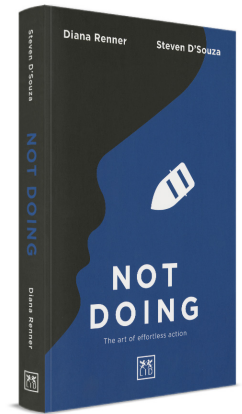


Not Doing

The Art of Turning Struggle into Ease

by **Diana Renner and Steven D'Souza**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

We live in a world of constant busyness and striving that in myriad ways makes us feel compelled to push, control, and work harder. Too often this leads to exhaustion, burnout, worsening health, and diminished relationships.

Not Doing: The Art of Turning Struggle into Ease describes and gives many examples of the philosophy of Not Doing. It suggests that we go with, rather than against, the flow, working in harmony with the natural energy around us. By effortlessly adapting to the environment, like the river that wends its way from spring to ocean, we can discover a new way of living, working, and succeeding, so that our action can sustain us, our organizations, and our environment for generations to come.

Diana Renner and Steven D'Souza, with more than 30 years' experience between them, consult, coach, facilitate, and train on a diverse range of leadership and management development programs. They wrote *Not Doing* to propose an antidote to a harmful narrow view about how we get things done.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The symptoms of a kind of doing that lead to exhaustion and burnout.
- How our ways of doing are often dysfunctional and counterproductive.
- The negative capabilities that are important to develop.
- How to improve your life with Not Doing—going with rather than against.

Coping with the complexity and uncertainty in the modern world is challenging. We might feel that despite our best efforts, we are

- making no progress in our work
- tempted to find a quick fix or jump into action
- overwhelmed by strong feelings, like anxiety or anger
- excessively busy
- lacking in joy and fulfillment

These are symptoms of a kind of doing that is not tuned in and working with the dynamics and energies of the system of which we are part. When we resist or try to control it, this can lead to exhaustion and the destruction of our health and well-being. To learn and grow, we have to surrender to the currents in the ocean, tap into their energy, and follow their lead. This is called Not Doing, which is not inaction or passivity; it is allowing and going with, rather than against, so it requires less energy and more awareness of the context in which we are working.

The Dysfunctions of Doing

We live in a get-things-done world. We speed up and jump into action without taking time to think because we are faced with so much that is unknown. Too much busyness can become counterproductive, resulting in exhaustion, ineffectiveness, mistakes, and despair. Burnout symptoms lead the body and emotional system to operate in survival mode and ultimately shut down.

Why We Do What We Do

In an achievement-oriented culture, the default focus is on the output—how much we are doing rather than what it achieves. Our dysfunctional relationship with doing is shaped by the economic myth—bigger, or more, is better.

When we manage other people, we can feel a strong expectation to provide answers and lead the way with confidence and certainty, even as we question our ability or responsibility to do so. When we feel overburdened, pressured to do more, and unable to ask for help, it is likely that we have taken on too much.

Negative Capabilities

Waiting, patience, observing, and listening, are based on Not Knowing and Not Doing. Negative capabilities like these have low status in the workplace but are the very

capabilities we should foster to make progress and facilitate the space for learning and growth—the space between doing nothing and overdoing.

Let the Mud Settle

Pause

Pausing, whether something life forces us to do or a choice we make, is an effective intervention to break momentum and create benefits we would otherwise not enjoy, including space for regrouping and reflecting before reacting.

Create Space

A leader who creates space allows for different inputs, ideas, and experiences to emerge. The negative capability of creating space can be fostered in the workplace by valuing, creating, holding, and protecting the space between the words we speak, meetings we attend, and projects we manage; by not acting when we feel the urge to step in and fix; and by letting go of the need to control everything.

Presence

If we can let the mud settle, we can become present to the current, sensing the flow, keenly aware of the forces at work. Presence is a way to engage with, tap into, and benefit from our environment.

Silence

We are so addicted to busyness that we crowd out the internal voice, the subtle messages, the unconscious stories that we may need to hear. In silence, we can have an increased awareness of our own discomfort, our anger or frustration, our fear or nervousness.

Solitude

Solitude has many benefits, such as creativity, intimacy, and spirituality. Solitude is about creating the experience of space and freedom, despite the constraints of roles and expectations of the outside world.

Wait

We do everything we can to evade experiences of passivity and waiting, with our emphasis on activity and control. Rather than avoiding the discomfort, we can wait for new information to evolve, ideas to gestate, opportunities to appear, resources to become available, and relationships to develop.

Deep Listening

Listening is undervalued and underutilized in the fast-paced world of work. Deep listening is a crucial skill when operating in complex and uncertain environments. In the absence of words and the compulsion to speak, through the quality of our attention and listening, we can have a positive impact on the world around us.

Boredom

With boredom, as with the blank page that confronts a writer, there is great possibility. The individual allows nothingness to flow through them until new ideas and imagination emerge. If we give our brain space and time away from doing, we make space for ideas to take shape, filter through the noise, and reach our consciousness.

Sanctuary

We need a sanctuary where we can find some space, protected from all the pressures of the roles we have in our lives.

Let Go of the Shore

Step Back

Stepping back temporarily is useful when people expect immediate action or when we feel pressure to solve problems quickly. It allows us to spend more time understanding the problem, collecting further information, and exploring alternative interventions.

Let Go

Whenever we go through a period of change, or grapple with a complex problem or decision, we come face-to-face with the unknown. At this point, when we find ourselves at the edge, we need to let go of the certain and familiar, trust, and be open to new possibilities.

Unlearn the Doing Instinct

We need to accept that uncertainty cannot be managed and unlearn the doing instinct. Old habits can be changed by slowing down, pausing, and becoming present to ourselves and our context.

Get Out of the Way

In embracing Not Doing, we need to have courage to break the rules that get in people's way, regardless of the perceived risks. Leadership is about enabling people to learn and grow without assuming that we know best, without

interfering in their process.

Being There

Just being with someone can have a significant impact, beyond helping, advising, or solving problems. It forms a space—a negative capability—that has the capacity to contain the anxieties of a situation.

Refrain from Reacting

Refraining from action can at times be the most compassionate thing to do. The danger in rescuing is that it has the potential to place the other person in a position of dependence, getting in the way of learning and interfering in a process we have no way of fully understanding.

Yield to Overcome

When someone is attacking us with words, how we stand, listen, and respond is key. Meeting force with force is not effective. If we are aggressive in the workplace, others will react by resisting our suggestions. We can relax in tough situations and yield like water, finding a different way to flow around the stone.

Say No

For most of us, the ability to say no doesn't come naturally, especially if we value being helpful or being the go-to person or we associate meeting expectations with achievement and success. We need to learn what lies behind our impulse to say yes to learn how to say no respectfully and confidently.

Less Is More

A minimalist approach is essential to working in complex systems characterized by flux and unpredictability, no right answers, emergent patterns, and many competing ideas. Attempts to make big changes in the workplace often result in unintended consequences that are negative, whereas small changes will accomplish more positive results.

The River Knows its Destination

Follow the Current

Following the current allows us to trust the creative process to unfold as a journey, recognizing that there may be several twists and turns along the way. Paradoxically, by not being attached to our goals, by holding them lightly, and focusing instead on the process, we can yield more effective, successful, and enduring results.

Wandering

If we trust in the river's course, we can let go of the need to reach a destination and replace fear and control with curiosity. The less travelled pathway with its surprising twists and unexpected vistas may lead to more insights than a known highway if we are open to the learnings along the way.

Let Things Emerge

When we are confronted with challenges and blockages, we can simply accept them as the river accepts the rocks and boulders in its way. We can observe the terrain, the natural patterns in our environment, becoming the soft around the hard, turning obstacles into opportunities.

Active Surrender

In a world that values pushing through and working harder to get things done, what may enable us to be more effective is to actively surrender to what is happening right now, rather than resist or use more effort than required.

Stillness within Action

In order to experience stillness, it isn't always necessary to stop. Not Doing is about carrying stillness within as we go about our activities. Not Doing is not inactivity or passivity. It is following the natural pace in our environment.

Embodied Action

In our culture, which privileges the rational over the somatic and emotional, many of us live disembodied lives. Reading the environment is a key skill in dealing with complex situations, and it all starts with being able to read one's own feelings and sensations.

Build Creative Capacity

Following your curiosity and letting things emerge may allow you to tap into the creative dynamic at the heart of the doing–Not Doing continuum.

Be Water

In a world that is dynamic and constantly changing, we need to be less rigid and more adaptive and flexible, responding to the changes we see around us. Like water, which takes the shape of the cup it is poured into, we need to adapt to our environment without becoming set in our ways.

Wu Wei

Wu Wei literally translates as non-doing. It means not inaction but effortless and spontaneous action, without struggle or excess effort, tuning in and taking time to follow our energy, not just our will.

Do Nothing

What would our organizations be like if we took time to discovery where things flourish and under what conditions? What if we removed things that were necessary? What happens when we step back from our need to control everything and live in harmony with the natural world?

In the context of Not Doing, beautiful action is the culmination of all the negative capabilities explored in the book. It means that we pay attention to how we live and interact with the world and people around us. It is a call to action, one that is more purposeful and aligned with the natural flow of life. It encourages us to do right by the hand and by the people.



Diana Renner is a leadership educator and award-winning author. As the director and co-founder of the Uncharted Leadership Institute she helps individuals and organizations navigate uncertainty and make progress on complex challenges. She has written two books with co-author, Steven D'Souza, *Not Knowing* and *Not Doing*.

Steven D'Souza is an international educator with international experience in the fields of HR, leadership, and talent management, diversity and organizational development. He is an experienced executive coach, working frequently with senior teams including at the CEO level.

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