

Raising the Bar

Forget FOND (Fear of Not Doing): How to Set Limits and Keep Your Sanity

By Ashley Crank Scarpetta

The path to becoming a lawyer is not an easy one: undergrad, the LSAT, law school, and the bar exam. Both the time and money invested can lead us to wear “busy” as a badge of honor. Because what could possibly be worse than not having enough work? If any of you are like me, you likely find yourself saying yes far more often than you should. Maybe you have a fear of saying no, as a lot of people do, or maybe, when an opportunity arises, but before *really* thinking it through, yes seems like a good idea. For example, you may say yes to an additional research project for a partner with whom you have really wanted to work. However, she needs the research no later than Monday morning, and you are slammed during the entire week. While it was probably not the best idea to commit to the project, you committed before *really* thinking it through. Therefore, you find yourself working on the project over the weekend regardless of your plans. In addition, you also may find yourself saying yes to opportunities that seem like good opportunities, in theory—writing that article, chairing that committee, or attending that conference—for which you really did not have time. Because you were pressed for time due to overcommitting, you had to cancel plans with friends or family. Sound familiar? If we are not mindful of what we are saying yes to, the practice of law can easily become more overwhelming, and all-consuming, than it arguably already is. And again, if we are not mindful, we will find ourselves missing out on things, big and small, for which we really want to be present. If you are a parent, this could be your child’s daily bedtime routine. If you are in a relationship, this could be a weekly or nightly dinner with your significant other. The list goes on.

Regardless of why you may tend to overcommit in your professional life, it is important to recognize that overcommitment makes us less productive in both our professional and personal lives. It is also important to recognize that other’s needs, feelings, and demands are *not* more important than our own. Next, it is important to recognize that more isn’t always better. More hours, more projects, more committees, more articles, more conferences, coupled with our already high professional and personal demands, will lead to stress, and sometimes, if we aren’t mindful, even burnout. How do we proactively prioritize what is most important? Then, how do we decide when we can say yes to more without sacrificing our priorities?

Do one job at a time. This sounds simple, but it is probably one of the most difficult concepts to master. Practice wearing one hat at a time. While multi-tasking is praised in today’s society, if you think back to a day when you tried to write a substantive brief and an article, both due around the same time, for example, you might have felt that you did a mediocre job on one, the other, or both. Therefore, the next time an opportunity arises, let’s say to write an article, check your calendar closely for deadlines, both in your professional and personal lives, before you commit. If committing to the article will interfere with something that is already on your calendar, respectfully decline. More opportunities will come around.

Set boundaries and know your limits. And once you set your boundaries, do not compromise them. If you know that you need eight hours of sleep each night to function each day, do not put yourself in the position of staying up all night working because your workload is too heavy, but you did not want to tell your partner. Tell your partner. Do not stop going to your Saturday work-out class because you feel that you need to review documents at the office. Unless it is truly urgent, which sometimes it is, the documents will still be there waiting for you on Monday. Last, know your limits. Everyone needs breaks at times. These can be big and small. For example, I need a fifteen-minute break after looking at something that makes my head hurt for an hour. Or, sometimes, I need a Saturday to do absolutely nothing. Your limits probably look different from mine, but learn them, and do not ignore them.

Destigmatize the need for help. We're all in this together. If you need help in any regard, reach out to the partners and associates in your firm, local and state bar associations, and DRI. Someone has likely been where you are before and can help. If not, people who you know certainly can listen and help you talk through your challenging situation. Last, become familiar with the signs of burnout. Burn-out is real, and it is more than just a bad day or bad week. *See Job Burnout: How to Spot It and Take Action*, Mayo Clinic (Nov. 21, 2018), <http://www.mayoclinic.org>.



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