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Reframing

Career Development





How often have you seen a piece of art, photography, or even a child's drawing transformed by placing it in a new frame? A simple black frame, or one that highlights a color in the piece of art, can dramatically change the impact, whether it's an elementary school sketch or classic work. Reframing can change one's entire perspective. How we see things depends greatly on how we frame them, or rather reframe them, in our minds.

This summer has been fraught with an endless cycle of intense deadlines, late night hours, and working weekends. The pressure has been enormous, and I have been worn mentally and emotionally thin by the stress. I'm sure many of you have experienced the same in your careers at some point. Finishing one project only leads to three more marked "urgent, need yesterday." Work has become so all-consuming that keeping track of the days is only incidental to meeting the next deadline, each one rushing at me faster than a series of racing freight trains. Non-emergency emails, phone calls, and text messages from colleagues, friends, and family languish unanswered and unacknowledged. As a self-proclaimed "foodie," in this intense work season, food has become little more than fuel, and many lunches are spent at my desk continually reading, researching, reviewing, and drafting documents. In the midst of this work frenzy, many things are left undone and incomplete at home. Personal obligations pile up. Meals go unmade, and I live off take-out.

With this kind of work-life imbalance, it has become all too easy to slip into a mindset of constant frustration with pockets of despair. Many of us experience times like these, but I propose that those in the role of solo in-house counsel see these cycles more frequently. When no one else in your company does what you do, no one else understands the responsibility, pressures, and struggles you experience on a day-to-day basis. No one comprehends your level of frustration when a customer sends you a contract with 344 boilerplate clauses that are only incorporated based on 344 different circumstances that have to be reviewed and researched. Not a single other person in your company comprehends why a patent is not a license to make something but, rather, the right to exclude others from practicing, making, selling, or licensing an invention. People turn to you for a legal opinion, but when that opinion appears as a roadblock or limitation on what they think they want or need to do, they question the advice.

How does one prevent a downward spiral in the midst of a pressure cooker with no apparent means of release? Reframe the circumstances.

This idea of reframing came to me while listening to an audiobook entitled *Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life* by Bill Burnett and David J. Evans. Burnett and Evans, two Stanford University professors, apply the principles of product design to planning and pursuing one's life and career goals. The genesis of the book was a Stanford class for product design students that helped them "find jobs." In one section of the book, they discuss the idea of reframing: "pivoting your perspective to address a perceived problem."

I had to reframe my perspective on the problem to solve it. The problem isn't that the customer is unreasonable and impractical (even if they are). The problem isn't that an engineer doesn't understand patent law (even if he or she doesn't). The problem boils down to resources: not enough people (just me) to complete all the work at hand. So what is the solution? Quit my job because I am overwhelmed? Probably not. What are some other possible choices? Hire another attorney? Hiring a number two would only be justified by a sustained increase in legal need, not sporadic instances of overload.

But the idea of hiring temporary help ... that just might work. A paralegal or well-trained assistant may be just what I need to wade through the morass of projects, prioritize my list of items to review, and help manage my schedule. Just considering what a properly trained assistant could accomplish released me from the grip of paralyzing mental and emotional pressure. As I contemplated this option, it also occurred to me that I could also hire temporary help in my personal life. Why not consider bringing in someone to help with home projects as well. Now there's a thought! The idea of a personal assistant is not a monopoly held by the rich and famous. Business strategies, properly reframed, can make significant differences in our personal lives.

Caught in the endless hamster wheel of to-do lists, I had been unable to see outside the box (or outside the frame) that I had built around my work and life picture. Taking a step back to define the problem instead of working on the projects felt like I was losing ground. But unless you take a step back, you can't see how crooked the picture is hanging or if it needs a new frame. Reframing helped me to see the real problem and brainstorm a viable solution.

Sometimes what feels like going backward is necessary to move forward. It comes down to perspective. I am reminded of a quote by Robert Brault: "Taking a step backward after taking a step forward is not a disaster, it's a cha-cha."

Reframe: Life isn't a race we should rush to complete; it should be a dance we seek to enjoy.

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