

Mastering the toughest management skill: Self-maintenance

To get the best uptime, give yourself better downtime.



By John Hitch
Editor-in-chief



@Hitched2Trucks



Of all the Billy Joel lyrical advice I should have heeded, who would have thought it would be “workin’ too hard can give you a heart attack (ack-ack-ack).” But that’s exactly what happened to me as I was approving the last issue before sending it off to the printer.

As much as I would love to shift the blame, this one was on me. You see, I wanted to start the year off with a killer issue, (over)worked through a few consecutive weekends, and one quiet Friday morning—pow, right in the ticker—my very own myocardial infarction. The funny thing is I thought it was indigestion for an entire day, and only after 20 hours of heaving chest pain and radiating numbness did I seek a non-web-based medical opinion.

They found a total blockage in one small artery. This was likely due to genetics, along with foregoing exercise and sleep for more working nights and weekends. And Red Bull. Too much Red Bull.

Luckily, only the good die young. So, I survived, with just one stent as a parting gift from a two-day hospital stay. A weekend in the cardiac ICU is plenty of time to contemplate the usual post-heart attack concerns: my own mortality, my family’s future, and if I will ever know the heavenly taste of a cappicola, ham, and salami sandwich again.

My most demented thoughts were about work, though. I would be forced to take time

off, so who will handle the day-to-day stuff like newsletters? What about the March issue? And we have a supplement—how will that get done?

In my two weeks off, I learned to accept that a drive for excellence can very well take you over the edge, and it’s better to coast in cruise control every so often than go full throttle and overheat—or worse—cause an accident.

I imagine it’s the same for a lot of other managers out there, especially those running fleets and maintenance departments. The country needs you folks a heck of a lot more than they do another snarky magazine editor, so hopefully, you will consider heeding some of the following management advice I came up with over the past month.

Aim for higher health metrics

I used to scoff when my last corporate workplace would hold an annual 5K run. Who had time to don dorky company T-shirts and jog around downtown when stories needed to be written and web traffic needed to be driven? Improving quality and data were everything to me, as I had to show my bosses how valuable I could be. I carried that mindset over to the management level, though the only person I was trying to prove something to was myself... and I would never be satisfied.

So for all the KPIs you are trying to improve, focus more on how far you can walk or run per day, or lowering your LDL cholesterol (the bad kind) year-over-year. Remember, as famed football guru Bill Parcells said: “Availability is the best ability.” So you can kill it in the data department one year, but your shop will still be in far worse shape if you work yourself to death the next. And the better you feel, the better your decision-making will be.

Plan for your own absence

Whether you’re a shop owner or floor supervisor, you should always have a strategy in place for planned or unplanned leave. No one plans for a heart attack (except maybe the CIA), but if you have one, or some other health problem or accident

go more smoothly if you know your employees know how to get into the shop and can access various schedules and dashboards.

The big questions to ask yourself are, as things stand now: “How long can the business survive without me?” and “How much work will I have to do when I get back?” For me, it was about two weeks off, supplemented by a few emails and phone calls. Luckily, I work with some great colleagues who kept up the positive momentum.

Having all your files organized in a sensible manner and uploading critical folders to SharePoint or other cloud services can help give your team the tools they need to succeed. In a large business, the IT department could likely access your crucial emails and files, but regarding smaller independent shops, you may want to consider sharing spare key and password locations with a significant other or trusted employee.

A matter of trust (& empathy)

This shouldn’t need much explanation. If you give your employees time off to take care of their lives, handle emergencies, and always treat them fairly, it comes back to you. If you overload your techs with unfulfilling tasks and get on their case for missing work if their kid is sick, then you’re setting up the exact expectations they will have for you if you need to leave work for a medical follow-up or rehab work.

You’re also unlikely to retain capable people to handle things while you’re gone, leading to more stress when you return.

Maintain a healthy work/life balance

This is a constant struggle for remote workers such as myself, as there is always work that could be done and my commute is a staircase. I’ve set boundaries, such as taking a full non-working lunch hour and walking for 20-30 minutes instead of reading emails. Weekends are now reserved for quality time with my incredibly supportive wife and kids, not catching up on lagging projects.

And as I try this new sobriety from workaholism, Mr. Joel’s song “Vienna” makes a lot more sense, too: “Where’s the fire, what’s the hurry about? You better cool it off before you burn it out.”

I’m certainly trying, and I hope you do, too. ▀



1363130988 | azatvaleev | Getty Images