

Effective Leadership and the Fine Art of Systematic Neglect

Disconnect, unplug, hang up, log off. That's it: now quietly close the door, sit back, take a few slow deep breaths...and allow yourself time to be still for a moment in purposeful withdrawal. And, while doing so, rest assured planet Earth won't stop revolving on its axis just because you gave yourself permission to take a momentary sabbatical. It really is going to be okay.

Take comfort in knowing an occasional, brief, and mindful retreat from life's commotion at work, home, or in the community is an essential element of practicing and sustaining effective leadership.

For those of you who are still reading, and have not yet wandered into a daydream or have charged off to your next pressing task, I invite you to ponder the following passage from Robert K. Greenleaf's acclaimed essay, *The Servant as Leader* (1970).

"People who go for leadership (whether they are servants or non-servants) may be viewed as one of two extreme types. There are those who are so constituted physically and emotionally that they like pressure - seek it out - and they perform best when they are totally intense. And there are those who do not like pressure, do not thrive under it, but who want to lead and are willing to endure the pressure in order to have the opportunity...For both, the art of withdrawal is useful.

The ability to withdraw and reorient oneself, if only for a moment presumes that one has learned the art of systematic neglect, to sort out the more important from the less important - and the important from the urgent - and attend to the more important, even though there may be penalties and censure for neglect of something else. One may govern one's life by the law of the optimum (optimum being the pace and set of choices that give one the best performance over a lifespan) - bearing in mind that there are always emergencies and the optimum includes carrying an unused reserve of energy in all periods of normal demand so that one has the resilience to cope with the emergency.

Pacing oneself by appropriate withdrawal is one of the best approaches to making optimal use of one's resources. The servant-as-leader must constantly ask him/herself, how can I use myself to serve best?"



Further reflection on Greenleaf's prolific writings, along with the teaching of like-minded others, reveals a significant number of corollary benefits associated with being intentional about creating the conditions for *self-awareness*. As Stephen Covey writes in *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*: "[Self-awareness] is essentially another word for the space between stimulus and response - the space where you can pause and then make a choice or decision."

Haven't you found it's often during periods of quiet solitude and calm reflection when:

- Technically complex information is best absorbed;
- Emotionally charged situations are correctly assessed;
- Intuition and foresight is most likely to emerge;
- Creative thinking and innovation happen;
- A meaningful vision for the future comes to light;
- Sound, ethical judgments are made;
- Courageous, decisive decisions become evident; and
- Connecting spiritually with something greater than self occurs.

Leonardo da Vinci, arguably one of the world's all-time greatest inventors and artists, was a master of productive reflection. He advised:

"Every now and then go away, have a little relaxation, for when you come back to your work your judgment will be surer. Go some distance away because then the work appears smaller and more of it can be taken in at a

glance and a lack of harmony and proportion is more readily seen."

Ask yourself this: given the remarkably high value of contemplative reflection, are you taking enough time out to "withdraw... sort...and reorient?" Are you pacing yourself and optimizing your physical and emotional resources? If not, do it now. Disconnect, unplug, hang up, log off...

Happy insights!



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