



Pearls of Leadership Wisdom: Protect the Vital Few

Welcome once again to my backyard. The Pearls of Leadership Wisdom topic today is: Protect the Vital Few. I'm going to start with two stories. The first happened last week when MDA hosted a webinar in which Mark Decker from IRET, their CEO, participated. He used an analogy to talk about how he moved the business from being focused on a variety of offerings to having a centralized focus. In the analogy, he used he told the story of packing for family vacation. Packing the car for family vacation, in fact, where everyone, because they were going by car, could think of just one more thing to have in the car. That really cool frisbee, the extra beach gear, the ball gloves, whatever it was, there was always room for that one more thing. But then, two days before they were to travel, the family decided to fly instead. You can imagine what happened to the packing. Instead of everything being able to be loaded into the truck, each person had to decide what was really necessary. It turns out there were a lot of things that were just extra stuff. Mark was able to use that analogy, of the extra stuff, in moving his business, from being focused on so many things to choosing a vital few.

Now my second story came from an article that I read in *Forbes* magazine, and this is actually an interview with the CEO of Graeter's Ice Cream in Cincinnati, Ohio. Rich Graeter happens to be the 4th generation CEO of this more than hundred-year-old family business, and he spoke about how they had taken some initiatives to expand production, modernize their facilities, provide additional support for their suppliers, and they did a number of different things from automating whatever they could to changing some of their distribution channels to using more technology. But the one thing—the one thing they chose not to change—was how the ice cream was made. They use a special, what's called a French Pot Process, which means the ice cream has to be made in small batches and packed by hand. What he said about it was that it was core to who they were as a business. It was core to how they differentiate themselves in the market, that their ice cream is different, and this was the way to make that ice cream. He was actively involved in protecting the core of the business, or as I would say the vital things that are part of its success.

So how do these things apply to us as leaders? I have three bywords for you today.

#1 Choose

#2 Let Go

#3 Tell Others

Choose simply means you do need to select which of those myriad of activities that you have on your calendar for today, this week, this month, this year, are really the most critical for you and the business. Make a choice. Decide what those one or two most important elements are, then protect them.

Second you need to let go. If you're going to choose some things that means letting go of some others, leaving those frisbees at home that don't fit in the car anymore. Letting go means either taking things off of your calendar, or choosing to do them in a less perfectionistic way. Or choosing to do them maybe 80%. Regardless, choosing to do some things as vital for you and for the business means letting go of others.

Finally, tell others what you are doing. As a leader, I know that my team and the people I work with need to know what I think are the most important elements of what we are doing. If I can't be clear to them about what I think is critical, how can they then plan their own time? Or if I have something that I'm delegating it's important for me to be able to say how much effort I think should go into it. Is it a two-hour task? Or is it a two-week task? The clarity I can provide when I do let go is going to help them plan their own time. So for these elements you can do the same, you can choose, you can let go, and you can tell others. Now as I think about these stories, I'm ready for some ice cream.