It's OK to be Selfish

By Hugh Culver

Who do you put first? If you are anything like 99% of the leaders that I work with you are good at putting other people first. Your clients, your family, your staff, your church – they all come first. Don't get me wrong, giving to others is laudable and should of course be a big part of our life focus.

And at the same time we need to be selfish. If fact if we are not a little selfish with our time and our decisions we won't have much left to serve others.

OK I have to admit I'm using the word 'selfish' to get your attention. But I'm doing that because I think this is so important and I don't want you to dismiss it as just another good-to-do-when-I-have-more-time item on your endless "To Do" list.

So, why is this important? There are many factors that have crept up on us that are ringing warning bells for the need to put ourselves first more often:

- **Working longer hours.** Employer expectations, career aspirations and good-old dedication can lead to logging longer hours, booting up in the evening and list and "To Do" lists for the weekend.
- **Global economy.** I have clients doing work in India, the UK, Singapore and back home. Not only do they have to balance making lunch for the kids, they have to squeeze in a call to Dubai at the same time.
- **The current recession.** Companies are cutting back, hiring less and expecting more. According to research conducted by the Corporate Executive Board (www.executiveboard.com) among more than 50,000 global workers in 2006, 53% of employees felt they had a good work-life balance; that number fell to 30% in the first quarter of 2009.
- **Technology.** There is no question that our InBox is a distraction, and smartphones (Blackberry, Iphone, etc.) mean we work longer hours. One study reported that the average smart phone toting worker is now logging an average 70 minutes more time at work starting to checking emails at 7:10 AM and firing off the last one at around 10:00PM.

So how are you doing in the "I come first" department?

Ask yourself these questions:

1. Do you turn off your smart phone in the evening and limit emails after hours and on weekends?
2. Do you have a regular exercise practice (strength + endurance + flexibility) that you follow?

3. Do you have 'down time' every day (not TV or Internet) that you look forward to enjoying?
4. Are you getting enough sleep on a regular basis?
5. Do you have a healthy diet including healthy snacks?
6. Do you have personal goals that you are excited about?
7. Are you spending enough time with your family every day?

Think of it this way: you wouldn't think of driving your car for months and months without attending to its servicing. Eventually it will start to show signs of wear and lights start to show up on the dashboard to let you know you're in trouble. It's no different with our personal wellness. You can't continually put in long hours, work in stressful conditions, and not attend to personal maintenance for long before the lights start to show up on your dashboard.

I've been there: long hours, high stress, endless travel and poor eating habits. Pretty soon the weight starts to pile on, the exercise routine is gone, energy is low and I'm miserable. When I look honestly at who is to blame for my wellness demise the finger always seems to be pointed at yours truly. Somehow my misguided beliefs justified the long hours, procrastination about anything healthy, and poor decisions.

And because we are wired to believe our own stories we see evidence all around us to justify our destructive beliefs. "Look at my desk; am I ever busy!". "People book my calendar so there is no time left for me!", "We are in the busy season, so I have no time for me". It's easy to find reasons to explain whatever we believe; *the hard work is to create better beliefs*.

The only way to change your habits is to first be convinced that this is important. Ask yourself if your current patterns are serving you long term. If you keep this up how is your mental health, physical health and family life going to be in three more years?

Next create a new belief, one that empowers you to take action. When I start slipping on my plan I remind myself that I am ultimately responsible for my time. It may be 8:30PM or 5:00AM but there is always time for what I think is important.

Now attach some evidence to this belief by acting on your plan. Take that evening off, don't make a list for the weekend, read a novel just for sheer entertainment or take your wife/husband out for dinner. Prove to yourself that you are in control of your time and that you *can* be selfish and it's OK.

Now you need to repeat this pattern: revisit the goal, take the action and repeat. The more times you visit your goals and act on them the stronger they become.

Whatever we are doing now will catch up with us later. Great relationships, a healthy family, and good health will all pay dividends in the future. And now is the time to create them.

Take action, have fun, and get it done!

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