

# THE INSPIRED ESTHETICIAN ESTHETICIAN

## **It's Just Business (and other career myths): Your Work Is Your Life – How Well Are You Living It?**

*By Douglas Preston*

I have a client on the line for her Friday 6:00pm business coaching call with me. She was late for the call by about 20 minutes, which isn't so bad except that I'm in California and she's in Florida where it's three hours later. She's late because it's taken her over two hours to close the spa, double-check the receipts, make confirmation calls to all of tomorrow's clients (since her receptionist had forgotten to), and she'll still be working after we're finished talking tonight. At least it's been a better week than the last one was, she sighs.

Robert and his wife Shayna aren't in the mood to speak, particularly to one another. They have dinner together at home but exist miles apart in their feelings about business and marriage. This is because the business *has become the marriage*, and today the marriage is under the strain of a financial crisis for which they're blaming one another. Romance? Cuddling? A glass of wine by the fire? Forget about it.

Julia recognizes that she needs to terminate a long-term employee because she's disruptive and uncooperative with coworkers. The trouble is that this particular employee has become her closest friend and confidant over the six years in her employ. If she doesn't let her friend go, the others on her team will probably quit en masse. On the other hand, if Julia terminates her friend/employee she'll not only damage a good friendship but will risk the disclosure of certain sensitive business activities that could land her in some hot water legally. That third glass of wine isn't making the decision any easier.

This is business and this is life – life lived in, and affected by, business. It may even be your life – it certainly was mine, and it may persist this way for years on end without improvement or appreciable relief. Today's entrepreneurs (workers in general for that matter) are weighted down with occupational demands that have interwoven life, love and leisure into a coarse fabric we have yet to learn to handle well. Work now follows us everywhere. It's ever-present and torments us with guilt when we attempt to ignore its wailing call to action. And it's getting worse, not better. Is *this* what you had in mind when the entrepreneurial sylph lured you into the promised land of wealth and freedom?

I witnessed so much pain and suffering when called upon to help distressed spa owners untangle their mess of a business. Disclosing ones ineptness in management is a regular hellish experience for the overwhelmed, humiliated client. As much as I try to appease their embarrassment with tales of my own former fiscal lapses in judgment, they squirm as I pore over the clumsy ledgers and wild assumptions that

led to their present SOS. Now the berg has been struck, the boat is listing and the band has stopped playing. No more pretending that everything is really alright. It isn't, and we have to do something...now.

But the point of this article is to offer a little advice to those of you who have become caught up in the vortex of business as life. It may require superhuman willpower to resist the desk, keyboard, home invasion or convenient relationships that represent work, but a strategy is needed for setting boundaries and allowing *normal* life to flourish in the midst of a crazy schedule. Remember, you went into your business and career in order to improve your circumstances and you can't do that by mortgaging your soul to the cause. We need to remind ourselves now and then why we're putting up with all of this misery. This means pausing the action, reflecting and making the best decisions in a clear-headed fashion for the good of the business, and us! Here's a collection of destructive behaviors and excuses that you will do well to identify, confess to, and correct with something better. To that end I offer you the following:

**I can't afford to take a business day off.**

Absolutely real sounding nonsense that feels like a genuine term in jail. Think about it; you take that day off and this is what will follow:

- financial disaster
- the business will fall apart
- something terrible will happen that you'll need to handle
- your employees will run wild
- service and quality will suffer

Right? No, not right. The truth is that you're scared of being away from your business, so much so that you wouldn't enjoy your day off even if you were crazy, foolish, reckless or selfish enough to actually drop off the grid for just one day. Might as well go to work instead of wasting the day? But that's exactly what you will be doing – wasting a day, a day of your irreplaceable life if you don't take that day off or if you allow the dread of not being at work besiege you. Let's face it – you're become a slave to the place and its tether can stretch long and far, across continents and time zones, into your mind and throughout your shallow sleep. You have to put a stop to this and now.

I challenge you to clear your schedule on at least one weekday per month, and do whatever you would do if work no longer existed in your life. Call it a sick day, a day that you cannot help but take away from work, because you are sick, sick of an existence ruled by stress and toil. Will the business really implode? Will you truly go broke due to a single day absence? Are your employees so unreliable that they'll rob you blind and drive away your customers? You know better than that and you need to experience the reality of it, too. You must take some time to recuperate from your steady decline as a business leader. Drain the well of its source and you have a dry, empty chasm. You do your business, customers, employees and yourself no favors working this way, so put an end to it. Be happy now and then – require it of yourself.

### **I'm too personally disorganized to manage this place right.**

That may be true – it certainly is with many of my clients. You don't set priorities or make meaningful to-do lists. Even if you did you'd probably have trouble sticking to it, with every distraction and thought pulling you far off course. Days become lost in a sea of indecision and the unexpected. You stack things in piles, including important papers, and misplace some of them. Phone calls don't get returned in a timely manner and emails are ignored. Your employees, kids and spouse are losing patience with your broken promises and excuses. All of this pressure and confusion places your business, your life, in an unhappy state of disarray.

If this sounds familiar then you may be suffering either from a known or unknown case of attention deficit disorder (ADD), are just plain habitually disorganized, or both – the latter being one consequence of the former. Many people exist for years with undiagnosed focus challenges that limit life and create expensive problems in business and career. But there is plenty that you can do about it!

- Begin by reading *Driven to Distraction*, by Edward M. Howell, M.D. and John J. Ratey, M.D. (1995 Touchstone Books, Simon & Schuster). It's an excellent insight into the mind and possible detection of ADD. My own self-evaluation revealed a high propensity for the disorder. No wonder my messy desk drives me to distraction!
- Consult with a physician to inquire about diagnosis and possible treatment. Maybe you're just overloading yourself with work and responsibility, but you could be too easily overloaded. It's worth finding out where you stand.
- Get a life coach. I love these people! They help you sort out the necessary from the trivial, prioritize tasks, schedule action items and completion dates, and lift the massive burden of crisis-causing inefficiency from your life. A life coach, with your permission, will stay on top of you and stop your unconscious slide back into patterns of procrastination and overwhelm. Think it's expensive to hire one? Just calculate the cost of the way you go about your business now!
- Begin to delegate tasks that you think only you can handle reliably. I challenge you to select one or two seemingly critical but, actually small and mundane items from your daily list and assign them (with instructions!) to someone else on your team or in your family. Let someone sort your mail, check your voice messages daily and create a list of people you need to call, pre-screen job candidates, or even remind you of things that you typically forget to do. It's amazing how these accumulations of minute activities can pile up into a heavy load of attention-stealing demands. But, just like losing body weight, go pound-by-pound and don't try for a quantum cure – you'll only achieve another form of self-defeating delay.

### **But my wife and I find business talk at home exciting!**

Sure you do, new ideas and plans are always stimulating. But, how is your romantic and sex life? Are you discovering that it actually takes business talk to get passion going again, and yet, not necessarily physical passion? Are you too exhausted, conditioned or distracted to maintain the level of intimacy you once enjoyed not-so-long-ago? Has virtually everything in your life together taken on a commercial or opportunity flavor? You may not realize it but business can insidiously replace the emotional inspiration once supplied in a romantic relationship. It can steal all of your energy, creativity and attention. It can even become the cementing bond between couples without their awareness of it, until too late, that is. I've witnessed this with the many husband/wife or committed partners I've consulted over the years, noticing their enthusiasm spike whenever business potential or conflict is discussed. Otherwise they wilt into a pattern of lethargy and energy conservation that dulls the landscape of their love life. I warn my clients not to sacrifice their relationships on the altar of commerce – a sad result for the hope of bettering lives traded in this Faustian deal. You could easily discover that the only chance to find romance is to look beyond your now business partner for it. You do not want to let neglect to progress that far!

With a little commitment and a lot of discipline you can begin to remove many of the emotional impediments and diversions that often lead to hollowed out relationships. Again, your life coach may come in very handy here when creating and sticking with a fundamental change in established behavior. Change isn't always easy and old habits can die hard, so, get some assistance if you feel it would help. No matter how you go about it, allow the following to be central to your plans:

- Shut off working at home by a set hour daily with 7:30pm being the absolute cutoff point if you must finish late. This means no talk or activity related to the job or company – none. Require the remaining hours of the day to be spent on family, friends, reflection, or just relaxing. Make a list of all the small things you used to enjoy doing before business swallowed you, then begin doing some of them. Remember when you and your spouse made weekly dates a priority? You love to dance and go to the movies, not that anyone would imagine that from observing you now...chained to the home computer night after night.
- Plan and commit to at least one romantic experience -- an entire day -- every month with your mate, partner, or current interest. Go somewhere fun and new, somewhere that will create new feelings and observations, not just a rehash of a well-worn favorite place. The idea is to get away, far away, from ritual and habit and open up to adventures that allow you to grow and revive your interest in life and in each other.
- Take at least two one-week vacations annually. These breaks don't have to be expensive but you must stop thinking of the mere time away from business as an expense as well. Stop talking yourself out of living the life you are slaving away to build. Want a little more push? Drive by a cemetery – you'll get all the inspiration you'll need, right there.

### **My employees are some of my closest friends.**

Tenderhearted mistake! This is something akin to believing that a parent can become their son's or daughter's best friend – there are just certain lines in relationships that shouldn't be crossed and this is one of them. Why not, you ask. You get along pretty well and those business-generated friendships make you feel good as a manager, safer in that difficult role. This is all fine and well until a perceived slight, power struggle or pay issue develops between you -- and it will, inevitably. Business (employer/employee) friendships expose you to potential extortions, large and small. They take the form of caving in to special work privileges, exceptions to company rules, or testing the limits of acceptable performance. You know that you should draw the line but are afraid to damage the relationship. Worse, you've become dependent on a person or persons who you've allowed to know things about the running of your business that you don't – effectively handing them ominous power over your security and company well-being. It's even possible that you've made the gravest error if you have disclosed (in utter confidence, of course) some dark and dangerous secrets that could be seriously damaging in the wrong ears. All of this makes you guilty of management double standards, vulnerable to theft and embezzlement, and short on employee respect. You may possibly find yourself a prisoner of your own permissiveness in your own business – a sentence duly earned and delivered. Again and again I am trying to extricate my clients from the entrapment of a soured employer/employee friendship – and they can become a bitterly mean, hard shackle to unlock.

If you haven't gone too far in this direction yet, you'll do well to erect some fences along these important boundary lines:

- Be friendly with employees, but not best friends. Friendships can change as quickly as the weather with sunshine turning to a hard rain in an instant. Never offer more intimacy than you're prepared to lose, particularly when you can't simply walk away from it as you might a more conventional relationship.
- Do not allow *anyone* in your business to possess critical knowledge or data that you don't have access to. A bookkeeper, spa director, or even a concierge could do a lot of damage by carrying away the secret to your computer files or bank account! Protect your slumbering self.
- Never, ever, *ever* let an employee/friend see or hear about your dirty laundry. Of course *you* would never do this but more than a few spa owners fail to report all cash sales, pay people "under the table" or gripe about one employee to a trusted other. You talk about setting yourself up for trouble! Here you have a fully loaded cylinder pointed right at you using ammunition that you provided. Just one little call to the IRS or labor board and you'll be in it deep. Disgruntled employees keep those phone numbers keyed into their speed dial.
- It's an employee's cherished right to dish on you in their private time – an essential steam vent – and no amount of hugs and kisses will deprive them of it. So don't fool yourself by

trying to get around this. No matter how close you may feel to your employees they are constantly aware that you have the power to fire them and this disparity alone, the taproot of Marx's glass struggle ideology, ever serves as a natural barrier between individuals in the workplace. Find your true friends where true friends are found – beyond the snap of a time clock.

As in smoking, exercise, losing weight or reclaiming your life – it's never too late for positive change. Your work addicted, love deprived, sold-out existence is always up for a better game even if the task seems daunting now. Besides, the spiritually and emotionally depleted are not strong candidates for anything resembling business success. So live a little – it won't kill you.

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