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STRIKING A BALANCE

By Judy Hissong, CLM
President, Nesso Strategies

PR Newswire reports the average working American doesn't take 3 of their 15 paid vacation days in a year. That's 20% of paid time off that is not utilized to restore, repair, and play. A deeper inquiry into this reveals that 10% of these folks are concerned about how their employer will perceive them if they take all the time off they are provided. Another 14% feel guilty taking a vacation. Smith Bucklin, a leader in association management, recently revealed "20 for 2017", where they report the number of mobile devices is multiplying five times faster than our population.

These numbers are concerning when I factor in the levels of employee engagement in the US (reported as high as 39%, which is an all-time low). Our brains require disengagement to create full engagement. In other words, if I want to do my best work, and be my best self, time away from my work is critical. So why do we have a morale problem in our workplace? I suspect we have trouble disengaging from our work, which compounds with other factors to impact our workplace productivity.

A law firm in Canada requires one owner each year take a 3-month sabbatical. With 5 owners of the firm, this means every five years one owner has 3 months off. If you look only at their financials, you see no difference in performance year after year among all five owners. In other words, the same amount of work is produced in less time. That's the power of restoration!

I challenge the traditional thinking that balance is the best goal. I'd like more consideration of a world where *flow* is the desired state. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Pronunciation: Me-high Cheek-sent-me-high) author of *Flow* and *Finding Flow*, and his ideas are only gaining strength as we are more challenged to direct our energy on paths that generate our desired outcomes. In other words, losing ourselves in social media may provide a momentary hit to our dopamine levels, and resulting feel-good opportunity, but does it offer the longer-term flow of feeling good with our relationships?

OUR BRAINS REQUIRE DISENGAGEMENT TO CREATE FULL ENGAGEMENT

As Csikszentmihalyi discusses in his books, *flow* is where our concentration, creativity, and satisfaction intersect. I interpret this as those days when the clock moves so fast the day is complete before I think it's started. These high-challenge, high-skill opportunities aren't available continuously, much like balancing a plate on a stick for hours on end. The idea is to seek opportunities for flow inside the regular course of life, to be more engaged whenever possible.

Part of this challenge is to shift our conversations from measuring time to measuring energy. Instead of thinking about the amount of time a project takes, consider the energy you invested. Would you invest the same again?

More? Less? This shift is also a fabulous approach to conversations with colleagues. “I spent all day” becomes “this was a huge commitment”. Which is more motivating?

Now we can really see our priorities. Not the ones we claim— the ones we honor. If I’m focused on losing weight, but invest my energy in sitting on my couch, I’m in conflict. This conflict saps my energy even further (who loves conflict? Internal or external.) and less energy = less motivation. You see the spiral?

How do we put all this together in a new way? Create parameters for yourself. Open that email inbox once an hour for 15 minutes, instead of instant responses all day long. That shows your priority of managing people by being with people, or dedication to a project by immersing yourself in it.

Another element is delegating. As you consider creating more flow in your life, pass on those things which aren’t challenging you, or growing new skills. Let go of “perfect” and allow someone else the benefit of flow in their evolution. And, yes, I imagine this one can be quite difficult for some of you!

The final piece I want you to consider is *play*. *Joy*. Where do you have fun? And how can you have more of it? What afternoon can you take off from the office, and from technology, and play? I dare you! Even better, coordinate with someone you care about and create a memory from the experience. Let me know what you do, I’ll be ready to celebrate with you!

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JUDY HISSONG, CLM

President, Nesso Strategies | Founder, Legal Leadership Institute

Judy understands leadership and teams. And, she knows how to help you maximize the potential of yours. For over two decades, Judy has applied her vast knowledge of team dynamics, emotional intelligence, work/life balance, leadership, and finance to help organizations improve their people, process, performance and, ultimately, profits.

Bachelor’s Degrees in Accounting and Physical Education | Master’s Degree in Sports Management | Former Professional Athlete | Licensed Provider of Emotional Intelligence Tools | Certified Living Your Vision Facilitator | ALA Certified Legal Manager | ACE Certified Personal Trainer | ICF Professional Certified Coach

CONNECT WITH JUDY for Coaching, Consulting, Training + Speaking Opportunities

619.546.7885 | judy@nessostrategies.com | nessostrategies.com | legalleadershipinstitute.com

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