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Moving From The Stress Cycle To The Balance Cycle

The vehicle for moving from the Stress Cycle to the Balance Cycle is a Personal Vision. The answers to making your life more balanced and meaningful are not out there somewhere: they are inside you.

***By Anne Whitaker
Counsel On Call***

It is possible to have a career that you are excited and passionate about. A career that truly fits you and brings you satisfaction and fulfillment - even if you feel overwhelmed, frustrated, burned out, out of time, or you don't have a clue where to start. In the first article of this series (See Vol. 2 No. 1) I explained what a Personal Vision is and why it is crucial to you having a satisfying career. As Steven Covey said, you can "work harder and harder at climbing the ladder of success only to discover it's leaning against the wrong wall."¹ When you create a Personal Vision you decide what wall you want to lean your ladder against as well as what ladder you want to use.

The Eight Critical Success Factors

Your Personal Vision needs to take the whole picture of you into account. There are eight factors that need to be considered: natural abilities, skills, interests, personal style, values, family of origin, stage of adult development, vision and goals. Some of them are objective, such as your natural abilities, and some of them are subjective such as your vision and goals. In the next article we will focus on the first of those factors, your stage of adult development. Before we do that, we need to look at something that is closely connected to it - the Stress Cycle.

You know what stress is but probably are not familiar with the Stress Cycle. Yet chances are good that you are caught in it at this very moment. The Stress Cycle impacts your daily life and will stop you from creating your Personal Vision if you aren't aware of it and don't take action to address it.

What is the Stress Cycle? If you are unhappy with your career and yet find yourself starting to think things like "I don't have time to think about whether I'm happy or not right now," or "I'll get to it when things are not so hectic in my life," you are probably caught in its grasp. Feeling like you don't have time for yourself or you are too busy is a natural side effect of being in the Stress Cycle. Most of my clients are caught in this mode when they first come to me. Their lives feel out of control and they need help stopping the cycle.

The Elements Of The Stress Cycle

- **Relentless Rush** – You never stop. You feel like you are jumping through hoops, are on a treadmill or a runaway train. You think you only have time to do the next task or project that comes up. And there is always another.
- **Short Term Focus** – You tell yourself things like "I'll just make partner (or wait until this large case is over or wait until next year) and then I'll be able to live my life." You focus on the task at hand instead of envisioning a bigger picture of your life.
- **Reactive Decision Making** - You respond to everyday events as though they are crises and have a constant sense of urgency even about little things.
- **Status-Driven Goals** – You are focused on gaining things such as a new car, new house, second home, making partner, getting somewhere in life, joining the country club, or wanting more responsibility so you can be in charge and can have a life etc.
- **Outer-Directed Priorities** – Your main goals are earning a lot of money and gaining a position of power -both worthy goals if they are connected to your Personal Vision but if they aren't, then they are empty.

The elements of the Stress Cycle relate strongly to each other – one element leads to the next, and then the next. Once you get into the Stress Cycle it perpetuates itself and is very difficult to escape. Often, people feel like they are trapped and helpless to change the status quo.

You are not alone in this. The truth is the majority of people, particularly lawyers, live in the Stress Cycle. Why? Because we grow up in systems that set it up that way. Here is a snapshot of how life goes for most of us: Start out in our family, move through the school system to college, graduate, go to law school, get a job, achieve some success, earn more money, buy more things, move up in the organization, make partner or go in-house, win the big case or close the big deal, gain the boss's attention and approval, become a boss, retire. We get so caught up in the effort to keep up with what's going on around us and what the systems (family, schools, firms, companies) want us to achieve that we get out of touch with who we truly are, what we really want.

It's especially hard for lawyers not to get caught up in the Stress Cycle. On top of the system's demands, lawyers often have personal characteristics that contribute to creating the Cycle. We are competitive, ambitious and typically impose unrealistic demands on ourselves. Furthermore, the practice of law trains us to focus on facts and have an outward orientation. Too often we get used to tuning out the inward messages that give us insight into how we really feel about what's going on in our lives and careers.

What The Balance Cycle Looks Like

It may sound hopeless and that there is no alternative to the Stress Cycle in today's fast-paced, competitive and driven workplace. Contrary to what you may believe, however, you can move from the Stress Cycle to the Balance Cycle.

What does the Balance Cycle look like? The elements of the Balance Cycle include:

- Long Term Focus – you do things that connect to a fundamental value or goal.
- Meaning-Driven Goals – what you do every day should contribute to giving your life meaning. If it doesn't, why are you doing it?
- Inner-Directed Priorities – You move toward goals you have chosen, not the system's goals.
- Vision-Based Decision Making – You use your Personal Vision as a template or measuring stick that you compare with every opportunity that comes along. If the opportunity will move you toward your vision, you take it. If not, you just say no.

As with the Stress Cycle, the elements relate to one another. Once you get into the Balance Cycle it perpetuates itself.

Moving From The Stress Cycle To The Balance Cycle: Start By Stopping

How do you get out of the Stress Cycle and into the Balance Cycle? You must start by stopping. The Stress Cycle keeps you in constant motion and keeps your mind constantly occupied. You must stop the relentless rush and set aside a significant amount of time to devote to yourself and your goals and look within. And not just for 15 minutes. The Stress Cycle makes stopping seem impossible because it makes it appear that everything is urgent and nothing can be set aside. However, you don't have time to NOT do this work – your life is a marathon, not a sprint. Creating your Personal Vision is not something you can knock out in a day, or even a weekend. You need to give both your creative mind and logical mind a chance to work together over a period of several weeks or months. (I'll explain what I mean by that later on.)

You also must get outside of your systems. Your family, friends, colleagues, boss, fellow church, synagogue or club members, no matter how well-intentioned, will not be of much assistance in helping you get new information about yourself. You need answers that are different from what they can provide because you need to take a fresh look at your own answers and preconceptions. You need a process that helps you look within and get a more objective and complete view of yourself.

The vehicle for moving from the Stress Cycle to the Balance Cycle is a Personal Vision. The answers to making your life more balanced and meaningful are not out there somewhere: they are inside you. You need to unplug from the messages that surround you and focus for a period of time on The Eight Critical Success Factors to see what you can learn about yourself that you may have never known or may have simply forgotten.

If you don't do it for yourself, who will?

One Lawyer's Story

Frank, age 41, is a partner at a large law firm. He has worked for the same firm since he graduated from law school. He is a successful litigator with a great book of business, including some of the firm's largest clients. He is well-respected by his colleagues and others in the community.

Despite all of his apparent success, Frank is silently miserable. He is busier than he has ever been before and feels as if everybody is putting more demands on

him. He is constantly putting out fires and dealing with urgent deadlines, and is tired of dealing with so much conflict. The hours he is working are getting longer, not shorter. He does not enjoy the work he is doing and is finding that the things he has achieved do not mean much to him anymore.

Although he is unhappy, he feels as if he does not have the time to even think about changing things. It is all he can do to just keep up with what he has on his plate. He can't fathom adding one more thing to his day, even something as positive as creating a Personal Vision for his life. He believes that he is too busy to stop and just hopes that at some point things will change.

Frank is deep into the Stress Cycle. He is a prime example of how easy it is to get caught up in the system and become trapped in the cycle of rushing, urgency, and outward focus. He doesn't realize that nothing will change until he stops what he is doing and takes time to assess what he really wants out of life and how he can get it. Otherwise he will continue to be busy meeting the goals that others set up for him.

How Frank handles his situation and whether or not he does something to move out of the Stress Cycle and into the Balance Cycle will be largely affected by where he is in his life: his Stage Of Adult Development. The Stage of Adult Development, the first of the eight factors that everyone needs to consider when creating a Personal Vision, will be our focus in the next article.

In the meantime consider giving yourself some time off every week to reflect only about you and what you want. You may be surprised at the kinds of creative solutions that bubble up!

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1. The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change, Stephen R. Covey, 1989, Simon and Schuster.
 2. Don't Waste Your Talent: The 8 Critical Steps to Discovering What You Do Best, Bob McDonald, Ph.D. and Don E. Hutcheson, 2000, Longstreet Press.

<http://atlanta.thecompletelawyer.com/volume2/issue2/article.php?ppaid=108>