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SIX WASTE-BASED PITFALLS

Chris Majer



Six Waste-Based Pitfalls

Boost your productivity and profitability.

By Chris Majer



Contemporary management theory and practices have ill-prepared us for calibrating our enterprises to be competitive today. Sadly, most managers and leaders are meeting these changes with puny, incremental or entirely misdirected responses.

Leaders must develop a new way to think about *waste*—where *waste* is not a thing but an assessment or interpretation. *Waste* is not trash to be thrown out—it refers to the events, phenomena, experiences, and features that diminish our capacity to do what matters to us. ***Waste kills productivity and profitability.*** Wastes are particular to specific concerns and moments. What was wasteful yesterday may or may not be wasteful tomorrow. The old wastes of business—scrapped material, wasted movement, wasted time, and wasted resources—were invented in the traditions of the Industrial Revolution, manufacturing, and mass production. We no longer live in that world. We must now eliminate *six modern wastes*—the new ***pitfalls of productivity and profitability:***



Read Chris' article "Commitment Based Management"



Read Chris' article "Re-Engaging the Workforce"

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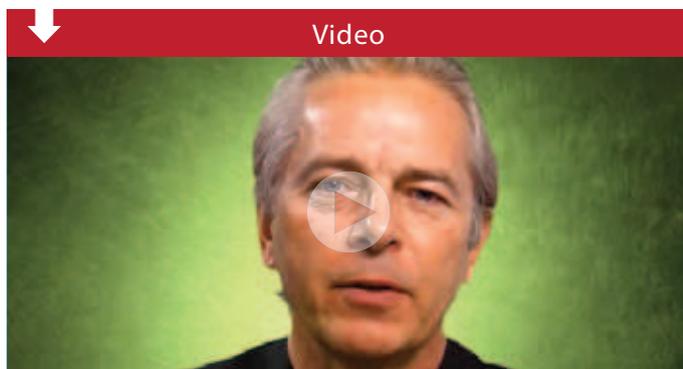
Pitfall 1: Degenerative moods. A mood is a predisposition for action. We are always living in one mood or another. We are mood-driven creatures, and our moods are the foundations from which we assess and move in the world. Moods come in various shapes and sizes, but they all fall into one of two categories: generative and degenerative. They either do or do not generate possibilities. In the world of possibilities, new futures are invented. Many organizations are in the grip of degenerative moods—with a culture marked by distrust, resentment, resignation, cynicism, arrogance, and complacency. These degenerative moods can lead to unproductive behaviors, which consume or *waste* resources while leaders are forced to work around or try to correct them. Degenerative or unproductive moods are invisible killers of productivity and profitability. People simply cannot or will not perform to their potential when their cultures are negative, unhappy places to be. Moods impact productivity and profitability. *Disengaged* workers are unhappy with their organizations, emotionally disconnected from their work, and less likely to be productive. If you don't get *mood* right, nothing else you do is going to matter. There is no structural or process change that can overcome deeply entrenched degenerative moods.

Pitfall 2: Listening vs. Hearing. To *truly listen* does not mean merely hearing or paying attention. Listening is a type of active interpretation that shapes our realities. This largely unknown and unrecognized skill is critical in business. By blindly creating and/or tolerating working conditions in which people do not and often cannot effectively listen to one another, we kill productivity and profitability. This lack of listening can be the result of *degenerative moods* (e.g., institutionalized



mistrust, resignation, or resentment), technology addiction (which can make it difficult for some people to actually *talk* to others), or a simple incompetence for speaking and listening. If people are not listening to each other, accomplishing anything becomes extremely expensive, and making effective changes becomes all but impossible. Yet few professionals have had formal education or learning to understand and improve listening skills and techniques. Many organizations today have created and tolerated a range of practices in which creativity, innovation, and the fundamental expressions of our thoughts and feelings about our work and our futures are ignored or spurned. This lack of listening is a huge source of waste.

Pitfall 3: Bureaucratic Styles. To most people, *bureaucracy* is a bad word, synonymous with *red tape* and *wasted time*. Yet, most companies still operate bureaucratically—insisting employees work inside of complex structures with processes and procedures designed to standardize or control everything. While this might have been the most efficient way to train assembly line workers, human capital is now the greatest resource for companies. We're paying people to think, innovate, and collaborate with others to produce the best possible results. You can't achieve this performance if you attempt to dictate their every move with rigid policies and procedures. The fall of many great companies is a testimony to bureaucratic blindness. Current hierarchically oriented systems—no matter how lean and *matrixed*—are relics of the bygone era. In the new business world, bureaucratic practices are becoming increasingly dangerous. They not only kill productivity and profitability, they also kill the generative moods of ambition, confidence, and trust that are essential to building consistent competitive advantage.



Pitfall 4: Worship of Information. In our rush to *modernize* everything and make our enterprises *more efficient*, we've mistakenly come to believe that information is our most valuable commodity. But data and information are useless without people to interpret them. These days, computers can do just about anything—except think for themselves. But we have come to tolerate the illusion that the essential matters of work can be invented, managed, and sustained through the creation, storage, retrieval, display, and publication of information. Contemporary information systems are blind to many of the key drivers of productivity and have consistently failed in their quest to integrate the diverse operations of a company. **By making information the priority, we have lost sight of its purpose—to enable the people to effectively address the concerns of their customers.** Rather than trying to replace people, our IT systems, processes, and products should enable human cooperation, collaboration, and innovation—essential to growing a business. No matter how impressive or efficient an IT system claims to be, it will never replace the passion, joy, creativity, and spontaneity of people—all essential to generating competitive

advantage. As people deal with the inadequacies, breakdowns, and sterility of modern information systems, they unavoidably generate waste and unproductive moods. In fact, workers report wasting an average 42 to 43 percent of their time on the computer due to frustrating experiences ([a study](#) by researchers from Towson University, University of Maryland, and Carnegie Mellon).

Pitfall 5: Suppressing Innovation. Thanks to the bureaucracy and lack of listening that exists in most companies today, we have created working environments that stifle the creativity, original thought, and innovation that make our human capital so valuable. As such, it has become all but impossible for many organizations to adapt to our changing business world. An organization that can't innovate is dead. Many organizations confuse the occasional *lightning strike* of a new idea or product innovation with having a culture that fosters innovation. But for this to be the case, innovation should be viewed as a critical competence—a skill to be developed, fostered, rewarded, and embedded into the workforce. The greatest enemy of innovation is modern management. Contemporary management practices are geared toward ensuring stability and predictability, and avoiding surprises or *problems*. But innovation is unpredictable, even disruptive. Thus, in many organizations, innovators are largely suppressed for the sake of *productivity*. Ironically, this only kills productivity in the long run.

Pitfall 6: Modern Indentured Servitude. Today's world is one of sharp contrasts. We have more choices, opportunities, wealth, and prosperity. Yet, we are also more depressed, dissatisfied, and despondent. More than 21 million Americans are depressed, costing US companies \$31 billion each year in lost productivity. A key contributor to this malaise is our view of work—an endless series of *things to do*, things which have commercial value for the enterprise but produce little or no sense of value for me. Hence, we've inadvertently created a *modern indentured servitude*. We sell ourselves into service in exchange for a paycheck and have only fleeting *real* lives after or outside of work. In this modern malaise, many people feel like victims, trapped by their need to make a living, prepare for retirement, and support families. We ignore, diminish, or distort the ways that work can bring meaning to people's lives. To have our work be seen as nothing more than modern feudal toil saps all our strength and turns our working lives from a source of inspiration and contribution into a futile search for meaning. Those in management roles may have trouble identifying with this phenomenon and may mistakenly assume it only happens elsewhere. They are largely immune from this (yet responsible for it). They design or tolerate practices, processes, structures, moods, and measures that create it. One symptom is the degenerative mood of *overwhelm*. Resignation, resentment, arrogance, distrust, and cynicism have been with us forever, but overwhelm is a creation of our times. The narrative for emotion sounds like this: *There is too much to do, too little time, and too many things pulling at me. I don't have enough energy for this, and it is never going to stop.* Overwhelm and the resignation and panic it generates are great wastes and effective killers of productivity and profitability. No enterprise can survive for long with a culture that produces modern indentured servitude.

Eliminate these modern wastes—**pitfalls of productivity and profitability**—and transform your organization! **SSE**



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