

STYBEL PEABODY & ASSOCIATES, INC.



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Can You Help Me Stop Being "Whirled About" by Others?

Marcus Aurelius was the Emperor of the Roman Empire from 161 to 180 AD. He observed, "Do the things external which fall upon thee distract thee? Cease to be whirled around." (Aurelius, 2014).

Psychology Today readers may not have the experience of being Emperor of the Rome, but they can relate to Marcus Aurelius' complaint about being "whirled around."

Below are some suggestions to better control your life.

Use Your Electronic Calendar as Your Shield:

There is a cliché, "nature abhors a vacuum." If the cliché is valid, you can predict that open slots on your electronic calendar will get filled. The only question is, will those slots get filled with events that are meaningful for you and for your company? Dr. Sarah Reiff-Hekking of True Focus Coaching (2020) suggests using your electronic calendar to establish boundaries.

Below is a situation from our coaching practice:

We were retained to provide coaching for a General Counsel (GC) at a Fortune 1000 company. He was well respected by the CEO. But there were complaints of sudden outbursts of hostility that were out of proportion to the business discussion.

The result was high turnover among team members within the legal department and a perception among senior leaders that the GC was competent but "strange."

In reviewing the GC's life, his adolescent dream had been to be a rock musician. He played guitar with a rock and roll band during college. But he got "realistic" and decided that he could best support himself and his family by going to law school.

While he has been successful as an attorney, his success has been achieved at the cost of suppressing his inner musician. That inner musician was trapped, ugly, and hostile.

Through our work together, it became clear that the irrational outbursts directed at others were his inner musician expressing hostility at GC.

Once we framed the issue as "abandoning your inner musician doesn't mean he is dead," the solution became: how to use GC's

electronic calendar to set boundaries at work that gave him time to feed his inner musician.

The GC purchased an electronic guitar with headphones. On his electronic calendar he created two half-hour meetings with “Mork,” the name GC gave his inner musician.

One meeting with Mork was Tuesday afternoon at 4:30pm and the other meeting was Thursday afternoon at 5:00pm. During these sessions, he would feed Mork by playing rock and roll on his guitar, and the music would go to his headphones.

GC later joined a rock band—all successful business leaders and professionals with inner rock musician yearning to be free. The band plays local bars on Friday and Saturday nights.

Result: The irrational outbursts ceased. The key was using the electronic calendar as a boundary mechanism.

Cubicle Courtesy.

The late Brandeis University psychologist Abraham Maslow told the story of how wearing a fireman’s hat helped establish boundaries between himself and his child.

If your job is farming, it is relatively easy for a child to know when a parent is at work and when the parent is free to play. But for home-based knowledge workers like Maslow, it is difficult for a child to know when a parent is working versus merely sitting idly in front of a computer screen.

To deal with this boundary issue, Maslow purchased a red firefighter hat. He asked his six-year-old daughter to assume he was invisible whenever she saw the hat.

The daughter thought of it as a funny game. The real purpose was to allow Maslow to work at home without having to deal with the guilt associated with emotionally rejecting his child.

Assume you are not working at home but at a cubicle in your office.

Dr. Reiff-Hekking suggests that a set of headphones might serve a similar signaling purpose. Let people know that when the headphones are on, you are focusing on some task and would appreciate them to stop by later or send a text.

When the headphones are off, you are open to conversation.

This technique allows you to send a signal without having others feel that they have been rejected by you.

If you use such a technique, it is important that you not abuse it. Headphones-off means you are open to conversation with others.

Open-Door Policy.

If you work in an office, does your company have an open-door policy, or do you work in an open space? Perhaps you work at home.

Open doors is a great concept. But closed doors allow employees to establish boundaries to define when they are open for conversation.

If you work in an office setting, we recommend keeping the door open when you are open to talking with others. If you want privacy, close the door. Consider purchasing a "Please Knock" sign to provide additional boundary setting.

If you are operating in an open office environment, Dr. Reiff-Hekking suggests you consider doing work in an empty conference room.

If you are working at home and there is no door to close, apply some signal to tell people to stay away. For example, stick a pirate flag outside the door.

Boundary Setting at Team Meetings.

Tired of feeling “whirled about” by leaders who never finish scheduled meetings on time? At the start of the meeting, quietly inform the leader that you have a hard stop at a certain time and will have to leave. (Saunders, 2019).

If you are running the meeting, it is useful to make the same statement at the start of the meeting so that you have a reputation of being a team leader who ends meetings on time. Clarifying the end time at the start of a meeting gives permission for others on the team to support your efforts.

Setting Boundaries at the End of the Day.

One of our clients complained that she was feeling constantly irritable. She was getting 5-6 hours of fitful sleep per night. She complained about nightmares. The nightmares revolved around the same theme: being whirled about by powerful forces.

The consultant asked the client what she did before retiring for the night. She replied that she watched cable news. We suggested that she establish boundaries before sleep. And those boundaries should include no news on cable or radio—focus on something pleasant.

She enjoyed Larry David’s *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and started watching it right before sleep instead of CNN.

Her nightmares ceased and she got eight hours of sleep.

Boundary Setting is a Balancing Act.

Boundary setting is finding the right balance between the need to accomplish tasks and paying proper attention to the needs of your team members. If you fail to establish your own boundaries, do not be surprised that you will also complain that you are being whirled about by others.

Nature does indeed abhor a vacuum.

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“leadership and career success” for valued**

senior level talent. Core services include retained search (Board members, CEOs, COOs, CFOs), leadership development coaching, and executive-level outplacement using the Stybel Peabody Five Distribution Channel System.

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