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WHEN WORK DOESN'T WORK ANYMORE

How to cope with the stresses of the executive workload

Over the past 20 years, I have worked with hundreds of executives who at some point confided, "I'm not sure this is really what I want to be doing anymore," "It's getting harder to gear up for travel," or "I just don't feel as sharp as I once was."

And these statements usually are followed by: "Is it me?"

Well, yes — it is you. And me. And each of us at some point in our careers, if we are really honest and self-aware. So where does that leave you? Quit your job? Change careers? Move to the monastery in Tahiti?

Instead, begin by exploring the root of your discontent; what is causing you to really feel as you do, and what are your options to change that?

Is the pace and intensity too much? It's not unusual for an executive to feel like "enough is enough" and desire more free time where there is not 24/7 accountability and pressure.

Does managing no longer motivate you? Leading others can be exhausting and distance you from what most excites you about the company or industry. Some executives realize they'd rather advise or do something other than the day-to-day running of the business.

Has there been a change in your company? Has the composition of your board, leadership team,

company ownership, brand positioning or core values left you less enthusiastic or feeling disconnected from the company you once loved to lead?

Do you simply feel underappreciated, unfairly compensated or under challenged?

You didn't just wake up suddenly feeling miserable about work. Your discontent has come on gradually and is more like an abrasion that doesn't heal. Left untreated, the abrasion can become infected or maybe it already has. Remember that infections, untreated, often feel like general malaise.

So what can you do about it?

Find the quiet time to get away and have a candid conversation with yourself. Write out a "what bugs me" list about your work life. Be honest. It is most important that you discover what problem you are trying to solve.

Note the things on there that you influence directly or indirectly. Most executives are humbled when they are truly honest about how much they do or could influence about their work life and possibilities.

Jot down options given what you know. Do you need to designate "no meeting days" or "no travel days"? Do you need more frequent or less frequent contact with your board chair? Is your current organizational structure enabling you to be fully leveraged? Consider what would address the

frustrations on your "what bugs me list."

Have conversations with the appropriate people to explore options. Gently explore with their confidential assurance, options to the "issues" that you are considering — or that they may suggest that you have not thought about. Talking with those who have a shared accountability for the company's success is an important step toward addressing the issues you have noted.

Ignoring your "infection" or leaving it untreated will not produce a miracle cure, but taking positive actions that acknowledge and act on your discontent can.

The best gift you can give yourself is intellectual honesty regarding the sources of your frustration/weakened passion and the options you have available. Once you understand the source of the problem, you can take steps to make necessary changes.

You owe this to your company, colleagues and shareholders who rely on you to lead with passion and commitment every single day. But most of all, you owe it to yourself. Doing nothing is doing something. Take action. You'll be glad you did. <<



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