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Real Life Practice

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Take Back Your Life – 20 Minutes at a Time

Imagine this scene.

It's a late afternoon in early autumn. The warmth of the day is fading away into a "just cool enough" evening. You're sitting poolside at your favorite resort – or lodge – or cabin – or your own backyard – whatever works for you. The sun is sinking in a beautiful orange and pink sky. You lean back in your comfy Adirondack chair and watch as day turns into night. You're sipping your favorite beverage. You are relaxed. You are grateful for your life and your practice. And you are particularly grateful that this is the beginning of a six-week vacation that you've been looking forward to this year.

"Fantasy!" you say? Not at all. This scene can be a reality in your life if you'll just "Snap out of it!" (Think: Cher slapping Nicholas Cage in *Moonstruck*, one of my favorite flicks.) and get your interruptions under control.

Here's the truth about what interruptions are stealing from you.

For years I've been telling my clients that each unnecessary interruption they deal with is costing them, on average, 10 minutes. Well, it looks like I've been wrong. It's more like

20 minutes. According to research in Winifred Gallagher's new book, *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life*, it can take the brain up to 20 minutes to recover from an interruption. So, if you're dealing with only six unnecessary interruptions during your day, you're losing up to two hours. Two hours – gone. Two hours you could be billing. Do that math over the course of a year! And those two hours a day add up to over twelve 40-hour weeks a year. Weeks you could be spending with your loved ones or golfing or biking or on your boat. You get the idea. But there is something you can do about it.

Here are three things you can do right now to manage your interruptions and take back your life.

1. Create a Power Hour for yourself each day. Actually, I'd like to see you create a "Power 90." A Power 90 is 90 minutes of uninterrupted, focused work time each day. One of the first steps in gaining the laser-like focus you need to be most effective is to start your work day by concentrating for 90 minutes on your most important tasks. Schedule these 90 minutes into your calendar, and make it a habit to stick to them. After 90 minutes your brain needs a break, so shift your focus to other work, like answering emails or returning phone calls. (See #2 below.) Schedule another Power 90 in the afternoon, if you can. And if you're easily distracted by voices or sounds in your office,

wear ear plugs or listen to music with headphones during your Power 90. I began using ear plugs or listening to music to block out distractions when I was studying for the bar. And I recommend this strategy to my clients, as well. Using ear plugs or listening to music can dramatically improve your focus and productivity.

2. Batch similar tasks like answering email, returning phone calls and reviewing your mail.

The research in Gallagher's book makes crystal clear that the idea of multi-tasking is a myth. Our brains cannot multi-task. They can only focus on one thing at a time. And as we age, our ability to jump quickly from one task to another diminishes, sometimes resulting in costly mistakes. Maybe you've experienced this first-

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hand by accidentally hitting “Reply to all” while simultaneously talking on the phone and returning emails. In addition, industrial researchers have determined that when similar tasks are grouped together we can complete them up to four times faster!

3. Ask your staff to batch their questions and bring you at least one suggested answer.

Asking your staff to batch their questions is one of the most powerful things you can do to begin to take control of your time. It’s also a wonderful way to educate and empower your staff. Here’s how it works. Rather than allowing your staff to interrupt you every time they have a question, ask them to keep a list of their questions for you, together with suggested answers. Then, set aside a couple of 10-15 minute huddles with your staff to address their questions. I say “address” rather than answer because the goal is to get them to the point where they can answer most of their own questions. Making huddles a habit will make a tremendous impact on the effectiveness of everyone in your office. You owe this communication time to your staff. Without it, they’ll be forced to following you to the restroom or to your car when you’re on your way to a meeting in order to discuss their questions with you.

Here’s the bad news: These things may be simple, but they are not easy. Here’s the good news: You can do this.

Bad news first. These strategies are deceptively simple, but simple is often not easy. The key to taking back your life 20 minutes at a time is to actually put these strategies to work. So, take it one day at a time. Put Power 90s in your calendar and honor them. Ask your staff to help you stick to them even if that means pushing you back in your office when you come out to “check on things.” Schedule times to answer your email and return phone calls, then really use that time to do those tasks. And have those huddles like clockwork every day, whether you think you

need them or not. Put someone else on your staff in charge of making sure they happen at the appointed time.

OK, so now you’re thinking, “Great, I can take a six-week vacation, but how is my office going to run while I’m away?” Well, that’s a topic for another day. For now, just know that if you can begin to manage your interruptions, you’ll begin to take back your life - 20 minutes at a time.

As a business coach and practice advisor with Atticus, Nora is dedicated to helping attorneys create the lives and law practices they dreamed of when they were in law school. She knows the frustrations that attorneys experience every day and is committed to helping them change their lives for the better. Nora has practiced as an employment law attorney and certified mediator and has served as a professor at both Stetson University College of Law and the University of

South Florida, teaching courses in alternative dispute resolution and negotiation. In addition, Nora has been a speaker at conferences for the American Bar Association and The Florida Bar. She has also served as the Executive Director of the St. Petersburg Bar Association.

Nora is a graduate of the Leadership Development Program at Eckerd College, and is certified in the Conflict Dynamics Profile® developed by Eckerd to help individuals and organizations learn how to deal with conflict constructively. She received an undergraduate degree in journalism, summa cum laude, from the University of South Florida and her J.D., cum laude, from Stetson University College of Law, where she was a member of the law review and served as a mentor for incoming students.

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