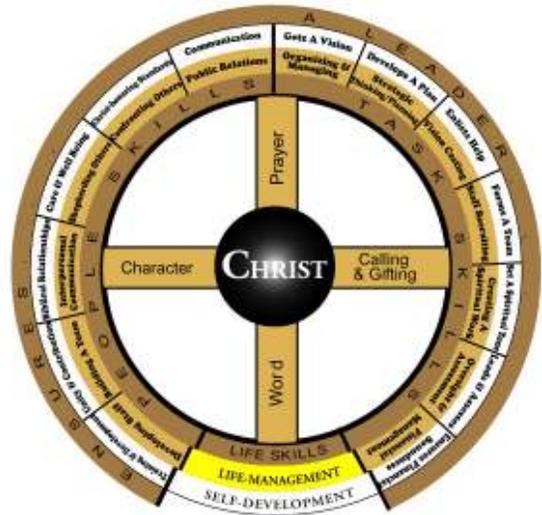


Leadership University

Life Skills – Life Management

Margin

Dr. Richard Swenson
National Leadership Retreat - 1996



We must have some room to breathe.
We need freedom to think and permission to heal. Our relationships are being starved to death by velocity. No one has time to listen, let alone to love. Our children lay wounded on the ground, run over by high-speed good intentions.

Five Environments

Most of our progress:

- 1) Physical environment (wealth, technology, health – the material world)
- 2) Cognitive environment (knowledge, information, education – the intellectual world)

Most of our pain:

- 3) Social environment (family, friends, neighbors, church – the societal world)
- 4) Emotional environment (feelings, attitudes – the psychological world)
- 5) Spiritual environment (the eternal and transcendent – God)

Change in our personal lives may seem to be best described as linear, but exponential best describes much of historical change. It is hard for us to envision exponential change:

If you fold a piece of paper in half forty times, how thick would the result be? Thick enough to reach from here to the moon.

Construction paper .016 inches thick. Doubled 10 times, the pile would be 16.83 inches thick. Doubled another 10 times, the pile would be 16,777 inches thick, or 1,398 feet. Doubled another 10 times, 1,431,552 feet, or 271.1 miles. Doubled 10 times, 277,606. Distance to the moon is 250,000 miles.

Information overload causes us to burrow ever deeper into specialization, subspecialization and then superspecialization, thus effectively burying ourselves with our own problem.

“When the world comes to us in pieces, in fragments, lacking any overall pattern, it is hard to see how it might be transformed.” Habit of the Heart

Whether we like it or not, history will steamroll us with the whole, not with particles.

If the negatives are sufficiently dangerous, they cannot be offset by the positives no matter how beneficial the positives are.

Many of the problems we have today are not new. “What is new is the intensity with which they demand our attention. I’m sufficiently convinced that our society is heading in a dangerous direction that I feel compelled to sound a note of extreme urgency.” George Gallup, Jr., Forecast 2000.

My greatest worry about our prospects for the future stem from a full awareness of the following linkage: (1) Mankind is fallen and capable of limitless acts of evil, and (2) progress exponentially increases the power available for the purpose of evil.

Margin, the space that once existed between ourselves and our limits, was an early casualty.

It is hard to solve the problems of the world when you can’t even make it through the next day.

Three contemporary sources of stress that mark our age as a difficult one (Psychologist David Elking):

First, due to the alarming increase in violence and crime, we are more afraid.

Second, due to rapidly changing job markets, technology and economic factors, we are more professionally insecure.

Finally, due to widespread separation and divorce, we are more alone.

Social supports have been bowled over by progress.

Each of us must carefully analyze himself and try to find the particular stress level at which he feels most comfortable, whatever occupation he selects. Those who do not succeed in this analysis will either suffer the distress of having nothing worthwhile to do or of being constantly overtaxed by excessive activity.

Decompressing stress-filled lives (recommended by researchers and experts in the field):

- Practice gratitude
- Generate goodwill
- Do volunteer work
- Set realistic expectations
- Laugh (inner jogging)
- Play
- Meditate
- Pray
- Accept what cannot be changed
- Avoid frustration
- Exercise (sweat to forget)
- Learn to relax (behavioral aspirin)
- Put more control in your life
- Reconcile conflict in personal relationships (confession/forgiveness)
- Above all, avoid anger and the desire for revenge.

The spontaneous tendency of our culture is to relentlessly increase all detail to our lives: one more option, one more problem, one more commitment, one more expectation, one more purchase, one more debt, one more change, one more job, one more decision. We must now deal

with more “things per person” than at any other time in history. Yet one can comfortably handle only so many details in his or her life. Exceeding this threshold will result in disorganization or frustration. It is important to note here that the problem is not in the “details”; the problem is in the “exceeding.” This is called overload:

- Activity overload
- Change overload
- Choice overload
- Commitment overload
- Competition overload
- Debt overload
- Decision overload
- Education overload
- Expectation overload
- Fatigue overload
- Hurry overload
- Information overload
- Media overload
- Ministry overload
- Noise overload
- People overload
- Pollution overload
- Possession overload
- Problem overload
- Technology overload
- Traffic overload
- Waste overload
- Work overload

With generator indicators continuously pointing to “discharge,” it is little wonder our batteries are drained. Our weary, withered state is not God’s plan. Fatigue overload attacks our emotions, leaving us self-protective; it attacks our bodies, leaving us weak; and it attacks our relationships, leaving us isolated.

It is important for us to set people free to seek their own threshold/tolerance level for overload... My own spiritual walk in the midst of my own overload is enough of a burden to keep me fully occupied.

Many families are now overworking and under-relating.

We must learn to accept the finality of nonnegotiability of the 24-hour day.

Margin grants freedom and permits rest. It nourishes both relationship and service. Spiritually, it allows availability for the purposes of God. From a medical point of view, it is health-enhancing.

Instead, by default rather than choice, people of the past lived slower, more deliberate lives. Perhaps this is a key to understanding why the past often holds such charms.

The Christian cultural idea today is that to honor God we have to be all things to all men all at once by myself.

His asking us to walk the second mile, to carry other’s burdens, to witness to the Truth at any opportunity and to teach our children when we sit, walk, lie, and stand all presuppose that we have margin and that we make it available for His purposes. Obedience to these commands is often not schedulable.

Actually, margin is not a spiritual necessity. But availability is.

The effects of no margin are familiar to us all: people who are harried, more concerned with personal sanity than with service to the needs of others; people who have no financial margin, painfully uninterested in hearing of yet another “opportunity” to give. Such people are no longer

concerned with building a better world. Instead, they simply want to survive another day. Such people are no longer motivated to meet the needs of others. Instead, they simply want to escape their suffocating schedules. Overworked and overwhelmed victims occupy our no-margined world.

We have noted how the unprecedented pathogens of stress and overload often wage war on our emotions. Add the assault of speed, the kind whose sheer velocity precludes adaptation to change. Compound the situation by fracturing families, dissipating any sense of community and decrease social supports of all kinds. Separate the elderly from their extended families. Add uprootedness by factoring in mobility. Add individualism to narcissism. Alienate adolescents in the direction of R-rated movies, drugs, heavy metal music, early sexuality and suicide. Add teenage pregnancy and single parenting to welfare dependency. Add child abuse, sexual abuse and wife abuse to pornography. Add the crime in every city to the reports of crime on every television. Add indebtedness and bankruptcy to job insecurity and demanding bosses. Add unaffordable housing to unaffordable health care. Add traffic to noise to hurry to impossible work schedules to technology that doesn't work to ringing telephones to crying babies.

To be healthy, we require margin in at least four areas: emotional energy, physical energy, time and finances.

Emotional energy margin:

It is important to understand our emotional reserves... how much we have at the beginning of each day and which influences drain our emotions dry or recharge our batteries.

Over the last decade, the number of therapists has risen tenfold. We have more mental health workers in the U.S. than police.

Dr. Afield, M.D.: "For each person suffering from a mental or emotional disorder, the lives of at least three other persons are significantly affected."

- 1) Cultivated social supports: We must learn how to make our relationships mutually nourishing.
- 2) Serve one another: Doing nothing for others is the undoing of one's self. We must be purposely kind and generous, or we miss the best part of existence. The heart that goes out of itself get large and full of joy." Horace Mann.
- 3) Rest
- 4) Laugh and cry: Laughter lifts, crying cleanses – both are partners in the process of emotional restoration.

- 5) Create appropriate boundaries: Do the people closest to me love my “no” as much as they love my “yes”?
- 6) Envision a better future: We all must have a purpose bigger than ourselves that we can live for. We must have something we can believe in, something we can give ourselves to. We must have work, and the work must have meaning. We must have direction, and the direction must have structure. A transcendent vision with purpose, work, meaning, direction and structure.
- 7) Offer thanks: Recognize that the world is full of beauty, that most people are worthy of our respect and trust, and that the affairs of suffering humans are replete with acts of love, kindness, nobility and sacrifice; that overseeing it all is a God who knows well, who loves us anyway and who is very, very good.
- 8) Great grace: When we grant grace to our enemies, they receive a shockingly unexpected glimpse of the Kingdom.
- 9) Be rich in faith: “I believe the most vital ingredient of resilience is faith.” Dr. Flach. When all hammers are dust, the anvil will yet endure.
- 10) Hold fast hope: “The Kingdom of God is at hand when it becomes harder and harder to ignore or evade God’s ways... Because of faith in the good God intends us to have, Christian hope can survive even in the disintegration of a culture.” Diogenes Allen – Princeton philosopher and theologian.
- 11) Above all, love: Love is the only medicine I know of which when used according to directions, heals completely yet takes one’s life away. It is dangerous; it is uncontrollable; it is “self-expenditure”; and it can never be taken on any terms but its own. Yet, as a healer of the emotions, it has no equal.