



AVOIDING STRESS AT WORK

My equanimity – my peace of mind – is often dependent upon whether I am caught up or behind at work. By caught up, I don't mean that all my work has been completed; it seems there is always more work to do. By 'caught up,' I mean that I have eliminated pressing deadlines and that the preliminary work necessary to enable me to meet future deadlines is comfortably underway.

BY ALBERT G. MARQUIS, ESQ.

Among pilots, this is called staying ahead of the airplane. This phrase signifies that preliminary work is getting done early – well ahead of pressing deadlines – which will avoid a log-jam of duties that have to be performed at the last minute. For example, when approaching the destination airport, the pilot needs to check the weather well in advance. If it is clear and sunny with little wind, things are going to be easy. If there are strong winds, the pilot needs to make some preliminary decisions regarding which runway to use and whether or not his airplane is capable of handling the anticipated cross-wind. If there are clouds, the pilot needs to determine the ceiling (the distance between the ground and the cloud base) in order to, in turn, determine whether he will need to implement an instrument approach. If such an approach is necessary, there are hosts of other

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duties and responsibilities that kick in. Which approach should be chosen? How low will a particular approach allow the pilot to go? Will this be low enough to get below the cloud base? On top of all of this, the pilot needs to make sure that he familiarizes himself with the runways and other facilities at the destination airport and that all of the correct frequencies are tuned into the radios.

If all of this is done well in advance, the pilot and his airplane will be set up and ready to file the approach to landing. If emergencies or other unexpected events occur at the last minute, he will have time to address these because the routine matters will have already been taken care of.

On the other hand, if the pilot is behind the airplane, stress and discomfort prevail. He'll end up attempting to perform multiple tasks under stressful conditions, which simply leads to more stress. Listening on the radio, controllers and other pilots can tell when a pilot is behind the airplane. He doesn't respond to the controller immediately or he stutters and stammers and his voice begins to crack. In the cockpit, he is working frantically while beads of sweat break out on his forehead.

While most people are probably thinking they don't want to fly with such a pilot, it is not much fun for the pilot, either. These are stressful times that create nervous anxieties and give pilots knots in their stomachs. Not to mention the fact that it is dangerous as hell to get behind an airplane like this. How, for example, would such a pilot handle an unexpected emergency?

All of this parallels how an attorney handles his or her workload. So many attorneys wait until the last minute to start work on a brief or a contract. Accustomed to cramming the night before a test when

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they were in college, they can't seem to motivate themselves unless a critical deadline is looming. Then it is crisis time. All of a sudden the attorney and every subordinate must go into emergency mode. Clerks must frantically do last-minute research. The secretary has to stay late to complete the typing. Runners have to wait around to deliver the documents at the last minute. There is little time to proof what has been written or to solicit valuable input from partners or the client. Mistakes are inevitable.

Suppose an important client calls or some other emergency arises at the last minute. Just like the pilot who is behind the airplane, the attorney who has been waiting until the last minute to begin drafting has lost any ability to address emergencies or other matters that may unexpectedly arise. So the procrastinating attorney runs the risk of not only turning out a poor work product, but also alienating co-workers and other clients who may be in need of his advice during the emergency.

The irony to all of this is that attorneys who "get behind the airplane" often complain about their profession, claiming there is so much stress involved. But it is not the practice of law that has created stress; it is their own personal work habits.

All of this anxiety can be avoided if projects are started early and organized so that completion occurs well ahead of the deadline. If other employees will be involved, convene an early meeting,

brainstorm about what needs to be done and assign tasks and completion dates. Then follow through with an interim meeting to check on the status with each team member. In this way, everyone will be "caught up" with their assigned task, and they can rest assured that their performance is in accordance with the boss's expectations. Everyone will be so much happier.

There are, of course, true emergencies which are unavoidable. But attorneys should fight to keep these to a minimum. And the existence of these unavoidable emergencies is precisely why attorneys should not procrastinate to the point where routine matters back up and turn into emergencies themselves.

Get organized. Anticipate what is going to need to be done and start early. Get caught up. Clear off your desk. Your secretary will be happier. Law clerks and others who work for you will be happier. Clients will be happier, and you will be happier. ■

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