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I Don't Have Time

Not long ago, I was invited to work with a group of distinguished nurse leaders from around the country. We were starting a year-long process that included individual executive coaching for each leader. As we discussed our coming work together, it became clear that many of these leaders had concerns about time. Some of them literally said, "I don't have time" for executive coaching or reflecting on their leadership.

I felt such empathy. How many of us say, "I don't have time" at least once a day? How many more times a day do we feel this way, even if we don't say it? All too often our best efforts to manage time do not lead to the satisfying, well-balanced lives we envision. Instead, many of us feel frazzled and busier than ever.

Without intending to, some of us wear our "busy-ness" like badges of honor. We are so busy that we almost feel good about it, even if we have little time for our families and personal well-being. We come by our contradictions honestly. Being excessively busy is tolerated and even condoned in many organizations and in our achievement-driven society. Many Americans put a high value on "hard work," even when it is not healthy. Today's economic pressures can push us deeper into habits of working too much, often to the detriment of our personal lives. We are all trying to do more with less as incomes decline and savings plummet. We feel that we have to be this busy because our financial pressures are real.

Most of us have the best intentions; we want to do a great job. To accomplish this, we have learned how to focus with aplomb. But what are the consequences when we focus like lasers and perpetually fill our calendars with more and more meetings and other "legitimate" demands on our time? Unfortunately, one consequence is that we become so good at focusing that we become blind to great opportunities when they are right in front of us.

Some of us are so committed to our to-do lists that we do not see or hear new information that tells us we need to shift priorities. We may not be as effective with others as we once were, but we can be blinded by the work instead of being open to the input that would allow us to adjust. We just can't see what we

should see because we are so focused on getting it all done.

Some of us are actually addicted to our "busy-ness" and to being needed, even if this addiction empties other parts of our lives or causes colleagues and team members to over-rely on us. Some of us are so busy because we don't delegate as we should; some of us do delegate but become overly involved in implementing when that is no longer our concern. Why? Perhaps we feel others don't know enough about how to do it or they already have too much on *their* plates. All these reasons may be true, but they conceal the key question that we should ask ourselves as we plan our days: "What is the work that I alone can do?"

Many of us go along being overly busy for weeks, months, and even years with no discernable negative consequences. We excel in our jobs and sometimes in our personal lives. We may not feel as "happy" as we could be, but we are still fully participating in our lives. For some of us, unexpected circumstances force us to a hard stop and demand a steep price for our extreme dedication. If we haven't taken care of ourselves, we can become sick and require much care or rehabilitation. Or we can lose our jobs because we are no longer effective and because we did not see the signs when they started to appear. These and many other interruptions can temporarily or permanently suspend our "busy" and not optimally productive patterns.

So what should we do? How do we manage our best intentions and the all-too-real demands of our professional lives? What solutions will give us a better quality of life and the biggest return, even if they require courage to implement?

1. The first step is the most critical. We must step back and away from the "I'm so busy" cycle long enough to evaluate what we are doing and why. If we do not do this, the cycle will perpetuate itself indefinitely.
2. We must remember that we teach people how to treat us. If we say yes too much, if we are available to handle whatever emerges, if we produce near-perfect results every time, we must realize that we are creating an expectation that we will always perform this way and that we will always do "whatever it takes."

3. We can identify situations that in fact *do not* require our self-imposed, unsustainable standards of perfection and excessive effort.
4. We can engage in fundamental principles of time management, such as re-examining our priorities on a regular basis and recalibrating our areas of focus. We can ask ourselves hard questions such as “am I doing what is most important for me to do now?” “If not, why not?”
5. If we feel resistance to our own wisdom, and we know we need to shift gears, but we resist doing so. We must ask ourselves what it will take to change—being even more stressed? Getting sick? Having others view us with less regard? Losing an important relationship? Or can we make needed shifts without such difficult personal sacrifices?
6. If we feel internal resistance to committing to what is most important, we must consider what else we are committed to that is preventing us from moving forward. In other words, we must look at

our own competing priorities. For example, is it more important to do almost perfect work when excellent work will suffice most of the time? Is it more important to please others by saying yes when we really want to say no? Is it more important to feel needed than to allow others to grow into work that is theirs to do? Is it uncomfortable to face a life with more free time if we don't know how to fill it? Will we disappoint people if we have trained them to expect more of us? Do we know how to set new boundaries and explicitly adjust people's expectations in appropriate, professional ways?

Our biggest “time management” challenge is not managing the time in our days. It is managing ourselves. If we ask ourselves these questions and engage in these practices on a regular basis, we will find that our lives are more productive, less stressed, and more fulfilling.

The leaders in the room with me that day knew they were at an impor-

tant juncture. They realized that they were exhibiting classic symptoms of leaders who have become habitually too busy. How could they take advantage of this significant opportunity to grow if they were not available to receive it? They knew that time spent does not necessarily correlate with the quality of the results, and they saw the irony of their resistance.

Setting boundaries and creating new limits is challenging for the most courageous and skilled of leaders, but these leaders were up to it. They knew—and we know—that such efforts can produce enormous benefits for others and for ourselves.

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