Work Simply: Embracing the Power of Your Personal Productivity Style

By Carson Tate

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Make work simple by using the tools and tactics that are right for *you*

Your time is under attack. You just can't get enough done. You find yourself wondering where the hours go. You've tried every time-management system you can get your hands on—and they've only succeeded in making your work *more* complicated.

Sound familiar?

If you sometimes feel you spend more time managing your productivity than doing actual work, it's time for a change. In *Work Simply*, renowned productivity expert Carson Tate offers a step-by-step guide to making work simple again by using the style that works best for you.

Tate has helped thousands of men and women better manage their time and become more productive. Her success owes partly to the realization that most of us fit into one of four distinct productivity styles: **Arrangers**, who think about their projects in terms of the people involved; **Prioritizers**, who are the definition of "goal-oriented"; **Visualizers**, who possess a unique ability to comprehend the big picture; and **Planners**, who live for the details.

In this book, you'll learn

- How to identify your own productivity style as well as the styles of those around you—bosses, coworkers, staff, and family.
- How to select your "tools of the trade" to maximize your effectiveness, from the style of pen you use to the way you decorate your office.
- When face-to-face conversations are more effective than e-mails—and vice versa.
- What it takes to lead the perfect meeting.
- Why a messy desk is right for some, but a disaster for others—and how to tell.

After reading *Work Simply*, you'll come away with a productivity system that

truly and fundamentally fits **you**—and you'll never feel overwhelmed again.

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Editorial Review

Review
"We all work differently, and knowing ourselves is the key to effective time management. In this approachable guide, Carson Tate shows how to embrace your own style—and get more done."

—**Laura Vanderkam**, author of *What the Most Successful People Do Before Breakfast*

"The most important asset you have is time and you can't afford to waste it. Not only is *Work Simply* rich with solid, practical, grounded advice about reclaiming your time, it's infused with heart, warmth, and humanity to boot. You'll want everyone in your office to read it."

—**Sonia Choquette**, author of *The Answer Is Simple* and *Trust Your Vibes at Work*

"A leader's most important resource is time. *Work Simply* helps leaders find that time, so they can maximize the contributions of others and strategize for the future. This book is an invaluable resource."

—**Bill Timmerman**, retired CEO of SCANA

"At a time when work has become overly complicated, with so many of us caught up in busyness, drowning in e-mails, interrupted, distracted, and overloaded with information, Carson Tate has written a guidebook to sanity. Filled with imminently practical advice, this book can help us all learn to work simply and live fully."

—**Brigid Schulte**, author of *Overwhelmed*

About the Author
CARSON TATE, the founder of *Working Simply*, is a nationally renowned expert on workplace productivity. She serves as a consultant, coach, public speaker, and executive trainer for a wide range of Fortune 500 companies and other clients. She lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, with her family.

Visit www.carsontate.com

Introduction

A Road Map to the Book

MY HOPE IS THAT THIS BOOK CAN BE A TOOL THAT SUPPORTS you as you reclaim your life by using personalized tools that can make you more productive, creative—and happy.

To assist you as you read this book, I have included a road map of each chapter to give you an overview of

the chapter contents and help you quickly determine the reading order that suits you best. By following the links from one balloon to the next, you can see how the ideas in each chapter are connected to one another.

You may find that the ideas in certain chapters quickly grab your attention because they relate so closely to challenges you're facing in your daily life and work. Feel free to jump from chapter to chapter as your needs and interests dictate. But I recommend you start by reading chapter 1, "Work Smarter, Not Harder," chapter 2, "Get Ready to Work Smarter," and chapter 3, "What's Your Productivity Style?" to assess the root causes of your stress and to identify your Productivity Style. That style will be referred to throughout the book as you develop your personalized path to productivity.

Prologue

The Day After Christmas

IT WAS DECEMBER 26, 2011—THE DAY AFTER CHRISTMAS. IT was also ten days after the first birthday of my beautiful daughter EC. And I was tired. Very tired. I am sure that's normal for the mother of a little toddler, especially in the midst of the busiest time of the year and a very special birthday celebration to boot. But I couldn't help wondering, "How did I end up sitting on the floor, my bones aching, wondering whether I would be able to stand up again?"

Andrew and I had waited a long time after marriage before deciding to start our family—eleven years, in fact. So when I got pregnant, it came as just another challenge for the two of us in the midst of two very rich, very busy lives. Our careers were well established, our friendships were deep, and we were heavily engaged in our community. I was running one successful business while making plans to sell it, launching a separate consulting practice, and working on a master's degree in organization development, all at the same time. Yes, it felt hectic at times—working on airplanes, juggling homework and client conferences, saying good night to my husband by telephone from halfway across the country. Andrew and I loved our lives just the way they were, and we had every intention of keeping them intact, baby or no.

When the news of my pregnancy was confirmed, I promptly decided that nothing was going to change in my life. In the months that followed, I was true to my word. I did not slow down at all during my pregnancy. I did not cut back on work, school, family, social, and community activities. I even kept up my usual exercise routine, including outdoor runs, right through my thirtieth week.

EC was born on December 16, and the three of us enjoyed a wonderful holiday season as a family in our home in Charlotte, North Carolina. By the end of January, I'd resumed work on my master's degree and was back on an airplane headed to Phoenix to work with a client for a few days. My total time off after EC's birth: less than six weeks. I told myself, "After all, if I don't keep pushing to build my business and make it successful, who will?"

I maintained this pace for the entire first year of EC's life. I finished writing my master's thesis, continued to work with clients across the country, and stayed relentlessly focused on building my consulting business. And of course there was the adjustment to motherhood and the joy of being with EC as often as my crazy schedule would allow. I am lucky to have a wonderfully supportive husband who filled in for me as much as humanly possible—but, yes, it was tiring. There were a few too many nights when my hours of sleep numbered four or five instead of seven or eight; a few too many jet-lagged evenings when I smiled at friends or colleagues over dinner table conversation without really hearing a word they'd said.

By the time December rolled around again, I was running on fumes. I'm sure that family and friends, and

especially Andrew, were wondering when I planned on slowing down. But in my own mind, the plan was clear. "I can't stop now!" I thought. "I have to plan EC's first birthday party, the holidays are coming up, I have a thesis to defend, and clients and employees to entertain."

But occasionally even I had to admit there were cracks showing in the façade. I recall Andrew staring at me in concern one day that December as I was rushing to set the table for a dinner party we were hosting. "You know," he finally said in a gentle tone of voice, "you've missed a few things this holiday season. Are you okay?"

I was deeply shocked. I remember thinking, "He says I've missed a few things! Is that possible? I don't miss things! That's not who I am!" When the denial finally wore off, I admitted to myself that of course he was right. I'd forgotten to send a present to his grandmother in Kentucky. I'd forgotten to call our favorite caterer to plan the holiday party for Andrew's work event until forty-eight hours before the event—during their busiest time of year. I had even missed a conference call with a key client. With all these thoughts whirling in my head, I smiled reassuringly at Andrew, finished laying out the last place setting, and dashed off to tackle the rest of that afternoon's to-do list.

Somewhere inside me I was wondering, "How many balls have I been dropping? And if Andrew has noticed, who else has noticed? Am I really out of control?" But there was no time to focus on questions like those. I kept going at full speed—or maybe a little bit faster.

I made it all the way through Christmas—and then, on December 26, I crashed headfirst into the wall of my so-called life. And that's when I found myself sitting on the living room floor, staring up at the twinkling lights on the tree, oblivious to the sounds of EC and Andrew from some other room in our house, aching with an inner weariness unlike anything I'd ever experienced before.

This was more than just physical fatigue or sleep deprivation. This was soul fatigue. I'd achieved what I'd wanted—to keep my rich and busy life intact while being a new mom too. I'd proven I could do it, and there was satisfaction in that. The image of a successful woman that I'd always carried with me was that of a woman who was smart, driven, professionally accomplished, a Mary Poppins mom, a loving wife, a leader in the community—and someone who made it all look effortless with her calm, impeccable style. That superwoman was the gold standard I'd spent years trying to live up to. And in the past year, in some sense, I'd achieved it.

But now, on December 26, I'd woken up and realized I wasn't living. Not really.

It wasn't just that I was tired—tired of trying to do it all, tired of trying to live up to some bogus notion of success. It was my memory of EC's first birthday, ten days before. As I sat there on the floor, I remembered watching EC blow out the candle on her first birthday cake, which was the size of a small castle—one of those telltale symptoms of working-mom guilt. "Isn't it amazing?" I'd thought. "I have a one-year-old daughter!" And suddenly I'd realized I couldn't remember a single significant detail or moment from her first year. EC was the single most important thing in my world—and I was living a life that left me fundamentally out of touch with her.

Another memory popped into my head—a conversation I'd recently had with one of my closest friends, whose son had recently turned ten. "I only have eight years left with him at home," she'd said with a sigh—"only eight more years." And now I'd just missed the first year of my precious daughter's life. Was I going to blink and find myself suddenly celebrating EC's tenth birthday, wondering where all the time had gone?

That was the moment when everything changed for me. The moment when I knew it was time for me to

reevaluate my life. Time to get real about who I was and who I wanted to be.

I'd spent the past year frantically racing around the country to build my business. And what was the name of that business? Thinking about it, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. My company is called Working Simply. I teach people how to work more simply, more purposefully—to use smart planning to achieve much more with less effort.

Ironic? Yes, painfully so. But appropriate too. A wise woman once told me, "We teach what we need to learn the most." Suddenly I grasped the full truth of that saying. Suddenly I realized how much I had to learn along with my clients.

I am very grateful that I woke up the day after Christmas, looked at my beautiful daughter and amazing husband, and decided that my busyness was no longer serving me. That the drive to achieve my idealized notion of success no longer served me. It came with a cost so high that I no longer chose to pay it.

And I realized that "working simply"—the promise I make to my clients—is about more than simply being efficient, well organized, and productive. It's about moving beyond being busy to reclaim purpose and meaning in life.

In the weeks that followed, I made a number of important changes in my life and work style. As I'll explain later in this book, those changes and others I've made have profoundly enriched my life and my relationships with colleagues, clients, family, and friends. So now my work is more important to me than ever—because I'm on a mission. A mission to change the way we work and to support individuals, teams, and organizations in working smarter, not harder. A mission that I share with my clients.

If you've ever found yourself in the same desperate place I was in that December 26, I hope you'll join me. To get started, please turn the page . . .

1

Work Smarter, Not Harder

I SPENT NINE HOURS IN MEETINGS TODAY. MY E-MAIL INBOX has twenty-five thousand messages. I did not have time to use the restroom until 3 p.m. When I got home, my daughter threw my iPhone across the room and told me she was tired of me always being on it. It takes me hours to fall asleep at night because I cannot turn off my brain. I do not remember the last time I did something fun. I feel overwhelmed, stressed out, and frazzled. *My life is out of control.*

Does this sound familiar? Life in the twenty-first century is busy! We have access to unprecedented amounts of information. We are connected to one another twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Technology has blurred the lines between professional life and personal life. We *can* do more, so we do.

Statistics confirm this reality. About a third of Americans who work full-time say they work more than fifty hours per week. According to the National Sleep Foundation, moms who work full-time and have school-aged children say they spend less than six hours in bed on weeknights. John de Graaf's handbook *Take Back Your Time* reported that dual-income couples say they can find only twelve minutes a day on average to talk to each other.1

This epidemic of busyness comes with a pervasive belief in time management. We tell ourselves that if only we could make better use of downtime (read e-mail in the elevator? At a stoplight? In the line for coffee?) or

multitask more cleverly (I can do this conference call *and* walk the dog *and* pick up the laundry), we'd get ahead of the busyness and reclaim our free time. But the stark reality is that we are not going to become any less busy. The demands on us at work, at home, from our friends, and from our community are not going to diminish—if anything, they are only going to increase. As we work harder and harder, we invest more hours and energy trying to fight a losing battle. Something's got to give.

If you're reading this book, your efforts to solve your busyness problem have probably not paid off. As a result, you're probably feeling frustrated. Or worse—you feel like a failure. Why can't you stop procrastinating? Why can't you get more done? Why isn't your inbox under control?

The truth is that the problem is not you. It is *how* you are trying to overcome your busyness that is the problem.

THE MYTH OF TIME MANAGEMENT

Within weeks of starting my first job out of college, I was sent to the in-house time management training program. Everyone in the entire organization attended the program, which was designed by a world-famous company that specialized in time management strategies. On the first day, the instructor handed out a planner and instructed us to use it to plan our tasks. We were told to prioritize our tasks, using numbers and letters, and record them on the left-hand side of the page in the planner on the date when they were to be completed. If a task was not completed on the designated day, we were instructed to move it to the next day by rewriting it on the left-hand side of the next day's page in the planner.

I dutifully attended the class and used the planner as instructed. But as the weeks went by, I noticed that my productivity hadn't seemed to improve. The time I spent filling out the pages in the planner felt like a needless waste. And I wasn't the only one. As I looked around at my colleagues, I noticed that many of them were really struggling with the system. Busyness, stress, and the feeling of being overwhelmed quickly crept back into our lives.

What happened? Now that we were armed with the secrets of a popular time management program and its specially designed planner, why weren't we all productive, efficient employees living balanced, purpose-filled lives?

The reason is simple: Time management programs do not work. Such programs teach a process focused almost entirely on how to plan and exercise control over the amount of time spent on a specific task or activity—for example, "Set aside adequate time to prepare the quarterly sales report before your meeting with your manager." This stems from the erroneous belief that poor allocation of time impairs performance. But such a one-dimensional approach does not account for the reality of work today, which is multifaceted, fast-paced, and constantly changing.

For example, at many companies, corporate goals are often only broadly specified. When I worked for a hospital foundation, one of the corporate goals was to be the preferred provider for cardiac care in the region. I worked in development and was not directly or indirectly responsible for providing patient care. So how did I organize my time to support the company's goal? I focused on employee giving and exceeding the target for our annual fund, which supported the operational budget of the hospital. As an employee, you must ascertain how to align your individual goals to the larger organizational goals. The numerous demands placed on you require that you not only increase your efforts but, more important, deploy those efforts wisely—otherwise the increased effort is not translated into performance gains.

Time management training is not going to teach you how to work more productively. And that explains why time management training in fact has not been proven to have a direct impact on performance.2

If you want some firsthand evidence, look around you. How many people in your office, in your neighborhood, and at your gym talk about how they are working to manage their time better and then frantically pull out their smartphone and rush to the next project or meeting because they are just so busy?

In my work as a productivity trainer and consultant, I have plenty of opportunities to see for myself how ineffective time management training is.

Andi waited to have her son, Jonah, until later in life, when she was already the managing partner at the largest of the regional offices in the Northeast at one of the top four consulting firms in the country.* After his birth, her world started spinning out of control. In the past, she would work long nights and weekends to catch up on work. With a child to care for, this was no longer possible. Suddenly the crushing weight of her workload seemed heavier than ever, and as an overachiever and perfectionist, Andi now felt as if she was failing to meet her professional and personal responsibilities. She could not remember the last time she'd gone for a run, her inbox was about to explode, she was behind on almost all of her reviews, and she felt completely out of balance. She was composing e-mails with her son in her lap and falling into bed exhausted.

Of course, Andi didn't simply allow these problems to overwhelm her. She did everything she could to fight back. By the time she called me for coaching, she had purchased four books on time management and enrolled in an online seminar. She had written an extensive to-do list, prioritized it using numbers and symbols, and blocked her calendar in fifteen-minute increments to complete her work. When her calendar was triple-booked and she was spending more time creating her to-do list than completing actual work, she realized that time management was not the real problem. She was going to have to radically change the way she thought about her work, how she structured her workdays, and how she took care of herself and her family. Everything had to change—and fast.

As Andi experienced, the problem with time management is that it is inherently limited in its effectiveness. Though she blocked her calendar in fifteen-minute increments, very little of her work could actually be completed in this amount of time and it left her no time to respond to her team's requests for her input, an essential component of her job. Andi's time management seminar did not support her in considering the broader context of her work and the need for a comprehensive overall productivity strategy. She needed a productivity strategy that addressed how she prioritized her work responsibilities, how she planned ways to meet her work objectives, and how she allocated time and effort to enhance her work performance. By contrast, Andi's time management course was myopically focused on increasing her perception of control over time and increasing the time available to pursue her activities. Time management applies a one-size-fits-all solution to a very complex problem whose dimensions are different for every individual.

As Andi realized, time management is not what impacts productivity; rather, it is our *work strategies* that impact our productivity. Andi stopped making assumptions about how long it took to complete each component of the review cycle. Instead, she timed herself so she could accurately plan her work and manage her effort. She got very clear on how she uniquely contributed to the bottom line of the company, and she strategically began saying yes and no to requests for her time and expertise. Andi also realized the importance of self-care; she began running again both for stress relief and to provide time to reflect and think.

PERSONALIZE YOUR PRODUCTIVITY

Andi realized that she worked best when she had a large volume of deliverables that had to be completed within a short time period. The intensity and satisfaction of quickly and accurately completing the work fueled her and heightened her focus. Her analytical, logical thinking preferred working with specific facts and data, and she realized that she got sidetracked when her direct reports came to her with vague or open-

ended questions. Not only was this a source of frustration for her, but it also required a significant amount of time and energy to respond to their needs. Andi knew she was analytical, logical, and fact-based, but it was only upon reflection that she realized that her preferred working style was unique to her way of thinking.

Your work strategy is your approach to planning and allocating effort across goals, activities, and time periods.3 This approach is usually unconscious and unsystematic rather than deliberate and rational. Nonetheless, patterns can be detected, which generally grow out of your individual *cognitive style*—your habitual pattern or preferred way of perceiving, processing, and managing information to guide behavior.4 Since everyone has a distinctive cognitive style, you also need a unique set of work strategies. It is the *personalization* of these strategies to suit our individual strengths, preferences, needs, and talents that enables us to be efficient and effective.

You cannot outwork your busyness using one-size-fits-all time management solutions. The latest app, prioritization tip, or e-mail management strategy will not work if it is not personalized for you, aligned with the way you think and process information. Instead, it will only create even more frustration, inefficiency, and ineffectiveness.

Brigham is the owner and chief creative officer for a large national event management company. He purchased the company from its founder a few years ago and has been steadily growing the firm. Brigham called me a few months ago to say that he was struggling to adjust to the growing demands of being CEO and leading his team. He was constantly in meetings, had little or no time to think, and could not remember the last time he had a creative idea.

When he called me, Brigham had begun using a new task app in the hope that it would fix his feeling of being overwhelmed. I asked him, "What prompted you to switch your task management system?"

"Well, the CEO of my largest corporate client recommended it. So I figured it must work well."

"Well," I asked, "has it worked for you?"

"No," he replied. "I am now more overwhelmed and frustrated than ever."

As I probed deeper, it became apparent to me that the app was a linear, analytical tool that was not in alignment with Brigham's big-picture, holistic, synthesizing style of thinking. Of course it was not going to work! Brigham had squeezed himself into a T-shirt that was three sizes too small. He needed a tailored, personalized solution.

Brigham installed two additional large whiteboards in the company's meeting room and deleted the to-do list app from his iPhone. At the beginning of each week he now goes into the meeting room and mind-maps his weekly to-dos on his two whiteboards. He captures ideas on the boards, and throughout the week he goes back to them frequently to see what he needs to shift to respond to the day-to-day demands and challenges of the business. When he is feeling stuck or overwhelmed he goes into the meeting room, gets a marker, and just lets the ideas flow.

WHY THIS BOOK?

The busyness epidemic symptoms are familiar to most people, but we often fail to fully recognize the price we pay, as individuals and as a society, for accepting a way of life in which we are deprived of our most precious resources—time, freedom, and meaning. The loss of these three resources was a price I was no longer willing to pay. Are you?

If you are tired, frustrated, and desperately searching for a solution to the stress and chaos in your life, you have picked up the right book. *Work Simply* will show you, step-by-step, how to personalize your systems using what is unique about you and the way you think. You will be shown proven strategies and tools tailored to your thinking style. You will learn how to work well with others to actually get work done. You will at long last have a productivity system that truly and fundamentally fits you.

This is what my clients have sought and achieved. They are engaged in meaningful, purposeful work, producing high-quality results. They have exceeded sales goals, led wide-scale corporate change, created new, innovative businesses and products, and doubled the size of their companies in a year. At the same time, they are living life to the fullest: taking ballroom dancing lessons, coaching Little League baseball, drinking wine with friends, and reading best sellers. They are present and fully engaged with their colleagues, significant others, children, and friends.

How is this possible? They have personalized their productivity, embraced their individual Productivity Style (as we'll discuss in chapter 3), followed the simple yet powerful strategies outlined in this book, and leveraged their strengths. And as a result, they are working simply and living fully.

It is time to let go of the traditional approach to overcoming busyness—time management—and instead embrace the power of your unique cognitive style to guide and inform the choices you make about planning and executing your daily work. It is time to get personal about your own productivity.

But before we jump directly into personalizing your productivity, you need to prepare yourself for success. In the next chapter, we'll examine some of the key issues that are standing in your way.

2

Get Ready to Work Smarter

IT WAS LATE AUGUST, ONE WEEK BEFORE THE OFFICIAL START of my freshman year at Washington and Lee University. My parents had just dropped me off at the loading dock outside the gym where I was about to begin the preseason training camp for the university's cross-country running team.

As I climbed into the waiting van and met my veteran cross-country teammates—many of them All-Americans—for the first time, I was suddenly overcome by fear. What had I done? There was no way I could keep up with these women! How could I even hope to compete at a collegiate level? I was convinced I'd made a huge mistake.

But later that morning, as I tied my running shoes and prepared for our first run of the day, I noticed something about my veteran teammates. Each of them had her own prerun routine. Some stretched, others sat on the floor listening to music, and still others did calisthenics—jumps, squats, and butt kicks. Still later, at my first college race, I would see how these routines intensified and shifted when they were preparing for a race.

My teammates had learned the power of preparation. Their prerace routines prepared them for the hard work that was to come and helped them get into a mind-set that enabled them to focus completely on the present moment. During my freshman year, I learned these lessons from my wise teammates, and I continue to apply them today. That's why I believe it is important for you to get ready before we start personalizing your productivity.

ROADBLOCKS TO SUCCESS

To get ready for your journey, it's important to identify the two major roadblocks that may be standing in your way. This analysis will help you to develop strategies to confront these obstacles head-on when they threaten to derail you or undermine your success.

ROADBLOCK #1: LOCUS OF CONTROL

If you are going to get personal about productivity, it means that the solution to the disorganization and chaos threatening your daily productivity starts and ends with you.

Locus of control is a concept developed by psychologist Julian Rotter. It refers to the extent that individuals believe they can control the events that affect them. A person with an *internal locus of control* believes that success or failure is due to their own efforts, while a person with an *external locus of control* believes that success or failure is controlled by other people, environmental factors, chance, or fate.

Where is your locus of control? It's a question most people have never asked themselves—but one that can change your life, as my client Samantha recently discovered.

Samantha is a smart, articulate, seasoned corporate executive who has spent her entire career working with and in Fortune 500 firms as an information technology consultant. She has worked for her current company for three years, managing its information technology support center and training team. Samantha has a great sense of humor, is an avid New England Patriots fan, and is a working mom to a cool twelve-year-old son, Christopher, who stars on the local Little League baseball team.

Samantha had always been successful and delivered exceptional work. Lately, however, things had started to change. She had begun to receive feedback that she was not meeting expectations, she was missing deadlines, and her planning and follow-up on the training programs she ran was becoming inconsistent. Little by little, her clients were beginning to question her ability to effectively support them.

Lack of effort was certainly not the problem. Samantha was working nonstop, texting and e-mailing with her boss on weekends and late into the evening, even while she sat in the stands at Patriots games. She was busy, but not producing the results that she and her organization wanted. As a result, she had been recently passed over for a promotion—something that had never happened to her before.

When we met for our first coaching session, Samantha spent the first part of our day together telling me how everyone else was the problem. The VP of service delivery never responded to her e-mails; her manager just did not understand her big-picture thinking and her strategic ideas; her team was not supportive.

For Samantha, her locus of control was external. Everyone else was impacting her ability to be successful. At the end of day one, I told her, "If you want to achieve results and reclaim your life, you are going to have to choose to do something differently. And that begins with owning that *you* are in control."

It was like watching glass break. The tough strategic consultant exterior shattered and the fragile, sad woman beneath the surface emerged. Samantha burst into tears. "You're right—I know you're right! I was devastated when I didn't get that promotion. I felt like all my long hours and personal sacrifices were for nothing. What a waste—what a waste!" And for several minutes she simply cried.

It was obvious that the two of us had a lot of work to do together. But it was equally obvious that Samantha's commitment to her career was genuine, and that deep down she knew that she was ultimately in control.

You and only you can change your life. You have the knowledge, skills, and ability to create the life you want. But first you must accept this reality and stop expending time and energy blaming the culture, technology, your boss, your organization, your significant other, your children, or your pets for your busyness.

This doesn't mean that you can expect to change the world to suit your personal preferences. As I have learned only too well on my parenting journey, we really and truly have absolutely no control over others. You might know what I am talking about if you have ever tried to get a three-year-old to eat vegetables. Those vegetables are not going to be eaten if that three-year-old does not want to eat them—end of story!

I can't control the behavior of a forty-pound toddler. But I can control myself and the way I choose to respond. When EC chooses not to eat her vegetables, I simply tell her that is her choice—and as a result of her choice, there will be no dessert.

Deep down, Samantha knew that she was responsible for her own success—she just had to be reminded. In the same way, you probably realize that you are responsible for creating the life that you want. Taking conscious ownership of that reality—internalizing your locus of control—is the first step toward personalizing your approach to productivity and thereby conquering the busyness epidemic.

ROADBLOCK #2: GUILT AND THE SHOULDS

I felt guilty. EC woke up soaking wet because, the day before, I had accidentally bought pull-up diapers for boys instead of girls. I'd been rushing through Target, completely distracted and consumed by a pressing deadline at work, and just pulled a box of pull-ups off the shelf, quickly checked out, and rushed home. During the night, poor EC paid the price for my haste and distraction. No wonder I felt guilty the next morning.

Of course, this is just the minor leagues when it comes to my guilt—I can lay it on myself so thick that it is almost paralyzing. Am I working too much and not spending enough time with my family and friends? Am I undermining my health and my family's health because a majority of the food consumed in the household this week came from a takeout box? Am I letting down my community because I said no to that request to serve on a local board? All I need to do is to spend a few minutes pondering questions like these and soon I am deep in the black hole of guilt—insecure, confused, and miserable.

Emily, one of my clients, was also stymied by guilt. She is one of three female managing directors in the investment bank at her financial services firm. She graduated at the top of her class from Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia and rapidly rose through the ranks in the investment bank, consistently exceeding her revenue goals. She was a success!—until her most recent performance review, when she received a performance score of two on a scale of one to five (her first score lower than five).

When Emily called me, she described her work and the personal challenges she was facing working eighty- to ninety-hour weeks and never seeing her husband and family. She told me she felt incredibly guilty and was failing at everything. Then she said to me, "I realized I couldn't go on this way last Sunday afternoon." She continued, "I was at home, for once, and I was with Tom and the kids in the backyard. It was a beautiful spring day, and our baby Molly was practicing her walking on the warm grass, tottering around the way they do. Then she fell down and started to cry, and I jumped up to help her. But she wasn't crying, 'Mommy!' She was crying, 'Daddy!' and holding out her arms in Tom's direction.

"I felt like I had been punched in the gut," Emily said. "My baby didn't even know me—or want me—anymore. I feel like a failure, personally and professionally." Emily was deep in the black hole of guilt and about to break.

There is a very close cousin to guilt that often is just below the surface. I call it the *shoulds*. The shoulds are those voices in your head—you know the ones—saying, "You *should* be doing this," "You *should* like that," "You *should* spend time on this," "You *should* stop doing that," and so on and so forth, endlessly. There were numerous unspoken shoulds contributing to Emily's guilt as well as my own.

The problem with the shoulds is that they can easily become a runaway train, completely undermining your ability to get clear and focused on what you need.

For example, one of my clients—Colin, an estate attorney with both a JD and MBA and enough real-world experience to make him a formidable adversary if you are in the unfortunate position of being opposing counsel—was succumbing to a long list of shoulds. His firm was experiencing rapid growth, which prompted his call to me.

When we met, Colin was working ninety-plus hours a week and had been for months because that is what entrepreneurs *should* do—their business is their life.

At one of our meetings, Colin confessed that he had just eaten an entire sleeve of Thin Mint Girl Scout cookies for lunch because he was working out of three offices, one of them his car, which had a portable printer in the backseat for use in clients' offices. Why? Because he *should* always be accessible and uber-responsive to his clients.

Colin had every electronic gadget known to man, each of them ringing, pinging, and buzzing throughout the day, because of course, he *should* be in touch via the latest and greatest technology.

Unfortunately, with Colin spinning out of control because of his shoulds, the firm he was building was bending under the weight of the increasing caseload, forcing him to turn new clients away.

The shoulds had completely masked the real issues Colin was experiencing, which were normal business growing pains. He could no longer separate his priorities and goals from the culturally imposed shoulds playing like a heavy metal rock band in his head.

To combat the shoulds and liberate yourself from their tenacious clutches, the first step is to use the three-step evaluation process to test some of the assumptions that are behind guilt. Think about the fears and anxieties that are driving you (guilt is the manifestation of both) and then ask yourself, "What is the worst thing that could happen? Is it real? Is it true?"

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