

Stop wasting
your
time and energy!



SELF-MASTERY AND THE WAYS WE WASTE OUR TIME AND ENERGY

Time is a resource. And leaders never have enough of it. There are staffs to be managed, customers to be coddled, finances to be figured out, superiors to satisfy, and the partner and kids at home to be pleased and loved. The list goes on and on. Time's a wastin'. Yet, we rarely think about the things we do on automatic which waste time and energy. I'm not talking about watching TV, resting, having a glass of wine, or playing with the kids. Those activities are not wasteful. They are useful for both pleasure and energy renewal. Do them well.

It's the complaining, blaming, worrying, making excuses, and rationalizing that concern us. Procrastinating is another—too often I go shopping or clean the kitchen floor when I should work on this article. Another is analyzing for the 30th time how I'll talk my editor into giving me a bigger advance. Arguing and trying to convince are too rarely useful to be anything but energy sponges.

Then there's pretending—pretending we know something we don't, pretending we're okay when we're not, pretending we're cool when we don't feel cool at all. The list goes on. These energy sponges are unproductive activities that soak up time and energy. What are yours? Get out a pen and paper (or your mobile device) and make a list. If you can't think of many, ask your buddy at work or your partner and kids at home. They know.

The complexity of life in today's organization and the pace of change is ever-increasing. Successful leaders must make efficient use of their energy and time and minimize behaviors that waste them.

Why do we have energy sponges if they are such a waste? At some point in our lives, they helped us accomplish whatever goals were at hand. Your whining got you that puppy your parents didn't want you to have. Through procrastinating someone else took out the garbage. When you argued long enough, your parents gave in.

As adults we all have automatic habits that are no longer useful. To minimize them we must be aware of them. Then we can, with intention and deliberation, choose a different focus for our energy. We discussed these steps in "Self-Mastery: Choice, the Foundation of Leadership." Beware, though, trying to get rid of your sponges. They will never go away. They are a permanent part of our behavioral repertoire and will show up anytime we are under stress or have become too complacent. What we can do, however, is dramatically shorten the time we spend with them.

Here's a two-part exercise that will help you increase consciousness of your sponges and see alternative choices. You will need pen and paper or someone to do the exercise with. We'll use the story of Dr. Jane Parker who owns and runs a sizeable data-management organization to make our points.

APPRECIATIVE USE OF SELF EXERCISE

1. Think of a time when you were at your very best. Tell or write the story including what it was like. Was it exciting, anxiety-producing, peaceful?

Dr. Parker told of a meeting with her board of directors. Her management style was being challenged by a new member as being too soft. In the past, she automatically met such a sexist suggestion with the heat of her rather short temper. That day, however, she took a breath and replied softly, "Maybe, it's my softness that generated a revenue increase of 75% this year." The challenger had nothing to say in reply.

Regarding what it was like to be at her best, she said she was surprisingly calm and centered. She also said the way she responded was very effective though it cost her the ego-satisfaction that a blast of her temper would have given her.

2. Share or write the beliefs you have about being at your very best? For example:
 - a. Does being at your very best depend on certain circumstances? A full moon? An emergency? The time of day?
 - b. Does it depend on other people? For what?
 - c. Does it depend on your succeeding or not?

Dr. Parker thought her upbeat mood allowed her to forego her automatic anger at the sexism she so often encounters. Whether her reply ended his sexism or not wasn't an issue for her. She was pleased with herself and her response with no expectation that "the jerk would stop being a jerk."

Share with someone or write about: Can you be at your very best whenever you choose? If not, why not? If you can, why?

Dr. Parker's initial thoughts were that being in a good mood and being in the midst of a very successful year had been important to her being at her best. She was sure she couldn't be at her best all the time. When reminded that the question was about choosing to be at her best whenever she wanted to, she said she had always believed that people were in charge of their own choices. In that case, she could see no reason she couldn't be at her best anytime she chose to. She sat straighter and smiled as she said that.

ENERGY SPONGE EXERCISE

1. Make a list of as many of your energy sponges as you can think of.

Dr. Parker listed...

- a. Worrying
- b. Over-analyzing
- c. Procrastinating
- d. Blaming herself
- e. Holding anger in

She had added anger to her list. Emotions are not energy sponges. However, what we do with our emotions can be. Using anger for hostile behavior can be a sponge as can holding anger in. The latter can cause headaches, depression, and passive aggression. Jane added holding-anger-in to her list. She gets migraines to prove it.

2. Rate on a scale from one to ten, with one being least problematic and ten being most problematic, each of your energy sponges.

Dr. Parker rated her sponges:

- Worrying 6
- Over-analyzing 5
- Procrastinating 4
- Blaming herself 8
- Holding anger in 5

3. Share or write about a recent time when you were doing your highest rated, most troublesome sponge. Write about this situation, how it felt, and how long that energy sponge lasted.

Dr. Parker needed to have a conversation with her vice president of administration about the growing number of hints she'd been getting about his uncooperative demeanor with other vice presidents. She worried about offending him and possibly losing him. She had put off talking to him for over a month. She felt anxious and blamed herself for not working more closely with him, not saying something to him sooner, and for procrastinating when she should be forthright.

4. Write or share what you would do if the situation occurred again, and you were at your very best?

Dr. Parker said she would calmly and politely ask him if he knew about the problem and what he planned to do about it. She said she would speak to him the next day.

5. Put what you would do if you were at your very best into action.

At our next meeting, she said all of her energy sponges started up the morning she planned to confront him. However, she focused on her ability to choose action rather than continue with her sponges. She told him what she had been hearing. He said he did not know about the complaints and that he would speak with each of the vice presidents about how he might be more helpful. She scheduled an executive staff retreat to focus on how the team might improve its communication and effectiveness as a follow up that would benefit the entire team.

There isn't enough time in a day for leaders to satisfy all of the demands that their role and life offers them. Time and energy are too precious to use much of them doing things that are neither productive nor satisfying. Mastery of how we use our own energy is the first place we must look to improve our efficiency and effectiveness. From there we can help those that have chosen to follow us to master themselves as well. A great formula to create great teams and organizations that will thrive and prosper!

Our next "Practical Wisdom for Leaders" will be about the three keys to self-mastery. Conscious-use-of-self can cover an enormous range of how we might better choose how we interact with the people and world around us. The Three Keys article will narrow that range considerably to intention, connection, and ego management. All three are crucial to effective leadership.