woods to gather wood, see it and catch the planks. Instead, teach him his desire to sea. - Antoine de Saint-Exupéry According to personal accounts about what followed, the place was in chaos for a short time. Managers were shocked by how serious the situation was and quickly experienced waves of paralysis, denial and finger pointing. But soon they solved the problem at hand, and it quickly became clear that everyone thought that Lufthansa was worth fighting for. Once this fact was established, some kind of excitement arose. They are committed to achieving ambitious goals. In the end, they embraced 130 radical changes and implemented 70% of them during the transformation. By 2000, Lufthansa not only recovered its loss of DM 750 million, but also made a record profit of DM 2.5 billion. Many factors entered this success, but the combination of the challenge and the choice that the CEO gave to his colleagues was extraordinarily important. In 1995, Siemens Nixdorf Informationsysteme was in the midst of a crisis. Faced with cumulative five-year losses of DM 2.1 billion and a gradual erosion of the market, the company's survival was uncertain. Domestically, the very different corporate cultures of the two fusion partners (Nixdorf computers and Siemens' it division) have created a vicious political, unstable environment – a perfect breeding ground for procrastination, disengagement and distraction. Klaus Karl, a young software engineer in the relational database part of the business, reached the end of his rope. Exhausted by political struggles, Karl became listless and looking for a new job. He received an excellent offer from software manufacturer Sybase and was less than a month away from his planned departure when he attended a meeting organized by newly hired CEO Gerhard Schulmeyer. This meeting was a call to arms: Schulmeyer reminded employees of the company's roots, saying it was intended to be a much better technology partner for companies on the continent than any American competitor could possibly be. Doubling the company's IT partner for change, Schulmeyer announced that it would give its tech savvy young people an opportunity to take part in corporate strategic planning. Their common challenge was to help top management rethink SNI's approach to market, technology and change. Karl's name was on the list of young intelligent employees who joined the new team. I faced a real dilemma, says Karl. We had an excellent offer, with higher wages and higher prospects. My boss made it very clear that it was quite likely that the effort for change would fail and that I might find myself looking for a job. On the other hand, if I was willing to join the agent change program, I would be sent for a special change management training program that spans three months at MIT- along with top managers, including Schulmeyer himself-and then could define my change initiative of his own. He weighed his options carefully, and the opportunity to make a difference proved too enticing. Karl got a job at SNI. During his training program in the United States, Karl learned to use strategy and change management tools. He formed close ties with colleagues in the program. By the end, Karl and the other trainees – including Schulmeyer – had committed to transforming the company. For the next two years, I saw Karl completely shake the middleware development department. We had to focus on a smaller portfolio of projects so that we could better allocate our resources, he says. Initially, we tried to convince people to use a new set of analytical tools. He'd laugh at us. Some have left meetings. Many older people even refused to participate. But Karl stuck to the guns and continued his campaign of persuasion. Gradually, they started listening. They started to change their thinking about projects. As a result, a new product portfolio analysis system was completed in just three months. Karl's contribution had a strong impact on the company's baseline. Within three years, it successfully launched a variety of new projects that stimulated the bottom line of DM 400 million. re-energized, reoriented, the SNI would never have managed such a dramatic comeback. To be sure, the prospect of hanging your own focuses the mind. But a crisis does not have to be a prerequisite for challenge and choice. Sony Sony Ideas exactly the same result with the image of a future community of Vaio users, digital dream copies. Convinced that they are building a creative tool for an entire generation, Sony engineers have charged an amazing determination to the front. Note that neither Weber nor Ideas used typical management tools to create energy and focus in their subordinates. Motivating people, or telling them what to do, has grim results. In fact, such exhortations often lead to the exact opposite of what is needed. When directors outline desired behaviors for middle managers and set goals for them, managers are not given the opportunity to decide for themselves. As a result, they do not fully engage in projects. They distance themselves from their work because they feel they have no control. To avoid this kind of response, top managers should present to their people with significant challenges and real choices in how they could cope with these challenges. We are not suggesting that significant challenge and personal choice are guaranteed to turn around a failing company. We also do not want to imply that individual managers will be able to overcome lifelong behavioural patterns simply because they are presented with challenge and choice. However, we strongly believe that it would be a mistake for a top manager to conclude about a subordinate, John will never be an intentional manager because he is not just built that way. Focus and energy are indeed personal features, but organizations can do a lot to enhance these traits in their managers. In fact, leaders can directly affect the type of behavior exposed in their organizations by weakening formal procedures and purging dealingwork. Presented with a challenge for which their contributions are essential, managers feel necessary. Asked for their opinions and gave choices, they feel encouraged. When corporate leaders make a sincere effort to give managers both challenge and choice, most managers can learn to direct their energy and improve their focus and ultimately find their way to the sea. Great.