Why We Focus on Trivial Things

Tagged: [Decision Making](#), [Decisions](#), [Parkinson's Law](#), [Strategy](#)

Bikeshedding is a metaphor to illustrate the strange tendency we have to spend excessive time on trivial matters, often glossing over important ones. Here's why we do it, and how to stop.

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How can we stop wasting time on unimportant details? From meetings at work that drag on forever without achieving anything to weeks-long email chains that don't solve the problem at hand, we seem to spend an inordinate amount of time on the inconsequential. Then, when an important decision needs to be made, we hardly have any time to devote to it.

To answer this question, we first have to recognize why we get bogged down in the trivial. Then we must look at strategies for changing our dynamics towards generating both useful input and time to consider it.

The Law of Triviality

You've likely heard of Parkinson's Law, which states that tasks expand to fill the amount of time allocated to them. But you might not have heard of the lesser-known Parkinson's Law of Triviality, also coined by British naval historian and author Cyril Northcote Parkinson in the 1950s.

The Law of Triviality states that the amount of time spent discussing an issue in an organization is inversely correlated to its actual importance in the scheme of things. Major, complex issues get the least discussion while simple, minor ones get the most discussion.

Parkinson's Law of Triviality is also known as "bike-shedding," after the story Parkinson uses to illustrate it. He asks readers to imagine a financial

committee meeting to discuss a three-point agenda. The points are as follows:

1. A proposal for a £10 million nuclear power plant
2. A proposal for a £350 bike shed
3. A proposal for a £21 annual coffee budget

What happens? The committee ends up running through the nuclear power plant proposal in little time. It's too advanced for anyone to really dig into the details, and most of the members don't know much about the topic in the first place. One member who does is unsure how to explain it to the others. Another member proposes a redesigned proposal, but it seems like such a huge task that the rest of the committee decline to consider it.

The discussion soon moves to the bike shed. Here, the committee members feel much more comfortable voicing their opinions. They all know what a bike shed is and what it looks like. Several members begin an animated debate over the best possible material for the roof, weighing out options that might enable modest savings. They discuss the bike shed for far longer than the power plant.

At last, the committee moves onto item three: the coffee budget. Suddenly, everyone's an expert. They all know about coffee and have a strong sense of its cost and value. Before anyone realizes what is happening, they spend longer discussing the £21 coffee budget than the power plant and the bike shed combined! In the end, the committee runs out of time and decides to meet again to complete their analysis. Everyone walks away feeling satisfied, having contributed to the conversation.

Why this happens

Bike-shedding happens because the simpler a topic is, the more people will have an opinion on it and thus more to say about it. When something is outside of our circle of competence, like a nuclear power plant, we don't

even try to articulate an opinion.

But when something is *just about* comprehensible to us, even if we don't have anything of genuine value to add, we feel compelled to say something, lest we look stupid. What idiot doesn't have anything to say about a bike shed? Everyone wants to show that they know about the topic at hand and have something to contribute.

With any issue, we shouldn't be according equal importance to every opinion anyone adds. We should emphasize the inputs from those who have [done the work to have an opinion](). And when we decide to contribute, we should be putting our energy into the areas where we have something valuable to add that will improve the outcome of the decision.

Strategies for avoiding bike-shedding

The main thing you can do to avoid bike-shedding is for your meeting to have a clear purpose. In *[The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters]()*, Priya Parker, who has decades of experience designing high-stakes gatherings, says that any successful gathering (including a business meeting) needs to have a focused and particular purpose. "Specificity," she says, "is a crucial ingredient."

Why is having a clear purpose so critical? Because you use it as the lens to filter all other decisions about your meeting, including who to have in the room.

With that in mind, we can see that it's probably not a great idea to discuss building a nuclear power plant and a bike shed in the same meeting. There's not enough specificity there.

The key is to recognize that the available input on an issue doesn't all need considering. The most informed opinions are most relevant. This is one reason why big meetings with lots of people present, most of whom don't

need to be there, are such a waste of time in organizations. Everyone wants to participate, but not everyone has anything meaningful to contribute.

When it comes to choosing your list of invitees, Parker writes, "if the purpose of your meeting is to make a decision, you may want to consider having fewer cooks in the kitchen." If you don't want bike-shedding to occur, avoid inviting contributions from those who are unlikely to have relevant knowledge and experience. Getting the result you want—a thoughtful, educated discussion about that power plant—depends on having the right people in the room.

It also helps to have a designated individual in charge of making the final judgment. When we make decisions by committee with no one in charge, reaching a consensus can be almost impossible. The discussion drags on and on. The individual can decide in advance how much importance to accord to the issue (for instance, by estimating how much its success or failure could help or harm the company's bottom line). They can set a time limit for the discussion to create urgency. And they can end the meeting by verifying that it has indeed achieved its purpose.

Any issue that invites a lot of discussions from different people might not be the most important one at hand. Avoid descending into unproductive triviality by having clear goals for your meeting and getting the best people to the table to have a productive, constructive discussion.