

Boundary Permeability

“Just do it”? Or, “Just say no”. How are we to decide?

When fatigue, dissatisfaction and burnout loom, it may seem all the more important to set limits, not to get caught up in the ambient freneticism of work, to protect time for self and family.

This is important. None of us should take on excess duties simply because we cannot firmly decline them. If you need to get better at defining and asserting limits, let’s talk.

But one advantage in resolutely saying “No” when we choose to is that we might then conversely feel free to say “Yes”. And we don’t want to over-rely on limit-setting just because we’re good at it. The risk is that we’ll be decreasingly engaged with work. And our level of engagement affects our level of satisfaction.

We are all citizens of our own institution and professional group, and engaging fully with them might be considered something of a “duty”. But, ideally, it will also be self-serving. One reason is, we want to see ourselves working for an organization we actively support. Seeing no such efforts from ourselves, we may become disproportionately critical. A budding level of feeling marginal may start to expand. As a rough parallel (perhaps extreme), look at some of our citizens at the state and national level who experience disenfranchisement and who can so easily work up a froth of anger, often allowing rage to distort their perspective. I personally one who tells me he is too angry to vote. It is a bi-directional interaction between unhappiness and disengagement.

Another rationale for more “Yes” is that no one lives by bread alone. If your work-a-day routine, no matter how complex and demanding, remains just that – the work-a-day – might it not start to feel tedious?

We ameliorate this of course, by having a life outside of work – family, friendships, faith, and all our other pursuits. But “outside of work” suggests that our job limits our sources of fulfillment and meaning.

You can probably name physicians who derive great rewards from interests that are related but separate from direct patient care, for instance:

- Writing and other arts
- Leadership (within GHC or in a professional organization)
- Civic activism (lobbying, advocacy)
- Volunteering (locally or afar)
- Education (talking at local schools)
- Research
- Social convening
- Pipeline work (advising, mentoring and precepting at any level)
- Developing innovations

- Piloting new projects
- Guideline committees

The list could go on. The point is, there is much more than just butter to go with your bread. All of these areas permit broader avenues with which to express who you are in this profession and beyond. Not just your compassion and aptitude, but your full range of values and curiosity.

Putting this playfully, if you work in medicine, you might miss half the fun in life. But if you don't work in medicine...you miss the other half.

Say "No" too much, and it may difficult later to alter an entrenched pattern. Say "Yes" too much, and it's never too late to scale back. My own two cents? Generally, err on the side of the latter.

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