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HOW LEADERS WORK SMARTER, NOT HARDER

Welcome to *The Highly Valued Leader* podcast where I make it simple for leaders at all levels to amplify their value. My name is Mel Savage and I went from working in the mailroom at a small ad agency to making multiple six figures in senior management at McDonald's, to running my own multiple six-figure executive coaching business. I've had huge successes in my career and epic failures. All of it taught me the world-class leadership, mind and skill sets that I simplify for my clients and share with you on this podcast. I'll help you reset your leadership style, demystify the politics, and help you become the highly valued leader everyone wants on their team. Get ready for the most honest, direct and revolutionary leadership coaching you've ever heard. Let's simplify leadership together.

Hey, leaders. Welcome back. Today, I want to talk to you about what it means for leaders to actually work smarter, not harder. Has anyone ever said that to you? It used to drive me crazy when people would say, *'Hey, Mel. You just have to work smarter, not harder.'* You're already working a million miles an hour, you're trying to get everything done, and you might, for a moment, say, *'Oh my goodness, there's so much going on. I don't know how to handle it.'* And someone will just throw out, *'Hey, you need to work smarter, not harder.'* And it was at that point that I wanted to punch someone in the face.

I have to be honest because it's not helpful, first of all. So please don't say that to people. And oftentimes, when someone would say that to me, and don't get me wrong, I've said this same line to other people. But upon reflection, I don't think it's the most useful thing to say to people. Because what it actually suggests, first of all, is that they just need to get more done. Like I have to figure out how to be more efficient. It's not helpful because it doesn't actually share with anyone how to work smarter. It just actually makes people feel more stupid because maybe they're thinking, *'Oh, I'm not doing it right.'*

And it's just like this pithy line that people say, but it doesn't actually mean anything. And sometimes it actually just assumes, when someone says it to you that you're not working smart in the first place. Like something must be wrong with you because you are so overworked. So it's not bad enough that you are overworked. Now, you have to have all this shame about the fact that you're not managing your life effectively.

So I think that my recommendation is if you're going to say this to someone or you're going to maybe think that this person is not working as effectively as they could, then turn it into a teaching moment to support somebody and/or if you are realizing that you yourself are not working as efficiently as you could, then what I want to offer you today are some strategies for actually working smarter, if that's something that you want to incorporate into your life or support someone on your team actually incorporating it into their lives.

That's what we're going to cover today. The real definition of working smarter, not harder. The goal for this session is to really help you create a strategy that's customized for you on how to embed a working smarter, not harder approach into your leadership style so that you can truly decrease the overwhelm and the exhaustion and

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actually increase the amount of energy that you generate throughout the week. What we're going to cover is why you're not implementing a work smarter strategy right now, why you might want to create something specific for you, what's included in doing that, and where you can actually start.

If you are not currently intentionally implementing a strategy where you are going to work more effectively *aka* working smarter; if you're not actually intentionally implementing a strategy for that, it's probably because you haven't really had time to think about it. You're just implementing all the stuff. You're just trying to get all of the work done. And you're feeling overwhelmed. And you think that maybe you should try to find a better way to do things but you have no idea where to start.

That's usually why people aren't doing this. They just end up becoming the effect of all the work that's coming at them. They're just trying to keep it all up in the air versus going, *'Wait a second here. I am going to take control of this shitstorm and figure out what's going on and how to work this thing more effectively.'* I would say that's more of an approach of taking a leadership role with your time, which we're going to talk about today, taking control of the situation, versus just trying to be going, *'Well, I have no choice. I just have to do all this work.'*

I think that's the difference between when you were an individual contributor, even though you did have a say then, you probably felt like you didn't have a say. And if you're carrying that over into your leadership life, then yes, of course, you're feeling overworked. But when you step into leadership, it now becomes your job to actually take control of all the work coming in. And I'm not saying become a gatekeeper and just say no to everything, but really get strategic and intentional about the work coming in. And we're going to talk more about that.

Now, the other reason you might not be doing it, this whole idea of being more efficient, is because you just think someone is trying to get you to do more stuff in less time. And already, you feel like you're on a hamster wheel, where you're just like ticking boxes, and quickly making decisions without thinking it through. And the last thing you want to do is try to get things going even faster so you don't take it when someone says to you, *'Hey, work smarter, not harder,'* you think what they're actually saying is, *you need to do more in less time*.

That in itself is overwhelming. And so you don't address it. You don't even think about it. You think, *'I'm doing the best I can with what I've got. I don't need you telling me that I'm not working smarter.'* So you just kind of dismissed the whole thing.

I think the biggest reason, honestly, that people aren't working smarter, and they're just working harder is because most people believe managing your effectiveness is really about managing your to-do list. You think it's the number of things you have to do and the amount of time it takes for you to do them equals how effective you're being.

But I want to offer you a different definition. Because I think the biggest time waster is not the amount of things that you have on your plate, or how quickly you do them. The biggest time waster is how you feel about all this work. The amount of negative emotion that you are processing or feeling every day is the biggest time waster that you have.

So what we're going to talk about today is really figuring out how to manage the amount of negative emotion you're feeling in a day. And when I say manage, I don't mean push down and pretend it's not there. I mean, really effectively manage and regulate your emotional life so that you can actually work more effectively. And combining that with a strategic approach to your to-do list. Those two things working in concert, are actually what it means to work smarter.

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And we're going to talk about each of those individually, and how they can work together to help you really be more intentional about the work you do, and the amount of energy you put into the work. When I say energy, I mean the kind of energy put into the work so that you can actually think and make more informed strategic, 'smarter' decisions.

Because if you really are truly working smarter, it should feed you more energy. It should help you think more strategically. You shouldn't be ending the day or the week totally exhausted and totally overwhelmed. You should feel in control. And what you get done in a week isn't the number of things. It's about the quality of the work, and how you curate and prioritize what actually needs to get done.

What I'm saying to you might sound right now a little bit far-fetched or out of your reach. But it's actually a very simple process. And when it starts to work, like almost immediately the small tweaks that you can make, it starts to feel like magic. Because anyone that I've coached with one-on-one when I help them with this work, they automatically will tell me, *'What a relief you know… Oh my God, I feel so much lighter… I am so much calmer... I am so much less frenetic... I don't run like a friggin Hamster all the time, or I'm not a Chihuahua all the time… I'm not hustling all the time… I actually get to stop and think and be purposeful about what I'm doing...'*

When you are actually working with that energy, imagine the dream is that you are getting the smart work done in a calm and thoughtful way using your best thinking. Now imagine if that's you. That kind of leader gets noticed. That's the kind of leader that management holds up as a role model for other leaders. That's the kind of leader that management wants more of. And if that's your reputation, people are going to want you.

So it actually makes sense to figure out the best strategy for you to combine effectiveness in your prioritization of workload combined with your emotional regulation, because people want leaders on their team, who create a calm, effective environment for results to happen. I always say your job as a leader is to create the environment for results to happen. And when you work smarter, and the way that I'm talking about it, part of the environment that you're creating is a calm and effective one.

The people who work for you want to be in that kind of environment. You're a thermostat for your team. And if you're always running too hot, people get exhausted faster. And your boss is also going to love it because you're a thermostat for them too. How many times have you had someone on your team working for you who's always overworked, always exhausted, always running a high energy, like really hot, let's call them in terms of a thermostat that impacts you as well?

Your boss is going to consider it a breath of fresh air working with you because you are the calm, effective one. You get all the shit done with the minimum amount of drama. And I don't know about you, but I would take 20 of those people on my team every day. Plus, the bigger benefit of that, though, is that you get to feel energized. You get to feel like you're doing great work. I think that's really the biggest benefit is that have more energy. You don't feel overwhelmed, and you are so satisfied, proud, and fulfilled by the work that you're doing.

All the other benefits like your boss is cool, the senior management loves you, and your team likes working for you are all a bonus to how you actually feel. And when you are that way, you actually cast a shadow of that type of energy for everyone else. You set the tone for everyone else.

We're going to talk about working smart now. I like to define working smart as taking stronger accountability for two things. I've already mentioned them–your emotions and your time. Working smart is taking stronger accountability for two things–your emotions and your time. We're going to start with your emotions. Last week, I

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did an episode on managing your emotions. You should go and listen to that because I really talk about the role emotions play in your job, and maybe some of the emotions that you really want to focus on as a leader.

Oftentimes, we treat emotions like something we're not supposed to have in a professional environment. But that's not a useful way of thinking about it. We all need emotions. And what I offer you in last week's episode is really about getting intentional about the emotions you choose and how to do that. Because when you feel a negative emotion, or you're overwhelmed with negative emotions in a day, it is a huge time suck, not just in that moment, but throughout the day.

Because if something happens, let's say first thing in the morning, someone doesn't do something they're supposed to do, and you're frustrated by it because it puts you in a difficult situation. That frustration isn't just in that moment when you deal with it. You have this low-grade frustration in the background for a while. It could be all day, it could be all morning, it could be whatever. And that low-grade background frustration that you have impacts your energy in the next meeting that you go to and how you make decisions. It's just sort of there.

And when the next thing happens in the day, all of those negative emotions start to pile up. And so it's really important that you deal with the negative emotions as they come up. Now you're going to tell me that you can't control when you get upset because you can't control what happens on a given day. *'If someone doesn't deliver what they say they're going to deliver, of course, I'm going to get frustrated. Why wouldn't I?'* But what happens in the world on a given day, isn't actually what controls your emotions. The world doesn't control your emotions, you control your emotions. The way you do that is by how you think about situations and how you think about the fact that someone didn't deliver the work they were supposed to deliver.

Let's say someone doesn't do that and you think, *'I can't count on that person.'* or *'They put me in a difficult situation.'* That's the thought you have, and so you feel frustrated. But if you thought, *'I wonder why this happened. I need to figure out how to solve this problem.'* Then maybe you wouldn't go right to frustration. It's your thoughts that drive your emotional reactions. Words matter, and the words we tell ourselves matter the most.

For instance, if your boss didn't approve a recommendation, you might feel disappointed in that because you're thinking, *'I didn't sell it well enough… They didn't get it… I really wanted this to happen... What a waste of time…'* Those might be the kind of thoughts that you have that are helping make you feel disappointed. But if you were thinking something like. *'I'm not giving up… It's not a big deal… I understand their position…,'* whatever. Then you're not going to feel disappointed.

It's all really about what you make what happens in the world mean for you. And don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that you shouldn't have those initial reactions. I'm not saying you shouldn't be initially frustrated if someone doesn't deliver their work on time, or if your boss doesn't approve your recommendation, that sort of thing. You're a human being. Your brain is going to quickly feed you a habit reaction, a habit belief that you normally have in situations like this.

But as a leader, what you need to recognize is that's just your first reaction. And your first reaction is not often the strategic reaction. The first reaction is usually your habit reaction so you need to let it be that. *I've had a habit reaction to this. I feel frustrated. It's normal. That's what I normally do in these situations. I feel frustrated and so I'm just going to take a moment here to feel frustrated.* And I will tell you how to do that.

Once you sort of just noticed and recognized and acknowledged that you feel frustrated, then you create the space for yourself to decide, *'Okay, how do I actually want to think about this situation in a more strategic, leaderly*

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kind of way that's going to get me the results that I'm looking for? Versus me, walking around frustrated, not just all over the report, who didn't send me the stuff on time, but also, I'm going to have this low-grade frustration that I'm taking out on myself and anyone else that comes into my path for the next few hours.'

We don't want that because negative emotions are an energy suck. The more negative emotions you have in the day, the more energy you use up, and the more exhausted you are. Positive emotions actually create energy. The more positive you are, the more energized you are. Let's take the same example of your boss not approving a recommendation. You can be initially disappointed, and you're going to feel that disappointment. And then you can think about it strategically.

So your first reaction is disappointment. Your strategic reaction and your next reaction need to be more thoughtful. And you just notice. *'My initial habit reaction is to be disappointed. But actually, how do I want to think and feel about this?'* You can start to think about questions. You can ask yourself, *'Why was this decision made? What are the benefits of the decision that was made? How can I make this decision work for me even though it's not the decision that I was hoping for?'*

And when you get yourself into that calm, thoughtful, strategic place, then you're in a position to ask questions, give more feedback, and relay what happened to your team, whatever it is, from this place of calm collaboration. You don't do that by thinking, *'That was a dumb decision... It's so wrong... That was a shitty decision... I can't believe they did that... What are they thinking?.. They're going to miss the boat on this… I'm right. They're wrong…'*

What I want to offer you here is that you can't work smarter unless you think smarter. And I want to say that again. You can't work smarter unless you are thinking smarter. In order to do that, you need to let yourself have the first reaction, feel that emotion, and then reset it into a strategic reaction.

I'll do the steps. Have your first reaction quietly to yourself. Feel it. Process that first reaction. What I mean by that is, when you feel frustrated, for instance, you're going to feel that tension in your body somewhere. Like me, my stomach is always the first to be on fire, that anxiety feeling in my stomach. The way you process an emotion is you feel it. And the way you feel it is you just find the tension in your body. And you actually just relax into it. You breathe into it. That's all it takes to feel an emotion. It's to notice the tension, and relax and breathe into the tension. That's it. That's how you feel about anything.

So you have your first reaction and you feel the emotion. And while you're feeling the emotion, that's going to give your brain space to catch up and start to think strategically about whatever's occurred. You can actually create space for your brain to think smarter.

Let me give you a real example of one of my clients. She is an incredibly intelligent woman who is working at a company on contract. And she really wants to do well in this job so that she can be hired full-time. And for the first, I don't know, six, seven months, whatever it was, maybe almost a year, she was treating every interaction in the organization like a mini interview. In her mind, she was always trying to impress everyone that she would come across because she wanted to be hired. And she kept putting pressure on herself in every situation.

She was thinking to herself, *'I need to say smart things… I need to do well… I need to prove I'm capable.'* Imagine what it's like, every time you talk to someone in the back of your mind, you're thinking, *'I need to say something smart… I need to prove myself… I need to show him capable…'* And the emotion that was creating for her was anxiety and constant pressure to do well.

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I see this so often not just with people who are obviously trying to get hired on a contract position, but with people who are new in the job and new in position and onboarding or are just newly promoted. They're like, *'Oh, my God. Everything I do needs to be great and smart and perfect.'* They put this pressure on themselves to be that person. And that is exhausting. It's very common for people to be like that.

If that's you, I want to offer that when you start to notice that you're doing that and that you have that anxiety, just give yourself a minute. Honestly, it can be seconds, where you can just notice, breathe, and then go, *'Okay, I'm doing it again. I'm going to that thing where I need to prove myself again.'*

What my client did, the thought that we found that worked for her was, *'Okay, instead of telling myself I need to do well, I need to prove I'm capable.'* She just tells herself now, *'Look, I just need to do what I'm already good at. That's what they want from me. I just need to do what I'm already good at. Every interaction is not an opportunity to prove myself. I just need to be me.'* When you have a couple of go-to thoughts like that, those can just help surround you with the energy that you want to have.

Because if the thought you're having is '*I just need to be me*', then you feel calm, centered, controlled, and thoughtful even instead of feeling anxious, pushing the anxious feelings down by not processing them and pretending to be casual and pretending to be okay with everything. That takes even more energy when not only are you feeling the negative emotion, but you're not processing it and you're pretending to feel something else. That's exhausting. That's that's the hugest time waster of our day. Our negative emotions that we're not processing, or that we're acting out on and carrying around with us like luggage all day long.

What I'm suggesting to you is the idea of thinking smarter, processing your emotions and then resetting your thinking into a more strategic reaction. That takes like one or two weeks of consistent effort. Honestly, if you were just grounding yourself in that process every day as much as you could, and not even every single time, but as much as you could practice, practice, practice, in a couple of weeks, it becomes a more habitual thing.

You may not ever stop the first reaction, you probably will. But even if you don't, even if you always feel frustrated at first, the switch into not feeling frustrated, this switch into resetting your emotions becomes more habitual, it just becomes something that you do. Even if every time you go into a meeting, let's say you're new at your job, and you go into a meeting and you think, *'Oh, I need to prove myself,'* the switch becomes more natural.

We're not trying to stop our first reactions unnecessarily. We're trying to make the transition to something more strategic an easier transition, a more natural transition. I think a lot of the time people get caught up in, *'I need to not be frustrated… I need to not feel self-doubt… I need to not tell myself I can't do this...'* No. Go ahead and tell yourself all those things. Feel all those things. That's just the first thought. That's just the first reaction.

You just need to feel that for a second and then go to the more strategic approach. That is a way easier thing to do than to try to stop yourself from feeling a natural reaction. That's what I have for you on the emotional side. That's the first step to working smarter is thinking smarter.

Now, you need to combine that with how you lead your time. If you're someone who walks around going, *'I'm so busy, I can't get it all done. There's not enough time for everything…';* you're not leading your time, you are letting it affect you. You're just trying to be at the effect of it. It's kind of what I call a victim mentality. I don't want to call you a victim. I know you're doing your best right to do it. But I'm just saying, that a victim by definition is someone who doesn't take control of a situation. And that's when you are walking around talking about how busy you are all the time. You're not taking control of it.

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What I often recommend to my clients here is a top-down approach to time versus a bottom-up one. And the bottom-up one, I've talked about this before is where you just keep adding and adding to your to-do list versus a top-down approach is like, *'I'm only going to work this finite amount of hours this week and what needs to get done within it.'* And you start taking control of your time like a boss. You're like, *'I've got 45 hours or 50 hours. Here's what's going into it this week… Here's what's not getting done…'* And then managing the noise around what you're not doing in a way where it's not as noisy. That's the job of a leader.

Managing your time is a boundary-setting exercise. And it's your job to be able to work within the boundaries that you set for yourself. It's no one else's job to manage your time, but yours. So if you say, *'My boundary is to work 50 hours and I'm just going to do whatever. Then it's your problem if I don't get it all done.'* No, that's not the job of a leader. The job of a leader is to say, *'Okay, my goal is to work 45 or 50 hours. Now it's my job to manage where I put my time and what I think are the most important things to do.'*

You're the one who has to determine how much you can get done in a week, and then negotiate up, down, and across the organization to make sure that you're working within your time strategy and getting the most effective work done for the organization. Part of that, of course, is not slowing everything down by carrying around a lot of unnecessary negative emotions. That's another part of what you're doing. But also just deciding functionally what you're actually going to work on and what meetings you're going to go to. All of that is part of it.

You need to be on top of what you can get done and negotiate what you're not going to get done. It's always what I call a *zero-sum game*. If someone gives you something else to do, that's all of a sudden a priority one, if something's on fire, then you need to let something else go. You don't add it on. It's a zero-sum game. And the more you manage this effectively, the more you train people around you to work with you like this.

It's going to be messy at first because you don't operate this way. And there's going to be a lot of emotion around it where you're like, *'Oh, I'm afraid to say no.'* And it's that thought, that *I can't say no, I'm afraid to say no, what will they think of me* if I say no, or if I try to negotiate this, that's what's making you feel anxious. Those are some of the thoughts that you need to work on with a coach or with yourself depending on how you do it. I always say everyone in a leadership position should have a coach to help them work these things through especially as you're trying to transition from one kind of operating procedure to another kind of operating procedures. You need to really reset how you think about yourself. Reset how you do work. Reset your sort of your overall operating manual.

If you want to be someone who works smarter, who feels lighter, and who feels that sense of energy all the time, then your job is to be more accountable for your emotions, and for your time. You need to take ownership of both and you need to have a strategy for how you're going to do that. And you can start small. You can just start a little bit at a time and build your strategy slowly over time based on what's working. Maybe you just start to feel your emotions at first. Maybe you just get used to that first, and then you're like, *'Okay, now I'm going to try and do a top-down time management strategy. I'm going to try to work X amount of hours a week.'*

Maybe you want to get to 40 hours, but you need to get to 50 first. Take it slowly. Don't try to do everything all at once. Working smarter is a real thing. But it's not about getting more done in less time and working phonetically and cutting corners. The best way to work smarter is to be more accountable for how you feel and what you do in combination. So I say give it a try. What do you actually have to lose? And if you need help, let's talk about it. You know where to find me. That's what I have for you this week, my friends. Talk to you soon. Bye for now.

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