Sharpening the Saw: How to Really Take Care of Ourselves So We Can Excel on the Job and at Home

By:

Lawrence J. Center
Georgetown Law Center CLE
Washington, D.C.

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Lawrence J. Center
Georgetown Law Center CLE
Washington, DC

Lawrence J. Center is Assistant Dean for Academic Conferences and Continuing Legal Education at Georgetown University Law Center in Washington, DC, where he has served since 1985. Previously, Larry was Acting Dean and Director of Continuing Education at the Institute for Paralegal Training in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Director of the Master of Arts in Legal Studies Program for Antioch School of Law in Washington, DC. Prior to his career in continuing legal education, Larry practiced law in Washington, DC and worked on criminal justice projects for two national organizations. A graduate of Georgetown Law, Larry is a member of the District of Columbia and Maryland Bars. Larry is a Past President of ACLEA and served on the Executive Committee from 1993-1999. He also was a regular member of the ACLEA Revue in its many national tours. Larry also helped found the Continuing Legal Education Section of the Association of American Law Schools and was one of its first chairs. Larry has presented on a variety of subjects at many ACLEA meetings during the past 25 years and thinks that ACLEA members would be tired of hearing from him already, but most members who have attended his sessions are probably retired by now. In his spare time, Larry facilitates the workshop, "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" as part of the Georgetown University Management Certificate Program and now also teaches the course to Georgetown Law students. He facilitates the "Lawyers in Balance" course for Georgetown Law students, faculty and staff, a course which teaches stress management skills, skills any CLE professional must perfect. Larry consults on CLE issues for other law schools, presents on leadership subjects for local and national associations and is active in many civic organizations in his community. Larry is very pleased to be co-chairing the Baltimore Annual Meeting with his dear friend Susan Blair, the last meeting run by their wonderful friend and colleague, Donna Passons.
Introduction

The concept of Sharpening the Saw has been around for thousands of years. We all know that we can be much more effective with a sharp saw than with a dull saw. In the past 25 years, author and consultant Stephen Covey popularized the term by terming his seventh habit of “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People” “Sharpen the Saw.”

What did Covey mean by using this saw analogy? He was calling upon all his readers to think about the concept of self-renewal. Any aspect of our lives, if neglected, deteriorates and breaks down. This applies equally to any piece of equipment we use – our cars, our lawnmowers, our tools and machinery. We usually follow maintenance schedules for these tools and vehicles, but do we do the same thing with our own minds, our own bodies and our own relationships? Frequently we neglect our minds until they become dull, we do not maintain our physical health sufficiently and end up getting sick, we ignore the spiritual aspects of our nature until we become insensitive to the beauty around us and we neglect our most critical relationships until we become alienated from people to whom we were once very close.

Covey’s metaphor of sharpening the saw represents our commitment to preserving and strengthening the greatest asset we have – ourselves. How well we sharpen the saw affects every aspect of our lives, both at the office and at home. At some level of consciousness, we know that it is important for us to maintain balance and strength in all areas of our lives, yet we all fall victim to laziness, lack of goals, poor time management and other people’s priorities, and we neglect these important elements of renewal. We have good intentions, but our actions do not follow our intentions. Our priorities get out of order. We get distracted. We get tired. We tell ourselves, that we have honorable intentions about exercise, diet, sleep, relationship-building, reading, and other essential activities, but we do not maintain the self-discipline to follow through on all our wonderful intentions.

The Four Dimensions of Sharpening the Saw

Our lives have four critical dimensions: the body, the mind, the spirit and the heart, or our relationships with others. Covey pointed out that organizations, including our own CLE organizations, have these same dimensions. They have the economic, or physical side, to produce the bottom line, whether we are organized to break even to make a profit. To empower our team members, we must develop everyone’s specific talents. That is the organization’s mental dimension. Our CLE operations must always renew our commitment to our mission and values, serving the legal profession, enhancing the cause of justice and fulfilling the learning needs of those who may desire our services most through pro bono programming and scholarships – that is the spiritual side. Our organizations must also maintain high trust cultures and relationships with all team
members must be based upon integrity and honesty – that is the social side. For us as people and for our organizations, all four dimensions must be cultivated on a regular and consistent basis if we want to be successful in our personal and professional lives.

In the physical dimension, we are easily burned out at work after a long fiscal year, a very tough CLE program, or a major book project that finally sees fruition. When we feel burned out, we neglect our physical health and become stressed out. We neglect our diet exercise and sleep. We become ill or out of sorts. We take our stress out on these closest to us, on family and our professional colleagues. We all know that physical exercise is one of the most high-leverage activities we can pursue to maintain our health, yet we so often neglect it for a hundred reasons.

We also know that we should be maintaining our health in the mental dimension. How many of us have books piled up on our night tables or on our desks at work, all those great books we intend to read but do not seem to get around to? We are in the business of continuing legal education, yet how many of us get so focused on the next program or the next publication that we neglect our own mental self-renewal? With the rapid growth of technology in our own industry and all around us, we must continually increase our education as it relates to this profession.

The spiritual dimension is our core, our values, what we stand for. It is a very private part of our lives, a part we do not often share with others. It is probably the most private of the four dimensions and yet a very important one for all of us. It calls upon those sources that inspire us. We all renew ourselves spiritually in different ways. Some people find spiritual inspiration though organized religion. Others seek it through uplifting music. Many find spiritual strength through being in nature. My family recently returned from a vacation to the Canadian Rockies – Jasper, Lake Louise and Banff. Paul Wood, Dawn Offner, Jennifer Flynn, Alan Treleaven, Ron Friesen and others alerted me to how beautiful this country is, but I was still blown away by the majestic peaks and the pristine lakes. Bering out in nature for a full week allowed me to connect with my spiritual dimension in ways I had not accomplished in quite some time.

The social and emotional dimension refers to our relationships with other people. Covey advocates that one of the most important accomplishments we can have in this dimension is to renew or rebuild a broken relationship that we care about deeply, a relationship at work or at home that has been stressed or hurt. It takes tremendous courage to be the one who reaches out to repair that alienated relationship, to extend the olive branch. Covey quotes from former U.N. Secretary General Dag Hammarsjjold, who said: “It is more noble to give yourself completely to one individual than to labor diligently for the salvation of the masses.” That is true because usually it takes more strength of character to build a relationship with one person who is a real challenge,
whether a teenage child or a difficult co-worker, than to work hard for a wonderful cause.

**The Physical Dimension**

When I facilitate this break-out session at this Baltimore ACLEA meeting, I will ask participants to consider this one assumption: “Assume you had a heart attack in the past month. How would you approach exercise and nutrition?” I unfortunately have known many people who have experienced heart attacks – some survived and some did not. My own father died of a heart attack when he was 55. Spouses of two Georgetown Law colleagues suffered fatal heart attacks in the past year, and both were only in their 50s. Just last month James Gandolfini died of a heart attack at 51. Last year my first cousin had a heart attack at 53. In the past year, he has lost 100 pounds and changed his entire lifestyle. Hopefully, we have sufficient willpower and desire that it does not take a catastrophic event to motivate us to revise our attitudes and behavior in the physical dimension.

Here are some interesting facts that you may not know about the physical dimension:

- Aerobic exercise boosts the supply of nourishing blood to the brain, improves the efficiency of the nerves, and increases the neurotransmitter hormones that produce feelings of well-being.
- Physicians recommend drinking 2.5 liters or eight glasses of water per day. Drinking less can cause mild hydration, headaches, grogginess and problems with blood pressure or circulation.
- To optimize performance at work, experts suggest taking five to ten-minute breaks where you totally disengage every 90 to 120 minutes.

We all know that our physical health is a key part of our effectiveness at work and in our private lives, but we too often fail to make commitments to ourselves about sufficient sleep, a nutritious diet, regular exercise and stress reduction. Why do we neglect these issues or not give them enough priority on our lives. They are not urgent – if we do not do them, nothing significantly bad will happen today or tomorrow. However, if we neglect these important issues for a period of time, we know we will pay the price.

In the physical dimension, as well as the other three dimensions, success is all about self-discipline. We have to make and keep commitments to ourselves each and every day.

**The Mental Dimension**

When teaching about this critical dimension, I always ask the question: “Assume your knowledge and skills will be obsolete in ten years. What new learning avenues would
you explore?” This assumption is actually not too far-fetched for those of us in the continuing legal education industry. During the past 10 years, we have witnessed and are still witnessing tremendous changes within the legal profession that are impacting law firms, government agencies, and companies—and the lawyers who work within these organizations. These changes have produced significant repercussions for the CLE business and for our attendees and readers. Similar changes in technology have created new possibilities and new challenges for all professions, including continuing legal education. We cannot afford to rest on our laurels and remain satisfied with our prior levels of knowledge and skills.

Here are some fascinating facts that will encourage you to sharpen the saw in the mental dimension:

- About 180 million books have been published worldwide. The number grows by 1 million per year. (Let’s bring back the ACLEA Book Club!)
- At birth our brain has about a trillion neural connections. That sounds like quite a few, but that is baby brains! The best way to grow more connections is to take up a challenging activity that is new to us, like technology, music or a foreign language.
- According to one empirical study, taking piano lessons for even four months can improve young people’s performance on math tests by an average of 27 percent.

Just like in the physical dimension, we know what we should be doing in the mental dimension, but we get tied up in tasks or activities at work and do not give ourselves permission to enjoy real thinking time. When we get home at night, we are often too fatigued to engage in those mental activities that we know so well. Instead, we end up “vegging” in front of the TV for several hours or perusing Facebook after dinner until it is time to go to bed. Then the next day we get up and repeat this process all over again.

At some level of consciousness, we know that we would benefit from reading books throughout the year, from keeping a daily or weekly journal, from developing a new hobby that challenges us or taking classes in person or online. Too often we know we should be doing these things, but we do not. Again, we must ask ourselves why? What are we waiting for?

The Social and Emotional Dimension

This dimension refers to our relationships with everyone in our lives—our family members, our friends, our co-workers, our customers, our suppliers and our acquaintances. In this dimension, we ask the question: “Assume that everything you say about people will be heard by them. How might you choose your words differently?”
Study after study show that the number one factor that hurts families and organizations is gossip – negative words and thoughts that people spread about others who are not there. Why do we all engage in such gossip? Because it is fun. It brings people together. They can have a common “enemy” – a particular friend who everyone is upset with, a relative who has angered us, a co-worker who has engaged in upsetting activities, or, very often, the boss. It may indeed be fun in the short term, but in the long run such negative gossip is a major weakness that tears down organizations from within. People who engage in gossip about a colleague who is not present know deep down that next time they are not there, these same co-workers may very well be gossiping about them. There are two easy approaches we can follow when we find ourselves caught in a gossip conversation: change the subject or simply walk away. Initially, people will make fun of us when we do this repeatedly. Eventually, we will gain respect for our integrity.

Consider these facts about the social and emotional dimension:

- The number one reason people leave their jobs is poor relationships with their managers.
- In a study of marriages lasting more than 25 years, the ability to solve problems together is a major factor contributing to satisfaction.
- Lifespan increases in direct proportion to the amount of contact people have with their close friends.

The social and emotional dimension often is the critical factor that contributes to our long-term success and fulfillment. We tend to take our most important relationships for granted instead of focusing on them one at a time and striving to keep them healthy. We rush from task to task at work and have a tendency to concentrate on things and activities rather than on people.

Sometimes we must lay an important activity aside or delay completing a task in order to spend quality time with a friend or colleague who can benefit from real empathic listening or who is seeking our wise advice. In today’s fast-paced world with so many complexities, it is easy to neglect friends from different circles, even though Facebook and LinkedIn are right at our fingertips. How often have you said to yourself, “Wow. I have not spoken with ____ in so long. How did I let so much time go by?” That is why when we set goals for the week, the month, the quarter or the year, it makes sense to for us to hand-pick certain people with whom we want to maintain or strengthen our relationships, then go out and make it happen.

**The Spiritual Dimension**

The spiritual dimension is the most personal of the four dimensions. What inspires one person very often will not inspire his or her friend or co-worker. Some people are
inspired by classical music, which they play softly in their offices during the work day. Many professors at Georgetown Law play classical music in the a background while they write or prepare for class. Other people find spiritual fulfillment through religion and attend religious services on a weekly basis. Others may not attend religious services, but are inspired by reading the Bible. Every day on my way to work in the morning, I see many people on the Metro reading verses from the Bible. Still others find spiritual enhancement by reading great literature or by studying inspiring quotations from famous people. Only we know what fulfills us in this spiritual dimension, and only we can make the time to pursue these activities. Again, they are not urgent, so we do not feel pressure to engage in these activities. That is why we postpone them or delay them.

There are myriad strategies for seeking fulfillment in the spiritual dimension and there are many studies showing that people who are spiritually strong lead more meaningful lives. Think about these facts:

- Giving service can improve your health. Studies show that it can boost the immune system, speed wound healing and lower your frequency of colds and other infections.
- Reading biographies teaches us empathy, encouraging us to, if just for a few minutes, inhabit someone else’s worlds, according to award-winning author Jane Kurtz.
- People work about 11,000 days between their mid-20’s and age 65. That is a very long time and very many days if we are unfulfilled or disengaged at work. We spend too many hours of our lives at work to remain for long periods in dissatisfying jobs.

It is important to remember that we need not be religious to get in touch with our spiritual sides. We do have to be sensitive to what brings us closer to this spiritual fulfillment. Once we know, it is up to us to seek the fulfillment we deserve.

**Conclusion**

Take some time to think about where you stand right now in these four dimensions. Pretend you are staring at four Likert scales that go from one to ten, each representing one of these dimensions. I invite you to do a self-assessment. Put a mark on each scale representing where you are right now in terms of your overall health in the physical, mental, social and emotional, and spiritual realms. Be honest with yourself. Self-deception will not serve you.

If you are extremely healthy in all four dimensions, congratulations! Keep it up! In fact, become a role model for your co-workers, friends and family members. If you realize that you have some work to do to achieve sustained health in one or more of these
dimensions, congratulations to you as well! Awareness is the first step to real behavior change.

At this ACLEA meeting, I challenge you to make goals for yourself in all four dimensions of your life. Keep doing what you are already doing if it is effective for you. If there are areas where you want to improve, create goals for yourselves. Write them down. Tell your friends. Post them in your home or office. Measure your progress. Reward yourselves when you achieve your goals.

You can sharpen the saw every day and I promise you it will help make you more effective, more successful, healthier and happier. What are you waiting for? Get started! 😊