

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

October 1, 2009

Disruptions? Plan For Them!!

by Dr. Mike Armour

Several months ago I decided to suspend this newsletter for a while. There were too many things on my plate, and something had to give.

You've probably had times like that yourself. Demands here. Commitments there. Not enough hours in the day. Not enough days in the week.

We typically get into situations like this gradually, not overnight. We wedge an additional commitment into our schedule today. Tomorrow we wedge in two more. Next week we add still another. Perhaps none of these commitments are all that big, all that time-consuming. But little by little they add up.

Then one day we realize that we are totally unfocused. A thousand distractions are diverting our attention and taking our eye off the ball. We no longer feel effective. The satisfaction of a job well done is more and more elusive.

Lessons Re-Learned

In my case the calendar was pretty full, but still manageable, until last fall. That's when unexpected, wholesale disruptions came crowding in. For months on end we went through a series of health crises in our extended family. And in the midst of all of this, the downturn in the economy put fresh urgency on devoting time to marketing and business development.

As I said, something had to give. And this newsletter was one of them. Now, with the greatest disruptions behind us, it's time to look back and do a "lessons learned" exercise. Or more accurately, a "lessons re-learned" exercise.

And here is the biggest lesson re-learned: Don't ignore Murphy. Take him seriously. Things will go wrong. And they are likely to go wrong at the most inopportune moments.

A Critical Omission

My recent predicament came about, in part, because I ignored the sage advice of a mentor years ago when I was in my early thirties. I was pushing hard, accomplishing a lot, but always time-strapped. I complained to him one day about all the daily disruptions that upset my well-planned day. Thanks to the disruptions, my daily "to do" list never seemed to get finished.

"Your problem," he answered, "is that you don't have a well-planned day at all. You think you do. But you don't. You've left one critical item out of your daily plan."

"What's that?" I asked.

"You've not planned for disruptions," he replied. "You've packed your day to the hilt, without allowing for anything to go wrong or for unexpected demands on your time."

He was absolutely right. Whenever a disruption came along, my first thought was, "I don't have time for this!" I resented the disruption. It was costing me time for my "to do" list. Before long, resentment turned to frustration. Impatience soared. I got testy with people. And at the end of the day, I didn't feel all that good about myself.

A New Framework

So I took his advice to heart. I purposefully began organizing my day around a different framework. In effect, I pre-planned for disruption as I laid out the day.

I started by making a realistic "to do" list for the day, a list of things I could accomplish if nothing went wrong. I then broke the list into two groups of items: those that absolutely had to be done and those that it would be good to complete.

Next, I conditioned myself to build my daily expectations around the "have to do" list. I told myself each morning, "If I only get these 'have-to-do' things done today, my day will be a success."

I then devoted the day's discretionary time to items on the "absolutely have to do" list. I disciplined myself to focus on them tenaciously. Only when I had lined off every one of them did I turn to anything on the "good to do" list.

If disruptions popped up (and they usually did), I found time for them by foregoing lower priority items on the "good to do" list. Sometimes disruptions preempted any time whatsoever to work on the "good to do" list. But that was okay. After all, nothing on the list had to be done today, anyway.

When I began using this approach, I noticed a distinct and almost immediate change in my attitude. I quit feeling that people were imposing on me when they brought me a thorny problem. I quit being so upset when equipment malfunctioned and threw me off schedule. I quit resenting the person who "wasted my time" by letting a meeting run long.

Making a Broader Application

Over the ensuing years this approach served me well in managing my daily schedule — what I might call my "micro-schedule." But looking back, I see that I failed to apply it rigorously enough to my "macro-schedule," i.e., my larger pattern of life-commitments.

Looked at as a whole, I let my life get so filled with high priority commitments that there was no time for wholesale disruptions. My month-to-month calendar could not accommodate a disruption that lasted more than a day or two.

So when a big disruption came along, I just wedged it into the calendar, driving it in with a sledge hammer, if need be. I slept a little less. I put in an extra hour or two each day. I tried to do more multi-tasking.

But it was like driving a wedge into a piece of timber. At some point things had to start breaking apart. And eventually they did.

So I've spent the past few months coping with the disruptions, but also starting to realign the priorities on my "macro-schedule." I'm not there yet. But I'm working at it diligently. It's far more difficult than I first imagined, because these large-scale commitments are on my macro-schedule for a reason: I have genuine affection for them. They really mean a lot to me. Reducing my commitment to them or eliminating them altogether is emotionally difficult, almost gut-wrenching at times.

Which has led me to a new "lesson learned." When we are young, with schedules packed and lots of to-do's on our list, we fantasize about what it will be like when we are older, slow down, and don't have so many commitments tugging at us.

For me, however — and probably for most people — the commitments that tug have grown more numerous with each passing year. The longer we live, the larger our family. The more extensive our network of friends. The more numerous the experiences that draw us into some new, fulfilling opportunity.

We take these new members of our family, these new friends, these fulfilling opportunities into our bosom. We incorporate them into our very sense of identity. They become part of us. And to give up commitments to them is like giving up part of our very self.

Perhaps you've heard people say, "I retired five years ago, and I've never been so busy in my life." I now understand more than ever what they are talking about. Even though I have no plans to retire soon, I could fill every day of the week right now with commitments already on my calendar that have little to do with my professional career.

The beauty of life is that it offers to become deeper and more fulfilling with each passing year. No wonder that time seems to go by faster and faster as we age. There are so many things to do. So many things to enjoy. Which simply means that the challenge of keeping life and calendars in balance will pursue us to the very end.

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