

CHAPTER 12.

IS RESISTANCE FUTILE? STRUGGLING AGAINST SYSTEMATIC ASSIMILATION OF ADMINISTRATIVE WORK

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In the second season of Star Trek's *The Next Generation* (TNG) episode, Captain Picard and crew are introduced to the Borg, a cybernetic alien species. The Borg were not the typical enemy the U.S.S. Enterprise crew met during their exploration of the Milky Way galaxy. Unlike other alien species, the Borg's objective was to assimilate all biological life into "The Collective," a hivemind driven by their quest for total domination and complete perfection. The Borg's motto, "Resistance is Futile," often declared by thousands of Borg in unison, terrified Picard's crew and television viewers alike. As a humanoid species with a shared consciousness across millions of Borg drones, the Borg function as a systematic network: they physically plug into the Collective mainframe where they have their own docking stations and receive the Collective directives through network downloads.

I open my chapter with the Borg supersystem because it is a fitting—albeit dramatic—metaphor for the many working environments rhetoric and composition administrators experience within the neoliberal university supersystem. Much has been written about the professional, emotional, and invisible labor of administration work, such as Diana George's *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadours* (1999), Theresa Enos and Shane Borrowman's collection *The Promise and Perils of Writing Program Administration* (2008), and, more recently, Courtney Adams Wooten et al.'s *The Things We Carry: Strategies for Recognizing and Negotiating Emotional Labor in Writing Program Administration* (2020). Many hallway conversations, conference workshops, and Facebook feeds are filled with how the system of academia reduces humane working conditions and increases emotional and cognitive overload. A common theme in the scholarship and side conversations are rhetoric and composition administrators' worries about setting boundaries and saying no due to workplace (covert or overt) retaliation, feelings of powerlessness, and fears over letting students and colleagues down (McGee & Handa, 2005).

However, a (often) missing piece of the conversation and scholarship about rhetoric and composition administrators' work culture is how neoliberal ideals and values have shaped rhetoric and composition administrators' identities, motivations, and work mindset. While much has been written about the neoliberal university more generally, very little scholarship on rhetoric and composition administration explores how the neoliberal university functions as a system directly affecting rhetoric and composition administrators' (hereafter administrators) wellbeing. Systems theory is an important framework to consider in this conversation because, as we write in the Introduction, it provides "a tangible way to engage in identifying the gaps, the in-between, and the silences that result in broken systems and people." Therefore, my chapter is not a critique of the administrators who are caught-up in an all-consuming system, as many of us have been conditioned that this administrative life is normal or that nothing can be done about it. Rather, I want to draw attention to system processes that affect our personal and professional lives and impede the meaningful change we want to create for ourselves, our colleagues, and our students.

The neoliberal university supersystem, according to Evelyn Morales Vázquez and John S. Levin (2018), "relies on the idealization and needs of faculty members as entrepreneurial workers" (para. 3). In this model, administrators "operat[e] in the position of middle management, are often tasked with maintaining viable writing programs on skeletal budgets with overwhelmingly contingent faculties" (Scott, 2009, p. 184). Administrators in the United States and elsewhere are probably familiar with the neoliberal buzzwords of the ideal university employee: the employee exhibiting "flexibility," "competitiveness," "entrepreneurial spirit," "economic rationale," "adaptability to precarious environments" and "emotional detachment" (Vázquez & Levin, 2018, para. 3). In this system, workaholism, scarcity mindset, managerial processes, economic priorities, and emotional disembodiment are prized. Resistance, push-back, self-care, and boundaries are discouraged or even disciplined.

In this chapter, I focus on how the neoliberal university supersystem functions as a top-down collective defining and shaping administrators' work mindsets and identities. In this hybrid essay genre, which blends research, narrative, and reflective exercises, I first provide an overview of social science scholarship on neoliberalism to show how neoliberal university supersystems affect administrators' workloads, job satisfaction, and personal care. Social science scholarship can give administrators language and framing to better understand how the neoliberal system shapes our work and, often, hides from view how we might resist neoliberalism. Second, I use mindfulness theory, neuroscience, and psychology to encourage readers to adopt what I call a "mindful work mindset" (MWM) to counteract the demands of the neoliberal university supersystem. In this section,

I offer mindfulness and boundary exercises for administrators to try for personal and professional self-care. Ultimately, my objective is to support your examination of your own (conscious or unconscious) roles in the neoliberal university supersystem, how you might resist neoliberal work expectations, how you might reclaim their personal and professional identities, and how you might (re)establish meaningful personal and relational networks.

As you read this chapter, I would like you to consider one or more of these questions, perhaps with a journal by your side, to guide your reflection and mindfulness:

- What do I value most about my administrative work and why?
- What do I value least about my administrative work and why?
- What is my biggest concern about how administrative work affects my personal life?
- What is my biggest concern about how administrative work affects my professional life?
- What parts of this chapter resonate with my experiences as an administrator and why?
- Do I feel like I can set boundaries and say no? And when/if I do set boundaries or say no, do I feel like I am letting students, faculty, or others down?
- How does the neoliberal supersystem function in my program, department, college, or university? In what ways am I required or encouraged to perpetuate the supersystem?

WHEN UNIVERSITY SYSTEMS RESEMBLE THE BORG: AUDITING CULTURE, WORKAHOLISM, FRAGMENTATION, AND COMPULSORY CITIZENSHIP BEHAVIOR

I draw from psychology, anthropology, business administration, and public administration research to highlight four negative outcomes of neoliberalism that impact administrators as human beings: auditing culture, fragmentation, compulsory citizenship behavior, and workaholism. Auditing culture, fragmentation, compulsory citizenship behavior, and workaholism are the byproduct of the neoliberal university supersystem. My purpose in this section is to introduce readers to social science research that could help them better understand the work culture they have been foisted into or unwittingly adopted. Until we can recognize the supersystem dynamics affecting our work culture and pressures, it is very difficult to resist, internally and externally. (Readers should also hop over to Bradbury et al.'s chapter on activity systems in this collection, as their

observations about how activity systems “interact with or otherwise influence each other, perhaps through shared membership, shared goals (objects), similar rules (sometimes referred to as *norms*) or reliance on the same or similar tools” offers readers another perspective of how systems shape how we see ourselves and the work we do.)

I am personally invested in this conversation because I have experienced this supersystem, as perhaps all readers have, and have felt its emotional and professional toll. Coming out of my doctoral program in 2013, I took a 4-4 tenure-track job at the University of Wisconsin-Stout (UW-Stout), which I knew would be a difficult teaching load for me as an ambivert and empath. During faculty orientation, the provost announced faculty turnover was 47%, which was demoralizing to hear before the semester began. During my four years there as an assistant professor and also as the Director of First-Year Writing (with one course release each semester), I experienced the emotional and professional exhaustion working at a university with high teaching loads and low salary. (My salary for nine months was \$51,000 gross, which barely covered student loans and the cost of living.) Because of the low salaries, especially among faculty in the humanities, many of us took overloads, taught courses during the three weeks of winter break, and taught in the summer. It felt like the campus was generally burned out. At least in my pockets of campus.

My own workload, with the internal pressure to publish enough to be considered competitive for a job with a lower teaching load, caused me to have adrenal fatigue and chronic exhaustion, which is still affecting me years later. Most everyone around me, it seemed, was exhausted, resentful, and applying to other jobs. And I was exhausted, resentful, and applying to other jobs. At that time, I thought taking a position with a lower teaching load might reduce the exhaustion, but it did not. In 2017, I accepted the position at Colorado State University (CSU), and the exhaustion of my CSU colleagues was the same at UW-Stout if not higher. Ten years post-graduation, rather than being resentful about the academic climate, I have poured myself into understanding *why things are the way they are*. In my research for this collection and chapter, I've learned a few things: the neoliberal university supersystem keeps us in the cycle of exhaustion; as well, being trained in a field where overwork seems to be the norm (and do I dare to say prized in some circles), sets-up graduates to accept neoliberal work environments as the norm. But my personality as a problem-solver and ever-questioner means I ask “why?” quite a bit. Why do we prize exhaustion? Why are we taught exhaustion is normal? Why do we think we can't say no? Why do we think if we set workload boundaries, we're disappointing colleagues and students? These questions and more drive my research.

According to anthropologists Cris Shore and Susan Wright (2015), the neoliberal university model has fostered an “audit culture” with significant consequences (p. 430). In their study of how neoliberalism has shaped European university systems, Shore and Wright explained, “The introduction of audit and accounting changes the nature of the organizations so that their activities become increasingly focused on the measures by which their performance is judged” (2015, p. 430). The perceived “positive outcome” of auditing culture is it “delivers efficiency, commensurability, and accountability” in addition to “transposable templates for managerial control and make possible new forms of remote surveillance” (Shore and Wright, 2015, p. 430). Despite the perceived benefits, Shore and Wright identified seven consequences of academic audit culture as identified by international scholars:

1. “loss of organizational trust”
2. “elaborate and wasteful gaming strategies”
3. “a culture of compliance and large compliance costs, including the appointment of new specialists preoccupied with creating position (mis) representations of performance”
4. “defensive strategies and blamism that stifle innovation and focus on short-term objectives over long-term needs”
5. “deprofessionalization, a disconnect between motivation and incentives, lower employee morale, and increased stress and anxiety”
6. “‘tunnel vision’ and performing to the measure, with a focus solely on what is counted, to the exclusion of anything else”
7. “and the undermining of welfare and educational activities that cannot be easily measured” (p. 430).

I don’t know if it reassures us to know our international colleagues are experiencing similar demands. Perhaps it’s a bit reassuring. If anything, it reveals that higher education institutions, acting as supersystems, rely on compliance, quantified methods, auditing culture, loss of autonomy, and personal self-sacrifice to maintain their output: more students, more classes, more sports, more awards, and more money. As we can probably all guess, auditing culture does little to benefit staff, faculty, and students.

Working very hard, often defined as “workaholism” or “overwork” depending on the context, is a by-product of the neoliberal supersystem. Because context is important to defining whether one is a workaholic or an overworker, researchers studying workaholism often struggle to agree upon definitions (Peiperl & Jones, 2001; Schaufeli et al., 2009). According to Wayne Oates (1971), who coined the term “workaholism,” it is “the compulsion or the uncontrollable need to work incessantly” and likened workaholism to a type of addiction (p. 11).

More recently, Wilmar B. Schaufeli et al. (2009) defined workaholism “as the tendency to work excessively hard (the behavioral dimension) and being obsessed with work (the cognitive dimension), which manifests itself in working compulsively” (p. 322).

It is worth noting there is a difference between workaholics and overworkers: whether or not workers feel valued by the organization. According to Maury Peiperl and Brittany Jones (2001), workaholics are “those who work too much but feel that the rewards arising from their work are at least equitably distributed between themselves and the organizations that employ them (if not slightly more favorable to them)” and overworkers are “people who work too much (in their own terms) just as workaholics do but at the same time feel that the returns of their work are inequitably distributed in favor of the organization” (p. 374). Peiperl and Jones (2001) concluded, “Workaholics, then, have a clear reason to continue their extreme work behavior; overworkers, by contrast, may be trapped in a pattern of working that is neither sensible nor equitable” (p. 374). We administrators might lean into the workaholism category or lean into the overwork category, depending on the task or situation.

Based on the scholarship, it seems whether an administrator is a workaholic or overworker depends on context and personal feelings of choice: does the administrator want to work to the extreme? Or do they feel trapped in a system where they feel they must work to the extreme or the _____ (insert program, students, initiatives, etc.) will collapse? Sometimes administrators believe they must be workaholics or overworkers; sometimes they choose to be workaholics or overworkers; sometimes their tenure and promotion requirements require them to be workaholics or overworkers. Regardless, the consequences are the same. Workaholism and overwork results in loss of morale, increased mental and physical health issues, and non-existent collegiality (Berg & Seeber, 2016; van Dernoort Lipsky & Burk, 2009). The rhetoric and composition administration scholarship, social media posts, and listserv conversations bear the human consequences to be true: many administrators are burned out, disenchanted, resentful, and mistrustful.

Whether administrators choose or feel obligated to work excessively, workaholism and overwork often leads to compulsory citizenship behavior (CCB). CCB is also called the good soldier syndrome, where employees place the needs of the organization above their own needs for the “good” of the organization (Hayat et al., 2019; Soran et al., 2017; Vigoda-Gadot, 2006). For example, if an administrator is burned out but feels they must attend all meetings they are invited to for the good of students, faculty, their program, the department, etc., this is a sign of the good soldier syndrome. Or, if an administrator feels they must single-handedly continue an initiative without compensation for the good of the

students, faculty, program, etc., this is a sign of the good soldier syndrome. According to Eran Vigoda-Gadot (2006), CCB “may be viewed as another means by which those with authority and power take advantage of other, less powerful individuals who simply cannot resist or say ‘no’”; it is “anything but spontaneous behavior” (pp. 83, 85). Similarly, Fang Liu et al. (2019) defined CCB as “personal participation in extra-role activities that always go against one’s will” (pp. 1-2). Most frequently, CCB occurs when employees are expected to complete tasks or adopt roles not defined in their job descriptions and when employees do not receive formal rewards for the additional work they do (Vigoda-Gadot, 2006, p. 85). For example, if the provost asks the administrator to develop a new course or participate in a new outreach program, the administrator may experience CCB if they feel they must participate and cannot say no due to being already over-extended or if the request is outside of their job description. And they may feel they must say yes to maintain the goodwill of the provost.

A result of workaholism, overwork, and CCB is professional and personal “fragmentation” (not to be confused with psychology’s fragmentation of personality) which results in fractured professional and personal identities. According to Vázquez and Levin (2018), fragmentation “denies the roles that personal histories or professional goals play in how faculty members experience their work and their academic identities” (paras. 3, 6). For example, administrators may experience fragmentation when they are unable to enact goals or initiatives they are socially, politically, professionally, or ideologically committed to, such as having a budget for ongoing professional development, offering long-term contractual work to non-tenure-track-faculty, or adopting anti-racist assessment practices and curriculum. Fragmentation may materialize through burnout, disillusionment, anger, workaholism, people-pleasing, or codependency—or a myriad of other possibilities depending on administrators’ coping mechanisms, trauma, and upbringing (Burke & Cooper, 2008).

It is important to note CCB is different from organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), as OCB is personally driven. With OCB, employees commit to extra-role activities that “serv[e] their private interest, including impressing the management” (Liu et al., 2019, p. 2). However, even if administrators choose to go above and beyond to serve their private interest, they are setting a norm for working beyond their job descriptions and signaling to those around them—graduate students, colleagues, the chair, the dean, etc.—they are willing to do more with the same compensation. This doesn’t mean administrators shouldn’t do extra work that serves their personal and professional interests. It simply means they should be aware of how their OCB may affect the program or department: it may cause others in the program or department to feel like they have to commit to extra roles or activities, or it may cause others in the

department or college to expect the administrator to continue to take on extra activities and roles without compensation.

So why does overwork, workaholism, fragmentation, OCB, and CCB happen in academia? It may be because many academics all have a high level of public service motivation driving them to serve. According to Tse-Min Wang et al. (2020), there are “four types of motives” in public service motivation: “Compassion, Attraction to Public Service, Commitment to Public Values, and Self-Sacrifice” (p. 2). Organizations with high public service motivation, such as non-profits, government, and higher education, draw employees interested in interweaving their personal identities with the public’s greater good (Ingrams, 2020). Tse-Min Wang et al. (2020) explained, “Individuals with high [public service motivation] can be seen as ‘moral exemplars’ who pursue their moral goals to achieve a life characterized by deep integration of self and public morality” (p. 3). I would argue many in rhetoric and composition choose to become program administrators because of a high public service motivation: to change students’ lives for the better, to support students’ rights to their own language, and to improve non-tenure-track faculty’s working conditions, among other reasons. An administrator who has a high sense of public service motivation also has a high sense of moral obligation for the work they do—which may exacerbate CCB, fragmentation, overwork, and/or workaholism.

Perhaps most painful about working within the neoliberal university super-system is little scholarship that neoliberalism makes our programs, departments, colleges, and universities better. Jodie-Lee Trembath (2018), anthropologist and expert on modern university life, wrote on her academic blog, “[T]here has been no evidence, statistical or otherwise, that increasing ‘quality control measures’ in universities has actually improved quality in universities by any objective criteria” (para. 16). Rather, research overwhelmingly suggests the human cost outweighs any financial benefit.

It is possible, at this point in the chapter, you are feeling frustrated, disenchanted, and, maybe, hopeless. Or, possibly, the light bulb has turned on and you are able to make connections between your work experiences, your university system, and your own values and expectations. Or maybe these thoughts are running through your mind:

- But I cannot say no.
- There is nothing that can be done.
- If I don’t do it, no one will.
- The provost says I must.
- I don’t want to make waves.
- I don’t want to make people mad at me.

- I just need to keep my head down.
- I don't want to lose my job.

If you are thinking one or more of these statements, you are not alone. They are a natural reaction for administrators working within the neoliberal university supersystem—a supersystem that prizes self-denial, emotional exploitation, workaholism, people-pleasing, and codependency. However, resistance is not futile, even if it feels like it. And it's important to be aware of what we tell ourselves about our agency because if we hear “I can't” enough, our brains will believe it as true. As Lucien Darjeun Meadows wrote in his chapter in this collection,

[C]ommunication is an emergent social system, every dialogue between writer and consultant is a network of utterances, such as verbal and nonverbal communicative acts, generated via what Schirmer and Michailakis (2019) called “selections”—that is, conscious and unconscious choices between communicative possibilities.

While Meadows' chapter focuses on communication between writer and writing center consultant, his analysis rings true for the communication selections of within ourselves and to ourselves. What we believe and say to ourselves becomes a brain pathway, like an over-skied slope, that becomes hard to undo. Mindfulness and self-reflection about what we say and believe about ourselves acts like fresh snow renewing the mountain.

In this next section, I introduce readers to a new way of thinking about work: a boundary- and mindfulness-based mindset I call “mindful work mindset” (MWM). MWM is based on scholarship on mindfulness theory, psychology, psychotherapy, and neuroscience. For MWM to occur, administrators must better understand their inner selves first. One of the challenges of working within a systems-based, fast-paced modern life is administrators are often so focused outward—on helping others—they forget to focus inward. As Jenna Morton-Aiken, in this collection, wrote, “WPAs are in the business of connecting people and resources, elevating voices, and putting people in touch with the right systems.” And this is all true. However, we cannot continue “doing good stuff” without connecting with our own selves first. In our efforts to do good work, we cannot—we must not—place ourselves last.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?: A MINDFUL WORK MINDSET TO RESET THINKING AND BEING

Not surprisingly, the neoliberal university supersystem conflicts with administrators' reasons for entering the profession in the first place. Quite simply:

we (generally) love the work. For many of us, our administrative work “is the expression of our soul, our inner being” and “puts us in touch with others, not so much at the level of personal interaction, but at the level of service in the community” (Fox, 1995, p. 5; see also Gini, 1998). Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) such as Courtney Adams Wooten and colleagues (2020), Megan McIntyre (2019), Bruce Horner (2007), and Susan H. McLeod (2007) and others have written about the love many WPAs have for the work they do while also feeling burned out, frustrated, disillusioned, disappointed, and angry at many facets of that work. So how do we do the work we love and feel called to do within a broken system?

I believe one of the best ways to resist assimilation by the neoliberalism university system is to change our mindset about what we “can” and “cannot” do. Neoliberalism thrives as a supersystem because it takes away (or tries to take away) the agency of the employees. Additionally, neoliberalism thrives in academia because academia is a rewards-based system where the rewards are often couched in what Allison Laubach Wright (2017) called “the language of excellence” (p. 272). The neoliberal university supersystem uses rewards and the language of excellence to continue demanding, consuming, and growing. As long as the people in the supersystem acquiesce, the supersystem will continue. However, as much as it may not feel like it, we do have agency, and we do not have to resign ourselves to the expectations and demands of the neoliberal university model. We may not be able to convince upper administrators to abandon neoliberalism, but we can focus our attention on our own agency, and we can encourage our colleagues and graduate students to claim their own agency. But first, we need to be aware of our emotions and what our bodies are telling us about our work mindset.

For this next section, I include three steps towards a mindful work mindset, which I have developed with therapists and practitioners to help me practice self-care in the workplace. As a result, grappling with (and oftentimes resisting) a mindful work mindset helped me better understand my personal and professional needs and relationships as an administrator working within the neoliberal university supersystem. Each step below, which can be done in any order but is purposefully organized from big picture to small picture reflection, includes exercises you might want to try.

STEP 1. ADOPT MINDFULNESS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND HOW YOU RESPOND TO YOUR WORK STRESSORS

Recent scholarship shows academics around the world are in perpetual states of chronic stress (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Coetzee et al., 2019; Gill & Donaghue,

2016; Smith & Ulus, 2019). Part of this stress is working within the neoliberal supersystem. Other parts of the stress are rooted in a myriad of places, including public service motivation, internal pressures, fear of failure, and scarcity mindset.

As a result, the body goes into fight or flight mode to manage the stress. Because the brain does not know the difference between an actual threat (such as being chased by a bear) and a perceived threat (emotional stress), the body will respond to work-related emotional stress the same way it responds to you being chased by a bear: your hypothalamus sets off the alarm which causes the adrenal glands to release hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol (American Psychological Association, 2023; Mayo Clinic, 2019). Many academics reap the “benefits” of adrenaline and cortisol because it allows the body to push through exhaustion and long hours. However, when the body believes it is constantly under attack, for example, being in hours and days of stress due to course scheduling problems or working under a tight deadline, the body relies on adrenaline which causes the body to become chronically stressed and depleted of adrenal hormones (Kearns, 2020; van Praag et al., 2004). And while the chronic stress may result in tangible benefits—more publications, more initiatives, better professional development, etc.—the results of chronic stress include anxiety, depression, digestive problems, headaches, sleep problems, and concentration and memory problems, among others (Gottlieb, 1997; Wilson, 2014).

Before we administrators can resist the neoliberal supersystem in meaningful ways, we need to heal a little bit (or a lot) from our chronic stress and reduce our body’s adrenaline response. One way to do this is through mindfulness. Mindfulness, defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003), is “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (p. 145). Research showed that mindfulness improves “emotional regulation,” supports “decreased reactivity and increased response flexibility,” and “promotes empathy” (Davis & Hayes, 2011, p. 199-202).

To get you started, here are some mindfulness-based reflection questions you might free write about (now or later) to help you process your chronic stress and adrenaline responses:

- What work situations cause me to feel anxiety or an adrenaline rush? Do I know why they do cause those reactions, or do I need to spend more time understanding my body’s reaction?
- Where do I find work-related tension or anxiety in my body? In my solar plexus? In my neck? In my stomach? In my throat? Do certain work situations cause me to feel tension, anxiety, nausea, acid reflux, or some other discomfort or pain?

- Do I feel like my throat is closing up, or do I feel a ball of tension in my throat before, during, or after work tasks and situations?
- Do I feel like I can't take a work break on-campus to attend to my needs: going to the bathroom in a relaxed state, leisurely eating my meals, stretching or walking, etc.?
- Are there days I dread going to campus, addressing certain tasks, meeting with certain people, etc.?
- Are there times I cannot fall asleep because I do not want to go to work the following day?

Take note of your body's reaction to these questions and your mental, emotional, and physical responses. If you find yourself resistant to some or all these questions, you might want to ask yourself where the resistance is coming from. With such a heavy topic as this one, give yourself time to process and feel. It is okay to stop reading here if you need a break or if you feel emotions bubbling up to the surface.

To better understand the roots of my chronic stress and adrenaline responses, I had to slow down and listen to my body. I did not know how to do that, so I worked with therapists, medical doctors, acupuncturists, and other practitioners to learn how to listen to what my body was telling me. I learned my body was always in a heightened state of anxiety, particularly when it came to my academic work. The adrenaline rush was always there. But I needed to train my body to relax and to let it know I wasn't being "chased by a bear" all day, every day.

I want to share with you three exercises I developed with the help of therapists and practitioners to increase my mindful awareness around my body's chronic stress and automatic adrenaline responses. You will get the most out of these exercises if you practice them at least for a week—but even after one or two days you will see a benefit. While I list the practices below that have significantly helped me, I encourage you to develop your own MWM that help you reflect upon your body's automatic stress responses. The end goal of your MWM should be to help bring awareness to your body and thoughts, so you can make the best choices to support balance and self-care in your administrative work.

Exercise #1: Breathwork to Lower Your Stress Response and to Learn to Listen to What Your Body is Telling You

If you are experiencing a stressful day or if you are stressed out about your next task, such as responding to email, set your timer for three to five minutes, close your eyes, and breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Allow your body to relax and focus your thoughts on your breath. When you are feeling an adrenaline response, your body will get the most out of breathwork. If

your brain is sending you messages that you cannot slow down and take a break, be aware that this messaging is your brain trying to protect you from the “bear” (e.g., emails, student complaints, the upcoming meeting, course preparation, etc.). Messages such as “If I stop now, I won’t get it done” or “I don’t have time to take a break” are your brain’s protection response; they are not true. You *will* get it done. (More to come on the brain’s resistance in the next section.)

After your breathwork, take one to five minutes and write down what thoughts, emotions, and feelings you experienced. Do you feel tired? Do you feel pain in your left shoulder? Are you hungry? Do not judge your thoughts, emotions, and feelings. Notice them and use your notes later to make decisions about how you can address what your body, brain, and heart are telling you about your workday and your emotions around your work tasks.

Exercise #2: Noticing and Retraining the Brain’s Automatic Stress Response

If you are feeling stress around a particular task—for me, it’s opening my email in the morning—do not open your email when you are in a heightened response state. We often experience adrenaline or anxiety responses around a particular work task because the brain is in fight or flight mode, and it is releasing enough adrenaline and cortisol to complete the task. Even if you believe, rationally, you should not be in a stress response, the body will act based on habit. The brain needs to be taught it can “stand down.” To retrain your brain’s response, either complete exercise #1, go for a short walk, watch a video clip that will make you laugh or smile, or do another task until the stress resides. You might find it helpful to have a conversation with your brain to remind it that you have “got this” and that it does not need to go into an automatic stress response. Before checking email, I often have a conversation with my brain such as “I know you are trying to protect me by creating a stress response. But I will be fine, and I have the tools to take care of the emails I might receive. Thanks for protecting me, but I have got this.”

Keep a Post-It note by your desk or open your smart phone’s note app and record what tasks or situations create a stress response in your body. Notice what stress responses feel automatic: that is, the reaction does not feel warranted, but your body is producing that response regardless. When you have a moment of calm, perhaps over the summer when you have more mental and emotional processing time, look at the list and decide what task(s) you want to retrain your body’s response. Do not feel compelled or guilty into fixing the responses all at once; do not judge yourself for your list; do not allow negative self-talk such as “I should not be stressed out by this” or “I must be the only one with this problem” (you are not!). You are retraining your brain’s habits, which takes time and practice.

Exercise #3: Carry a Notebook and Write Down Everything You Want to Say—Good, Bad, and Ugly

If you find yourself in meetings that leave you feeling frustrated, silenced, angry, hopeless, and/or bored, take notes in your notebook or on your laptop about what is said and what you would like to say back, unfiltered. Be honest in your notes about what you believe is right, what you disagree with, and what you wish you could say. After the meeting and when you have mental and emotional processing time, look back over your notes. Note trends you see, such as particular people you frequently disagree with or what you would really like to say but do not. To find a way forward for future meetings, reflect on the following questions and develop an action plan:

- Is it true I cannot say what I want to say? Or is the brain trying to keep me safe with its stress response?
- Am I keeping quiet because of perceived repercussions that may not actually happen, or am I keeping quiet because I know there will be actual repercussions?
- How might I revise my unfiltered notes into keywords or phrases that I can say in future meetings?
- Are there others in the program or department I can speak with honestly, so they can help me formulate my ideas or thoughts in ways that will be heard?
- Is there a legitimate reason why I cannot say what I want or need to say? Will I lose my position, will it affect my annual review, will I lose necessary cultural capital, etc.?

Exercises #1–#3 are data collection: the information you have gathered by completing one or more exercises tells you quite a bit about your work mindset and your body's reaction. Once you have data, you can make a plan about how to identify and set boundaries to redefine what you want from work and what your colleagues and administrators can expect from work. If you have the means, I highly recommend working with a therapist who is versed in systems and organizations to help you further change your mindset and set boundaries.

STEP 2. IDENTIFY AND SET BOUNDARIES TO (RE)DEFINE WHAT YOU WANT FROM WORK—AND WHAT WORK CAN EXPECT FROM YOU

Just as teachers might reestablish classroom norms throughout the term if student-teacher boundaries get too porous, administrators may need to reestablish (or define for the first time) boundaries around their time and job descriptions.

Academic social workers Janice M. Rasheed et al. (2010) defined boundaries as “the arrangement both between subsystems and within systems outside of the family. . . . The function of boundaries is to protect the integrity (differentiation) of the subsystem” as “every subsystem has different functions and makes specific demands on its members to prevent interference from other subsystems” (p. 218). Boundaries teach people how to treat our emotional, physical, and mental spaces. As children, we learn about boundaries from how we are raised and treated; we carry those boundaries into our teenage years and adulthood. Many of our workplace boundaries (or lack of boundaries) can be traced back to how we were raised and the boundaries that were modeled to us by the family members who raised us or had authority over us (Burn, 2016; Katherine, 1991; van der Kolk, 2014). When boundaries are crossed, even accidentally, we might feel like we have been taken advantage of, abused, neglected, and/or disrespected (Burn, 2016, p. 13).

For example, I repeatedly had an anxiety response whenever there was disagreement between faculty in a regular meeting I attended. If I anticipated disagreement before the meeting started, anxiety appeared before the meeting began. In all cases, my anxiety disappeared as soon as I walked out of the meeting room. I suffered for two years not understanding why I had such a targeted anxiety response. It was not until after reflecting on my family role—I am the eldest and was raised to be the peacekeeper and problem-solver—that I instantly understood my body’s reaction: my body was sending me signals to solve and fix the workplace conflict like I had been trained to do in my family. Realizing how my family role carried over into my professional life allowed me to acknowledge the root of my body’s anxiety response. Then I was able to develop strategies with my therapist for how to set emotional and mental boundaries, such as reminding myself that I do not need to problem-solve other faculty’s conflicts. Mentally and emotionally setting boundaries before heading into meetings have helped lessen my body’s anxiety response.

Setting boundaries may be challenging, especially if we have to retrain our body’s automatic physiological response in addition to changing our ways of engaging, thinking, and responding (Kreiner, 2007; van der Kolk, 2014). Moreover, administrators may find it exceedingly difficult to set boundaries if having no boundaries creates cultural capital, gives us a seat at an important table, or gets us more program funding. However, if we do not set boundaries, no one will set them for us. We can only be responsible for ourselves—and our professional and personal satisfaction depends on how we choose to live in the world (Trefalt, 2013).

Drawing from the professional practice of Shawn Burn (2016), Anne Katherine (1991), Caroline Knowles (1997) and others, here is a partial list of

workplace boundaries you might consider setting to support your MWM:

- Create a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with your department chair and/or dean that refines your job description during the academic year and/or the summer.
- Become less available for last-minute requests or tasks that cannot be completed quickly. Set boundaries with phrases such as “Other work obligations prevent me from completing this today” or “I will need X days to complete your request.”
- If you have multiple long meetings in a day and do not have time for self-care, arrive late to a few of your meetings. Do not sacrifice eating, stretching, down time, etc., for meetings.
- Resist the urge to become the program or department’s problem-solver unless it directly corresponds with your professional role. Refer students and faculty to the correct person who can address or solve their problem. Phrases such as “I only have five minutes to talk,” “That sounds horrible, but I am not the right person to resolve it,” or “I don’t have time to talk right now; send me an email, so I can get you on my calendar,” are ways to set boundaries on your time and emotions.
- Close your office door and tape a printed message to your door with the message “I am under a tight timeline and cannot be interrupted except for emergencies.” Liberally use this boundary to protect your mental health.
- Block out enough “busy” time in your university calendar for rest time, mealtimes, breaks, writing time, etc. Resist feeling compelled or guilty into multiple meetings in a day that negatively affect your mental and physical health.
- Disable all email notifications on your laptop and smart phone to prevent distractions and anxiety responses.
- Set email away messages after hours, on the weekends, or during busy weeks explaining senders can expect a response within 48-72 hours.
- Avoid checking email on the weekends or after hours regardless of department norms.
- Practice not apologizing unless the situation warrants it. (If we were raised with the idea that setting boundaries is “being mean,” you might find yourself inclined to apologize a lot. It takes some practice to realize setting boundaries is not “mean.”)

Setting boundaries takes time. You will need to decide which boundaries you want to set, the amount of effort/time it will take to set them, any potential

challenges, and your existing emotional and mental bandwidth. I recommend setting one or two boundaries a semester. Start with easier boundaries and work your way up to boundaries that feel more complicated and challenging. You might even consider talking with a therapist or psychologist familiar with organizational systems who will help you set boundaries and help you respond to colleagues who break your boundaries.

STEP 3. BE PREPARED FOR YOUR BRAIN TO RESIST—AND THAT’S OKAY

Do not be alarmed if your brain and body resist your MWM. Resistance may feel like anxiety responses, feelings of fear, or brain messaging such as “You can’t say no!” or “Don’t set that boundary—everyone will be mad at you!” These examples of resistance may happen for different and overlapping reasons: people-pleasing tendencies, a lack of practice with boundaries, and the brain’s wiring, among other reasons.

The reward system of academia further entrenches the brain’s wiring to be resistant to boundaries. A reward system, Kerry Ann O’Meara (2011) explained, is “a set of interconnected and interacting elements that work together (and against each other at times) to regard, ignore, or disregard faculty and their contributions” (p. 162). In a reward system like academia, faculty and staff are “disciplined’ or socialized towards a certain set of behaviors” (O’Meara, 2011, p. 161). Reward systems are effective at shaping behavior because the brain is designed to seek out pleasure rewards and avoid negative experiences. When the brain receives a reward, which could be a thank you note, a salary raise, or a smile, it releases dopamine, known as the “feel good hormone,” which reinforces behavior in alignment with the reward system (Psychology Today, 2021, para. 1). Neuroscientist Marc Dingman (2019) explained the brain’s reward system is not simply focused on dopamine release; the reward system “also concerns learning and the development of motivation to try to achieve the experience again” (p. 157). For example, if a writing center administrator receives a dopamine release through workplace problem-solving and people-pleasing, the brain will be more inclined to problem-solve and people-please even if those actions are at odds with the administrator’s boundaries. However, if the writing center administrator decides they want to set boundaries and stop people-pleasing at work, the brain will resist because this is not what it expected—and because no dopamine release comes with set boundaries. But this is key (and underline it one hundred times if you must): just because the brain resists doesn’t mean the writing center administrator should stop setting boundaries. If our brains tell us we’re “mean,” “not good colleagues,” and/or “letting people down” when we set boundaries, it doesn’t mean it is true.

The brain will also resist MWM due to evolutionary biology. The brain is designed to keep us alive and safe and, as a result, prefers consistency and repetition, so it can be prepared for what might happen throughout the day (Jensen & McConchie, 2020). The brain does not like mental and emotional change because it fears change will put us in physical danger. Therefore, once we have established consistent actions over many months and years, such as staying late at work or answering emails after hours, the brain becomes accustomed to these actions. If we change those actions, the brain will send a “Stop! Don’t do that!” signal, such as an anxiety response or negative thought, to convince us to continue doing what we have always done (Stanley, 2019). The brain will use personal experiences, fears, and the ego, among other persuasive strategies, to keep you from changing your behavior. This brain response is evolutionary designed to keep us alive (Stanley, 2019; Wickremasinghe, 2018). But we don’t need to be afraid of our brain’s alarm system. Just because the alarm has been set off doesn’t mean we are doing anything wrong. In the moment, it is important to deeply breathe and tell the brain “Everything is okay. Thank you for protecting me. I am taking over control now. I’ve got this.” Speaking to the brain reminds us that the evolutionary biological responses are not in charge—we are.

CONCLUSION

As many conference presentations, hallway conversations, and Facebook feeds attest, administrators often feel “resistance is futile” against the neoliberal university supersystem and their home institution system. Sometimes administrators’ feelings of futility are conscious and other times they are unconscious. And sometimes they can find ways to resist the neoliberal university supersystem by developing their own personal and relational networks, boundaries, and self-care. And other times administrators let the system sweep them up, and they ignore their mental and physical health “for the good of the _____” (insert students, equitable working conditions, program needs, collegiality, etc., here).

For all the readers who are learning to reclaim their bodies and boundaries: good for you. You are a model for the rest of us. Please share your tips and strategies at conference panels, in scholarship, and on social media. For the readers who are not sure how to reclaim their selfhood or are afraid to set boundaries: I know it is hard to resist the system, but I believe in you. Talk to your fellow administrators about how you might develop a personal network of support and adopt a mindful work mindset to reclaim yourselves from the collective supersystem. In order to keep doing the good work you want to do, it is important for you to set healthy work expectations in your program and department and to develop clarity around how you show up for your personal and professional self. This administrative work

is demanding, and you deserve to take care of yourself first. As the saying goes, “You cannot pour from an empty cup.” And this is true for us administrators: to do the meaningful administrative work we want to do—the new curriculum we want to design; the new Celebrations of Student Writing we want to initiate; the new anti-racist program assessment we want to facilitate—we have to turn inward, first, and take care of ourselves. Then the rest can (and will!) follow.

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