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New Year's Resolution 2012 – 'Unplug'

By Marge Combe

I coach people for a living. My clients are smart, successful executives in for-profit and not-for-profit businesses. There are certainly themes in what is voiced as coaching needs, like improving skills for dealing well with people and setting good strategy. But in the past three years I've been struck by one issue that arises – and at times even dominates – the coaching conversations with every single client.

"I really don't know how to keep up with my e-mail. I'm doing it late into the night and still not keeping up." "I can't get away from my job any more. I'm phoned and e-mailed and texted and chatted 24/7." "I'm constantly swamped and feel bombarded by all the technology I have to respond to." The emotions attached to these statements are not just frustration, but also never-ending anxiety, hopelessness and a sense of failure. "Other people must have ways to handle this; why can't I figure it out?" moaned Jeff, shame and defeat in his voice.

Kind of good news, Jeff. No one else has figured it out, either. But kind of bad news, too. We've all internalized self-expectations of staying on top of our jobs, and when our jobs pursue us into our homes and our gyms and our cars via technology, staying on top becomes a mechanical effort to get stuff off our virtual desks. This need to feel we've 'stayed on top' means we respond instead of ponder. Think time eludes us, whether it was intentionally set aside or just brewed in our heads while we did a workout or read a book. Are we really 'staying on top' of the job when all we're doing is reacting to its dinging and beeping demands, not reviewing, synthesizing, planning, visioning?

In the January 1, 2012 New York Times, writer Pico Iyer quotes research that found that the average office worker today enjoys no more than three minutes at a time at his or her desk without interruption, and that the average American spends at least eight and a half hours a day in front of a screen. Where's the ponder time in this picture of our lives?

Marshall McLuhan, a leading prophet of the electronic age, spoke about extensions and amputations. Every extension of technology, he said, has a countervailing 'amputation'. For example, the extension of warfare technology via guns created a countervailing 'amputation' of men's archery skills. He warns that our fascination and excitement about extensions often blinds us to the amputations that occur. One of the questions he suggests considering about technology extensions is, "What does the technology reverse into if it is over-extended?" He perhaps prophesied an answer to that question about our current proliferation of

communication technology when he said, “When things come at you very fast, naturally you lose touch with yourself.”

So how can we say ‘whoa!’ to the over-extension of communication technology into our lives, and regain touch with ourselves; reintroduce time to ponder and make sense of the messages, not just react to them?

Pico Iyer offers the surprising insight of none other than the technology firm Intel, when it offered to its employees four uninterrupted hours of quiet time once a week, with the requirement that they not use the phone or e-mail. Sounds like heaven, doesn’t it?

Even if we can’t create a company-wide culture of creating time to ponder, we can do it personally.

Simple discipline helps: reviewing e-mails only twice a day instead of continually, asking to not be copied on e-mails unless a response is necessary, waiting for an e-mail exchange to be bantered back and forth before weighing in.

Quiet time helps: turning off or silencing the smart phone when you get home, reading articles or books instead of watching television, taking a walk. Silence counteracts the anxiety of media bombardment. From Pico Iyer: “A series of tests in recent years has shown...that after spending time in quiet rural settings, subjects ‘exhibit greater attentiveness, stronger memory and generally improved cognition. Their brains become both calmer and sharper.’ More than that, empathy, as well as deep thought, depends (as neuroscientists like Antonio Damasio have found) on neural processes that are inherently slow.” Far from making you a failure in your job when you unplug, you enhance your ability to be effective.

Being bold and clear helps: letting people know you won’t be responding to them on weekends, telling people you have booked quiet time on your calendar, indicating that you’ll only respond to e-mails or texts twice a day. Professional courtesy suggests you let people know what to expect from you in an age of endless expectations. Setting boundaries is a hallmark of an effective leader – and has the added benefit of putting forward a potential new norm for others.

As good for your health as diet and exercise are peace – and peace of mind. So among your New Year’s resolutions – maybe at the top of them – should be one to unplug.

About the Author

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Marge Combe is a coach/consultant with Vernal Management Consultants, LLC (VMC), a firm specializing in the professional development and effective business practices of leaders and leadership teams (www.vernalmgmt.com). VMC currently coaches a number of leaders and business owners in the project management profession, including some in North America, Europe, the Middle East, and South America. Marge joined VMC in 2008 after more than 35 years in portfolio management, strategic planning and large-scale change management for Northwestern Mutual and Whirlpool Corporation. She has leveraged that experience and a passion for coaching and mentoring into a consulting and leadership coaching role with special focus on her roots: the people side of change management, planning, and project management. Marge is a former PMI board director and Chair of the Strategic Planning and Program Alignment Committee. She was instrumental in shaping and leading a Fortune 500 Project Management Benchmarking Forum. She is certified in coaching through Lominger International and in emotional intelligence through the Institute for Health and Human Potential. She was the 2007 recipient of the Woman of Influence Award for mentoring. Marge can be contacted at Mcombe@vernalmgmt.com.