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Fire-fighting at the office

I was driving to work one morning many years ago when I felt the first knot of anxiety form in my stomach. It was uncomfortable enough to make me want to turn around and go home. While I loved the industry and the people I worked with, I had come to dread the never-ending stream of urgent situations that seemed to pounce on me the second I set foot in the office. I barely had time to shrug off my coat and drop my briefcase before I was off and running, never getting to my day-to-day duties, let alone answering emails or voicemails.

Things were slipping through the cracks. I was letting people down, not following through on my promises, and I felt further and further behind every day. It was overwhelmingly stressful.

I knew that the majority of "fires" could have been prevented with a little foresight and strategy. The answers seemed so close at hand. But no matter how hard I tried to head things off at the pass, the tide proved too strong and, like a flimsy wall of sand bags, my solutions were easily toppled.

I wasn't the only one at the company running around like this. Fire-fighting was a way of life. It strikes me as humorous when I think about it now, but no one thought twice about calling an "emergency meeting" with 5 minutes notice and no agenda. These meetings entailed grueling hours of circular discussion that rarely resulted in any tangible outcomes. I'm sure we all knew at some level that we had simply elevated time wasting to an art form.

I'd been operating in this environment for almost 4 years and that morning - in the thralls of that first wave of anxiety - I knew I had hit the wall. While I didn't turn around and go home, I did realize that when it comes to health and well-being, there are just some things you don't mess with. I left the company shortly after.

Through a strange series of coincidences that followed, I ran smack into a relatively new profession called "Life Coaching." I couldn't believe that such a profession existed. It was a chance to blend my insatiable passion for learning, growth and human development with a practical framework to help people and businesses overcome the kind of barriers that had thwarted so much of my professional life.

After completing a coach training program, I started coaching individuals and quickly grew to include corporate training and group coaching. During the last decade, I've worked with thousands of individuals across a wide variety of organizations and it's incredibly satisfying helping people avoid the common pitfalls that used to plague me.

Now I can reflect back on my fire-fighting past and understand why it was so tough to escape. What follows are a few simple insights and solutions for short-circuiting the fire-fighting cycle.

Over-riding our Auto-pilot

When we're faced with a panicked employee telling us they need our help RIGHT NOW, most of us have a tendency to go into autopilot, jumping into action without pausing to assess the true level of urgency or whether we're even the appropriate person for the job. The rudimentary message that flashes across our brain is "act now before it gets worse!" Our adrenaline kicks in and we can literally lose our ability to think logically or rationally. This kind of instantaneous reaction probably served us well in our "cave men" days, but not so well in the office.

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It takes practice to be able to stand in the heat and not go into autopilot. I recommend counting to 5 in your head before responding. This might feel like an eternity but it will buy you those few seconds that could spell the difference between staying stuck in the cycle of fire-fighting or taking your power back.

Here are a couple of questions you can ask yourself as you're counting. *"Am I truly the best person to handle this or is someone else better qualified?"* Be honest with yourself!

Also, *"What would happen if I didn't jump into action?"* Obviously if someone has caught fire there's no need to pause, but that's rarely the case.

Short-term gain, Long-term pain

As I discovered, fire-fighting begets more fire-fighting, quickly becoming a downward spiral that can be tough to short-circuit. The fuel that keeps the spiral spinning can be understood through the phrase "short-term gain, long term pain." That's precisely the thinking that gets us into trouble. The focus is only on this moment, blocking our ability to see the further reaching ramifications of our actions.

Short-term thinking can be particularly compelling to people who are already overwhelmed and overworked because jumping into a crisis can provide us with the gain of feeling focused, useful and productive. The fact that we're going to be back at square one the following day doesn't occur to us. It's the same thinking that fuels dieters who think, "oh I'll just have this little piece of cake." All those little pieces of cake add up, and wham - we never lose the weight. Or we never get caught up at work. That's the long-term pain.

Making the shift to "Short-term pain, Long-term gain" requires exercising our awareness muscle and focusing on HOW we're thinking vs. what we're thinking about. It involves being honest with ourselves at a time when we're not in fire-fighting mode about what our short-term gain thinking is costing us (the long-term pain).

Just what is the stress and overwhelm costing you? How much are you truly enjoying coming to work right now under these conditions? You don't have to quit your job to escape the downward spiral. But you might need to endure some short-term pain in the form of flack from your colleagues for not jumping into action like you used to. But if that's the only short-term pain, isn't the long-term gain of peace and calm worth it?

Fire-fighting is still an insidious pattern in a lot of organizations. It causes untold frustration, overwhelm and stress, not to mention the larger productivity loss costs to an organization. If you find yourself fighting fires more than a few times a week, consider putting that energy to better use and volunteer at a crisis centre or even the local fire department.

We all have those moments when we think the world will stop turning without us, but to the best of my knowledge, that hasn't happened yet. And as the quote on my office wall says, "the only thing that is the end of the world IS the end of the world! Now park that fire truck, roll up those hoses and start answering those emails!