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Make Time Work For You

[By Dan Coughlin]

Julie, a 39-year-old executive in a large corporation, told me she desperately wanted to improve her work/life balance and her results at work. She had two children at home, and her husband worked an equally time-consuming job. She was constantly working or taking care of her family. However, her business results were not improving, her career was stalling, and she wanted to see her children more.

I said, "Julie, you need to do some things just for yourself to recharge your batteries. If you don't, you may very well burn out, and that won't help your company, your career, or your family."

She looked at me and said, "And exactly when am I going to have time to do that?"

Does any of this sound familiar?

Seven Actions to Improve Your Most Important Business Outcomes, Accelerate Your Career, and Have a Life

See the business upside of down time.

People oftentimes say they get their best ideas while in the shower. That's because they stop doing activities for a moment and give their brains a chance to relax. By going on vacations, getting home early, and watching your kids play soccer, you can actually gain ideas on how to improve your business results. Seems paradoxical, but when you buy into this concept you will stop doing so many activities and achieve even better business results.

Schedule thinking time.

Since ideas come to you when you get away from work activities, schedule one hour a week just to think. Find a space away from your home, office, employees, and customers. Go there for one hour a week.

Take out a blank sheet of paper, write down the most important desired business outcome for your organization, and turn that outcome into an open-ended question. If the goal is to increase sales by 10%, the question might be, "How can we increase sales to our current clients by 10%?" Then answer that question with as many ideas as you can think of for 45 minutes. Finally, select your best idea and spend the last 15 minutes building your action plan. That one hour can make the rest of your working hours far more productive. It can allow you to work a lot less while achieving a lot more.

Say "No."

One of my all-time favorite ads is a BMW ad that simply said, "No" in large letters. In the small print it basically said BMW says no to a lot of good ideas so it can say yes to a few great ideas. That is tremendous advice!

How many good ideas are you acting on? Notice I didn't say, "How many good ideas are you considering?" It's healthy to consider a lot of ideas. It's like sifting through sand to find gold. You do have to go through a lot of sand to find the gold, but you don't run to the marketplace with sand in your hand and get all excited. You keep sifting until you find the gold. Keep generating ideas and keep sifting through them until you find the one to three great ideas you will act on.

Don't try to do more than three great ideas because before you know it you've turned

gold into sand. Trying to do too many ideas at once is a sure-fire way to generate mediocre results.

Stop doing the wrong things.

The key to Toyota's greatness can be summarized in a single word, "Stop." On the manufacturing floor any Toyota employee can simply see something that is wrong with an automobile and say, "Stop." Then the assembly process comes to a halt until the problem is fixed. That is in essence the key to making the highest-quality automobiles in the world.

Look at your projects. Is there anything that's going wrong? If so, stop the process and fix the problem right away. One of the biggest time wasters is redoing work you've already done.

Beat yesterday.

Here's one more secret to Toyota's success. It's not that they are just saying stop. With each step in everything they do, they sincerely try to get better. They call this "kaizen," which basically means, "How can we make today better than yesterday, and tomorrow better than today?"

Look around your business. When do you need to say "no" and "stop"? Instead of doing a lot of good ideas, focus on doing a few great ideas. But it's not enough just to do



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fewer things. Do those few things with such focus and attention and with such a desire to improve that you do them better than you've ever done them before.

Use the 1-3-6 Rule.

Here's the rule:

One - Write down the single most important business outcome you want to improve in your organization.

Three - Then write down the three things you can do that would have the greatest positive impact on improving this business outcome.

Six - Then, and here's the hardest step, write down the six things you are going to stop doing so you will have the time and the energy to do the three things that matter the most.

People invariably say everything they're doing is important, and they can't stop anything. While it may be true that everything they're doing is important, not everything they're doing is as important as everything else

they're doing. Some important things will have a greater impact on improving their desired outcome than other important things. If you keep doing everything you're currently doing, how are you ever going to have the time and the energy to do really well the three things that matter the most? As you let go of activities and focus your energy, your most important results will improve. Remember, you're not paid to do activities; you're paid to improve results.

Here's one of my favorite quotes from Apple's Jonathan Ive, the leader of the design team for the iPod (*Fortune* magazine September 2006):

"We don't make very much stuff. That's a very important part of our approach to what we do, which is to not do a lot of unnecessary stuff but just to focus and really try very sincerely to care so much about the few things that we do."

Sacrifice to accelerate.

In summary, look around you and decide what you can let go. What meetings, projects,

customer visits, and processes can you stop doing? Find the fewest activities that will have the greatest positive impact on improving your most important business outcome. Then do those two or three activities to the very best of your ability within a reasonable time frame. And then go home.

About Dan Coughlin

As a keynote speaker, Dan Coughlin provides practical advice to accelerate key business outcomes. As an executive coach, he has spent more than 3,000 hours on-site working with executives in over 20 industries. His clients include Toyota, McDonald's, Marriott, Coca-Cola, St. Louis Cardinals, GSD&M, Boeing, and AT&T. His new book, *Accelerate: 20 Practical Lessons to Boost Business Momentum*, arrives in bookstores May 2007. For more information, please contact: dan@thecoughlincompany.com, or visit www.businessacceleration.com.

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