

The Stuff of Life

IF WE HAVE trouble getting to what we want to do today, maybe it's because of all that we committed to yesterday. Old commitments block new opportunities. Many of us are not very good at sorting things out in the moment, and just saying 'no.' Because we are imaginative or afraid or ambiguous or we wish to please, we commit our tomorrows today and reduce our options then. Take a look at your calendar. How much time have you saved for yourself next week? Who decides where your time will be invested?

Think for a moment about something you would like to be doing, but can't because you don't have the time. If you can't think of anything, then this column is not for you. For other readers, it might be a program you want to develop or a client you want to work with. You are not doing that work because of something else you chose to do, or maybe someone else helped you choose. Search your recent past for decisions that you made that are taking your time in the present. Most of us are loaded with commitments that if avoided would have freed the time we need now.

And I think this way of operating is especially true for people in HRD. Our underpinning motivation to do this kind of work (learning, helping others, expanding human potential, and so forth) encourages our receptivity toward requests for our help. We say 'yes' to work that we ought to say 'no' to. If somebody likes us and thinks we might help, we are pushovers: "Well, of course I had to help...I just couldn't say no to her...I really didn't have the time, but they really wanted me to." Or if we have an intervention we are particularly good at and we see the opportunity to provide it again: "It's just so much fun to do! And people really like it! I just had to do it!"

If you are stressed out about how much you are doing, take a look at your reasons for taking on too much work. How does all this activity feed your work or life goals?

As you move through life, you accumulate stuff. You gather clothes,

appliances, habits, friends, obligations, skills, exercise equipment, talent, wisdom, hair dryers, maintenance contracts, and experience. When you move, all of this stuff moves with you. And mentally you don't leave it at home when you go to work; it comes to work with you! Imagine carrying all your stuff around with you in a suitcase, a backpack, a wagon, or a truck.

We each move through this world carrying all of our stuff. Why? Because it could be useful to us in getting somewhere; it might help us reach some life destination. Perhaps it's a model or method we will need at work, so we keep it handy. Or it might be an image of ourselves that

■ *How do all your various activities feed your work or life goals?* ■

we are busy presenting, or our most recent notion of creating change in organizations or people. All of this is in our inventory of stuff we carry to help us get somewhere in life. It makes sense to occasionally review all that we are carrying, to make sure that we have what we need and are not burdening ourselves by carrying what we don't need.

I've created a simple and slightly silly way of sorting out stuff. In real life, it doesn't work quite as easily as what you see here, but this model might stimulate you to think about what you have accumulated along the way to work and life success. Imagine sorting everything you have into four stacks:

- ▶ don't need and don't have
- ▶ need and don't have
- ▶ need and have
- ▶ don't need and have.

Don't need and don't have. This is the stuff in airline magazines, catalogs, and infomercials. This is all the stuff you have not acquired and can get

along without. If we were to stack up these potential acquisitions, they would be 148 stories high, dwarfing the other three stacks. Some of the stuff in this stack tries to seduce us into moving it to one of the need stacks. Its contents are best dealt with by saying aloud, "I don't have it and I don't need it!" Chant this repeatedly until the spell is broken. Stay out of this stack. Everything that is here belongs here. And you don't. (I know, there are some things that you don't have or need, but you *want!* This is not a good enough reason. More about wants later.)

Need and don't have. This is the stack of potential growth and real vulnerability. Not having something needed means your journey will be harder, or you will have to acquire what's needed along the way, or live with the consequences of not having it. For example, if you need a car and don't have one, you will be hampered in your movements. The same applies to skills, or traits, or experiences, or money you need and don't have. But be careful: Do you really need it? For example, do you need a car or do you need transportation to work? Identifying the need has profound implications in action.

Need and have. This is the stack we are all trying to build. The stuff here eases our burden. This stack contains the skills, attitudes, learning, and resources that you have accumulated to make this trip. Everything here helps you move forward. It's not heavy but uplifting, and allows us to move toward our destination with confidence. Examples include having the skills you need to do your work, or needing and having financial security.

Don't need and have. This is excess baggage. You can find much of it filling your closets, your bathroom drawers, and maybe much of your calendar. This is all the stuff that we keep, maintain, and choose not to discard. It includes old fitness plans, clothing, relationships, and worn-out stories you continue to tell about yourself. Most of it works; you just don't need it! Much of it you never needed, even when you acquired it.

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Get It All Now!

All of it, by definition, is a weight you carry into your future. This is where to thin out your obligations, your inventory of useless stuff, to make room for the need stacks. As long as you choose to carry all this stuff, you handicap yourself in moving toward your destination. Inventory this stack and give it away, or quit it, or have a garage sale. You will notice the freedom and lightness that comes with cleaning it out.

The two stacks to focus on are don't need and have and need and don't have. Reduce what you invest in the first and you free yourself to grow in the second. Clarity about what you need and do not have makes you more aware when the possibility of getting it comes along. And when you get it, your need and have stack increases—which is the purpose of all this sorting.

Notice that the word want is not used to define these four stacks. Wants are the confounding overlay on what we need; wants don't necessarily have anything to do with needs. Pursuing a want that is not a need leads to large stacks of don't need and have and we end up carrying all this stuff around. If you *want* a new car; you don't *need* it; you bought it and now you have it. Money, time, and energy are going to this new car for years, resources that could have been used on something you need. The don't need and don't have stack is loaded with potential wants. Indulge yourself and you will pay. Instead, find stuff you need and don't have that you also want; invest there.

You can use this model in relation to your next consulting project, or on a training design, or your HRD career, or your entire life. This simple process can remind you of your purpose and what you are doing about it.

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