



Changing How We Think About Our “Full Plate”

Description

We live in complex, chaotic times, and it can feel like we’re busier than we’ve ever been before. Everybody’s got a full plate. When I speak to groups and ask, “Whose plate is chock-full right now?” 100 percent of the hands go up.

This is not a new response. As long as I have been doing this work, no one has ever said, “I don’t have a full plate.” Our plates have always been full, and most likely they always will be.

Leaders are full-plate people. It’s because almost all of them are high performers, and high performers keep their plates full. They want to get things done. When something comes off the plate, something else goes on it. This is an issue only when a leader doesn’t realize this truth about themselves.

When I ask the full-plate question and see every hand go up, I usually say, “I know you. You’re all achievers. And you probably have in the back of your mind that as soon as you get this project done (or as soon as the Joint Commission leaves, or as soon as the budget process is finished), you won’t have a full plate.”

I then add, “But trust me: As soon as those projects are over or those milestones have passed, you will find something else to put on your plate. It is just what leaders do.” What this means is you will never complete your to-do list. That’s okay. But if you have this fantasy that you’re going to complete the to-do list, you will be frustrated when you don’t. The good news is you can reduce your own stress or anxiety by clarifying expectations. One of my favorite sayings is that our serenity is directly proportional to our expectations.

When we expect our plate to always be full, it gets easier. I sometimes quote what author M. Scott Peck wrote in his book *The Road Less Traveled*, “Life is difficult...Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult.”

So, once we realize and accept that we will always have a full plate, the question changes. Rather than, “How can I not always have a full plate?” we can begin to ask, “How do I manage the plate? How do I prioritize what’s on it? How do I know when it’s time to focus more on certain parts of the plate and less on other parts?”

Another “plate” visual comes to mind here: Remember those old TV shows when a guy would spin a bunch of plates on sticks? The goal was to keep them all spinning. He knew there were certain ones he had to spin all the time and certain ones that could wobble a bit. He had to be strategic to keep the whole thing from crashing down.

We can be strategic with our full plates also. A lot of times, it’s about periodically asking ourselves some questions. For instance:

- *Are some things on the plate “main courses” (A items) that are more important than others? Are some things side dishes (B or C items) I can get to if I have time?*
- *Am I trying to do too much myself? What can only I do? What can I do in partnership with somebody else? What can I teach somebody else to do?*
- *Is it okay if this doesn’t happen?* Almost every organization I talk to is in the process of reducing expenses. An exercise they all go through is, “What would happen if we didn’t do this?” Usually this leads to, “We’ll be okay if we don’t do it,” or maybe, “We’ll be okay if we don’t do it like we used to do it.”
- *Is everything on the list truly value-added? Can we do fewer things and still hit our goal?* For example, instead of ten creative ideas, will six ideas well executed get the job done?
- *Is there an action I can take right now that will move things forward enough that I can move on to something else?*
- *Do I have a good grasp on time frames and due dates? What on my plate has to be managed first? What can wait?*

A tip to go with this last question: Before you add something new to your plate, clarify, “How urgent is this? What’s the timeline?” Train your employees to say, “Before you walk away, when do you need this?” Often people overreact when the boss gives them a new assignment. Their intentions are good, but assuming everything is urgent can create a lot of stress. Remember: Clarifying expectations brings serenity.

Also, keep your project list in front of your boss. Teach employees to do this, too. Priorities often change, and items even come off the list, and leaders forget to mention this. When they see your list, it reminds them to say, “Oh, you can mark that item off.”

Full plates and long to-do lists will always be with us. They’re just part of the life of a leader. Yet how we think about them matters. When we can shift our perspective and think in terms of managing them rather than eliminating them, we can control the stress they bring and move a little closer to serenity.

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