



## The price of Sweating the Small Stuff

Last Saturday morning I was writing an essay for a degree program and my lovely wife asked if I could offer the kids a bowl of cereal for breakfast. As a good husband and soldier, I did as told. When they replied, I said to them that mommy would be serving it soon. She looked at me and said: "why didn't you do it?. It's just pouring cereal and milk into two bowls... She was right. I felt lazy and dumb and could not focus on my essay anymore. Why did I throw the activity back to her?. And besides, I enjoy doing this kind of stuff for my kids.

For some reason, the "assembly line" concept from my Industrial Engineering School years came back, and I remembered how much emphasis professors used to put on the high cost of stopping a production line: the loss of time and energy restarting the machines and reorganizing the crew are severe. I reflected on this for a few minutes and realized that the cereal situation was similar because it meant stopping and then restarting my "assembly line" of thoughts. Realizing that the issue was more about keeping inspiration than losing transpiration (doing the work) was a relief because I did not feel so lazy and guilty. I immediately told my wife, and she understood.

Similar situations are frequent at work: we get distracted by emails, calls, meetings, etc., some less than relevant, and although many take little in minutes and muscle, the cost of these distractions and the energy loss can be onerous. Like in assembly lines, we burn a lot of time and energy re-focusing after every interruption. It's like we have to start over and over what we are doing if we get interrupted. You've probably heard someone saying: "come on, that will take you only five minutes", or more dramatically: "if you had already started you would be done by now." What do you say to that if it is

true?. Unfortunately, many of our days at work end with the feeling that we achieved a lot but nothing concrete. What's even worse, we end up stressed and exhausted. We become what I call a "VPs of Unimportant Affairs."

David Rock offers an interesting approach to this situation in his book "Your Brain at Work". Rock explains from the neurological point of view what happens to our brain in the face of the avalanche of activities, and he awesomely translates these explanations into help to our day-to-day pains at work. This book has helped me in understanding why the famous "multitasking" concept can wear us out, and what to do about it.

I do not intend to offer formulas to get rid of futile work; I actually struggle at times with the day to day juggle like most people do. I have attended courses and read materials on the topic, and while they offer good hints, in the end, it all seems to be about prioritization which is not always easy in corporations where our work is connected with multiple agendas, some of which are not always aligned. However, there is one thing that has helped me separate the small stuff from what really counts: a clear sense of direction.

Whether I trace my own course, or it is given by somebody else, or both, clear direction seems the closest answer to resolve the vicious circle of unnecessary work. I have noticed that once the goal is clear, my mind is capable to weed out what does not contribute to it, and focus on what is of real value. But the downside is, this may get some folks disappointed along the way as chances are that you will need to say "no" to useless requirements. It may also hurt a bit your reputation as a team player given many people still don't understand that good team players are accountable for their own stuff. But on the other side, you will probably gain a lot more from being recognized as delivering on your objectives, which by the way are usually tied to your pay and career growth.

I've also realized that this also applies to our life and goals. On a larger scale, a job is just another part of a superior plan, and we can decide if our jobs are "small stuff" or they add to the bigger picture. With such clarity, we can make better career decisions and very importantly, lower our anxiety which translates into better health and more time for ourselves and families.

For the last years I've been eagerly seeking clarity on objectives both at work and in life; I'm also learning to say "no" when necessary, which can be difficult for Latinos (like me) because saying no is not coded in our DNA. But I am putting the necessary effort because I am decided to leave the "Unimportant Affaires" department.

Cheers,  
Israel