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Quality First Leads to Quantity

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Dear Colleague,

When I finished my 2-year health-system pharmacy administration residency, I received the advice that if my career was equivalent to a marathon, that is, 26.2 miles, I was at mile 0.5. Wow! What a way to knock the celebratory air out of you. After 2 years of incredibly long days with hard-earned effort, successes, and failures, I was only at 0.5 of a 26.2-mile race? It stung but also gave me great perspective. I didn't want to burn out at mile 7.

Taking the advice to heart, I knew that I would want to do many things in my career, including advancing the profession, being involved in professional organizations, and ensuring I was doing a great job at the roles entrusted to me at my institution. I didn't want to do the shotgun approach often seen in pharmacy school. You know, the approach where you sign up for every organization to have it on your resume but only actively participate in one or two of them? I wanted to ensure that whatever I said yes to I could do with high quality without sacrificing my day job. I had heard stories of others and seen colleagues who performed well in volunteering for professional organizations but whose job ultimately suffered. Additionally, I saw people who performed well in their hired role but signed up for professional organizations and outside commitments on which they couldn't follow through. My goal was, and continues to be, committing to being all-in for everything I say yes to.

The role I play in my organization is my top professional priority and obligation on a daily basis. Anything that I participate in outside of that role, including joining professional organizations, publishing, and presenting, is an added bonus. I know that if my day job isn't going well, if I'm lucky, the other obligations simply will have to go away. If I'm not lucky, the day job will cease to exist, and the other obligations won't matter anyway. With this in mind, I have ensured that the extra items fit into my capacity at any given time and are aligned with my interests and expertise. I often hear mixed messages: say yes to every opportunity and learn to say no to opportunities. Which one do you listen to?

I have looked at this approach from two angles. I believe in saying yes to the opportunity, assuming that I can continue my day job without interruption and it aligns with my personal schedule. There are seasons in everyone's life, and it's important to understand not only what season you are in but also how saying yes or no can impact your career. Early in your career, you are looking for ways to get involved professionally. When given an opportunity and you know you can do it well without sacrificing the two items mentioned previously, say yes. It may cause you stress, but these opportunities will get easier the more you take them. However, if in your early career you are also a new parent or have other personal obligations, it will be difficult to approach the opportunity well. In this scenario, it is better to be honest and give a timeline that could work for you. You can also state that the timing isn't aligned with other obligations you have and subsequently suggest a colleague who you think would be good for the opportunity. Providing that suggestion is helpful to the organization or individual presenting the opportunity, and your colleague will be thankful for the recommendation. These favors can be reciprocated at some point in the future when the timing is better for you. Understand the season you are in, know your capacity, and then say yes or no depending on how well you can commit to the opportunity.

When I finished my residency, I chose two professional organizations on which to focus my efforts. I applied for certain committees and positions within the organizations, some of which I was invited to join and others I wasn't. I had sought

out an executive-level position on a committee and received a call asking if I would take a nonexecutive role on a different committee instead. I graciously agreed, and it remains one of my most enjoyable roles in that organization. What you become involved with may not end up looking exactly like what you had planned, but being willing to put yourself out there and apply for a position opens the door for endless opportunities.

Similarly, I have aligned my teams and direct reports to focus on one or two big initiatives each year within their respective work areas. This focus on the top priorities ensures that everyone can remember the initiatives and understand his or her role in achieving them. Some employees are high performers and can do more than the one or two initiatives. If people have the drive, willingness, passion, and capacity for more, I'm not going to stand in their way. My role shifts to being their biggest supporter while reminding them that the top priorities remain and should be their first focus. This mindset also helps to determine my own priorities and where my time is best spent. I have found that this focus on the priorities each day, week, and month allows me to achieve high productivity with high quality. As a result, I have been asked to take on other priorities that weren't being accomplished elsewhere or new challenges that have arisen based on my reputation for achieving quality results.

The priorities and focus may shift year to year and sometimes even within a year. When priorities shift, I find it important to communicate why they are shifting and acknowledge all the work done on the original priority. Recognizing this shift can be difficult for staff; acknowledging it allows them to grieve it and then accept the new priority quicker. One year, we worked to justify dose-tracking software for each of our pharmacy locations. We spent hours researching available products on the market, noting product features, and narrowing down the existing companies to obtain quotes for the capital budget justification. We included members of the staff in the research process and company demonstrations because they would be the individuals using the products every day. At the same time we found out that the capital funding was secured, we also learned that our organization was going to transition our electronic health record (EHR) to a new platform that same year. Knowing that the EHR transition would consume all our time, it would not be feasible to also implement the dose-tracking software in the same year. We discussed the priority change with staff, particularly the individuals who were heavily involved in the research and on-site demonstrations. It was important to acknowledge all the work that went into the dose-tracking research and thank everyone involved. The dose-tracking functionality was still needed but was less of a priority than the EHR. We tabled the dose-tracking initiative at the time. After optimizing our EHR for several years, the focus on dose tracking resurfaced. Our initial research was valuable because we knew which product features we desired and were able to determine that our EHR had the specific functionality desired without needing to integrate and implement another software platform. The dose tracking was then implemented across areas.

I continue focusing my efforts on the same two professional organizations and have added one other organization over time. I have sought out new roles and responsibilities while ensuring that my day job within my institution remains the priority. We all have stretches in which we feel burned out, but ensuring that I can approach each opportunity with high quality has allowed me to establish boundaries and avoid long-term burnout. In short, do everything with high quality, and the quantity of opportunities will grow over time. No one wants to burn out before the race is done.

All the best,

Lindsey