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PEOPLE MANAGEMENT

Do Nothing!

By Kelly Hennigan

As mentioned in the Chairperson's Corner, this is the first of a three-part series focused on the "Do Nothing" leadership approach presented by Professor J. Keith Murnighan, the Harold H. Hines Jr. Distinguished Professor of Risk Management at the Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University. Murnighan is the author of the book *Do Nothing!* and promotes a synonymous leadership approach.¹

Murnighan's book, *Do Nothing! How to Stop Overmanaging and Become a Great Leader*, opens with a dream—a dream that many of us would believe less likely to materialize than the delusion of winning the lottery. (You can't win if you don't play, right?)

The author's dream for his reader is this: **You have just returned to the office after a three-week vacation during which you did not take your cellphone and did not check emails.**

Your first reactions might be: How is THIS possible? Who would this REALLY happen to? Maybe this happened in some OTHER company—it would never happen where I work ... and so forth. But, continue reading and barely 15 pages later, Murnighan has emboldened us to take his "Do Nothing" approach to leadership and make this dream a reality.

"So go on vacation. Leave your work phone at home. (Your team) might surprise you, and they might even surprise themselves."

—J. Keith Murnighan

The professor suggests that the role of a true leader is to facilitate, orchestrate and coordinate—essentially to allow people to do their work without micromanaging them.

STOP WORKING AND START LEADING!

Early in the book, Murnighan describes the typical everyday leaders—those of us with hectic, face-paced lives who never seem to be able to finish everything. Murnighan clearly states that he is not focused on the workaholic population, but rather the broader cohort of those of us who are hard-working, conscientious, and have the natural reaction to want to step up to do more. In a nutshell, he advises us to stop working and start leading.

The professor suggests that the role of a true leader is to facilitate, orchestrate and coordinate—essentially to allow people to do their work without micromanaging them. Oftentimes, particularly in the financial world, those who are technically savvy may be promoted up through the ranks and find themselves transitioning from a "doer" to a "leader"—even if they were not seeking out a management role. With a natural tendency to fall back upon the familiar, these new leaders can quickly fail if they revert back to what they know. It is all too easy to get back into the weeds, and intervene with the day-to-day technical details you have already mastered, rather than taking a step back and managing from afar. Many spend too much time trying to make things perfect, when good enough will more than suffice.

Despite this "Do Nothing!" approach to leadership, there are instances where leaders are expected to actually work. Murnighan suggests that leaders only work under the following two circumstances:

- 1. When you are the only one with the skills to do the task.** In some situations, you may truly be the only one capable, and if so, there is no choice other than to get the work done. Just be sure to train or enable a team member to hone these skills going forward. That way, if the situation arises in the future, you can sit back and truly "Do Nothing!"
- 2. When dirty work needs to be done, ensure that everyone on the team takes a turn.** There are always those tasks that have to get done that nobody looks forward to doing. In the spirit of fairness, it is only right to rotate these chores around the entire group, including you.

WALKING THE LEADERSHIP TIGHTROPE

"Leaders must walk a fine line between control and democracy, between delegation and taking responsibility, and between kindness and direction."

—J. Keith Murnighan

Many leaders in the financial industry have achieved success due to their ability to analyze the upsides and downsides of financial risks. However, as Murnighan points out, "It's far less natural for (leaders) to think that their interactions with people have



similar upsides and downsides.” Leadership is a social—yet at times, isolating—activity. Leaders across varying industries and professions experience many of the same leadership challenges that can be resolved by similar solutions. In *Do Nothing!* the following are identified as typical leadership problems.

1. **Egocentrism.** Many of us find it difficult to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes. This is a significant hurdle for leaders to overcome as they are frequently focused on their own actions due to being in the spotlight—whether it be in daily meetings with the department, as a liaison with other areas of the company, or as the “face” of the department to senior management.
2. **Empathy.** As a result of concentrating on their own behaviors, leaders may be viewed as lacking empathy for those who are at lower levels of the company.

In one example, a group of student doctors was told to imagine what patients were experiencing and then to go on their rounds, while a second group was told nothing. The patients interacting with the first group of doctors were more satisfied with their doctor/patient experience than those with the second, less empathetic group. Egocentrism and lack of empathy

can often go hand in hand, but leaders can overcome these by tapping into their emotions to better relate to others.

3. **Transparency.** People, and particularly leaders, believe that others see the world in the same way they do. Often we assume that our ideas are easily and well understood, when this may not be the case.

In an experiment, psychologists Dale Griffin and Lee Ross asked people to use their fingers to tap a melody on their desks so that a person listening could guess the song. The tappers presumed that far more listeners guessed the right song than those who actually did! By recognizing that others may have perspectives of their own, leaders can be better equipped to convince others with contrarian views.

4. **Behavior.** Society can stimulate behaviors that allow it to confirm expectations. Individuals can elicit actions from others that result in self-fulfilling prophecies.

For example, if a waiter believes that younger couples leave lower tips, he may not be as attentive with his service. This results in the young couple leaving him a lower tip. Leaders should consider the behaviors that they exhibit toward their teammates to determine if their actions are resulting in the

Initiating the dialogue and asking questions conveys respect, builds trust, and also results in getting information and answers.

behaviors that they would predict. To the extent that they modify their behaviors, perhaps it could result in a different reaction.

Murnighan suggests that leaders counterbalance the challenges they face via the following tactics.

1. **Focus on them.** The professor recommends that leaders ask lots of questions, which is the approach used by Duke University's coach Mike Krzyzewski in his book, *Beyond Basketball: Coach K's Keywords for Success*. He recommends focusing the attention on players by asking questions. Initiating the dialogue and asking questions conveys respect, builds trust, and also results in getting information and answers. (As an aside, it's tough for this UConn graduate to reference a Duke icon.)

2. **Practice the Leadership Law.** Those in managerial positions should take the time to establish rapport with team members. Supervisors can then practice the "Leadership Law": think of the reaction you want, then determine the actions to be taken to maximize the chances of generating the desired reaction from others. (His basis was Sir Isaac Newton's "every action has an equal and opposite reaction.") Similarly, rather than supposing that others are on your wavelength, it is recommended that leaders explain their ideas and provide supporting rationale, in order to achieve transparency.

3. **Be an active listener.** Leaders are called upon to speak in many circumstances—in meetings, in representing their teams in cross-functional projects, and in conversations with senior management. However, leaders also need to be able to actively listen to their teams. One technique to ensure a constructive, substantive dialogue is to repeat in your own words what a speaker has said. This will limit the number of back and forth exchanges and will further cement the dialogue in the leader's memory.

4. **Get on the balcony/walk the floor.** This phrase most succinctly describes how to combat all of the challenges that leaders face.

"Get on the balcony" refers to watching yourself and the situation from above as it unfolds. Imagine that you are floating



on a hot air balloon above the situation, or think of yourself as being in the press box above the field during the game.

“Walk the floor” refers to getting onto the same level as your teammates—focus on them, listen to them, get acquainted with them so that you can determine what actions to take to solicit the reactions you are seeking.

The author shares the story of Navy Cmdr. Michael Abrashoff, the commander of the USS Benfold at the age of 36 and the most junior commanding officer in the Pacific Fleet. The Benfold was plagued by low morale, high turnover and abysmal performance evaluations—yet 12 months later the ship ranked No. 1 in performance using the same crew. Abrashoff exemplified that leadership matters and culture is essential—and credits (in part) walking the deck.

SMELLS LIKE TEAM SPIRIT

“Teams that include people who know what they are supposed to do, who are happy to do what they are supposed to do, and who can do what they are supposed to do are successful teams.”

—J. Keith Murnighan

Teams are typically a reflection of their leaders. Leaders need to know to step aside when they have capable teams. Early on in *Do Nothing!* the author shares with the reader a historical anecdote about a small division of Eastman Kodak whose leaders had truly stepped aside. Due to some corporate changes, this particular department was left leaderless and fell off the corporation’s radar. Despite their lack of supervision, the division continued to effectively perform for months without disruption. Not until a customer contacted Eastman Kodak to compliment the group on their efforts, did the corporation realize that they had a “lost division” somewhere in the company! This example illustrates the ability of a team to be resilient despite the absence of a leader.

Most successful leaders set expectations around what their specific team members can (and cannot) do. Praising a team member in front of other employees for a job well done not only boosts that individual’s self-confidence, but also results in developing other team members’ “transactive” memories.

Transactive memory is a psychological hypothesis first proposed by Daniel Wegner in 1985 as a response to earlier theories of “group mind” such as groupthink. A transactive memory system

is a mechanism through which teams, groups and organizations collectively encode, store and retrieve knowledge. Each individual’s memory system consists of their own knowledge, combined with the memories of different teammates’ areas of expertise. In this way, a transactive memory system can provide the group members with more and better knowledge than any individual could access on his own.

Over time, seeing their leader single out various team members for a specific skill set enables others on the team to quickly turn to the right person when a new task or question arises. Teams that have worked together for longer periods of time often are more efficient than those that have been more recently assembled—due to having longer transactive memories. Ideally, all leaders want to build diverse teams with broad areas of expertise, so that the team exhibits a collective confidence—or esprit de corps—to nimbly tackle whatever challenge comes their way.

To conclude this portion of the series, Murnighan’s approach is a dream come true—he raises some thought-provoking, yet actionable concepts related to leadership, its challenges and solutions, and team spirit. Future installments will focus on trust and goals, as well as some unnatural leaders.

When asked why he wrote the book, Murnighan commented, “I wrote this book in the hopes that it would open doors to leaders everywhere. Leadership does not have to be hard—too often we make it harder than it needs to be. Sometimes we can’t seem to help ourselves. But I hope that the ideas in *Do Nothing!* help leaders see how they can do less and achieve more. Not only will they benefit, but their team members and their organizations will, too.” ■



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ENDNOTE

¹ Murnighan, J. Keith. (2012). *Do Nothing! How to Stop Overmanaging and Become a Great Leader*.