

## MULTITASKING HAS HAD ITS FIFTEEN MINUTES OF FAME

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When President Obama took office in January of last year, he won early praise for taking on a variety of hot-button issues during his first days on the job. He ordered the closure of the American prison at Guantanamo Bay. He drew up new regulations for financial companies. He issued a climate change agenda and committed to healthcare reform. He proposed new rules for lobbying in Washington. And he held six meetings with his economic team in his first days on the job.

The nation cheered this flurry of early action, which stood in stark contrast to the easy manner and long vacations of its last president. I joined the chorus as well, commending Obama in a column that stressed the importance of early victories within the first 100 days on the job.

But for all of that work – and with all the accolades that followed – the President has not accomplished very much at all. Guantanamo Bay remains open. Financial firms continue to post huge profits and pedal risky products. Lobbyists still enjoy coveted access to politicians. And the economy – for all its signs of rebounding – lies in ruin since there are still 15 million Americans unemployed. And health care reform...that may be a while still.

What happened? The president fell victim to a common trap for business leaders. In an effort to satisfy all of his constituents (and pacify many of his detractors), Obama has spent the last twelve months multitasking. As he divided his focus among so many issues, he failed to deliver well on any of them.

Now, there is no shortage of research debunking the efficiency of multitasking in managing day-to-day tasks. (Most recently, a group of researchers at Western Washington University found that people walking and simultaneously talking on their cell phones are less likely to notice the somewhat startling incident of a clown riding on a unicycle). And for years, I have cautioned against the common practice of doing multiple activities – like checking email at a key meeting, text messaging and talking with employees – at the same time.

However, Obama's problem is deeper, and I suspect many executives share it. The president isn't fully focused on larger goals. He doesn't say, "I am going to spend the next six months solving the employment problem, and everything else can wait." Yet,

that's the only way to solve big, hairy, complicated problems in an organization – be it a corporation or a country. You simply must do one thing at a time.

The president has come under fire for splitting his attention. “Ever since Mr. Obama took office, critics of his leadership style have accused him of tackling too many initiatives at once,” wrote John Harwood in *The New York Times* in an article published in December. And as the president's poll numbers have slipped, “that criticism has grown louder,” Harwood comments.

The president might argue that he did not get to where he is by paying his critics much attention and that his split focus reflects the reality of a complex time. We are, after all, facing more problems than the high unemployment rate. The health care system falls woefully short. The environment needs a true custodian. And the country is still at war. All of those issues are important. But none will get solved with only a fourth of the president's attention, if they even get that much. He must choose one problem and commit himself fully to it. For now, I would propose the right choice is the unemployment rate. It is the issue, Americans say, matters most to them. And it is at the root of so many other troubles, including the health care reform dilemma. Successful leaders make these kinds of choices swiftly and remain committed to them. A new CEO might say, for example, that fixing the revenue stream should become the company's top priority. At that juncture, everything else – the wasteful spending, the careless hiring, the misprint in the HR manual – takes a backseat to lifting the top line.

The president has done a good job of delegating some responsibilities, tapping nearly 30 czars to help manage weighty issues. But his personal attention remains split. (He may have appointed a czar on the environment, but he still traveled to Copenhagen to personally engage in climate talks many dismissed as largely symbolic.)

Effective leaders must not only maintain a singular focus, they must project one, as well. Until the president learns how to zero in on his top goal – creating jobs – and the communication to the public on the specifics of that commitment – he will continue to struggle with his agenda and leadership and lose favor with his supporters.

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