

## Managing Chaos

BY KARL E. BURGHER AND MICHAEL SNYDER

*"It's snowing still," said Eeyore gloomily.*

*"So it is."*

*"And freezing."*

*"Is it?"*

*"Yes," said Eeyore. "However," he said, brightening up a little, "we haven't had an earthquake lately." (Milne 1928)*

### WELCOME TO CHAOS...

...and your new normal. It is overwhelming, overextended, fast-paced, foggy, and frantic. And make no mistake: It is the new normal. You must accept this and rise to the occasion. Otherwise, you will give up or constantly seek greener grass through new employment. Chaos has come to organizations in all sectors—private, government, and academic. Yet even Eeyore could see through the fog and have a good day at times. If he could, then you can. There is always something to do that is purposeful, and that is something to be grateful for.

Welcome to the new world—"the Internet of things"—or "everything is moving fast with no time to be sure that we are done." This is the 21st century—CRM, NSA, "wired," Caprican, post-financial, meltdown economy. It has brought more of the vague, the unknown, and the uncertain, and with it a pace unknown in recent decades—

and one that carries with it considerable risk. Welcome to chaos. Life has gotten messy.

The risk—moving at a pace that exceeds your organization's abilities—is inherent in all decisions and practice. You may try to avoid risk, but oh, you must grab ahold of this beast right now or else continue to suffer in the unknown, unproductive world of work that is never finished and continually mounting. Let us remind you again (though we are fairly certain you have heard this many times): It is not whether risk exists but whether it is managed that matters. The problem is no longer whether you can avoid chaos; it is whether you can learn how to thrive in it.

Managing chaos is hard and risky, but not managing chaos is much worse. If you choose to embrace the current paradigm, it can be filled with opportunity, excitement, and numerous rewards. But it is not for the faint of heart. You must be confident, strong, methodic, and deliberate. You must be willing to constantly change your work and plans as new information is presented. You must dive in and attack. If you fail to, your staff will be underwater by the lunch hour. But if you succeed (and we believe you can), then it is a golden opportunity for you to shine and for the weak to fall away. The opportunity for field promotion during the battle with chaos is enormous.

What are the odds that you will actually change and embrace the chaos? They are low. Human beings are quite risk averse. But doesn't it sound like more fun to crash a Corvette than to drive a Yugo through life? Can you even call the safe path a life—or one you want to live?

Teddy Roosevelt (1899) said, “Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure...than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much, because they live in a gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat.” Roosevelt lived a phenomenal life, and you can too. Managers, it is time to live. It is time to really manage. It is time to assume risk, to lead, and to earn your pay.

We have spent much time in previous articles describing tools (white papers, charters, plans, etc.) to help you organize and manage. Now we offer more qualitative guidance.

## THE ILLUSION OF CATCHING UP, REVISITED

Before we describe the first steps toward managing a better you and a better office, we want to briefly revisit the ‘illusion of catching up,’ which we discussed several articles ago. It is a fallacy to think that one day you will get caught up with your work and that your life will get back to normal. Chaos is the new normal. There is no one project, one stressful semester, or one new hire that, once completed, will suddenly return you to a less stressful, slower-paced time. Recall the following all-too-common statements:

- “That project will have to wait until I catch up.”
- “Once I finish a few things, we will finally get organized.”
- “Once we get over the top on this one, we will examine your proposal.”
- “This time of year [applied to any time of year] is always busy.”
- “Let’s have lunch...right after I get a few things off my plate.”
- “When I catch up at work, we’ll take that vacation I promised you.”
- “Once work slows down, I will start coming home earlier and we will [fill in the blank].”

Over time, the thought process that underlies these statements crushes morale and destroys workplace productivity—especially as it begins to take its toll at home. Be honest: Rarely do you ever feel you are caught up. And

if you do, how long does it typically last? For most managers, working at 110 percent is the daily reality. Many strive to combat this reality by working more hours. (After all, being the last one out of the parking lot and saying that you worked all weekend have become badges of honor.) But consider this: Working all weekend means not only that employees are working ineffectively but also that they are being managed ineffectively. The longer the pattern continues, the more the stress builds, the more morale declines, the greater the risk of project blunders, and the greater the likelihood that good employees will feel that they are failing one another and becoming unproductive. This is burnout: It is real, and it results in poor work and poor physical health.

It is time to let go of the illusion of catching up. Give it up, managers. Admit, accept, and move on. It is time to embrace the race, choose to run, choose to start, define “done,” and deliver.

In this article, we discuss a number of concepts that provide a starting point for beginning to organize the chaos. The concepts include managing yourself; managing your people; managing your boss; and managing politics and deliverables.

## MANAGING YOURSELF

### Choose to Lead

Today we all must be leaders—of our subordinates, our peers, and our family and friends. In the workplace, you must remove a variety of burdens from your staff. One of the most important aspects of leadership is to protect yourself and your people from needless organizational time wasters and overload so that everyone remains effective. Think of yourself as an offensive lineman protecting the quarterback: You need to protect your people from interruption and politics. Their time must be managed and prioritized so they can concentrate on their work, finish their work, and feel a sense of accomplishment. There is nothing worse for a team than day-in, day-out stress. This leads to inefficiencies, lost time, lost resources, and delayed schedules. In short, staff under constant stress worry; they do not work.

Managers are like traffic cops or dispatchers who watch for the problems and landmines of the day. Leaders then take action to see that none of their people steps on those

landmines. The economy is too competitive to not pay attention to all things managerial. Each day, you must come in to the office, be strategic full time, and work. We urge you to also jump in, take responsibility, and lead.

### **Choose to be Healthy**

To quote the vile Count Rugen from the movie *The Princess Bride*, “If you haven’t got your health, you haven’t got anything.” In order to execute on the sections that follow, you must ensure that you are giving yourself the best chance to succeed. Each and every day you come to the office, you must be ‘on.’ You must bring your ‘A’ game. You must be clear headed, well rested, and in pretty good shape. Being physically and mentally fit will enable you to perform at your highest level. It will keep stress from overtaking you. It will reduce the chances of a life-altering health event or a nagging injury or condition. It will enable you to remember more, to be more creative, and to stave off burnout. It also will send a good message to your team, your boss, your colleagues, and your customers. It may not be fair that people judge those who are in good shape and good spirits more kindly than they do those who are not, but life isn’t fair. Don’t compromise yourself with poor health. If you won’t take care of yourself for the sake of your own body, then do it for your team and your pocketbook.

### **Pay Attention to All Things, Big and Small**

We cannot emphasize this enough: You must pay attention to all things big and small. The environment has become too competitive to overlook anything anymore. You must look at your customers, at your leaders, and at your organization and constantly be evaluating how you fit in, how your team fits in, what is being said, what is not being said, and what is important. You must be able to ‘go broad and go deep,’ meaning that you must understand a wide array of subjects but also have intimate knowledge of at least some of them. And because what is important changes from month to month, you must be ready to adapt yourself and your team quickly. This means professional development (discussed in greater detail below) and reviewing and adjusting strategy, structure, and methods as necessary. We estimate that new college graduates will have to become ‘brand new again’ every ten to fifteen years or so. What is a career but a few years of learning, a few more of high productivity and contribution, and then a few years

of hanging in and hanging on (assuming you avoid some major organizational shake-up)? Avoid that last stage and instead find yourself renewed in your productive stage. So choose to actively pay attention to as much as you possibly can. Take continual stock of and reinvent yourself as opportunity to do so arises; otherwise, you may find yourself miserable—or even miserable and unemployed. Learn to look for and read the signs, both obvious and implied. Pay attention, or prepare to be replaced by someone who does.

### **Quit your Whining**

Doubtless you have seen the sign “No whining!” No one likes a whiner, yet how often do we deserve the label? It is as if we are wired that way. As Agent Smith suggests in *The Matrix*, humans require misery. Life is not fair. Bad things happen. Talking about unfair things pushes away the blame. But as a manager, whining is unacceptable. You do not have time for it: it is not constructive, it helps no one, and it sets a bad example for your team. Yes, sometimes you need to vent. But if at all possible, vent to your spouse, to friends, or to your dog. If you must vent at work, close the door and do it with someone you trust. Stop whining. Work, execute, and deliver in order to stay profitable and employed. Period.

The fact is, you are where you are. If you aren’t happy with the circumstances, then change something. Move; become a boss; change the world. Otherwise, accept what you have, embrace it, and make the best of it. If you do not enjoy today, no one will let you be in charge of tomorrow. Understand and accept that you live in chaos—and that chaos, understood, can be rewarding.

### **Organize**

We urge you to utilize the organizational techniques articulated in our previous articles. You cannot afford to be the least bit disorganized. You must understand your team’s work. All work must be lined out and prioritized. You must know how many projects you have in motion, how many you are terminating, how long each is expected to take, who is working on what, and at what stage every project is. You must know how much time is required for maintenance, how much for management, and how much for meetings. Start simply—with white papers—then move to work plans and toward understanding how your resources are consumed. Always think in terms of resource

balance and deliverables. Resources include your and your people's hours, your money (budget), and your energy. Do not expend energy on things that are of no use.

### **Manage Time Like a Consultant**

Come to work ready to deliver that 'A' game. Think as if every hour of your day must be productive, billable, and useful. Plan every hour deliberately. Otherwise, you cheat your customer—your organization, your team, and yourself. Do not misinterpret this as burying your head at your desk every moment of every day. Chats near the water cooler and casual visits can be useful for politics and moving work forward—or simply for the sake of a little break (recall that we do need to take time for restoration). Just be sure that they have purpose; if they don't, move on after a friendly exchange or gesture. Neither consultants nor you can afford to allocate hours to non-billable or 'not useful' tasks.

### **Manage Professional Development**

Learn something every day. Make it a point to read for at least an hour or two every day. How can you find that kind of time? Be purposeful. You may not be able to read quite that much every day, but at least attempt it on many days. Once you are organized in other areas, you can make time to read. It is important. It is too easy to let go of personal and professional development goals. But you must make them a priority. Plan your career as well as your strategic development. Know how you want to progress. Know how you want to grow your team, your knowledge and intellect, your career, and even knowledge for knowledge's sake. Just as athletes continually train their minds and bodies in order to stay competitive, managers must train in order to hone their skills and stay employed.

### **Manage Confidence**

You need confidence. Yet confidence can be oh-so-difficult to maintain. Although you may feel insecure at times, do not reveal your fears and doubts to your people, your bosses, or your competitors. Instead, manage your fears. Some may be legitimate, but often they are your own creations. In any event, do not be ruled by them. There is no reason to feel a lack of confidence if you have trained and prepared. Remember and understand that what you do is work. And work is not life, your spouse or children, your tennis or golf game. Work is not who we are (although many seem to be-

lieve otherwise). It is what you do for pay; it is work. The point is not to take everything quite so personally.

You can help spread this confidence by empowering your people to take charge, allowing them to take the lead, and allowing them to help you. Your people need to be able to make decisions without fearing that their doing so will result in your becoming unfriendly and/or unstable. Too many of us have had a boss like that. By empowering your staff, you will give yourself the gift of time to train (professional development) and to be more productive.

## **MANAGE YOUR PEOPLE, UP AND DOWN**

### **Actively Manage**

Management is difficult—more difficult than in the past. It requires managing not only your people but also your bosses and, perhaps most difficult, yourself.

It is challenging to remain self-disciplined and self-strategic while not feeling stressed much of the time; at best, it puts you in a state of constant adjustment. It also can be very lonely. In fact, it has gotten a whole lot lonelier because in order to be effective, middle managers must make many more decisions in isolation than ever before. There is no time to spare: You must evaluate alternatives quickly, gather cost-benefit data and information, make decisions, and move forward, and, as necessary, change course—quickly.

In managing subordinates, you need to make fast decisions while at the same time encouraging and protecting. Your employees need to stay focused and confident in the assurance that their work is purposeful and meaningful. A group hug may not always be appropriate to ensure that everyone is on board. Shared governance is common practice in higher education, but there are many times and circumstances when it may not be appropriate or competitive, especially as external constituents and politics and the latest 'big idea' require a quick response. Even after big decisions are made, dozens of smaller decisions may be necessary to move an effort forward. (That said, be sure to avoid the over-planning that can doom a project before it begins.)

### **Managing Up**

Long ago you may have been taught that a manager was misdirecting effort if she spent more than 20 percent of her time managing her subordinates. The other 80 percent

needs to be spent managing stakeholders, customers, clients, and *the boss*.

Helping the boss see her way to the right decision has always been an important part of being a good employee. A boss cannot and does not know all things. Teach, help, and provide enough information to facilitate good decision making but not so much as to create confusion. Find the balance: Bring solutions to the meeting. Try not to be yet another problem for your supervisor.

If you cannot communicate your issue in five or fewer minutes (ideally, you will do so in two minutes or less), then you do not understand your problem well enough. You have not studied the issue sufficiently to communicate quickly, explain concisely, and identify solutions. Sometimes you may need to ask for advice. But keep that simple, as well. Provide a document and say, “I want your opinion.” Talk for a maximum of one minute and then ask, “How would you handle that?” Be brief, and request specific commentary about a specific subject so you can leave with a decision (or at least with some useful advice).

Frequent, brief, work-only, decision- and deliverable-oriented visits can help you get noticed. Help your boss make the right decisions day in and day out. Help him to be successful. As a result, you will be appreciated, you will learn, and perhaps you will even become the boss someday.

## Protect

In the midst of chaos, you must ensure that your employees feel protected so they will be free to excel, produce, and feel empowered and purposeful. How can you do this? Begin by managing yourself in such a way as to not burden your people with your own issues. Your employees have plenty to do without having to worry about managing you and your problems or inefficiencies.

Next, protect your people from outside attacks or assaults on their workload. (This is so important a concept that we include it under both leadership and management.) Make it clear to the outside world that your team is organized and working hard—that you have prioritized, scheduled, and planned. The world must know that you have good white papers and work plans and that your team delivers work efficiently. Those outside of your group must understand that you have your team under control and that the work flows through you. As manager, you are the gatekeeper. You are the sentinel. No work is under-

taken without it first being assessed by you, and no assignment is issued without your knowledge.

Be careful not to protect people from working hard—only protect them against overwhelming amounts of work. Your team must work hard and deliver a steady stream of high-quality projects. It must not be expected to deliver 33 top-priority outcomes by the end of the semester.

Consider one more strategy as a tool for protection: throw some work under the bus. At times you will be unable to hold back the crowd. Sometimes, for various reasons, you won’t be able to stop as much at the gate as you would like to, or you won’t be able to schedule, assign, and negotiate quickly enough. You cannot pile on work beyond the breaking point without jeopardizing both the quality of your work and related schedules. It is too easy to become a bastion of mediocrity. It is better to accomplish less well than to do everything poorly. When the quantity of work becomes overwhelming, consider strategic failure. Decide purposefully that some things will not be completed according to someone else’s plan. Throw the work under the bus of that vice president who can get the president’s attention; that attention might lead in turn to prioritization and perhaps even another person to help do the work. Or throw the work under the bus of the person with no power and whom no one likes. Whatever you decide, be strategic: having a poor or no outcome in one area should result in increased productivity in another area. This requires courage. Allow your team to let certain projects wait until another day. You may have to pay a price for utilizing this strategy. You may suffer a consequence for de-prioritizing the wrong project. This is a cost of being the manager. Adverse consequences are not your team’s fault. You must take responsibility, deal with the consequences, and negotiate the fallout. If you don’t like it, then you may need to rethink your management track.

## Coaching: Managing Isn’t What it Used to Be

Given the shift from an industrial society to one filled with knowledge workers (particularly so-sensitive millennials), considerable coaching is required. The coaching-managing philosophy is no longer optional but rather an everyday prerequisite for success. Previously, managing meant lining out your people, stating objectives or outcomes, and then letting your people do the work. Now, people require continuous monitoring, contact, motivation, engagement,

and a level of expressed gratitude not required previously. You need to encourage, communicate often, manage by walking around the office (and eating with your people), and let your people know that you know what they are capable of and that you expect nothing less. You must know each of your people well, care about them as individuals, and make them understand and believe that you are there to help them succeed. In today's workplace, teams need to be coached to victory.

### **Balance**

Unless you have been working in a cave, you have read and heard much about work/ life balance. Most managers and employees rate it as important. Some of us even make a concerted effort to make a few changes in order to attain balance, but more often than not we soon find we are back to feeling overwhelmed and working longer hours. What can you do to improve your work/life balance? First, be a bit flexible; second, have clearly defined work plans. The burden is on you as manager to assign the appropriate amount

of work to your people. The burden is on you to ensure that work plans are robust, with milestones and delivery dates established with balance in mind. Don't beat up your people. You will have to work them 45 to 50 hours a week, week in and week out. That is the new norm. But give them the time to work with some flexibility. Not all will rise to the occasion, but the best folks will. Take care of them.

Some of your staff will not go home willingly. But go home they must. If necessary, get angry. Force them to go home. Force them to take days off. Working all weekend and never taking vacation is not a positive trait. Usually it is a sign that something is wrong. Either you are not managing correctly, or the employee has some other issue. Rather than demonstrating a willingness to work hard, working constantly demonstrates that the individual has no life apart from work, is inefficient, or is not delegating appropriately. Work is good, but rest fosters creativity and innovation. Humans are workers by nature, but like salt in the blood stream, too much will kill a person...or at least make him miserable to be around.



**(ORIGINAL ADVERTISEMENT REMOVED)**

Know that attaining balance all the time is nearly impossible—but do aim for balance 65 to 75 percent of the time. Work is often crazy, but don't let "crazy" be the norm every day.

## Rewards

Rewards are good, but they are only as good as they are scarce and sincere. Work isn't third grade soccer camp where everyone gets a trophy for showing up. In trying to reward all for everything, you reward no one. Rewards need to be important; they need to be sincere; they need to be real. They are wonderful when used appropriately and horrible when they are not.

Reward only when work is great. Otherwise, keep the plaques in the drawer and wait for the day when you indeed do have a winner. Long ago we had a student ask why no one in class got an A. Our response was that no one deserved an A. Teaching evaluations for that class were not too favorable, but that is life. Managing—like teaching—can require some dissatisfaction in order to do what is right. Think through your rewards carefully, and be sure that any recognition you offer has a purpose.

That said, when someone is deserving, do not miss the opportunity to immediately and loudly acknowledge her contribution. Single out the person who is an example for all to follow. The reward need not be big or expensive. Whether you grant a day off, lunch with the boss, or tickets to a ball game, an expression of gratitude goes a long way. Save it for when it is deserved, and then make it visible and special.

Some argue that higher education has far too many rewards. Give significant thought to what is appropriate in your individual workplace, and be sure that rewards are appropriate and meaningful. Note that a 3 percent across the board pay increase is a cost of living allowance (or at best profit-sharing), not a merit raise. Do not call a pay increase a raise if it rewards all employees, good and bad, at the same level. This is destructive. That said, higher education allows far too little in the way of merit pay. But just because it is difficult to allocate does not mean that we shouldn't try to help our organizations keep great people. If you cannot increase your staff members' pay, then think of perks and recognition you can offer. You must differentiate good from mediocre work and then reward the good as appropriately as you can.

## MANAGING DELIVERABLES

### Be a Solution Provider

You should have heard by now that you should bring only solutions—and not problems—to the boss. Be the person who delivers solutions. Show up with evidence that you have taken the time to think the problem through and that you are seeking approval of possible solutions, not throwing up your hands because you don't have any idea of what to do. Communicate costs and benefits, pros and cons, and seek a decision that will move you forward. At worst, ask for guidance or advice; do not ask to be told what to do. And be careful about asking your boss if she wants A or B because she may say yes to both—particularly if A and B solve different problems. The objective is to advance progress, not to obtain more work. So deliver a solution. Deliver thought, a plan, and a close.

### Deliver Loudly and Visibly

Be sure to position your delivery so all can see it. Deliver a show complete with an opening, a beta test, and a final solution; serve cookies and punch, food and liquor. Do whatever it takes for people to notice that you and your team delivered on time and on budget. This is politics and showmanship at its finest. It can be done with humility, but remember: it is show time; it is delivery time. Take advantage of the fact that you and your team have done well. The team will get promoted, and everyone will get a little more at the end of the year—be it pay, a promotion, or an increased budget to do more excellent work the next year.

### Celebrate Delivery

There will be times when your delivery can be neither loud nor visible. Even in such cases, you still need to celebrate with your team. Thank your staff for doing great work. Whether delivered over donuts and coffee or at a black-tie event, your thanks let your people know that they have purpose and are appreciated. Have a party at the office; take them out to lunch; or give them gift cards. What you do doesn't really matter. Just do and celebrate.

Remember: Delivery in all its forms should be visible, loud, and celebrated. Get what you can while you can. Announce your wins. Perhaps the Office of Registration and Records just celebrated its 35th consecutive upgrade without a hitch, or the 10,000th online transcript was printed,

or the professional development software was implemented in record time. Is this playing politics? Yes. But it is also educational. If you do not tell the world what your team is doing, who will? Certainly not the other departments that are after your budget. Be strategic; be smart; deliver.

### HOLDING TIGHT TO SATURDAY AND SUNDAY

We know that we are not inventing new concepts but rather synthesizing and summarizing ideas for managing your work force. Good management and good leadership concepts have been around for quite some time, but we all need a constant refresher. Further, these concepts need to be modified according to each generation's attitudes and characteristics. The societal shift from industry to service and knowledge necessitates significant adjustment of management concepts and practice. We must constantly remind ourselves that there is always more to read and learn.

We hope that our practical, deliberate delivery of the management concepts discussed here—concepts that have stood the test of time—will help you attain real change at your institution, in your group or unit, and in you.

### WE ARE IN CHAOS

We are in an all-out competitive, war-like environment where everyone every moment is trying to out-do and out-compete everyone else. Education is now global; content is global—and packets of data are flying around at the speed of light. As you sleep, someone somewhere is trying to steal your students and your way of life in order to better his own.

Because we have such unrestricted access to information—and, thus, to projects and initiatives—the supply of work to add to our chaos seems never-ending. Well, actually it is never-ending. We are an overworked, under-rested, accelerated “5-Hour Energy Drink” society. There is no going back.

We need to learn to succeed, find balance, find faith today and in the future, hold on to hope, be human, and enjoy our children, spouses, and friends. We need to be

in the business of execution and delivery in the most efficient manner possible. Close projects, provide service, and make money (okay, academics, budget surpluses). Most of the time we do not need fancy concepts or long-winded quantitative models and behavioral concepts. Rather, we need to get people to do good work in a safe and uninterrupted workplace. Each of us works best when we feel as good about our place as we can and have some purpose and balance in our lives.

Commit to some light project management and some detailed people management. Take back your Saturdays and Sundays.

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Burgher and Snyder's first book, *Volunteering*, published in 2014 by Ventus Publishing, is about the management processes inside volunteer organizations; their second book, on managing in chaos, is planned for release in 2015.)

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