Maintaining Your Infrastructure

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Do you take as much care looking after your own infrastructure as that of your employer? For many of us, self-care is considered a luxury, something that you indulge in after all other needs of others are met. In fact, if you do not put your infrastructure first, you will not be able to meet these other responsibilities as well or as long as you would like. Or in IT terms, you will fail to meet your personal SLAS (service level agreements).

Drawn from many sources, but in this case, Stephen Covey, your management plan must include a discipline of balanced self-renewal. This includes four components:

1. Brain (Mind)
2. Heart (Emotional)
3. Body (Physical)
4. Spirit (Spiritual)

Many of us feel that our minds are already over-taxed, working as we do at more than one person's job, learning new things at an ever-increasing rate and just trying not to drown. But if your mind is only ever engaged on your job, it is like strengthening your quads and letting your hamstrings grow weak. By working opposing muscle groups in your mind, you make the whole stronger. What we do at work is certainly better than spending your life watching TV, but it isn't enough. Mental stimulation requires using a variety of mental "muscles," so if you solve puzzles at work, try working on other challenges, like improving your memory or learning something entirely new. Follow an interesting internet trail to a new frontier. As an example, we often find that a search produces some very unusual results in addition to those we wanted it to find. Go there – check out a different dimension. Look more deeply into a word you heard but don't really understand. Read – yes, real books. Novels. On various occasions, I explored the realm of multiverses after reading a review of "The Matrix" and then finding a number of links leading to an exploration of the philosophy behind it. Use your imagination and say "What if?" Many amazing inventions arose because the inventor wondered if there weren't an easier way to do something, letting go of the notion that if there were, it would already exist. Remove the limits and attempt to "believe 6 impossible things before breakfast." (Lewis Carroll)

Social and emotional renewal has suffered over recent years with the advent of working from home and communication solely by e-devices. Do you really engage deeply with people via IM? How many people would you consider close friends? Does your pet not remember you? For many of us, the last time we had close friendships was in college, where we were thrown together in dorms, in classes, in sports. Now, we work long hours, commute, check in on email at home and often neglect our emotional health in pursuit of career success (or even simply survival). The result is often that you lose your friends and your relationship suffers. But the cost to you is even greater than simply not having someone "to hang with." Consider those who are punished by spending time in isolation tanks in prison. The more we

isolate ourselves, the more inwardly we turn, usually becoming more and more negative. It affects our ability to think clearly, impacts our health, reduces the effectiveness of our immune system and more. The healthiest people in the world are those who have put some attention toward improving their emotional health.

Physical health is an obvious part of maintaining your infrastructure, but despite being objective and somewhat scientific people, many IT professionals fail to address this at all. How many of you regularly engage in any kind of physical exercise? How much of your diet is food you prepare from scratch at home? Do you take a multi-vitamin or ensure that you get all the vitamins and nutrients you need from the food you eat? Sadly, many people in IT believe that much of what ails them is simply a part of the aging process and inevitable – the days of the annual physical exam are well behind us. And let's face it, there is fear about getting a checkup. But as with your car, if you let things go, the consequences are far more serious and more costly (both in terms of money and health). Get a full check-up and fix the things that need fixing. Plan an exercise routine and resolve to eat a little smarter. Make a nice lunch the night before to bring with you and avoid the temptation to raid the vending machines. Chop up a lot of veggies for salads and put the components in zip-lock bags – create your own salad bar. You can also use this for quick and easy stir-frys. Eating healthier can be just a matter of reducing portions a little and making conscious choices. Another aspect is getting 7-8 hours of sleep per night. It is a myth that you need less sleep as you get older. In fact, the truth is that it gets harder to get the sleep you need after 50, so you have to ensure your room is quiet, that you have tired both your body and mind and that you have allowed enough time for sleep. Finally, find something you like to do and do more of it. For many, walking is cheap and easy. Get a good pair of shoes and find the local trails and bike paths. Find a dog (your own or a friend's). The energy of a dog on a walk is empowering. Keep moving and you will not only find that your body responds to this, giving you energy for everything else, but your best ideas will come to you when you are moving briskly. You'll be surprised at the innovation inspired by movement – exercising the body super-charges the brain.

The spiritual leg of your infrastructure table should not be ignored. For many, this sounds like I am going to suggest church, getting your spirit engaged is more than that. For those inclined, religion can be a powerful part of keeping the spirit in balance, but this area includes listening to great music, working in a garden, walking a labyrinth and reading a book. Books that inspire us might be a self-help book, but also include those that stretch your mind, such as the works of Daniel Pink and Malcolm Gladwell. It also means being the best person you can be. Are you estranged from family? Having issues with people at work? Finding a bridge to these people can be healing and it also goes to charging up your spirit. We can all use having less "baggage" in our lives. When you work on relationships and honoring who you are as a person, you will find that you are even more able to deal with life stresses and challenges.

So next time you find yourself focused on your datacenter infrastructure, take a moment to consider the state of your personal infrastructure.

Health is a large word. It embraces not the body only, but the mind and spirit as well; and not today's pain or pleasure alone, but the whole being and outlook of a man.

James H. West

Stay tuned for another edition of "Your Career Coach."