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## Why 'lean in' if laziness can be just as effective?



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Hard work is harming not only sleepless executives but the companies that employ them too

The other day I had a drink with a university friend who is one of the busiest women I know. For years she has been holding down a big job in a big organisation, dealing with an ex-husband, assorted children and decrepit parents.

But six months ago something happened to her. She fell in love and wanted to spend every spare minute with her new man. The trouble was she did not have even minutes to spare and so rather than make further inroads into the time she devoted to her children, she started working less — much less. Because she is senior enough to control her schedule, she gets in to the office later. She leaves earlier. She has stopped going to most meetings. She no longer sends emails in the evenings or at weekends. She avoids networking events. Instead of having lunches with contacts, she sees her boyfriend instead.

Last week I asked her what the cost of all this slacking had been to her career. None, she said, a triumphant gleam in her eye. Instead, she had had her best six months ever, her biggest bonus and an even larger job had been dangled in front of her.

I speculated that the happiness of love must be the reason. It had made her feel invincible; life has the unfair way of offering great things to people when they are already on a roll.

Nonsense, she replied. She has simply discovered that less is more. She has become lazier, which has made her much more focused. She spends time only on the things that really matter, and everything else, she either does not do at all, or delegates to someone else.

This experience has led her to a new theory of success that says laziness is good. It is only by being lazy that we become truly efficient, and come to see what is important and what is not. The trouble with women, she went on, is that we try too hard. We make ourselves martyrs to industriousness, and far from that being our secret advantage, it is our undoing. If only we were lazier we would do better.

Not only is she right, her theory is thrillingly seditious. "Lean in", says the corporate queen, Sheryl Sandberg, while every big name CEO warns their acolytes that if they do not like getting up at 4am and doing their emails while on the rowing machine, they are not going to make it to the top.

My friend is not the first person to see the wrongness in this. Helmuth von Moltke, head of the

Prussian army, got there a century and a half before her by devising one of the world's first management matrices. He assessed his officers on two scales: clever vs dim and lazy vs energetic, and came up with the following four permutations.

- Dim and lazy — Good at executing orders.
- Dim and energetic — Very dangerous, as they take the wrong decisions.
- Clever and energetic — Excellent staff officers.
- Clever and lazy — Top field commanders as they get results.

The system worked pretty well for the Prussian army, and could surely work just as well in modern corporations. Alas, instead of deploying something so bracingly honest, management theorists have taken von Moltke's idea and ruined it by turning it into the wishy-washy modern "skill-will" matrix. According to this, the person who is clever and lazy (or "high skill/low will") is not deemed to have won the lottery. They are deemed to be in need of coaching.

Laziness, according to the modern view, is like an illness or something we need to be coached out of. Instead, as my friend has demonstrated, the reverse is true — it is something senior executives need to be coached into.

Just to be clear: the sort of laziness to encourage is not the slobbish variety that means you do bad work. That is not laziness: it is stupidity. Instead, we need the clever version that comes from knowing there is an opportunity cost to every minute we spend working, so we use our time wisely.

Never has the elevation of laziness been more needed at the very top. Hard work is not only harming sleepless executives but is hurting the companies that employ them. According to a study at Bain last year, one weekly executive meeting at one large company ate up 300,000 person hours a year.

A similar McKinsey study showed that only half of company leaders spend enough time on business priorities, frittering away their days on email, meetings, schmoozing and firefighting.

My friend has been cured of all this through love. Since a similar cure for the rank and file of senior executives is not practical (and possibly not desirable), something else must be devised instead. Fortunately, most of us are naturally lazy and so what we must do is find a way of coaxing our inner idler back to life. Setting the alarm clock for an hour later is a good way to begin.

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