**7 Practical Tips to Help You Stop Working 7 Days a Week**

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*Set Boundaries and Save Your Sanity* | **By Carey Nieuwhof**

Building a church shouldn’t come at the expense of your health, family, or soul. Wise pastors learn to set boundaries, freeing them to lead with grace and spiritual maturity.

So, you’re busy. Welcome to the club.

For too many of us, busy now means working 7 days a week.

One leader approached me a while back and said the one thing he knew would change everything for him was to stop working 7 days a week. The problem was that he had no idea how to do it.

My heart went out to him.

I don’t think I know a single leader who hasn’t struggled with working too many hours. And **I know far too many who never take a full day off.**

While I think overwork will always be a struggle for most driven people (it has been for me), I think it’s a rising epidemic for most leaders.

So how do you change that? I’ll share some insights from my journey.

**Two Truths No One Can Really Argue With**

First, two things that are simply true in leadership:

**1. You will never be done.**

This may not be the case when you start. I remember beginning in ministry in some very small churches and thinking, “How on earth am I going to fill 40 hours?” I actually called people to see if there was more I could do.

As our congregation grew, I never suffered from the problem of boredom again.

In fact, a church of 100 can place just as many demands on ministry leaders as a church of 1000.  Sometimes more, because in a church of 100 people assume you have all the time in the world for them. Similarly, in any field, an organization of 10 people can place just as many demands on you as an organization of 1000 people.

You think you will make up for the demand by working more hours, or by working smarter, but that’s a dead-end street.

So just admit it. Say it out loud. **No matter how many hours I work, I will never be done.**

**2. The problem with needs-based ministry is there are always more needs.**

You probably got into leadership because you care about people. And you want to help meet people’s needs.

I’ll never forget what my friend Reggie Joiner told me when I first met him: “The problem with needs-based ministry is there are always more needs.”

If your goal is to respond to every human need out there, you will never sleep. Just know that. You are fighting a battle you will lose every time.

And the biggest losers will be your family, whose needs will be ignored in the process.

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So how do you de-escalate your hours, not make people angry, and actually have time to refuel?

Well, this journey has taken me years, but here it is in seven key points:

**1. Preplan your calendar with “slots” for everything you need to do.**

Over a decade ago, I moved to a fixed calendar. It’s the only reason I’m still sane today and can do what I’ve been called to do. By a fixed calendar I mean I pre-plan what I’m going to do and not going to in advance.

I book no meetings as a rule on Mondays and Wednesdays. Those are message writing/series planning days. I also do much of the administration I need to do.

Tuesdays and Thursdays are meeting days. I meet with our staff and if anyone else is going to meet with me, it will be in the slots available on those days.

The power of this system is that when someone asks if you’re free to meet with them, you can honestly tell them you are not. Your message prep is extremely important, and if it’s on your calendar, you can tell them that unfortunately, you’re not free Monday. If all you have is nothing booked, you will almost always tell them you’ve got nothing going on and you’ll meet them.

And you’ll do your sermon prep or big project on Saturday when you should be home with your family. And, by the way, your organization will suffer because you didn’t spend the time you needed to on what was most important.

**2. Book off-time in your calendar.**

Slot in family time, personal time, devotional time, exercise time, and time to just be. Write your day off in your calendar.

Then when someone asks you if you are free, you say “Unfortunately, I’m not.” Again, if you think rest isn’t important, ask the question again once you’re in full-fledged burnout.

And if you have pre-determined slots available for meeting people in the weeks ahead, you can offer them one of those.

**3. Learn to ask yourself, “Is it truly an emergency and am I the only one who can help?”**

If you lead in a larger church, this isn’t the issue it used to be. But when our church was smaller, people always looked to me for pastoral care (we’ve switched most of our care to groups and outside counseling, a move I can’t recommend highly enough).

The challenge is that everyone who asks you to meet with them wants to meet with you now because it’s so important and they’re in crisis and only you can help.

In those moments, remind yourself that what feels like an emergency to them might not actually be an emergency.  Their marriage didn’t get terrible overnight; it’s been sliding for years. Ask one more question, and you might discover that X has been in the hospital for a week and will be there for another week.

Too many church leaders give up their personal time and family time for crises that aren’t really crises. Pastors of churches particularly suffer from this.

And then ask yourself (especially if you want your church to grow), am I the only person who can really help? Truth is, I am sometimes the person who can least help. They need a counselor. Or a doctor. Or someone from their community group to visit.

If you are the only person who can help, try this: “I’m sorry to hear that. I have some time available Monday. Can we meet then?” You’ll be shocked at how many times the person immediately says, “Sure, no problem.”

**4. Power down.**

The problem is just as much you as it is them, isn’t it? You’re addicted to your phone. I am.

So, power down. I’ve moved my email app to a third screen on my phone, so I don’t look at it unless I intentionally want to. Almost all notifications on my phone are disabled, and 95% of the time my phone is on “Do not disturb.”

Have some moments in your life and leadership when you’re gloriously unavailable.

People expect you to take time off. So, when you’re off, be off.

**5. Tell people the truth. They’ll be happy for you.**

Maybe this is just me, but for years I felt guilty about telling people I was taking a day off. I know, only crazy people think like that, but I’m a crazy person.

Sometimes I would say things like, “I’ve been working for a month without a day off, so I really need to take it.”

Seriously. What is wrong with me that I need to justify time off?

So, next time you’re off or need to be off, just tell them, “Oh you know, that’s my day off. Can we do it another time?”

You know what? They’ll be thrilled for you. At least normal people will.

**6. Create categories of things you will no longer do.**

As your ministry or organization grows and you have more responsibility, you need to regularly decide what you are simply no longer going to do.

The best way I know how to do this is to think in categories.  
Personally,

* I schedule meaningful time with my direct reports and top leaders.
* I schedule less time for everyone else.
* I leave time open for people who don’t go to church.
* I don’t do individual coaching, but I coach thousands of leaders each year through my online course.
* I don’t do counseling.
* I don’t do many weddings or funerals.
* I realize many people will disagree with these choices, but they have helped me lead at a much higher level that’s generally very healthy and sustainable.

And I have time for myself and my family and time to pursue hobbies, like writing. Plus, it allows me to spend the majority of my working time doing what I’m best at and what most moves the mission forward.

If you have too much to do, start eliminating categories of things, instead of just selecting random things from your calendar.

**7. Learn to say “no” nicely.**

I hate saying “no.” I’d love to say “yes” to everyone. But I would be dead, and they would not be helped.

I also need to confess that I have a secret weapon. I have a great assistant and team around me. Sometimes I joke that I pay them to say “no” all day long. They’re good and it and so nice that when they say “no” on my behalf people feel like they said “yes.” I’m not kidding.

The transferable principle is that if you’re in a larger organization and can have an assistant or team, find people who excel at saying “no” and setting boundaries, nicely. It’s an amazing gift…not just to you but to the entire organization. And if you don’t have a budget for that, my guess is you can find a volunteer who will help you by handling your calendar or hire a part-time person.

A final word: This needs constant revisiting. I’m about to review all my outside and inside commitments again next month and start cutting again.

You are never done. As more opportunities arise, you need to be relentless in what you say “no” to…even if you say it nicely.

You deserve to stop living at an unsustainable pace. Get your time, energy, and priorities working in your favor.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



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Carey Nieuwhof is a best-selling leadership author, speaker, podcaster, former attorney, and church planter. He writes one of today’s most influential leadership blogs, and his online content is accessed by leaders over 1.5 million times a month. His book, At Your Best: How to Get Time, Energy and Priorities Working in Your Favor, is designed to help you live a life you no longer want to escape from. Instead, you might actually start loving it.