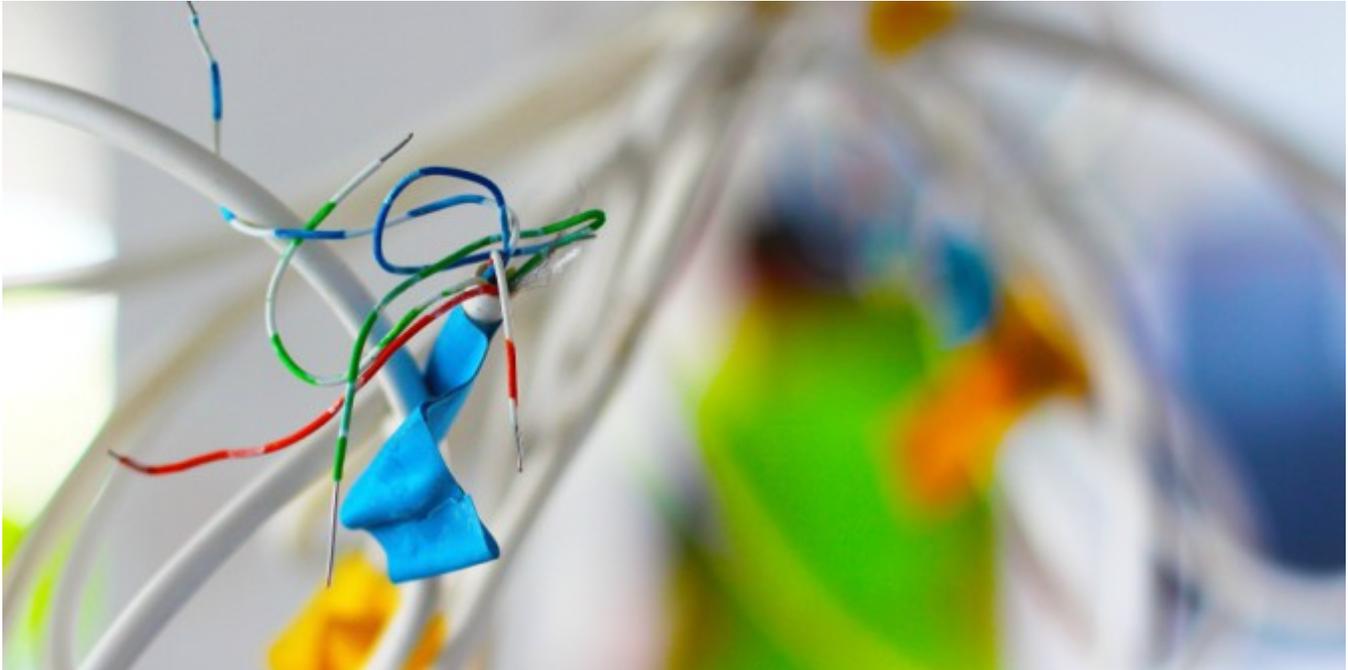


Endless online distraction is hurting leaders' ability to make decisions

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2017/04/06/endless-online-distraction-is-hurting-leaders-ability-to-make-decisions/

4/6/2017



Complexity has become our enemy. Complexity coupled with the ridiculous levels of distraction that now exist make us exhausted and feel that we are not on top of our game. Often that is true: we make things too complicated and the vast amount of noise that surrounds us confuses things.

The onslaught of social media in its many forms means that most decision makers suffer from a ridiculous quantity of data from sources near and far but also with a declining ability to sift, prioritise and focus. There's always a sense that you might be missing something. Yet increasing the number of information points does not improve the quality of our decision-making.

The endless distraction dumbs us down. We are less able to analyse and dissect an issue; we become (too) quick and careless. More importantly, we become less able to think deeply about a subject; we never spend more than one hour thinking deeply about something. As a result, we end up coming up with similar solutions to our competitors. Ironically, the sheer volume of distractions is dumbing down our capacity to think clearly.

Working with decision-makers and directors across all industries I have witnessed a general lethargy. A weariness with the endless array of new, silver-bullet solutions. Unsurprisingly, the combination of progressively lazier thinking and a loss of enthusiasm for the next, new initiative or model has created a cynicism about how we plan, run and grow our businesses. What's needed (and appreciated) is a back-to-basics simplicity that clarifies and focuses thinking and action.

Whether we look at our personal or our business lives, we can apply a simple rubric to identify our goals and how we are going to achieve them. By asking, "Where are we now? Where are we going? How are we going to get there? What are we going to measure to assess our progress?", we can quickly create a one-page plan. This is the starting point for making sense of what we are trying to do. Stephen Covey's phrase, "Start with the end in mind", nails the concept. Once we know where we want to go then we can map out our progress.

In business, we can ask, “Where are we now?” and score our business under the four headings of financial, marketing, operations and people and culture performance. When asking “Where are we going?” it can be articulated succinctly in terms of our “why do we exist?” (purpose), “what do we want to be?” (vision), “what measures will tell us we are there?” (mission) and, “how are we going to get there?” (strategy).

A simple one-page document (with white space) can summarise the whole “Where are we now? Where are we going?” exercise. Simple to explain, hard to do, this is what every senior management team needs to do: simply and concisely articulate the plan. Most fail to because they are distracted.

My experience is that boards from blue chip to independent businesses breathe a sigh of relief when they are forced to simplify what it is they are trying to achieve. Once the top-line plan is agreed then the tricky work of figuring out exactly how to deliver and exactly how to effectively measure progress can take place. But I would argue that the same rubric of simplicity, clarity and focus can be applied here.

KPIs (key performance indicators) are normally the devil’s spawn, reviled by everyone as irrelevant and unhelpful. In my map of business planning the board are allowed to use a maximum of four measures for each of their finance, marketing, operations and people and culture performance. That’s right, the finance director reports on four key measures and likewise the other directors. Think of it like the lights in the airplane cockpit: what matters is how high, how fast and how much fuel... Other measures are just detail.

My clarion call for simplicity, clarity and focus works. Yes, it requires discipline. Yes, it requires some tough conversations but who said that running a business was simple? What it does bring to the party is a sense of purpose and the ability to clearly and easily communicate what we are about and how we are going to go about making things happen. It cuts through the noise and gets the team pulling together in a single direction.

The creation and sharing of such a one-page document will demonstrate just how clear your thinking is. It will tell your people what is important (and what is not). It will tell you what the high impact activities will be and what the low impact and irrelevant activities will be.

Time to get your business team together and see how far the simplicity-clarity-focus model can take you.

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Notes:

- *This blog post draws from the author’s book [Check-In Strategy Journal: Your Daily Tracker for Business and Personal Development](#), co-authored with Adam Harris (Wiley).*
- *The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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