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The Freedom in Boundaries

Skills and Professional Development



It seems antithetical to say that there is freedom in structure. We tend to see boundaries as ways to keep us confined, restricted, or chained. In reality, the exact opposite is true. When we live willingly with certain checks and balances, we allow the most important things to have our undivided attention, while leaving trivial matters to fall by the wayside.

I've tried to avoid structure all my life. I'll admit it; I've been a world class rebel. I wanted what I wanted when I wanted it. While I was willing to work to achieve my goals, I didn't want to be told how or when to do so. But over the course of the last four or five years, I've learned that structure is actually my friend. By putting boundaries around my time, talents, and treasures, I've freed myself to focus on life's priorities.

I learned this lesson by mistake when I went back to school after spending over a decade outside academia. Before making this decision, I enjoyed a lively recreational life with my husband and worked full time. Time management isn't a concern when you aren't busy. The more you want to accomplish, however, the more important time management becomes.

While in school, it was easy to stay focused on the coursework and the deadlines provided. I simply had to schedule the rest of my life around those deadlines, or schedule assignments around the other events on my calendar. After graduation came the real challenge. I found myself with a host of other goals, unrelated to school, with plenty of time to accomplish them, yet I made no real progress.

It became obvious that I needed to get a grip on my time management. As one month turned to two, my list remained static because I did not give it enough attention. I set out to take control of my time. I accepted that I actually needed structure in my life and that I would thrive in an environment surrounded by deadlines. My challenge, however, was holding myself accountable to the boundaries I set for myself.

Daily steps, all entered on my calendar, gradually led me to my ultimate objective. While I don't always get everything done on my list, it is there to remind me what I'm working for. Before, there was just a nagging feeling that I was supposed to be doing something. I didn't really have a good grasp of what I should be doing at any particular time.

My epiphany came as I found myself handling a host of errands with a friend. She complimented the fact that I was actually keeping a running list of tasks to stay organized. I simply replied: "It keeps me focused and on track." I attempt to schedule everything, including meal times and getting dressed. I take a few minutes at the start and end of each day to both reflect on the past and plan for tomorrow. I think of the things I am grateful for, including the people and things in my life. I acknowledge my wins and note lessons learned.

When I look at my calendar, sometimes I get overwhelmed because every minute of every day has a purpose. However, that feeling is nothing compared to the chaotic stress I feel when I don't have a tangible agenda to get done.

Don't think for a minute that all of this planning means a lack of spontaneity. To the contrary, I just have to schedule it. There is more than enough time for fun, work, relationships, and relaxation.

Making a ritual out of appreciating my time has made it possible for me to get things done efficiently. While we all have the exact same number of minutes available to us each day, it is those of us who are able to prioritize that ultimately make the most of the time we are given.

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Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the *Lead the Way* column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.