

KNOWING HOW TO SAY NO

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“If you want a job done promptly and well, get a busy person to do it.”

You know it and your manager knows it. The top performers are the go-to people for the next workload. But in a day of diminishing resources and increased demand, even the most competent person cannot do 5 peoples' jobs. Just like a processor, every person has a defined capacity. And unlike processors, we also have lives and people we care about. We cannot absorb all the work our employers would like to assign to us. At one time, managers had more realistic views of capacity; now, they are servants of “hope and change.” They hope you will change your priorities to put the company first, last and only.

No matter how competent or efficient you are, there will come a day when you realize you are going to have to make unacceptable trade-offs to keep being the “go to” person. It isn't just missing your son's game or your daughter's swim meet. It isn't just working so late that you always eat dinner cold. Studies prove that no matter our age, we need 8 hours sleep (except for the rare individual who actually thrives on 5 hours). The less sleep you get, the more ineffective those longer hours will be. And at some point, rather than ensuring your long-term future with your company, you will make that inevitable career-limiting mistake.

So when do you hit the wall? Have you already done it? Are you ready to consider the possibility you need to say no? In this economy and job situation, more and more, employers are demanding (hoping) that their few remaining employees can do it all. So even if this has not yet happened to you, it will. Learn the various ways one can “know how to no,” to preserve your life, your marriage and your health, while not making yourself a target.

Common (but ineffective) strategies include:

- Ignorance is bliss. In some company cultures, emails and even calls are ignored. “If I didn't respond, I didn't agree.”
- Ask and ask again – don't do anything until the 2nd or 3rd request comes in.
- Say yes, and hope the project gets cancelled or defunded
- Teamwork blame-storm – always engage a team, so the blame is spread

These are all passive-aggressive and though some companies tolerate and even make these approaches part of their corporate culture, none of them really work forever. At some point, you will get called on this and passivity is not a plausible defense.

So if that doesn't work, what does? First, you have to know how much work you can realistically do well. That involves answering three questions:

1. How much time can you spend on work?
2. How much time can you work with high quality?
3. How much time should you be giving yourself and your family?

The answer to the question of your capacity will be 24 hours – 8 (sleep) – time with family = maximum time available. You will use the answer to question 2 to lower the final number. Everyone is asked to stretch, but you do need to know at what point your quality goes down seriously and your work schedule impacts relationships and health. So figure out what is actually the limit of what you are willing to do. And understand that those working intensely for 8 hours are accomplishing more than someone who is just filling a desk for 10.

Look at your given workload now; can you get it done? For most people, the answer is no. Prioritize the work – what must get done, what should get done and what is really less essential. Plot the work into your daily calendar. How much fits?

You need to map work into four categories – this will help you make a good case to your manager.

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	1	2
NOT IMPORTANT	3	4

Examples of type 1 might be regulatory compliance, security risks, costly performance or availability problems. Type 2 includes capacity plans, forward-looking performance analysis and mandatory reporting. Type 3 often includes dealing with phone calls and emails – these seem important because they impinge on your thinking. Type 4 are those tasks that come up all the time that do not result in bottom line impact, are vague and poorly defined and yet, are assigned to you. These are the ones that are often pitched as critical, though no one can really explain why.

Item types 3 and 4 should be challenged – what happens if they aren't completed? By mapping these to your calendar, you find out what you really have time for. Since scientists have now proven that multi-tasking does not work, do not plan to put two tasks into one time slot. What this means is that if a task takes 15 minutes, you cannot really put two 15 minute tasks in one slot. However, you can slot four 15 minute tasks into an hour slot and work on them in parallel. What was left when you slotted the work into your calendar?

A final step is to look at your high priority work. How much of it is the kind of work only you can do? What could be better done by someone else? Who is excellent at that kind of work? Who (realistically) has spare cycles? What part of it brings together what you love to do and what you are great at? Now, you have the information you need to talk to your manager.

Once you have completed this, it's time to have the priority discussion. These should not be held more often than once every two weeks, and if you get the message across, the discussions will be short. Remember that your manager is holding two invalid views in his head – that you could apply more hours to the job if you really wanted to and that he will tolerate degradation in quality to achieve more quantity. He is just hoping you will get it all done and make him look good. But this isn't simply about complaining about workload – it is ensuring that the important work gets done with quality. Both of you share this desire; this conversation helps get you aligned. Refer to previous columns where I talk about the need to understand what is in it for them, while getting your needs met.

You need a plan:

1. Ask for time to discuss work priorities
2. Share your priority schema and your calendar with your manager. Ask for input. This is just relating to what is most important, not whether it can all be done. Be open to priority changes.
3. Share the challenge (problem) of too much to do with not enough time to get it all done. Then, explain that you know that all the 1 and 2 items do need to be done. You are acknowledging his problem.
4. Suggest alternatives. This can include rethinking the requirement (windowing it down to a manageable task), other people who could do it better, faster (or at all), and defining which other group might be better suited to do the work. Too often, to look good, managers will lay claim to wider "turf" to expand their importance. But that only works if the work gets done.
5. Help your manager by showing them what you are best at and love to do. You have the ability to shine and make the manager look good at the intersection of these two elements.
6. Now you are ready to negotiate, but remember your bottom line. You can only be okay with your work life if you are able to produce quality work and still have time to sleep and interact with family. Ask for more than you want; leave yourself negotiating room to bargain down.
7. Be willing to remind him by analogy that everything has a defined capacity, even you. And using the same analogy, when you are interrupt-driven, doing a bit of this job and a bit of that one, none of it really gets done on time, well or without dispatcher overhead. This analogy helps them understand that sometimes, tradeoffs do not work to get more capacity. Sometimes, you simply have to get more capacity – more personnel.
8. Make sure you feel confident and composed when you have this discussion. Your confidence helps build your case. You also want to keep things focused on the needs of the business. No company can afford someone doing poor work or making serious mistakes because of burn-out.

Once, I was asked by a very senior bank manager, "If you worked more nights and weekends, couldn't we get by without replacing a person in your group?" I told him that even if that model worked for a short time, it would not work forever. One person cannot be two. I did not lose that job and he hired another person eventually. I have also used the argument of my expertise. Taking on projects where you are only average (instead of those where you can shine), results in lower results. There is always someone with those skills. When you make a good pitch, management self-interest will map to your carefully reasoned arguments.

If you find yourself at a company where the expectations are truly ridiculous and you cannot get a fair hearing, put aside some of those 3's and 4's to work on your resume and job search. There just are jobs that are not worth it. And when the economy turns around, those employers will struggle to get qualified candidates.

The question is simple – what is your life worth to you?

Stay tuned for another edition of “Your Career Coach.”