

Business Edge

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Memo to boss: Work less, take vacation

Focused coach stays on track

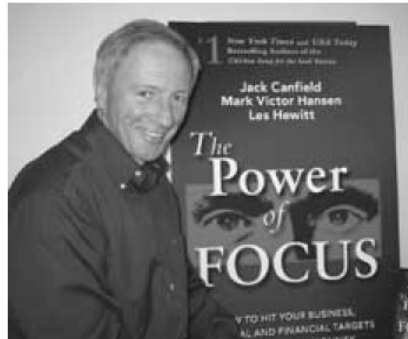
By Mike Dempster – Business Edge

Les Hewitt has a soft spot in his heart for today's business people – the entrepreneurs who build and develop small- and mid-sized companies.

He loves their dedication, passion and talent.

But as a professional coach he isn't enamored with their workloads, often averaging between 80 and 90 hours a week.

"In our workshops, when we ask how many weeks these guys have taken off in a year, they usually say zero to two weeks, on average," says Hewitt, the Calgary-based CEO and founder of Achievers.



Mike Dempster photo

Les Hewitt finds entrepreneurs at his workshops need to take more holidays.

"I tell them that I'm going to push them to take six weeks off, at the minimum," he says. "And they look at me like I'm nuts."

To ease their anxiety, he shares anecdotes about clients who have shifted from no holiday to taking six weeks, or even more. Hand in hand with the shift, their businesses make more money, he says. And the clients lead better-balanced, healthier and happier lives.

Taking holidays is one of 50 strategies that Hewitt utilizes in the Achievers Coaching Program. The program helps busy professionals to set goals, and most importantly, then pushes for accountability. The program takes two years to complete.

Accountability is achieved through follow-up workshops, and a buddy system whereby peers contact each other once a week to make sure that strategies are indeed being used.

"We find the people who implement this, really accelerate," says Hewitt, the co-author and driving force behind the self-help book *The Power of Focus*, which has sold more than 400,000 copies worldwide in 3-1/2 years.

"To me, so much of this is about accountability. The reason most people don't follow through in a training program is simply because they aren't accountable. They don't take responsibility. It's why for so many people, those half-day seminars don't work."

Hewitt knows something about the effectiveness of seminars. He formed Achievers in 1983 and for a dozen years the company conducted half-day seminars in Calgary, Red Deer and Edmonton. The programs featured expert speakers from across the world who delivered "phenomenal information."

The reality was that only 10 per cent of the audience actually implemented something they'd heard, says Hewitt. Ninety per cent of the audience never followed up, even though they had the best intentions.

It bothered Hewitt, to the point that in 1995 he switched his business model to focus on groups of 20 to 30 people who would meet every two months for two years. On the days they meet – eight hours away from the office – the sessions unearthed individual strengths and weaknesses in their business and personal lives.

The litany of pressing issues they face is classic: time pressures; financial pressures; family balance; keeping up with technology (a particularly tough issue for many baby boomers); finding, keeping and training excellent people; and a lack of direction and

purpose – the latter an issue that is often linked to the entrepreneur's level of confidence.

On the business side of the workshops, people are taught to focus on their strengths. The ultimate goal is critical: Spend 90 per cent of their work week utilizing their greatest skills.

"When this happens their confidence grows, their energy rises, the pressure drops and they become more productive. And that improves the bottom line."

Hewitt notes that when his company evaluates its clients, rarely does any leader achieve a rating of 50 per cent 'focus.' That means the entrepreneur is using his best two or three skills only half the time on the job.

A year ago, he addressed a western-based high-tech company that had been voted one of the country's best-managed companies. Ironically, only 20 of 23 senior executives that he evaluated had a focus rating of 50 per cent or better.

"The CEO was in that group," Hewitt says. "He was sitting with his head down. His focus was measured at five per cent.

"He (the CEO) was so interrupted and distracted by everything else, by people coming and going during the workday, that only five per cent of his week was spent doing what he does best."

Hewitt's advice for someone like this? Hire a great personal assistant, and learn to be less controlling. He offers a personal example. He's best at work when he focuses on three tasks: coaching, speaking engagements and creating new products (writing books, CDs, etc.)

"When I spend 90 per cent of my time doing these things, we are just moving forward. My energy is at its peak because that's what I do best.

"If you put me behind the desk half the week and pile me up with paperwork, my energy is drained by the end of the week. I resist it, my pressure goes up, and I'm not moving forward."

Hewitt's program sets out seven goals to key on in separate one-day workshops. One focuses on business (growth, sales, new ventures) and a second centres on financial issues (income, savings, investments and debt elimination).

However, the final five categories are more life-centred. The issues deal with fun, health and fitness, relationships, personal growth and contributions (charity, community and church).

"Some of the most dramatic stories we've had over the years is the balance component, areas where people have improved their relationships," he says.

"I had one guy tell me I'd (the workshop) saved his marriage.

"I didn't even know there was a problem. It's the stuff that thrills me."

Hewitt allows that it's a continuing job to maintain focus. Through his coaching, he's personally reminded on a regular basis about the positive habits that it takes to be successful.

This summer he put those skills to work with his wife, Fran Hewitt, who has just published a book, *The Power of Focus for Women*. The couple spent three months researching and writing the book, at the same time putting together a skilled team of people to deal with much of the book's detail work.

"We did what we do best, and they did what they do best," Hewitt says.

"When I was writing *The Power of Focus*, it took me more than three years . . . when Fran and I did this one, we produced a 300-page book that when we presented it to the publisher, was a finished product. It took us three months."

The idea was to get focused on a goal – in effect, to practise what he preaches.

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