

SCHEDULE TIME FOR STRATEGIC THINKING

I don't know if you have consciously noticed

we are all becoming far more reactive than at any other time in history. For example, it would seem that you can no longer hide behind voicemail or email because both colleagues and clients will now simply send you a text and then look for an immediate response – we are becoming the text-messaging generation.

Today, if you are like many law firm leaders, you are caught in a tidal wave of 24/7 communications from your partners and direct reports for quick responses to their requests. At the same time, other lawyers, staffers and, of course, clients want your input, require your approval, or request your participation in meetings or discussions. For most any law firm leader, keeping busy and focusing on the urgent is seductive. Many confide to me that they continue to find themselves more and more distracted. So is it any wonder that you are not being as strategic or thoughtful as perhaps you would prefer to be? Yes, you may be busier than ever before, but perhaps far less effective.

I recently met with a couple of firm leaders and discussed the demands on their attention as well as some of the timely issues that were important to them, and it reminded me of something I learned awhile back about where many leaders invest (or don't) their precious and limited management time...

When meeting with managing partners, I have often asked a couple of questions that usually serve to illuminate precisely where they spend their time. My first question is:

"What proportion of your management time is spent solving problems versus what proportion is spent on exploring new opportunities?" (Think about what

your percentage breakout might be)

After what can often be a rather awkward reflection period, the answer I will usually elicit is about 80% on solving problems and 20% on exploring opportunities.

From knowing and spending time with many of them, I suspect that it is really more like 95% on problem-solving and 5% on opportunity-seeking, but let's analyze what this division of time infers. This means that as a firm leader, you are spending 80% of your time and energy (by your own admission) looking backwards and fixing things, while only 20% looking forward and creating things. It's not too far a stretch to see that firms operating in this mode may be constrained in their attempts to take the lead in their competitive marketplace.

So why does this happen?

Well, it should be obvious that most professionals are veteran problem-solvers. We are trained to resolve the issues, put out the fires, correct the underperformance, and generally "fix" any and all problems. No matter what your title and task, there is a powerful gravitational pull that unconsciously moves us toward fixing things instead of innovating, toward restoring instead of increasing, and toward reacting rather than being proactive.

The truth is, we secretly love the urgency of problems to be addressed. The urgent makes us feel *valued*. We get an adrenalin rush from urgent matters. With problems to be fixed we can be the hero that saves the day. Some of us are even pros at waiting until the last minute to rush in with a solution. If we're honest with ourselves, we can admit that we feel more secure when we are busy doing something, even if it isn't the most important task on our plate. Indeed, that urgent little problem can sometimes actually become a convenient excuse to ignore or put off the important tasks. But firm leaders need to realize they need to focus their energies on where they will have the greatest impact.

For that to happen, they need to understand that fixing things, however noble, simply restores the prior performance or condition—

and that may be comfortable, but it limits value. However, if your focus is on improving the condition, on inspiring entrepreneurial endeavors, on being innovative; then your intent is not on restoring the *status quo*, but on developing a level of performance that exceeds any previous standards.

Now comes my second question, a follow-up I tend to pose which goes like this:

"Of the time you spend on exploring opportunities, (remember it was reported to be 20% of the total) how much of that time is directed

"No matter what your title and task, there is a powerful gravitational pull that unconsciously moves us toward fixing things instead of innovating, toward restoring instead of increasing, and toward reacting rather than being proactive."

toward pursuing billable production, winning the next big transaction or responding to a competitor, [i.e., the present] versus pursuing the development of entirely new skills, new technologies or new niche services [i.e., the future]?

Again, if I were generous in reporting what I have learned from this question, then the average managing partner spends about 60% of his or her time exploring present opportunities and 40% on pursuing future opportunities. This, albeit unscientific research does drive home a point worth scrutiny: What kind of a future is likely to be created by a firm leader spending only about 8% of his or her *total* management time and energy focused on the future?

That question might be tougher to answer than my first two!

Finally, to make matters worse, I find that many firm leaders have developed a technique of rapid-response to issues, becoming more reactive and losing vital perspective regarding the strategic impact and the potential unintended consequences from snap judgments. They are moving so fast, in so many directions, doing so much multi-tasking that the quality of their thinking, their relationships and their leadership is suffering.

Some will commit the time to develop detailed strategic plans but then not make the time to execute or consistently follow through in order to track progress on initiatives or maintain critical momentum. Others struggle with far too many "top priorities" when in fact, they should be narrowing their leadership focus, not expanding the number of initiatives on their agenda.

It may sound trite but I have discovered that the most successful firm leaders have learned to narrow their scope and limit their top priorities to those critical few with the greatest strategic impact. Where

I see firm leaders getting into trouble is when they are trying to do and manage far too many initiatives at the same time.

I strongly advise firm leaders to purposefully schedule white space into your calendar – time for quiet thinking and reflection. And if you cannot get that uninterrupted time at the office then go offsite and literally unplug for a few hours to engage in thoughtful reflection about your most strategic and important issues. This is not a luxury. Given the amount of change the profession is going through these days, it is a business imperative to improve your effectiveness.

An excerpt of this article appeared in June on legalexecutiveinstitute.com