

Chapter 3

Benign Neglect

Benign neglect is just as the definition says: ignoring situations for which one is responsible. Employing this type of (mis)management tactic when “cooperating” with temporary allies or interacting with an adversary may make sense. It’s a game of chicken or hot potato that two nations may play. It’s a type of brinkmanship that two political sides may engage in. However, this isn’t a good way to manage our group or to interact with other groups. We’re part of the same larger corporation. We’re all on the same team. There’s no need to do this type of dance.

Yet, we find ourselves doing this dance. We find ourselves conducting some type of political calculus to absolve ourselves of the responsibility of having to “deal with” another fire. Sometimes we know exactly where things are headed and so the easiest way to handle those situations is to give up and let it happen (the sage advice: “pick and choose your battles”). Other times, we know that we just have to wait things out and the problem will have fixed itself. This type of persistent logic leads us to benign neglect, whereby our default behavior is one of inaction and apathy.

Additionally, we can also wind up taking a policy of benign neglect through other forms of mismanagement.

- We may overcompensate for having micromanaged.
- Maybe we are just incompetent and we play it safe by not doing anything to let on that we don’t know what we’re doing.

As is going to be a recurring theme in this book, we need to find a balance between having a callous indifference and wanting to solve every problem. There are times when we have to be prudent about what we decide to wade into. Sometimes, the rumbling that we hear or the dysfunction we see brewing is actually none of our business and we really should just butt out.

3.1 Strategic Avoidance

We've all said this or something close to it at some point in our lives: "Oh god, I better just keep my mouth shut, otherwise I'll end up having to deal with this headache." We're also afraid of becoming pigeon-holed into doing something we really don't want to. We can rationalize this as a good sanity-maintaining policy, but people catch on pretty quickly. Haven't we all been able to tell when someone is just ignoring an issue or that they are hoping that by dragging their feet, someone else will take care of it? Wouldn't people notice just the same, if we were trying to avoid doing something? And what kind of a message does that send to the group we are overseeing or to other managers with whom we interact?

We have to recognize that from time to time, everyone will need help. Part of working in an environment where there are multiple groups tasked with operations is that some work, some skill sets, do indeed overlap. For example, an engineering group and an IT group, while having different core responsibilities, will likely have individuals that have transferable skills. Thus, when one group needs additional manpower, let's pitch in and help.

Now, I certainly understand that there are some tasks that really do not belong with us or our group. But there are constructive ways of having the misassigned task appropriately reassigned. One way is for us to do the task and to do it well. Then, we can offer training to the group or individuals who really should be handling that work. This works best if the conversation starts off with the expectation and understanding that in due time we will train the appropriate group to take over the task on a permanent basis.

Rather than trying to "get out of it", by helping out or by setting the stage for future training, we get the following benefits:

- We create camaraderie with and relieve work-induced stress for another group.
- It allows us to gain some insight into the day-to-day of another group.
- It gives us more exposure to our company's operations.
- We create a more efficient work environment through training (the old proverb: "If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime.")

Now, when we have a matter to resolve that is wholly self-contained in our group, there's no other place for it go but to us. Again, here we will have to find a balance between solving everyone's problems and doing nothing. What we have to do here is exercise sound judgment about what really is genuine dysfunction that we should aim to resolve vs something inconsequential. Everyone is going to have some complaint or another and depending on the size of the group we oversee this can be daily, weekly, monthly, etc. matter.

I am disinclined to give a set of rules or even a general guideline for what is inconsequential and what is absolutely necessary for us managers to look into.

It would just be too broad and no matter what I will miss some particular situation. However, the following are some of my experiences.

One member of my team (let's call him "Fred") had some buddies from another department. Typically they would have lunch together in the company cafeteria. One day, they all decided to have lunch in Fred's cube. No sooner did they begin their lunch, I received an email from someone (not Fred) complaining about the noise. So I moseyed on over to see what was going on. And of course, Fred was trying to work and his buddies were eating, one to Fred's left, one to Fred's right creating some nice sound bites. So, I politely requested that Fred's friends go eat in the cafeteria as this was too distracting. There was some grumbling by Fred's cohorts, but they complied. A few minutes later, Fred came by and thanked me for sending them away. He confessed he didn't know how to tell them to eat somewhere else and was just going to deal with it. A few minutes after speaking to Fred, the person who complained also thanked me. To some, this may seem trivial and not worth my time to resolve. I reasoned that this was something that was exactly suited for me to resolve because it was clearly distracting to at least one person and that if left unaddressed, it would become habit.

A few members of my team (let's call them "Fred" and "Ethel") complained about "Lucy". They said that "Lucy" wasn't shading in her cells in the spreadsheet to the appropriate color to denote what the final result was. Now, to put this in some context, these spreadsheets were purely internal. There was a summary sheet that had all the appropriate information and that summary sheet was converted into a proper final report. So for this particular issue, I wasn't going to address it. With that said, I didn't simply listen to Fred and Ethel's complaint and ignore it, but rather I listened and I explained why I wasn't going to do anything further.

If I listened and ignored then I am sending the wrong message to my team members — I am, in effect, saying, "I really don't care about your problems.", and this goes to drive people away. Thus, if I kept that type of behavior, then when there is an actual problem that I should address it wouldn't be brought to me until it was too late. That's not a good way to manage.

By listening and taking the time to explain that for this problem I am not inclined to do anything about it, it sends a different message. It says, "I hear what you are saying, but for this particular case, let's recognize that it's really one person's preference over another's and we don't need to narrowly define every single detail." This won't drive people away and it will help them to differentiate what actually is a matter worth resolving and what is just preference.

My team would often receive project materials from another group (not under my command). This group had a habit of sending the project materials in pieces throughout the week without any noticeable organization. I started to receive complaints about this independently from several of my team members. This is something to work to resolve, however, it isn't going to get settled in one day (though, in my opinion, it really should). So, my course of action was to explain to my team that they should tolerate this for a little while longer as I work out a solution with the other group's management. My team understood

and trusted that I would take care of it. They provided me with recent examples that I could discuss with management. In a few days, a better process was put in place and we never saw this problem again.

In short, we have some level of command and with that comes a specific set of responsibilities. We shouldn't be afraid to roll up our sleeves and help out when we can. We shouldn't get into the habit of deflecting matters in the hopes that someone else will be more inclined to take care of them. Benign neglect like this is weak management and weak leadership.

3.2 Defeated

It's easy to develop an attitude of benign neglect when we feel that all our initiatives, ideas, attempts to bring about increased efficiency and change are squashed. "Why should we bother?", we say to ourselves. "It's not worth wasting my breath over this because every time I try to fix something, I'm told to leave it alone."

I understand this. It's hard to want to do anything outside of the box when we're constantly met with rejection. But how should we combat this? How should we operate when we already know what's going to happen with a different course of action? Well, the first thing to do is not to feel defeated and not to give up.

Next, we should take some time to examine how we present our initiatives. Are we communicating the benefits of implementing our ideas in a manner that the decision maker will relate to? For example, if we are presenting to our CFO are we explaining the financial benefits or are we droning on about some low-level technical niceties? Our timing also matters. Are we presenting this at 5pm on a Friday or 8am on a Monday (both likely undesirable times)? Or are we presenting this mid-week, a little after lunch (by which time our boss has been able to get a handle on the week and is in a mild food coma making him more receptive to something new)?

Additionally, if our ideas are being turned down wholesale, are we making an attempt to inquire why? Maybe we are taking a direction that our company would rather us not take or maybe the associated risks are too large for executive management to stomach. Also, are we working on / thinking about the things that our boss does deem to be priority? Maybe our initiatives are being turned down not because there's something inherently wrong them, but maybe there are other matters that are more pressing.

If we really have a good idea, then it should be able to stand on its own. If we really believe that our company is making a mistake we can always start our own company (this is not unusual). No matter the case, we shouldn't let a sense of apathy come over of us because of rejection. We shouldn't succumb to benign neglect, but instead we should find ways to continue to be proactive.

3.3 Developing more mismanagement habits

Benign neglect can certainly feed into itself. Just like micromanagement, benign neglect can also lead to other forms of mismanagement. Benign neglect can lead to micromanagement (Chapter 2), incompetence (Chapter 5), and disastrous data-driven decisions (Chapter 8). We can get to a state of benign neglect through micromanagement or incompetence. This section will delve lightly into each of these transitions.

3.3.1 Benign Neglect to Micromanagement

Benign neglect and micromanagement are, in some sense, polar opposites. When we recognize that we are practicing one type of mismanagement, we “counter” it by taking an equal but opposite stance. Thus, if we recognized that we had been ignoring some of our responsibilities or not addressing some matters, then we may decide to get involved in everything. And very easily, we are micromanaging.

As a simple analogy, it would be like going to a restaurant and ordering chicken with hot sauce. When we taste it, it happened to not be spicy enough, so we ask if the dish could be made spicier. The restaurant obliges and brings back hot sauce with chicken. Now the dish is entirely too spicy. Dare we ask if they could make it less spicy (if that’s possible)? Well, we get the dish back and now it is entire too sweet because they added a pound of sugar. That’s pretty much how it goes with benign and micromanagement. We ignored too much, so now we’ll turn things around and ignore nothing. And we bounce back and forth, always being frustrated that we are either doing too much or not enough.

It’s just a matter of finding that balance between being hands off and hands on, passive and active, etc.

3.3.2 Benign Neglect to Incompetence

Unfortunately, as time goes by, we get older but our staff’s age always seems to be the same. We’re not as fast as we used to be. Technology has changed significantly. It’s become a lot simpler for us to just not make any motions for change. If we let things be, we can hold on to our job for just a bit longer. We’re becoming obsolete. We’re becoming incompetent.

Additionally, and this ties in with the Strategic Avoidance section, it may seem like a good strategy to feign ignorance / incompetence at something so that we don’t have to it. In fact there is a 2007 The Wall Street Journal article on this [2] wherein the author discusses the possible merits of showing incompetence for “keeping your desk clear of unwanted clutter.” This notion, I can probably get behind and maybe there is some wisdom in this, but even here, we don’t want to get carried away. My general suggestion though would be to find more constructive ways, as explained in 3.1. Other notions, like “feigning incompetence to ‘sandbag’ an opponent” [3] are not appropriate for the workplace.

We are, ultimately, finite beings with finite capacities and so we have to make sure that our limited time is not being completely wasted on trivialities. However, when we start to feign incompetence at anything new just so that we can stick with the routine that we know, that's when we have taken some steps closer to genuinely being incompetent.

There are some sure-fire ways to not become the stooge. We should always be active, to continue to learn, to never shrug your shoulders and "I don't know" and not make an effort to find out. The more we ignore and deflect new challenges that come up, the sooner we will be useless. Having an attitude of benign neglect will all but secure our obsolescence.

3.3.3 Benign Neglect to Disastrous Data-Driven Decisions

If we already have had a habit of ignoring situations for which we are responsible, it doesn't take too much effort to continue with the status quo. This is especially dangerous when we have make process or policy decisions based on data or we are deciding by what metrics we should measure performance. If we make no effort to re-evaluate performance metrics and say things like, "Let's just stick with the benchmarks we've always used", then we are creating long-term problems for ourselves and our group.

The business world is ever-changing and that means that we have to periodically re-evaluate the assumptions underlying our metrics and the relevance of these metrics. Here are some simple examples of what benign neglect can do with respect to setting up forward policies based on data.

Imagine a new business venture. It is not expected that the new business is going to be immediately profitable. Instead, a metric by which a new business' performance can be measured is revenue growth year-over-year or quarter-over-quarter. Eventually, though the focus is going to be on profitability through cost-cutting, organic efficiencies, economies of scale, etc. If we are lazy business managers we would simply continue to look at revenue growth and feel that things are rosy. Then one day, the realities of solvency will kick in and we'll be forced to find efficiencies in a hurry. So then we'll resort to micromanagement, layoffs, etc. to keep from sinking. This can be avoided if we think about our benchmarks and make preparations for when we will have to shift gears.

A common, though not always good, way to measure a group's performance is to compare the previous time period's average vs the current output. If the average has increased, then performance has increased (if we associate increasing with "good"). If we are lazy business managers and we agree that measuring our group by comparing current performance against previous performance by use of an average, then we may be dooming ourselves.

At some point our group is going to be at peak performance and incremental improvements are going to become harder. Imagine if our group was producing 10 widgets per month. If in a given month we produced 11 widgets, we will have recorded a 10% increase. Eventually, though, our group is going to become very efficient and we will producing, say, 20 widgets per month. Let's say that this is, in effect, the maximum or very near the maximum productivity of our group.

So one can say, we've had a 100% increase in widget production over the past [time period]. But can we sustain 100% increase in productivity indefinitely? Does it even make sense to continue to produce that much? We can "always" increase quantity produced by adding more people, machines, etc., but there are a lot of things we have to look into before we commit to such goals — things like scalability of production, demand for production, physical space requirements, growth of costs, etc. We have to be proactive and maintain some foresight of what our long term goals are. Not giving adequate thought to our metrics will have us developing policies, processes, tools, resources, etc. that are not aligned with long-term success.

I will discuss data-driven decisions and the perils of averages more fully in Chapter 8. In a nutshell, though, we want to make sure that we are not creating impossible situations for ourselves through benign neglect.

3.4 Benign neglect from a different type of mismanagement

We recognized that we were a bit of a micromanager. What should we do? A natural tendency would be to back off and not scrutinize as much or leading into benign neglect, to take a "let me let things be and they'll resolve themselves" stance. It's not that backing off is inherently bad, but it's more about *how* we back off that will define good or bad management. It is very easy for the pendulum to swing from micromanagement to benign neglect.

Micromanagement and benign neglect feed into each other. We realize we weren't watching things closely, so then we watch things ultra closely. We realize that maybe we were a little too eagle-eyed, so we counter it by being blind as a bat. We need to find a balance. Somewhere between these extremes is a nice harmony of keeping a close eye on things without being overbearing and being a little distant without being aloof.

If, unfortunately, we happen to be incompetent, then what are we to do? The correct thing to do is start learning and eventually become competent. One (of the many) incorrect thing(s) to do is just to ignore our responsibilities. We should ask for help if we really don't know what to do, but we shouldn't cover in our lack of knowledge and try to skate by hoping that no one will notice.

3.5 Some thoughts

How can you tell if you are employing a policy of benign neglect?

1. Do you try to skirt out of taking on different projects? Do you prefer to always have work that you've seen before?
2. Do you assume that if you or your group helped another group out, that you would end up doing that work from then on?

3. Do you feel that your ideas for improvement are not being heard or always being rejected and as a result have stopped making any further suggestions?
4. Are you getting ready to resign or otherwise hand over your responsibilities to someone else?

I discussed the first three questions in this chapter. The fourth question, I didn't really address in a specific section. My stance is this, our responsibilities exist in full for as long as we maintain our post. So, it doesn't matter if we have submitted our resignation or are transferring our responsibilities to someone else. We should remain dutiful to our position until it is over. Why do anything else? All the hard work we had put into our work can easily be undone because of our unattentiveness in the last few weeks.

The general takeaways in this chapter are

- Certainly recognize where energy should be directed, but simultaneously don't overemploy the notion of strategic avoidance.
- A feeling of apathy is the enemy. Find other ways to communicate ideas.
- Helping others is a good thing. While we shouldn't do someone else's job, we can help out and provide training.