

Forward Motion Coaching Newsletter

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More Effort, Fewer Results

The Boston Globe recently ran an article about how working excessive hours actually hampers job success. Diane Fasel, author of *Working Ourselves to Death* was quoted as saying that the people who put in the most effort “are not the best producers in terms of efficiency and creativity.”¹ Rather, the most successful individuals are the ones who strike a comfortable balance between their work and personal lives.

The majority of coaching clients I work with are grappling with trying to do too much, and feeling trapped by their current circumstances. Typical scenarios include being pressured to meet unrealistic deadlines, being “on call” for the job “24/7,” feeling paralyzed by too many urgent demands, and fearing that pushing back will result in job or income loss.

Interestingly, my experience has shown that when people decide to say no to excessive demands (self-imposed or not) and re-prioritize according to what brings them a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment, the conditions of their lives improve, almost “magically.” For instance:

- Following a corporate merger, an office manager’s responsibilities increased dramatically, while her staff was cut. For about 18 months, she struggled with 10-hour work days, and the expectation that she would work 5 days instead of the 4 that she was paid for. After a few weeks of coaching, the manager decided that “enough was enough,” and got very clear on her requirements for an ideal job. Within 4 months, she found a position working 3 days a week that paid her several thousand dollars more than the old job, and gave her time to pursue training in a new field.
- A Vice President became so burned out that he decided to resign his position and devote himself full time to finding a better fit. Friends and co-workers thought he was crazy, since he quit in the aftermath of the Dot-com implosion when “there were no jobs out there.” Eight months later, he decided to go back to school, and secured a consulting assignment with his former employer which paid him almost exactly his VP salary, for a 25-hour work week.
- The owner of a manufacturing firm struggled financially for years. Several months after gaining autonomy from the family business, demand for his services took off, and several new income-producing opportunities came his way as well.

The “magical” thing about the changes that these people experienced is that they came about without excessive striving or struggle. To be sure, they required consistent effort, and courage in the face of uncertainty, self-doubt and fear. However, all reported that once they decided not to settle, they were propelled forward by a sense of excitement and energy. When they challenged their limiting assumptions (“If I don’t work 10 hour days, I’ll be fired;” “In this economy, I’m lucky to have any job;” “If I ask for what’s mine, I’ll lose the business”), the obstacles seemed to simply drop away.

The reason for their successes may lie in our brain chemistry. In his book, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman explains that when we are worried, angry, frustrated or under other types of negative stress, the brain goes into “survival mode,” and “...falls back on simple, highly familiar routines and responses and puts aside complex thought, creative insight, and long-term planning. The focus is the urgent present – or the crisis of the day.”²

Little wonder, then, that when people are under continual pressure to do more, and do it faster, it becomes hard to see other options. Allowing time for reflection and relaxation activates creative thinking and enables us to see possibilities that we wouldn't otherwise. In fact, contemplation, stress reduction, and other activities that encourage the stepping away from pressing problems are core coaching techniques.

January's Coaching Challenge: If you find yourself frustrated, panicked, continually scrambling to get jobs done, or facing one urgent deadline after another, try this experiment. Decide on *one thing* that you can do to give yourself some breathing room. For instance, bargain on a deadline (“I can get it done on Tuesday if I get 3 hours of administrative help”). Say no non-critical requests from colleagues (“I've love to help, but can't consider taking on anything else until the 10th”). Prioritize (“If project A is critical, I'll move the deadline for project B up one week”). Choose an activity that you enjoy to engage in during the extra time that you create for yourself. Make a conscious commitment to do this for two weeks, and note the positive changes, large and small, that come your way, particularly any new ideas concerning a business challenge.

¹ “All work and no play could hamper job success,” BostonWorks, Boston Sunday Globe, December 25, 2005.

² *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, © 1998 by Daniel Goleman, Bantam Books, page 74.

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