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ACTIVE WAITING REVISITED: LEARNING FROM LIONS

C. W. Von Bergen, Southeastern Oklahoma State University
Martin S. Bressler, Southeastern Oklahoma State University

ABSTRACT

A bias for action, active decision making, and “getting on with it” appear to be highly valued by both practitioners and academics in America. Under such monikers as exhibiting initiative, being proactive, walking the talk, and taking charge, getting things done is widely lauded and promoted. As a result, most managers are happy dealing with operational activities that require immediate attention, daily routines, and superficial behaviors rather than addressing crucial issues requiring reflection, systematic planning, creative thinking—and above all—time. To address this often unproductive busyness the authors propose active waiting which involves the recognition that not all problems are open to a quick fix and that sometimes waiting can be a valuable option. Waiting does not have to be passive, though. The authors recommend that managers act like skilled, veteran lions and adopt active waiting in order to be able to seize the opportune moment in pursuit of effective business strategy. This paper offers a six-step strategy to help leaders integrate active waiting into their supervision style and concludes with recommendations for managers.

Keywords: Business strategy, active waiting, second-mover advantage

1. INTRODUCTION

"Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning a lion wakes up. It knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death. It doesn’t matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle. When the sun comes up, you better start running" (Friedman, 2005, p. 114).

The above motivational poster often is meant to communicate that individuals and organizations are in a race for survival and that it is the quickest, swiftest, and fastest that continue to live another day. Speedy action (i.e., running) enables people—and firms—to thrive and flourish. It should be noted, however, that while running is important for lions, they need to be wise in doing so. Inexperienced young lions that reflexively chase targets suffer many failed hunts. The more successful hunters normally surprise their victims after carefully scanning the horizon and waiting with patience and focused attention for the right circumstances to arise—and then act (Stander & Albon, 1993). It is not so much the lion’s speed—or its sheer size and strength alone or else we would still be seeing saber-toothed tigers and woolly mammoths—but its cleverness that is the key to its survival. Even if they are hungry, lions will pass on a meal rather than risk a reckless attack (Haas, 2013).

The wilds of Africa, it seems, can be fertile ground for unearthing important lessons for U.S. commerce. One such lesson highlights a seeming overemphasis on speed and action that often minimizes the importance of reflection, thoughtfulness, and cunning exemplified by successful lions’ hunting strategy. Both U.S. practitioner and academic literatures regularly accentuate the importance of speedy action.

1.1 Practitioner literature on taking action

Management guru and former General Electric Chairman, Jack Welch said that “An organization’s ability to learn, and translate that leap into action rapidly, is the greatest competitive advantage” (Welch, n. d.). We are told that relentless execution lies at the heart of achieving superior business performance (Bruch & Ghoshal, 2010), and generally respect people who make decisions quickly, referring to them as “decisive”—a highly valued quality (Greenberg, 2011). In In Search of Excellence (1982) Peters and Waterman identified “a bias for action” (p. 119) as one attribute of excellent companies that underpins all their other qualities. “Ready, Fire, Aim” (p. 119) was their prescription for building an action orientation.
Value for speedy action has become so ingrained in management thinking that a company, FastCompany, and their magazine is a popular read for managers. Such a partiality has been underscored by numerous other practitioner-oriented texts. Eccles and Nohria (1992), for instance, in their book Beyond the Hype wrote that "Management was, is, and always will be the same thing: the art of getting things done.... And to get things done, managers must act themselves and mobilise collective action on the part of others" (p. 32). Kelley (1998) highlighted initiative and other proactive behaviors as the keys that distinguish star performers from average performers in his book How to Be a Star at Work. More recently, Bruch and Ghoshal (2004) noted that management is the art of doing and getting things done in their book A Bias for Action.

These books provide uplifting accounts of organizational heroes who have achieved outstanding success by emphasizing action and speed while suggesting that those who are slow to act are simply today's dinosaurs bound for extinction. The need for action is even celebrated in motivational posters such as "The Essence of Survival" from Friedman's 2005 bestseller The World is Flat and his accompanying words that opened this paper.

From a different angle, in popular parlance the term "analysis paralysis" or "paralysis of analysis" refers derisively to a situation wherein a person or an organization keeps reworking or refining analyses, calculations, or computations, thereby making the decision making process lengthier or more protracted than is reasonable and necessary, sometimes resulting in no action being taken (Langley, 1995). Excessive analysis is an increasing problem as organizations' ability to gather, store, access, and analyze data has grown exponentially over the past decade (Shah, Horne, & Capella, 2012).

1.2 Academic literature on action taking
Such practitioner-oriented treatises promoting taking action have likewise been reported in the scholarly literature. Reflecting its importance in today's workplace, there has been a significant growth in concepts related to doing and execution which are frequently agentic in nature. For example, considerable research has addressed proactive issues (Parker & Collins, 2010), actively adjusting to new job conditions (Ashford & Black, 1996), using one's initiative (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2007), expressing voice—constructive communication intended to positively change the organization (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998), selling critical issues to leaders (Dutton & Ashford, 1993), taking charge to bring about change (Morrison & Phelps, 1999), self-initiated role expansions (Parker, Wall, & Jackson, 1997), the need for employees to be self-starting (Campbell, 2000; Ibarra, 2003), and network building (Morrison, 2002).

From a slightly different perspective Keinan and Bereby-Meyer (2012) noted the danger in abstaining from taking action rather than in taking it in such areas as not getting cancer screenings (Howard & Huang, 2012) or not saving for retirement (Kogut & Dahan, 2012), and other researchers have investigated the hazards of inaction biases such as the Status Quo Bias—the tendency for people to prefer the current situation over similar or even better options (Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1991). Despite different terms and theoretical underpinnings, these various concepts relate to an action mindset or simply "making things happen."

Moreover, there appears to be a negative connotation for those who procrastinate. Recent conceptualizations of procrastination suggest that it is often related to a variety of psychiatric syndromes and may constitute a causal stress that contributes to psychological dysfunctions and maladaptive behavior patterns and that it is both a contributor and outcome of psychiatric conditions (Ferrari, Johnson, & McCown, 1995). Procrastinators today are often labeled as lazy, indolent, and unambitious—pejorative words in achievement-oriented societies (Knaus, 1973). Furthermore, people typically do not like delays (Freud, 1959). The individual tendency toward impatience is well documented in the literature on impulsivity (e.g., Barratt & Patton, 1983), frustration (see Amsel, 1992; Lawson, 1965), delay of gratification (Mischel, 1974), and inter-temporal choice (Loewenstein & Elster, 1992).

DeSimone (1993), however, noted that many pre-industrialized societies did not have words comparable to today's notion of procrastination. Similar words or constructs have existed throughout history, although with different, and usually less negative, connotations. The term procrastination comes directly from the Latin verb procrastinare, meaning quite literally, to put off or postpone until another day (DeSimone,
1993). This actually is a compilation of two words—pro, a common adverb implying forward motion, and crastinus, meaning “belonging to tomorrow.” The combined word was used numerous times in Latin texts and seemed to reflect the notion that deferred judgment may be necessary and prudent, such as when it is best to wait the enemy out and demonstrate patience in military conflict (Ferrari et al., 1995). Furthermore, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 1989) lists the earliest known English usage of the word procrastination as occurring in 1548 in Edward Hall’s Chronicle: The Union of Two Noble and Illustrious Families of Lancastre and Yorke. According to the OED, the word procrastination was in common usage by the early 1600s and notes that the term was used several times in this work and apparently without disparaging connotations, reflecting more of the concept of “informed delay” or “wisely chosen restraint” popular in Roman accounts (Ferrari, 2001, p. 30).

The negative moral connotations of the term did not seem to emerge until the mid-18th century, at approximately the time of the Industrial Revolution. Perhaps to the ancients, procrastination involved a sophisticated, astute decision regarding when not to act. This paper examines such an interpretation as well as questioning the implicit expectation that managers must do everything quickly, must be permanently active, and must not hesitate to take immediate action. Active waiting suggested by successful lion hunts noted earlier is offered as an alternative approach.

2. ACTIVE WAITING

By its very nature, a manager’s job leaves little room for reflection resulting in supervisors who tend to ignore or postpone dealing with the organization’s most crucial issues since such matters usually require a “big picture” perspective—which means reflection, systematic planning, or creative thinking, and—above all—time. Often, these managers spend their time addressing trivial operational issues that require their energy, time, and focus but are insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Daily routines, superficial behaviors, or poorly prioritized tasks act like leeches on managers’ capacities—making unproductive busyness perhaps the most critical behavioral problem in companies (Bruch & Ghoshal, 2010).

American push-button culture begs for easy answers and speedy solutions demand that managers find out what is wrong and move swiftly to remedy the situation. The proliferation of technology and the “instant gratification” such advancements often bring (Samuelson, 1995) heightens the desire for quick fixes. Managers often jump to conclusions and then try to implement the solution they reached. This action orientation causes them to limit their search, consider too few alternatives, and pay too little attention to people who are affected, not realizing that decisions fail for just these reasons (Nutt, 1999). Speedy action is often favored, even in situations that have no real time pressure. There appears to be a strong need to move forward and a fear of being seen as indecisive.

Business folklore implies that managers are expected to guarantee solutions to problems the moment concerns emerge. Saying what will be done as soon as a difficulty materializes makes managers seem to be on top of things. Leaders are also frequently pressured by their bosses or people in oversight roles to seize the first idea that surfaces. People who create such pressure act as if all concerns have immediate solutions. Even when managers know that making decisions this way is foolhardy, the pressure for hasty solutions often wins out (Nutt, 1999).

Managers also reported avoiding participation in their decision-making because of its time requirements and the seeming loss of control despite research demonstrating that, in general, participation leads to positive outcomes (e.g., commitment; Marrow, Bowers, & Seashore, 1967). Thus, they often resort to management by edict and believe that their prerogatives and the need for timely action make this justifiable. They seem unaware of the high rate of failure of edicts and underestimate that amount of power needed because people resist the appearance of being forced to comply.

2.1 Patience is a virtue

Cultures of frenzy and unreflected activity dominate most organizations (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003). Energized action is necessary, but that does not mean being hyperactive or endlessly implementing change. Taking time for reflection, seriously reviewing and questioning projects are neither the usual practice nor well received in many organizations. Rarely do firms question such values. That is what
makes The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland so unique. Executives there worried that it was drifting too far toward a fast-action culture. It realized that it must act quickly in responding to disasters everywhere—earthquakes, wars, floods and famines—but it also saw the need to engage in the slower, more delicate task of building a capacity for action that was careful, thoughtful, and tailored to local conditions and needs. What was needed was an approach where reflective thinking meets practical doing (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003).

To encourage the necessary reflection, active waiting is recommended. It is a process in which individuals intentionally hold back from impetuously diving into making irreversible commitments of resources (Minniti, 2006). This, however, takes patience. It is often hard for individuals to believe that they will get more done by starting out slowly, patiently, planfully (i.e., by waiting around), but the patience of active waiting is essential for slowing and preparing the mind, which otherwise races on to the next crisis. Thus, "active waiting is less a matter of time management than of emotional management" (Boice, 2000, p. 108).

By pausing reflectively, one enhances the likelihood that his or her actions will seek to answer the right question, and to diminish the tendency to reframe themselves for making inevitable missteps. Thus, active waiting occurs in the space between stopping to recognize symptoms and prescribing a treatment. It involves considering and reconsidering what individuals might do until eventually arriving at a clear understanding of what they are going to do and how they are going to do it. In the process, active waiting takes advantage of the numerous environmental stimuli that often go unnoticed in the surrounding environment. That is, unlike passive waiting, which is the child of mindlessness and the parent of procrastination, active waiting is purposeful. As a result, awareness is activated to bring mindfulness to environmental cues, making individuals more alert to relevant information and making them the beneficiaries of seemingly costless gifts of relevant information extracted from their environment as they engage in other activities (Langer, 1989).

2.2 Second mover advantage
Although many business strategists espouse the value of "first-mover advantage", or being first to market with a new product or technology, another school of thought points to the value of "second-mover advantage" whereby companies that are followers can benefit by learning from first-movers mistakes. Henricks (2009) points to several examples of companies that benefitted from second-mover advantage. One example involved Voodoo Tiki Tequila, a high-end tequila liquor that challenged the category market leader, Patron Spirits Company. Patron took on the challenging task of educating and convincing consumers to switch from drinking vodka to drinking tequila.

Tiki Voodoo Tequila did not have to spend the time, effort, and money educating consumers as Patron had already paved the way. Instead, Tiki made significant improvements to packaging. Whereas Patron uses traditional Mexican packaging, Tiki uses numbered bottles made from hand-blown glass with a tiki inside the bottle and consumers now willingly pay more for a perceived premium, high-end product.

Henricks (2009) also points to other successful second-movers such as Southwest Airlines, which was able to learn from earlier entries in the economy airline segment, and Google gained much from the experience of previous search engines (e.g., WebCrawler and Lycos). In the cell phone industry, although Nokia and Ericsson were the early entrants; today, companies like Samsung and Apple dominate the market. Active waiting can allow the second-mover to take advantage of the leader's mistakes or lack of follow-through. In some cases, the market leader might not have intellectual property protection or an established distribution network. In other instances, the high costs of research and development or marketing could leave them in a weakened position. The first-mover might also have introduced their product before all the errors or defects were worked out, or using a technology the market would not accept.

Many other examples can be found where second-movers benefitted by active waiting: Target stores learned from WalMart and AMD computer chips gained much information from observing Intel. But often the real test is profitability. Rasmusen and Yoon (2012) found that when the second-mover possesses better knowledge, that company can utilize second-mover advantage to produce greater profits.
What about the importance of speed? Gamble, Thompson, and Peteraf (2013) noted that mobile phone usage around the world did not take off immediately. In fact, it took ten years to grow from 10 million users to 100 million users worldwide! Likewise, it took almost ten years for broadband home use to reach 100 million users worldwide. Gamble et al. (2013) remind us that the market penetration curve for many business opportunities is much longer than many businesses consider. Many more companies could benefit from active waiting and take better advantage of business opportunities within the market penetration curve.

3. IMPLEMENTING ACTIVE WAITING

A six-step strategy is offered to implement active waiting. This approach suggests that managers be doubtful, generate alternatives, assess alternatives, be flexible, implement slowly, and then take action. This six-step procedure is illustrated in Figure 1 and is discussed below.

Figure 1: The Six-Step Strategy for Active Waiting

3.1 Be doubtful
People and organizations seem culturally eager to praise the power of conviction—especially when it is unwavering. Self-confident persons show sureness in their ability to make decisions, organize and
execute action plans, carry out new tasks, and give opinions (Mayo, Kakarika, Pastor, & Brutus, 2012). Self-confident leaders are also more likely to be assertive and decisive, which gains others' confidence in decisions which is crucial for their effective implementation. Moreover, Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) identified self-confidence as one of six key leadership traits. If leaders are not sure of what decision to make, or express a high degree of doubt, then followers are less likely to trust those leaders and be committed to their vision.

Such confidence, indeed overconfidence, seems to be hard-wired into human nature (Kahneman, 2011). Individuals are often confident even when they are wrong, and an objective observer is more likely to detect their errors than the person who is wrong. People have excessive confidence in what they believe they know, and an apparent inability to acknowledge the full extent of their ignorance and the uncertainty of the world they live in. They are prone to overestimate how much they understand about the world and their high subjective confidence is not to be trusted as an indicator of accuracy. Individuals also tend to exaggerate their ability to forecast the future, which fosters optimistic overconfidence (Kahneman, 2011).

Nevertheless, some uncertainty may help be helpful. Bandura and Locke (2003) noted that “In preparing for challenging endeavors, some self-doubt about one's performance efficacy provides incentives to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to master the challenges” (p. 96) and Chamorro-Premuzic (2012) indicated that being somewhat unsure may be helpful and a catalyst for beneficial change. Woodman, Akehurst, Hardy, and Beattie (2010) also found that a decrease in self-confidence resulted in a significant improvement in performance from practice to competition in a sports-related activity. Gladwell (2013) indicated that “[D]oubt was creative because it allowed for alternative ways to see the world, and seeing alternatives could steer people out of intractable circles and self-feeding despondency. Doubt, in fact, could motivate: freedom from ideological constraints opened up political strategies, and accepting the limits of what one could know liberated agents from their dependence on the belief that one had to know everything before acting, that conviction was a precondition for action.” Doubt may help prevent what Barker (1993) describes as “paradigm paralysis” when it is assumed there is only one way to do something. This condition actually can prevent managers for exploring and considering other options.

Some practices for introducing caution as a counter to such overconfidence have been developed. An often cited example was the geologists at Royal Dutch Shell who became less overconfident and more accurate in their assessments of potential drilling sites after training in which they were given feedback as to what had actually previously happened (Russo & Schoemaker, 1992). Now, when Shell geologists predict a 40 percent chance of producing oil, four out of ten times the company averages a hit. In other situations, overconfidence was mitigated (but not eliminated) when judges were encouraged to consider competing hypotheses and in an interesting protocol Klein (2007) suggested a pre-mortem. The procedure is simple: when the organization has almost come to an important decision but has not formally committed itself, Klein (2007) proposes gathering for a brief session a group of individuals who are knowledgeable about the decision and then the leader tells the group: “Imagine that we are a year into the future. We implemented the plan as it now exists. The outcome was a disaster. Please take 5 to 10 minutes to write a brief history of that disaster.” Klein’s (2007) idea of the pre-mortem usually evokes immediate enthusiasm. The pre-mortem has two main advantages: it overcomes the suppression of doubt that contributes to overconfidence in a team which often leads to groupthink that affects many units once a decision appears to have been made, and it unleashes the imagination of knowledgeable individuals in a much different and needed direction.

3.2 Generate alternatives
The second step in the proposed protocol involves generating a set of feasible courses of action to take in response to an opportunity or threat. Management experts cite failure to properly consider different alternatives as one key reason why managers sometimes make bad decisions (Bazerman & Moore, 2008). Nearly every discussion of effective decision making calls for developing multiple options. The discarded possibilities are not wasted. They help confirm the value of a preferred course of action and frequently offer ways to improve it. Different choices allow managers in decision-making roles to combine the best features of options to make a superior one, and to make a comparison with a preferred action to demonstrate its merits. Nutt (1999), however, reported that managers produced several courses of action
in less than 20 percent of their decisions. When multiple options were developed, success rates jumped from 56 percent to 70 percent. Multiple ideas provide another way to increase one's chance of success but developing several possibilities is time consuming and to save time, the practice is often ignored.

Moreover, some managers are used to seeing the world from a single perspective due to their "managerial mind-set" and find it difficult to view problems from a fresh perspective. According to best-selling management author Peter Senge (2006), humans are trapped within our personal mental models of the world—that is, our ideas about what is important and how the world works. Generating creative alternatives to solve problems and take advantage of opportunities may require that we abandon our existing mind-sets and develop new ones—something that usually is difficult to do.

The importance of getting managers to set aside their mental models of the world and generate creative alternatives is reflected in the growth of interest in the work of authors such as Senge (2006) and de Bono (1968), who have popularized techniques for stimulating problem solving and creative thinking among managers. More recently Gladwell (2013) has noted that creativity often comes through the embrace of chaos and the release of control. Gladwell (2013) noted that famed economist Albert Hirschman even criticized organizations like the World Bank for trying to remove obstacles and secure economic and infrastructural stability in developing countries. For Hirschman, obstacles cause frustration and anxiety, which spur motivation. This chaotic unpredictability serves as the motor of creative energy—getting the rug pulled out from under us knocks us into a free fall that builds more momentum than standing securely on our feet.

3.3 Assess alternatives

Once managers have generated a set of alternatives, they must evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of each (Russo & Schoemaker, 1992). The key to a good assessment of the alternatives is to define the opportunity or threat exactly and then specify the criteria that should influence the selection of alternatives for responding to the problem or opportunity. One reason for bad decisions is that managers often fail to specify the criteria that are important in reaching a decision (Bazerman & Moore, 2008). In general, successful managers use four criteria to evaluate the pros and cons of alternative courses of action (Jones & George, 2011). Often times a manager must consider these four criteria simultaneously:

1. Legality: Managers must ensure that a possible course of action will not violate any domestic or international laws or government regulations.
2. Ethicalness: Managers must ensure that a possible course of action is ethical and will not unnecessarily harm any stakeholder group. Many decisions managers make may help some organizational stakeholders and harm others. When examining alternative courses of action, managers need to be clear about the potential effects of their decisions.
3. Economic feasibility: Managers must decide whether the alternatives are economically feasible—that is, whether they can be accomplished given the organization's performance goals. Typically managers perform a cost-benefit analysis of the various alternatives to determine which one will have the best net financial payoff.
4. Practicality: Managers must decide whether they have the capabilities and resources required to implement the alternative, and they must be sure the alternative will not threaten the attainment of other organizational goals. At first glance an alternative might seem economically superior to other alternatives; but if managers realize it is likely to threaten other important projects, they might decide it is not practical after all.

Some of the worst managerial decisions can be traced to poor assessment of the alternatives, such as the decision to launch the Challenger space shuttle. In that case, the desire of NASA and Morton Thiokol managers to demonstrate to the public the success of the U.S. space program in order to ensure future funding (economic feasibility) conflicted with the need to ensure the safety of the astronauts (ethicalness). Managers deemed the economic criterion more important and decided to launch the space shuttle even though there were unanswered questions about safety. Tragically, some of the same decision-making problems that resulted in the Challenger tragedy led to the demise of the Columbia space shuttle 17 years later, killing all seven astronauts on board (Berger, 2004). In both the Challenger and the Columbia disasters, safety questions were raised before the shuttles were launched; safety concerns took second
place to budgets, economic feasibility, and schedules; top decision makers seemed to ignore or downplay the inputs of those with relevant technical expertise; and speaking up was discouraged (Glanz & Schwartz, 2003). Rather than making safety a top priority, decision makers seemed overly concerned with keeping on schedule and within budget (Wald & Schwartz, 2003).

3.4 Be flexible

Centuries ago playwright and keen observer of human behavior William Shakespeare noted in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) that “Thus hath the candle singed the moth” (Act 2 Scene 9) meaning that just as a moth is attracted to a flame that leads it to make a fatal mistake, so too are people irresistibly and dangerously tempted by situations that often lead to disaster. Similarly, in business a firm’s steadfast commitment to a long-term view of what it should be doing and where it should be going, often touted as a powerful tool for improving corporate performance, can be problematic when such attraction leads to tunnel vision, a narrow concentration, and missing the big picture. For example, Sull (2004) details how Microsoft's fixation on mission statements related to PCs blinded them to opportunities and threats presented by the explosive growth of the Internet. Organizations must be careful to avoid such a “moth-to-candle syndrome” that can lead to its demise.

Rather than getting too focused on clear, long-term visions that can distract firms from emerging situations in the present, companies may want to consider softening such single-mindedness. Indeed, Sull (2005) tells leaders to “avoid marching headlong toward a well-defined future and instead articulate a fuzzy vision. ... A fuzzy vision works because it provides a general direction and sets aspirations without prematurely locking the company into a specific course of action” (p. 124). Such a vision contributes to a company’s situational awareness—the ability to identify, process, and comprehend the critical elements of information about what is happening around it (United States Coast Guard, n. d.)—and can act as a corrective measure when organizations fixate on and become preoccupied with one aspiration often losing the ability to detect other important environmental information. Fuzzy visions can motivate employers to explicitly consider alternatives and options because the flexible perspective inherent in such mission statements can promote greater functional dissent and other forms of constructive conflict. Such flexibility is particularly important in rapidly changing environments, including emerging markets, technology intensive industries where change is often revolutionary rather than evolutionary, and fields where different industries are converging (e.g., information technology and entertainment).

3.5 Implement slowly

The fifth step suggests measured, deliberate action. There is a saying in martial arts: you have to go slow to go fast. The idea is that individuals have to be relaxed and calm to move as quickly as they are capable of doing. Famous movie character, Ferris Bueller, voiced a similar theme when he said, “Life moves pretty fast. If you don’t stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it” (Hughes, 1987).

More formally, Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman (2011) summarized the research literature on decision-making and problem solving and described mental life by the metaphor of two agents, called System 1 and System 2, which respectively produce fast and slow thinking. System 1 is generally automatic, affective, and heuristic-based, and relies on mental “shortcuts.” It quickly proposes intuitive answers to problems as they arise. System 2, which corresponds closely with controlled processes, is slow, effortful, conscious, rule-based, and also can be employed to monitor the quality of the answer provided by System 1. If System 2 is convinced that our intuition is wrong, then it is capable of correcting or overriding the automatic judgments. System 2 takes over when things get difficult. Each system impacts the other because individuals have only so much attentional focus. If System 2 is engaged then System 1 may be negatively impacted. Intense focusing on a task can make people miss stimuli that normally attract attention.

The most dramatic demonstration was offered by Chabris and Simons (2009) in their book *The Invisible Gorilla*. They constructed a short film of two teams passing basketballs, one team wearing white shirts, the other wearing black. The viewers of the film are instructed to count the number of passes made by the white team, ignoring the black players. This task is difficult and completely absorbing and can be said to emphasize System 2 thinking. Halfway through the video, a woman wearing a gorilla suit appears, crosses the court, thumps her chest, and moves on. The gorilla is in view for 9 seconds. Many thousands
of people have seen the video, and about half of them do not notice anything unusual. System 1 thinking, it seems, was significantly impacted. It was the counting task—and especially the instruction to ignore one of the teams—that caused the blindness. No one who watches the video without that counting task would miss the gorilla.

It seems, then, that people, when engaged in a mental sprint characteristic of System 1 thinking, may become effectively blind. Chabris and Simons (2009) made the gorilla “invisible” by keeping the observers intensely busy counting passes. Seeing and orienting are automatic functions distinctive of System 1 and they depend on the allocation of some attention to the relevant stimulus, but when System 2 was engaged (counting) System 1 processing was compromised. The authors note that the most remarkable observation of their study was that people found its results very surprising (Vanderbilt, n. d.). Indeed, the viewers who failed to see the gorilla were initially sure that it was not there—they cannot imagine missing such a striking event.

The gorilla study illustrates two important facts about our minds—human can be blind to the obvious, and are also blind to their blindness (Kahneman, 2011). It seems that individuals must pay attention and if they do not then they perform less well, or not at all, if their attention is disrupted, drawn away, or directed inappropriately. Thus, anything that occupies individuals’ working memory reduces their ability to think and concentrate.

System 1 thinking can also negatively impact System 2 thinking. In a business context Bruch and Ghoshal (2002) noted that frequently there is an astonishing amount of fast-moving activity in organizations that allows almost no time for reflection. Such unproductive busyness characteristic of System 1 thinking, and what Bruch and Ghoshal (2002) call “active nonaction,” can be a hazard for managers and organizations since fully 90% of managers squander their time in all sorts of ineffective activities. What is needed is more System 2 thinking or what Bruch and Ghoshal (2002) refer to as concentrated attention—the ability to zero in on a goal and see the task through to completion which seem to define what they call purposeful managers.

Such attention requires that purposeful managers choose not to respond immediately to every issue that comes their way or get sidetracked from their goals by distractions like email, meeting, setbacks, and unforeseen demands. Such System 2 thinking involves carefully weighing options before selecting a course of action. Moreover, because purposeful managers commit only one or two key projects, they can devote their full attention to the projects they believe in. Purposeful managers manage time carefully and some refuse to respond to phone calls or visitors outside certain periods of the day. Other such managers build “think time” into their schedules. One executive, Bruch and Ghoshal (2002) observed, frequently arrived at the office at 6:00a.m. to think about issues before his colleagues showed up. This executive said, “In the busiest times, I slow (italics ours) down and take time off to reflect on what I actually want to achieve and sort what’s important from irrelevant noise. Then I focus on doing what is most important” (Bruch & Ghoshal, 2002, p. 68). Sometimes it is important to slow down and let an individual’s System 2 take control, which is often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice, and concentration. This involves active waiting. While the One Minute Manager (Blanchard & Johnson, 1981) focused on quick action was a best seller some years ago, more and more discussion is today being focused on reflection and moving forward slowly (Honore, 2004).

### 3.6 Take action

The final step in the Six-step Strategy is to take action. This step calls for applying the chosen alternative and carrying out the decision. In taking action it may be fitting to consider various mental shortcuts that frequently sabotage managerial judgment and action. Hammond, Keeney, and Raiffa (1998, 1999) and Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky (1982) have identified several key psychological traps that managers should be alert to and compensate for them when taking action.

One such trick is the status quo bias—the tendency to stick to the current state. By being aware of the role that this bias plays in their own lives, people can take steps to reduce the influence of this bias on their decision making. To avoid this error managers should 1) ask if the status quo really serves their
objectives, 2) ask themselves if they would choose the status quo if it were not the status quo, and 3) downplay the effort or cost of switching from the status quo.

Like college students who mistakenly think that in a multiple-choice test, they should always stick with their first answer, rather than changing it (Benjamin, Cavell, & Shallenberger, 1984), managers likewise often misguided stay with those options that first come to mind. They often fail even to think through the possible implications of information that would be harder to get.

To minimize the distortion caused by variations in "recallability," managers must take a very disciplined approach to making forecasts and judging probabilities and should 1) carefully examine all assumptions to ensure they are not unduly influenced by their memory and improperly give more weight to recent events, 2) get actual statistics whenever possible, and avoid being guided by impressions and dramatic events, and 3) try and recall instances of events that are not so memorable.

4. CONCLUSION

The focus of this paper is on the oftentimes benefits of waiting strategically. In part, this is a reaction to what the authors see as an overemphasis on swift action, execution, and doing. While the "Ready, Fire, Aim" concept is about velocity and the profound benefits of moving from ideas into action—from thinking into doing—at the fastest possible speed, it is essential to realize that such an approach may do more harm than good since such a strategy may cause individuals to completely miss the target if activities are undertaken with reckless abandon and bolting into action before due diligence is exercised. Managers are encouraged to heed the words of noted financier, Warren Buffet (n.d.), who said "I insist on a lot of time being spent, almost every day, to just sit and think. That is very uncommon in American business. I read and think. So I do more reading and thinking, and make less impulse decisions than most people in business."

We offer active waiting as an alternative to the cultural and business demands for quick action. Today's fast-paced modern life, in many ways, has encouraged people to demand things immediately and to be impatient. People eat fast food, use high speed Internet, and command that their emails be answered within an hour. Active waiting, on the other hand, allows managers time for additional study, research and testing, consulting advisors, and thoughtful deliberation—in a word patience. Although some situations require a rapid response, emergencies for example, most day-to-day decisions managers make in the course of their duties allow more time to pause and consider possible courses of action.

Patience is not only a virtue, but can also be considered essential to sound management. The authors find numerous examples of the importance of patience (active waiting) in business, perhaps none more significant than a study by Baumann (2010) that found a firm can improve performance through moderate patience, allowing for some additional exploration of other possibilities.

Rasmusen and Yoon (2012), Henricks (2009), and Birger (2006) support the advantages of active waiting. Companies ranging from Southwest Airlines to Lowe's home improvement stores benefited from being second-movers in their respective industries, resulting in better market positions and stronger financial performance. A famous quote by Sun Tzu in *The Art of War* (goodreads.com) states "if you wait patiently by the river, the body of your enemy will float by". Like the lion waiting for the perfect time to strike its prey, smart organizations need to take the time to thoroughly evaluate their environment, resisting the urge to act too quickly. As the authors present in this paper, many types of organizations find active waiting the best approach in their industry. The question then, is when will your company management adopt an active waiting strategy?

REFERENCES:


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