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The power of saying no and five ways to find focus in life

We're always thinking about new markets that we could enter, but it's only by saying no that you can concentrate on the things that are really important. —Steve Jobs, Business Week, 2004

We live in a society where there is constant pressure to say yes — to everything. Whether it is agreeing to participate in a trade association when we are already tapped out, multi-tasking our way through our daily commitments or regularly working seven days a week, the perpetual flurry of activity in our professional and personal lives becomes a significant distraction at a certain point, making it increasingly difficult to focus on anything in any meaningful way.

There are many reasons why we all need to make a more concerted effort to stay focused in the moment on a particular goal or task. As strange as it may seem, we ultimately save time and are more productive than if we try to accomplish several things at once. This is because our focus enables us to perform at a higher level. Since our minds can only hone in on a limited amount of information and process only so much at once, having focus enables us to separate the wheat from the chaff and to reach more effective, pointed solutions to various issues and problems.

When we are at peak performance, we find the activities in which we participate much more fulfilling and rewarding, and those around us will take notice. As a result, we are more highly motivated in all that we do. When we are focused, we also are able to create a space during the course of each day to take the downtime we need so that we can rest and rejuvenate,

which helps us to have greater overall satisfaction in our lives.

Being focused also significantly enhances our creativity. While many of us lawyers do not typically view ourselves as the creative type, we must not underestimate its importance to our clients. In a world of flat demand for legal services, one of the keys to differentiation is an ability to think outside the box and come up with unique solutions that others have not thought of. When we focus, those answers come to us much more readily.

Indeed, different parts of our brain are responsible for creating on the one hand and communicating, reading and consuming information on the other. If we get distracted and constantly switch from one part of our brain to another, we actually hinder the optimal performance of the whole and cannot think as effectively as we otherwise would.

In addition to making us more creative, focus can enable us to make our businesses more profitable over the long run by helping us to stay on course with what really matters. If we focus our energy on pursuing those opportunities which are best for us, we can take the time that is needed to think them through thoroughly and thoughtfully. This will maximize the chances that our efforts will ultimately be successful.

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However, if we lack focus and proceed in more of a scattershot fashion, we will confuse our clients as to where our true strengths ultimately lie. Practical speaking, the approach of

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"being everything to everybody" does not generally work and in fact may make us lose credibility, with our audience taking the view that we can't possibly be that good at everything.

Besides the advantages of adopting a task-based focus, there are a number of other benefits to keeping focused in our lives. I call these the Five Focus to Dos:

Focus on what you love. This sounds really easy, but when we take a closer look at the things we spend our time and energy thinking about, it becomes clear that we often focus on what irritates and causes frustration rather than on those things that make us feel good. We will be happier, more powerful and effective in our lives if we focus on the things that we love whenever we can.

Focus on what really matters. How often do we find ourselves spending significant time thinking about things that in the grand

scheme do not mean much at all? This can be anything from staying in a professional role that you have long since outgrown or chasing that piece of business that will not meaningfully add to your skill set or your organization's bottom line.

We all need to be more intentional about our personal energy and resource allocation so that we can be at our best when the more meaningful endeavors come around.

Focus on the positive. We hear it all the time — positivity begets positivity. It may sound corny, but it is true, particularly when it comes to client development. You are more likely to generate opportunities of all kinds, including with clients, if you always strive to have a smile on your face and to take a positive step forward into the world.

Focus on being your best. One of the biggest professional lessons I have learned is the importance of always pushing to learn, grow and improve yourself. Striving to be the best you can be and to diversify your skill set is critical, especially in a professional world where supply often exceeds demand. As you work on developing skills, remember to accentuate the positive and play up your strengths as much as possible.

Focus on the well-being of others. Whenever we make decisions, big or small, we must consider how we could potentially affect others. Whether we are making decisions to expand the geographic scope of our businesses or advising a client on a sensitive legal issue, we need to put ourselves in the shoes of others, truly empathize with them and assimilate those beliefs and sentiments into the course of action we ultimately adopt.

Bruce Lee once said, "The successful warrior is the average man with laser-like focus." I wish you every success in finding the warrior within you.