

Luttrell on Leadership  
by  
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### **The Leader's Imperative**

*Question:* What is your greatest asset as a leader?

*Hint:* It's not your brand, your line of credit, or the people working in your organization.

*Answer:* As a leader, your most important asset is *you*, your attitude, energy, and wellness.

The demands on people in leadership positions are manifold: managing diverse and perhaps conflicting interests, allocating scarce resources among competing organizational needs, making difficult decisions on complex issues, and personally responding to a myriad of people who come to you with urgent requests and concerns. And that's just for starters. Many leaders cycle between feelings of frustration, guilt, fatigue, and possibly resentment at the seemingly never-ending amount of work that needs to be done.

In a semi-sweet irony of our technological age, our clever new tools have actually increased the amount of work we do, ratcheting up the pace and intensity to increasingly stressful levels.

Let's assume that you are well organized, and that you are good at planning, time-management and delegation. Even with these essential self-management skills in place, it seems that most leaders feel they are barely on top of things, that there is always too much to do.

However, continually pushing yourself beyond the edge of your stamina is neither healthy nor wise. You need to maintain a reservoir of energy, both emotional and physical, for optimal everyday performance and for unexpected developments. If you continually push yourself to the limit, you may have little or nothing left when something out of the ordinary happens (and it always does.)

Sacrificing your personal well-being, thinking it will benefit the organization, is a prescription for burnout. This brings us back to the imperative for self-care. As a leader, taking care of your health and wellness is something you have to do for yourself. You can't delegate stress management.

I recommend to my clients three basic strategies for dealing with this challenge. The first is to "pace yourself." Although good management practices can certainly positively impact the quality of your work, often you are not able to materially change the *amount* of work to be done. But you can adjust the *pace* at which you work. The concept of sustainability applies on the personal level, too.

The phrase "pace yourself" no doubt comes from the athletic arena, related to long-distance endeavors like running marathons or bicycling. In contrast, for a short distance race, sprinting is required – go as fast as you can from start to finish. However, most leadership tasks are long-term in nature, requiring months and

years of effort, so the long-distance perspective is much more appropriate. Human beings are not designed to be in sprint mode for years at a time.

Pacing yourself means to find a working/striding pace that fits both the demands of your work and the needs of your body, mind, and spirit. Maintaining your health and your enthusiasm does more good for your organization, not to mention yourself and your loved ones, than trying to increase your output at the cost of depleting yourself. Find a pace that you can sustain over a period of years.

The second strategy is to hone your prioritization skills. When you have more to do than can comfortably be done, you must make critical judgments about which things to do first. Don't avoid the hard work of prioritizing. The need for making a decision about priorities doesn't go away, it just gets delayed and then you lose your range of choices, reducing your options. In effect, this is decision-making by default – waiting until you have little or no choice.

The third strategy is R & R. In this case, R & R stands for rest and renewal. Take seriously your body's need for rest and your psyche's need for renewal. Whether it's fly fishing, doing volunteer work, or spending downtime with the kids/grandkids, figure out how to refill your own emotional reservoir before going back to work.

To be a wise and effective leader, you need to manage your own personal resources so that you can go the distance. Pace yourself, prioritize your work, and make room for R & R. You already know that one of the fundamental responsibilities of leadership is to maximize the utilization of resources. Start with the resource closest at hand, and over which you have the most control – yourself. It's a finite resource, and if you don't take good care of it, who will?

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