

The Work Compression Paradox

“When I hung out at the dojo and told people to drop by anytime to work out, no one showed up. When I told them that class ran from 1-3, they showed up.”

This rather paradoxical statement was made by a friend of mine expressing frustration at getting his students to show up for practice. The idea of having an open workout period seemed like a good one, except that it didn't work out as planned. Students either didn't show up at all or they would show up at the very end and ask the instructor to stick around later than he'd intended. Students also were less focused and less well prepared when they felt they had as long as they wanted to practice. When the instructor went back to regularly scheduled class hours, pretty soon everyone was showing up on time and working out with considerably more focus and intent. Even though the actual work out time in the structured, “1-3” model, was a smaller block of time than in the open, “come work out” model, more got done.

Setting the limit did several things. First, it told students exactly when the instructor was available; if they wanted to practice, that was the time. Second, students knew they had a specific block of time in which to practice and demonstrate their progress to their instructor. Third, students knew that if they wanted to benefit from that time, they needed to come focused and prepared to work out. There was no more “oh, I'll just drop in if I feel up to it,” or “if I forget to eat lunch, I can always leave early.” For his part, the instructor found himself more focused and on the ball as well. He only had a limited time to teach his students, so he had to make it count. After all, if they didn't feel like they were learning, they wouldn't come back.

Paradoxically, restricting the available time increased motivation, enthusiasm, enjoyment, and results for everyone.

I was working with a high tech company on issues around employee engagement and productivity. Enthusiasm was lacking and showed in the quality of the product and the respect for deadlines. Employees were burnt out by the long hours and frustrated by management's apparent lack of respect for their time. There was little trust left on either side.

Solving the problem required a certain leap of faith from all parties.

We set up a schedule that was aggressive, but limited. Management could not ask the employees to work long hours or come in on holidays or weekends. Meetings were carefully restricted so that they happened only at specific, predictable times, always beginning and ending on time.

Naturally, managers screamed that they couldn't trust their employees to get the job done if the managers couldn't require them to come in on weekends or work until late into the night. Employees, on the other hand, felt that the deadlines were too tight and they were being set up for failure. But, perhaps because nothing else had worked, everyone agreed to give this approach a try.

At first, it didn't look too good. They missed the first milestone and howls of protest rose from more than one manager. At meetings, people stood up and left when the appointed end time arrived, whether or not the meeting was over. More than one long-winded presenter was stunned that his colleagues were not enthralled by his every word. Fortunately, the head of that department had the courage to stick it out for the long term, and his faith was vindicated. As the employees began to realize that they wouldn't be required to work long hours and that they were being chased out of the office by their managers (or by the head of the department) if they unnecessarily worked too late, their focus during the day increased dramatically. Once it became clear that managers were living up to their end of the bargain, employees became much more efficient in their own use of time.

As people recognized that meetings would end on time or people would just leave, only the most important meetings were held. Those meetings were planned in advance and kept on topic. As managers realized that work was getting done faster, they relaxed and became enthusiastic supporters of the new methodology.

Sixty plus hours per week of low productivity had been replaced by forty-five hours per week of very high productivity. Because employees were taking breaks instead of working to exhaustion, they came to the office each morning with more energy, enthusiasm, and creativity.

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As the old saying goes, work expands to fill the time available. That doesn't mean that more work gets done, only that it takes as much time as you give it. Leave the time open-ended, and even a simple task will take arbitrarily long. People also feel less of a sense of accomplishment when a task takes arbitrarily long. Impose limits on the time, and suddenly people become creative and effective in their use of it. The best way to convince people to take project deadlines seriously is to take personal deadlines seriously. The discipline to limit the time and hold to those limits is not easy to develop, but the productivity gains are well worth the effort.

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