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Balancing our purposes

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In the nearly two years since I became managing partner of Haskins & Sells, I have visited many of our practice offices and have attended or addressed a good number of meetings. In the course of these visits and meetings I have met personally many of the people in our Firm, and have discussed with them some of the matters that are on their minds.

The subject which tends to recur most frequently in these discussions, if it could be reduced to one short statement, is the difficulty of ordering our priorities, of balancing our purposes. Most of us work hard in pursuit of several objectives. We often find ourselves so busy that we wonder where we can find the time to go after all of them. None of us wants to give up any of these goals, because each one draws us and has meaning for us.

We all know the common saying that, "You can't have it both ways." This is true only in a limited sense; you cannot have two things that are in absolute contradiction to one another, like being both a winning jockey and heavyweight boxing champion of the world. But we do try, and we try very hard and often, to reach two or more objectives that are difficult to attain together. We do this because we genuinely, deeply desire them, and we are reluctant to sacrifice one for the other since they both are important to us.

We all have many needs to satisfy and goals to achieve—our careers, rewarding family relationships, contributions to our profession and our community, mental and physical stimulation and recreation. Think, for example, of the number of people you know who want to be successful in a professional field, such as public accounting, and who also want to be active in the affairs of their profession or community. This is as it should be, for all of us need to be concerned about the advancement of our profession and our community. Further, an individual grows professionally and personally as he gives of himself to such activities.

There need be no great problem here if there is a proper degree of perspective and reasonably effective planning and utilization of time. Of course there will be conflicts. There may be a Firm meeting that one must attend away from his home city at the very time he should be at an important meeting of the school board on which he is serving, or the town planning committee, or whatever it is. These things happen to almost all of us. And they happen most to those people whose abilities are widely recognized and who are therefore asked most frequently to serve on committees, or to deliver reports, or to hold office in organizations.

Now, add another purpose, or objective, to the situation—that of the promises we make to our own families. It is no accident that so many novels and movies center on the conflict between the pulls within the home and family, and those outside. This is a reality of life as we are living today in our hyperactive society.

Add just one more kind of purpose—our need for recreation. We all have leisure time activities that we enjoy, and we pursue them for exercise, for relaxation, and for just plain getting our minds away from the concerns of our work. These activities may be as varied as reading mysteries, attending concerts, playing golf or gardening, but they all center on our need to unwind and to enjoy ourselves for a while if we are to keep our health and our good humor.

As I write these words, I am keenly aware of conflicting pressures for one's time. It is a weekend afternoon, and an unusually beautiful and mild winter afternoon. The attraction of outdoor activity is compelling. There is, too, the usual briefcase full of reading matter and "to do" files from the office, to say nothing of books and magazines waiting to be read. To add to the list of things which might or must be done, there is a fund-raising presentation to be prepared for a non-profit organization and a meeting to be attended later in the day. I suppose that the reason I am doing what I am at this moment is because this task has the severest deadline. On the other hand, it could also be the one that appeals to me the most.

No one needs to be told how frequently these various purposes in life pull against one another. Because time is limited we cannot pursue them all as much as we would like. There are times when one must be subordinated to another, and at times we try to split the difference. There are occasions when we are tempted to spread ourselves too thin, and we wind up regretting that we took on too much, and did a poor job as a consequence. Everyone has memories of a meeting missed, a report that might have been prepared more thoroughly, an appointment for which he arrived embarrassingly late, or a family affair that was sacrificed to business, or other necessity.

Family affairs remind me of a conversation I overheard on a train a few weeks ago between two young men from the financial district of New York. One was bemoaning the train's running late; a dinner at home celebrating his wife's birthday was scheduled for seven o'clock so that he could make an eight o'clock paddle tennis tournament. I wondered about his priorities, but then it occurred to me that maybe his wife liked to play paddle tennis too. And at least he was going to be home for the occasion,

By Michael N. Chetkovich

even if only briefly. My wife had the misfortune not only to be married to a "traveling" accountant, but also to be born in January. In the first nine or ten years of our marriage I was home for her birthday only once; on all other occasions I was far away from our home in the San Francisco area, in South Dakota or Saudi Arabia. I don't know that this was "right;" I do believe it was necessary.

There are no rules for resolving these conflicting demands on our time and attention. I am convinced, however, that there are some important considerations which we should weigh in arriving at our decisions and these I should like to share with you, not necessarily in the order of their importance.

One of our primary considerations, if we reflect on it, has to be a recognition that one owes an obligation to himself and to those who rely on him (whether an employer, one's partners or associates or those he serves) to do the best job that he can in his chosen occupation. If he does not do this, it is unlikely that he will achieve the respect of his fellows and enjoy personal satisfaction no matter what else he might do.

I grew up in a very small town; there were few significant success stories there, in terms of widely recognized personal achievement. But there were men who were respected and even loved throughout the community, because they did a good job of what they set out to do. I can still recall some of them: the doctor who gave that extra measure of attention to the patient, even when he knew that it was unlikely he would be paid; the merchant who served you considerately and cheerfully regardless of the amount of your purchase; the painter whose paint job had a reputation for "holding up."

There is another important consideration for those of us who are practicing a profession. We must recognize that the essence of a profession is service to those who rely on it; this means responding to the needs of our clients and our public. This does not state that the needs of the client must come ahead of all else at all times; there are degrees to everything. It does mean that there is a strong presumption in that direction, and unless we are prepared to accept such a presumption we must question whether we truly are living up to our professional responsibilities.

Another important consideration is that of not taking on too much, of being realistic with ourselves and those who rely on us in determining the range of our activities

and the degree of our involvement. To use the vernacular, we should guard against scattering our shots.

And finally, we cannot overlook involving those who share our lives, primarily our families, in these important decisions. They are matters of mutual concern and importance; and while we cannot always expect to have mutual agreement and satisfaction with the decisions reached, there should at least be a high degree of understanding as to how and why they were arrived at.

One of the great frustrations of life is that there is so much to do and so little time to do it. I doubt that there is anyone who looks back from the vantage point of his declining years who does not regret that he did not do all that he could or might have done. The nature of life places a high premium on self-discipline in choosing for one's efforts those areas where he is likely to be able to make the greatest contribution, in limiting the range of his activities so that he does not settle for mediocrity in all of them, and in hewing to his established course.

In the final analysis, a reasonable measure of accomplishment would be to have it said of one that he was a fine doctor, lawyer or accountant. If to this could be added that he served his church, or his community, or his profession, or all of them, then we have a fuller measure of accomplishment. And it is quite likely that the two will go together, for the competent professional will generally have made other significant contributions in life. But I doubt that any of us would want to have it said of him: "I don't know how good an accountant he was, but..."

Balancing Our Purposes

