

Bonus Worksheet!

STOPPORTUNITIES

Anything not worth doing is not worth doing well.

- Dr. Joe Martin, former Dean of the UCSF Medical School

Delia

One summer, I was sitting in the hot tub at the gym. It was 6:00 in the morning. I had already had a great workout and was luxuriating in the spa, enjoying the sunrise and envisioning my day. Unusually, another woman was in the spa that morning - someone I'd never seen. She struck up conversation.

"Do you usually come at this time of day? I love to work out every morning but who has the time? It's 6:00 already! I've got to race out of here as soon as I'm through working out!"

She stretched as she talked, literally exercising while she was in the spa. She was an architect, apparently quite a renowned one at that. When she asked me what I did for a living, she squealed.

"Oh, an executive coach! I could use you! Everything in my life is so crazy! It seems like it's always like that! Here it is barely sunrise and I've already been up for three hours! I have to! Only way I can things done. I ran to the supermarket this morning because we're having people for dinner but I have to be at the firm by 9, and I have to walk the dog before 5, and I wanted to finish some plans on a kitchen remodel before I left -"

She talked faster than I could think, and as she went, I found myself getting more and more tense. It seemed this woman - Delia was her name - had lost all sense of perspective. When she got to the point about how "insane" her life was and "she really needed to make a change," I asked her that all-important coaching question:

"What do you want?"

The question hit her like a rock. She stopped stretching and sank back into the spa.

"I'll be sixty next year. I wonder if I'll ever be able to slow down."

What struck me so deeply about that comment was it was so incongruous to everything else she'd been talking about. Delia was choosing to wake up at three, work until five, put in a ten hour day and then have company. Believe me, I'm no stranger to that schedule; I still fall into it now and again. And I'm not judging anyone who loves their work and wants to make it their life, as long it makes them happy.

Delia was not happy. Delia was out of control. She was on spin cycle, and she couldn't stop.

Delia's impromptu vision for herself was to "slow down, if only I could find the time." To say nothing of the irony of that statement, Delia would only be able to slow down when she *made* the time. She could only do that by stopping some of the actions she was taking now. Her whole career, Delia had gained recognition for taking opportunities - now she was going to have to find her *stopp*ortunities.

Stoppopportunities are those actions that, believe it or not, you could actually stop doing. Take something *off* your plate for once. Free up some space. Create some margins.¹ Richard A. Swenson, *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives* (Navpress Publishing Group, 2004).

Jim Collins reports that stopopportunities distinguish good companies from great: The good-to-great companies at their best followed a simple mantra: "Anything that does not fit with our [primary focus], we will not do. We will not launch unrelated businesses. We will not make unrelated acquisitions. We will not do unrelated joint ventures. If it doesn't fit, we don't do it. Period."²

You can adopt the same approach, refusing to do what doesn't advance your vision as a leader and for your life.

"Just because you're doing something doesn't mean you're doing something useful."
- Laura Brandt, district attorney]

For people who have a lot of responsibilities and important things to do (and who doesn't?), that's hard. How do you, for instance, make a choice between

- responding to your boss's last minute call for an emergency meeting,
- dedicating two hours on your catalyst, as you promised yourself you would, and
- seeing your cardiologist for a check-up you've had scheduled for weeks?

What most of us do - logically - is weigh these options in terms of their urgency and consequences. *What has to happen first? We ask. What bad thing will happen if I don't do these things, and which of those is the worst?* While that will indeed force a choice, it's stressful and not very judicious after all the good thinking you've done about your vision and focus.

A few savvy tricks can help you stop doing the things that interfere with your ability to live and lead well.

Find Your M-No

If your *modus operandi* is, "Yes, I'll do it," try saying, "No, I'm sorry I can't." Change your M.O. to an M-No.

Finding your M-No is more than just practicing saying no, although that, too, is an excellent idea. Rather, it's about thinking long and hard about *why* you need to say "yes" to some actions and "no" to others, then choosing how to communicate that message.

¹ Richard A. Swenson, *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives* (Navpress Publishing Group, 2004).

² Collins, *Good to Great*, 134.

*To save your worksheet, use Adobe Acrobat Reader 9.0 Pro.

I have a friend who uses sincerity and honesty as her M-No. Instead of saying, "I wish could come to your (going away party/meeting/event) but I'm just too busy," she'll say, "I promised myself I wouldn't schedule more than one evening event away from home, and I want to be there for family night." Whenever she communicates this M-No, people nod and respect her choice.

I also have a client whose M-No is silence. His peers gripe when he can't meet with them for personal reasons, so he just keeps silent about his grounds for saying no. Instead of, "I won't be able to make that date. I've got (a date/plans with friends/a tennis game), he'll say, "That date doesn't work for me, but here's one that does." When he doesn't give them his causes for saying no, his peers have nothing to challenge.

Naturally, you'll want to be as accommodating and responsive as possible. The point isn't to get out of your responsibilities, just to make more mindful choices about what you will and won't do so you can make room for prioritized action. Then choose the words that help you to be strong in your conviction.

Do a Little Pruning

Another way to find stopopportunities is to do a little pruning.

When I was a teenager, my family lived in a house with a giant cherry tree in the backyard. Over the years, that tree got bigger and bigger, until ultimately it was too big to pick all the cherries. Plus, a gardener told us, it wasn't good for the tree.

So he pruned it.

By "pruned," I mean that we came home that day to an ugly, stumpy, lopped-off bush of a tree - a fraction of its magnificent self.

Turns out a good pruning was just what the tree needed. By the next summer, we had a robust, well-shaped, fruitful tree once again, and we could reach *all* the cherries.

You need pruning. Your action plans need pruning.

You do too much, and ultimately you're not going to be able to do it all.

How do you prune? Write down everything you're currently trying to do and hack off two-thirds. Even if you don't ultimately stop doing all of those things, the exercise alone will show you which of your current actions enhance your life and which impede your growth.

Match Your Actions to Your Focus Areas

Ideally, you have already been using your focus areas to create an action plan, but you can do the process backwards to find your stopopportunities.

Again, look at all your actions, and this time line them up with your focus areas.

Anything you haven't matched up with a focus area at the end is fair game to delete.

Management expert Peter Drucker said, "Most leaders don't need to learn what to do. They need to learn what to stop."³ If you want to be a better leader, that's just what you need to do. It won't be easy. You'll worry about the consequences, your relationships, your reputation, and your results.

But you'll also find time - lots of time - for the critical actions on your list.

Delia

Delia's stopopportunities literally changed her life.

· She found her M-No. From now on, as opportunities arose for Delia to do new work, she would say, "I'm not taking any new projects now, but I'd like to recommend you to someone who is."

· She did a little pruning. She identified the one or two projects she loved and would still want to do after she "slowed down." Every other project would be phased out.

· She matched her actions with her focus areas. She printed out her gigantic task list and labeled every line item with a focus area. She found over twenty actions on her action plan that had nothing to do with her focus areas. She spent the next week finding ways to get them off the list.

When the process was over, Delia had tamed her hectic life. She had wanted to slow down by the time she was sixty; in the end she did it with months to spare.

You may think you as you read this that you don't have any stopopportunities. You do. They're hiding in plain sight among the catalysts and other tasks in your action plan.

Exercise

Choose one of the exercises below to find your stopopportunities.

Exercise 1: Find Your M-No

What is your M-No? Write the words you will use to turn down requests that don't fit with your vision and focus.

Exercise 2: Do a Little Pruning

What one or two actions are so valuable that they deserve to be preserved?

³ Marshall Goldsmith, "Bad Behavior," *Leadership Excellence*

What's left? Choose one of these actions to prune.

Exercise 3: Match Your Actions to Your Focus Areas

- Print out or write up your action plan.
- Pull out your focus areas and number them.
- Write the number of a focus area next to each action item on the list.
- What doesn't fit?
- Choose one of these items to stop.