

# Breaking the Productivity Barrier

## A Few Simple Skills for Individuals and Teams

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The last 50 years have seen many remarkable breakthroughs in technology, but the question remains: have we made comparable progress in human productivity? As managers and training professionals, we are still charged with the responsibility of boosting the productivity of individuals and teams. To do so, I believe there are four fundamental productivity factors that must be considered:

1. **Quality—How Good**  
The degree to which the individuals or teams output meets or exceeds established standards.
2. **Quantity—How Much and How Fast**  
The amount produced in a given period of time.
3. **Economy—How Practical**  
The costs, benefits, and return on the effort.
4. **Acceptability—How Well-Received**  
The degree to which the output satisfies the expectations of others.

Although a team or organization may agree on how to measure each one of these productivity factors, research shows that there is great variability in how people rate the relative importance of the four productivity factors.

In analyzing the results of our LIFO<sup>®</sup> Style Surveys taken by managers and employees in Fortune 1000 organizations, 9% of the participants valued just one of the productivity factors significantly more

than the others; 55% placed high value on two of the factors; 31% valued three of them more highly; while only 5% valued all four equally.

The reason for this variability is that each of us brings to work our own unique mix of values, goals, and priorities. We may rarely speak about them, but they strongly influence our decisions about what should be done, how and when it should be done, and who should do it.

This can make it very difficult for people to agree on exactly how to improve productivity.

For example, people who place a high value on quality are committed to doing their very best. They believe it is important to take as much time as necessary to meet their high standards. It doesn't make sense to them to produce a product or service that isn't of the highest quality. Their underlying philosophy is: "Any job worth doing is worth doing well."

On the other hand, people who focus on quantity want to see action, and plenty of it. They approach work with a sense of urgency and an eye for the bottom line, eager to take control and get quick



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results. For them, productivity means getting a lot of things done. Quality is less important: "Just do it!" is their motto.

In contrast, people who value economy try to make the most of what they have. They believe that productivity is a complex issue that requires analyzing options, planning carefully, and selecting the most practical alternatives that are most likely to pay off over time. Their perspective is: "A dollar saved is a dollar earned."

And finally, those people who value acceptability more than the other productivity factors emphasize flexibility, harmony, and adapting to make sure that others are pleased with the outcome. To them, being productive means doing things that are acceptable to others: "It's OK with me if it's OK with you."

### A New Productivity Model

Each one of the four basic productivity factors—quality, quantity, economy, acceptability—can be thought of as being on a continuum, with *too little* at one end and *too much* at the other. Between these two extremes is a point of maximum productivity—

just enough of the most effective and efficient action to accomplish what we want.

Ordinarily, we evaluate the way people act and label their actions as good or bad, right or wrong, strong or weak. This kind of polar judgment keeps us from seeing actions as a matter of degree more or less, somewhere between the two poles.

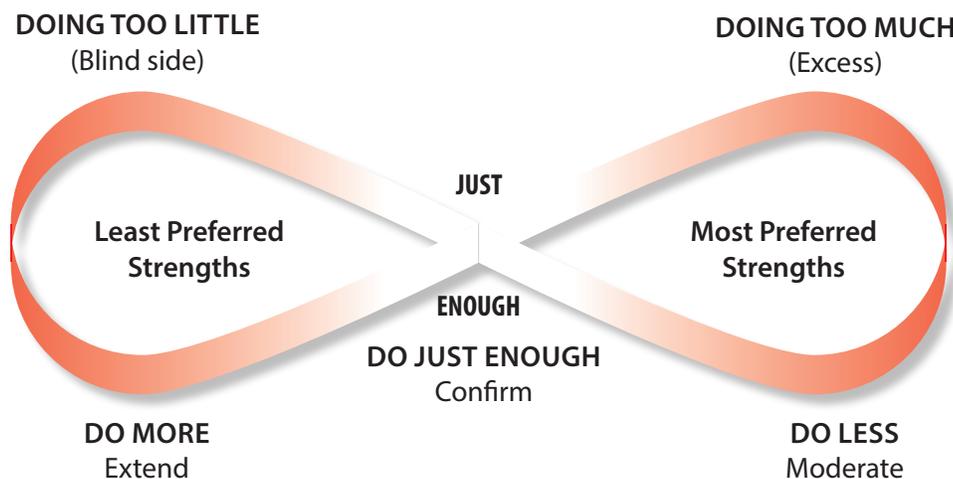
### Too Much of a Good Thing

To increase our productivity as an individual or a team, we need to develop a few simple skills. The first skill is learning to recognize when we are starting to waste time by doing "too much of a good thing."

All four productivity factors are important, but if a person or a team focuses too much on any one of these factors, they can become unproductive.

Too much emphasis on quality, and costs can spin out of control. Too much focus on sheer quantity, and error rates can skyrocket.

If economy becomes paramount, quality may drop to unacceptable levels.



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### Twelve Productivity Traps

#### Quality

1. Trying for perfection
2. Pursuing utopian ideas
3. Rejecting all but the best

#### Quantity

4. Jumping haphazardly between projects
5. Taking on impractical challenges
6. Leaving projects undone to take on more

#### Economy

7. Staying with the old until it breaks down
8. Rejecting things that can't be used now
9. Over-planning and losing opportunities

#### Acceptability

10. Trying to please everybody
11. Getting confused by too many opinions
12. Not taking action for fear of offending

And if acceptability becomes the overriding concern, an individual or team can lose the discipline and expertise that come from staying focused on a specific mission and a set of core competencies.

By pushing any single productivity factor too far, we can waste time, reduce our performance, and create confusion in people whose preferred productivity factors are different from ours. To break the productivity barrier, we need to control the over-reliance on quality, quantity, economy, or acceptability.

### Too Little of a Good Thing

If people exhibit *too little* awareness of any single productivity factor, their performance can suffer.

By not paying enough attention to quality, people can become too expedient and careless.

By undervaluing quantity, people can limit their output, slowing down not only themselves but everyone else who depends on them.

With too little attention to the economy factor, people can become overexpansive, implementing too many projects, spending too much money, or overcommitting resources.

Discounting the acceptability factor, people can work in an "ivory tower," unaware of how to position and present ideas, projects, or products in ways that appeal to others.

### Developing Total Productivity

We all view problems, people, and situations from our own special perspective and value system. For most of us, our perspective is limited by what is important to us our own priorities. For example, people who like a fast pace and variety may gloss over details or not consider how to consolidate gains before moving on to new projects. People who want to reduce risk and get the most out of what they already have may overlook opportunities for progress and improvement.

Ignoring or overemphasizing any of the four basic productivity factors can lead to loss of productivity through major mistakes when planning, problem solving, or managing others. In LIFO Productivity Training, individuals and teams identify the productivity factors they tend to overlook or overemphasize. They then develop strategic plans based on three simple but powerful action steps.

**MODERATING.** The first step involves learning how to de-emphasize the productivity factors we tend to push too far. For example, people who

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### Productivity Guidelines

#### Quality

- Is there a better way?
- Will it benefit all?
- How do we maintain our standards?
- Are we the best we can be?

#### Quantity

- How can we speed things up?
- What are the obstacles?
- How can we do more?
- What's next?

#### Economy

- Can we utilize what we have?
- Is it practical?
- What are the trade-offs?
- How can we limit risk?

#### Acceptability

- What are people's opinions?
- Is it disruptive?
- Will it gain acceptance?
- How can we get feedback?

overemphasize quality learn how to accept less than perfect performance and focus on practical action. People who focus too much on quantity learn how to develop routines and stick with projects until they are done.

**SUPPLEMENTING.** The second step involves identifying people who pay more attention to the productivity factors that we overlook or undervalue

and then having them help us incorporate their perspective into our plans and decisions.

**EXTENDING.** The third action step involves stretching ourselves to incorporate the productivity factors that we usually overlook or undervalue without the aid of our supplementing person.

By implementing these three action steps, individuals and teams develop a complete and balanced view of all the factors that impact their productivity.

Finally, for each productivity factor there are a series of questions that individuals and teams can ask themselves which provide guidelines for total productivity. These are listed in the sidebar to the left.

In LIFO Productivity Training, both individuals and teams identify their missing productivity factors and practice applying them to important issues, decisions, or plans.

Hopefully, in a team there are champions for all four productivity factors, and all four have equal voice when the team is formulating plans, making decisions, and solving problems. When working individually, each team member also needs to have the same balanced viewpoint in order to be maximally productive. By taking into account all four productivity factors, individuals and teams can achieve the goal of total productivity. 