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5 Practical Ways You Should Invest in Yourself



You can't help anyone else if you're running on empty. What leaders must do to refuel

[Merge Gupta-Sunderji](#) || February 5, 2016

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If you've ever boarded an airplane, you've heard this portion of the obligatory safety announcement: "In the event of a sudden cabin depressurization, an oxygen mask will fall from the panel above your head. Place the mask over your nose and mouth, fasten the elastic strap behind your head, and breathe normally. If you're traveling with someone else, be sure to put on your own mask before assisting another person."

That last bit about putting on your own mask before someone —why do you think it's there? On second thought, the answer is obvious: If you're incapacitated, you're of no use to anyone else! In order to be of help to others, you have to look after yourself first.

It's a fitting message to leaders everywhere. A good leader talks a lot about investing in other others —staff, peers, and the organization. But your capability as a leader is determined by what's available in your own fuel tank, which is why it's critical for you to invest in yourself first.

Here are five ideas to help you "put on your own mask," so that you have the skills and energy to invest in others.

TAKE A BREAK

Whether it's a 20-minute walk around the block to clear your mind, a hour-long daily workout at the gym, or a two-week vacation from the routine of the workplace, taking a reprieve from the pressures of the day-to-day will reenergize and revitalize you. When you step away—however briefly—you gain perspective. Coming at a situation with a fresh set of eyes means that you're more valuable to yourself, your people and your organization.



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ESTABLISH BOUNDARIES

In today's world, it's not uncommon for work and personal time to blur into one another. And I get that when you're running an important department or organization, you can't just turn it off. But that's exactly the problem with being "at work" 24/7. You never completely wind down, which is critical if you want to refuel your own energy.

So establish days and times when you're not available (every evening from 6 pm, or every Saturday and Sunday afternoon, or something else that works for you), and switch off all your electronic devices. Even better, program them to turn off automatically.

And stick to the plan. Only a life-or-death emergency should cause you to deviate. Remember, you teach people how to treat you—if you repeatedly stray from your boundaries, then why should anyone else take them seriously?

DON'T STOP LEARNING

Learning should be a lifelong process, something you've no doubt told your people on occasion. Be a positive role model. Maintain a healthy curiosity about how things work and processes operate. No matter how experienced you are in your particular area of expertise, deliberately and consciously seek to add to your knowledge.

Set a goal to attend at least one training course a year in your field—you'll be surprised at what new tip or approach you'll learn. Become an active participant in conferences in your industry or specialty. Or try leading a workshop—sometimes you learn more from teaching others than you'd expect.

STEP OUTSIDE YOUR AREA OF EXPERTISE

Speaking of lifelong learning, don't just stick to your wheelhouse; branch out into areas that are outside your bailiwick. When you step beyond your comfort zone, you grow, both psychologically and emotionally. You increase your capacity; metaphorically you increase the size of your fuel tank.

So explore the arts if you're proficient in technology and collaborate with social scientists if you're adept at numbers. If you're a big-picture person, ask in-depth questions of your researchers, and if you're gifted at the details, step back from the spreadsheets and seek to rise to a helicopter viewpoint.

GET A MENTOR

Wouldn't it just be great if there was someone around who could help you put on your mask when you really could use a hand? That's where a mentor comes in. Finding a mentor is a practical way to refuel your tank from an external source when you've simply run out of the reserves to do it yourself. Seek out someone who is not only supportive, but will also talk tough when you really need it.

IT'S NOT A ONE-TIME EVENT

No matter how many times you refuel, your fuel tank will always deplete. Investing in yourself cannot be a one-time event, it has to be an ongoing commitment. So make a pledge to yourself that you'll invest in yourself continually. It'll make you a better leader.

Merge Gupta-Sunderji is a speaker, author and consultant whose leadership development practice focuses on turning managers into leaders and people power into results. Through large-audience keynotes, small-group training, one-on-one mentoring, and customized consulting, Merge has given over 65,000 professionals in eight countries specific and practical tools to help them achieve leadership and communications success.

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