



CHRONIC TIME ABUSERS

Understanding four distinct types of time abusers

(Summary of an article by Steven Berglas published in Harvard Business Review, June 2004)

Time abuse is very different from time management. The usual time management techniques simply don't help some people. Steven Berglas suggests that there are four distinct types of time abusers, which are the product of a psychological conflict within the individual. Berglas argues that this psychological conflict is based on either a low self-esteem or a fear of being evaluated and found wanting. Berglas calls the typical time abusers the Prescriptive, the People Pleaser, the Perfectionist and the Procrastinator.

The Prescriptive

The 'prescriptives', who are the rarest type of time abuser, are the people who compulsively beat the clock. This is often great, but it can be a problem if they make themselves inaccessible to colleagues. This tendency seems to be driven by a fear of leaving themselves open to criticism, a need to maintain order, and a need to stay in control. Consequently, prescriptives are usually inflexible and less responsive to unpredictable demands.

A good way to manage prescriptives is to provide regular appreciation for their work through mentoring, or to encourage them to mentor others. In both situations the person should be encouraged to appreciate the needs of other people and the need for dialogue and consultation.

The People Pleaser

The 'people-pleaser' is another time-challenged person who appears to be too good to be true. The problem is that saying yes too often is highly dysfunctional. It follows that taking on more and more responsibilities out of a fear or dislike of confronting colleagues or senior managers will lead to a commitment to too many unproductive projects.

The origin of people-pleasing behaviour is that they have been taught to subordinate their desires for the good of others. Sometimes their help is given willingly and sometimes it will be resented. The people pleaser has a chronic need for appreciation, which is the real reason for doing more.

A good way to manage people pleasers is to praise their work regularly so they don't take on others' work to get that praise. They also need to be counselled that they will receive even more recognition if they are able to demonstrate more balance and better prioritisation of what is needed to contribute to business success.

The Perfectionist

Perfectionists take more time than allotted to satisfy unrealistic standards of excellence, and the perfectionist usually requires absolute control over the quality of the product he/she produces. The perfectionist goes to excessive lengths to avoid criticism, and they feel that they must demonstrate extraordinary proficiency to succeed or be accepted. Unfortunately, perfectionists tend to be rather inflexible, uncompromising colleagues, and they obviously take an inefficient amount of time to perform routine tasks.

Managing perfectionists is very difficult. One strategy is to evaluate work prior to the submission of a 'perfect version' and provide approval where appropriate to remove the fear of criticism. Also, early evaluation can enable some suggestions on what needs to be done to produce an acceptable version.

The Procrastinator

Procrastinators are the most common type of time abuser. They leave assignments until the 11th hour and then work round-the-clock to meet a deadline. One possible psychological cause is that procrastinators delay producing work because they secretly fear that they can't produce work of the highest standards. In situations where a person has received public acclaim, the expectations can increase, and the fear of failure or fear of not meeting expectations will also be enhanced. Procrastinators of course may work very hard but they allow themselves to get interrupted by other assignments, crises, or become too hands-on in helping out their team. These other reasons then provide a justification for not having the time to produce excellent work. If the work is poor, then the procrastinator can claim to have been handicapped. If the work is good, then the procrastinator feels that they have deserved disproportionate recognition.

One strategy for managing procrastinators is to ask for early first drafts, which don't need to be perfect, to reduce any fear of evaluation. The general strategy is to lower the procrastinator's anxiety about delivering a less-than-ideal performance.

SUMMARY:

Time abuse is a symptom of a problem, not the problem itself. It is therefore not possible to resolve the problem by managing time without understanding the time abuser's need for control and fear of evaluation. These psychological roots are of course unconscious, and most time abusers will be in a state of denial and change will be a slow process.