

Kiss My Aster

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Putting Out Fires

Amanda Thomsen



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I picked up a learned behavior, working in garden centers and in landscaping, where I'd make grand plans to stay out ahead of things, to proactively manage my workload ... then something bizarre would happen to knock me off course and it would take time to get back on track. I'd get so upset that I wasted so much time making a schedule, detailed goals and plans (playing by the rules) that I'd be a sour mess each time I was knocked off course, so I just gave into the dark side.

Someone said, "The wind does not break the tree that bends," and it was all I needed to hear. I did a full 180 and succumbed to the "tackling the bizarre stuff" parts of my job and then I never wanted to ... uh, go to meetings or work the register—the everyday stuff that's vital to day-to-day operations. I was addicted to managing chaos.

When you're good at putting out fires and then your boss rewards you for saving everyone, there's not exactly an incentive for preventing fires. And that's a big problem, for people and businesses.

I told myself that making a schedule and sticking to it was ridiculous since something completely bonkers would inevitably happen 32 times a day and my ability to go with the flow/quick reaction time more than made up for the fact that I had three months of filing to do. What I didn't realize is that I wasn't just addicted to putting out fires—I was often the person dropping the lit matches as well.

I have a long history of taking on too much work, never asking for help and sacrificing what little time I have to help out coworkers (often times helping them with things I needed help with myself). I have a complicated, thick and muddy relationship with caffeine, which helps me flit from crisis to crisis, not truly finishing the previous crisis before the ants in my pants urge me to move on. I have an even longer history of getting bored with the status quo very quickly, as well, ranging around for excitement and chaos and... sadly, drama. Basically I was ON FIRE, not just putting them out.

Does this sound like you, too? Or someone you know?

We all need firefighters in our businesses, from time to time, but now that I'm detoxing from this tricky addiction, I can see clearly how the skills can coexist with more healthy work habits.

- Identify your firefighters and watch them for procrastination, boredom and taking on insane workloads. They may

not seem like they need much managing, but they do. They may even need a rescue squad.

- Team up your firefighters with people that excel in consistency. Teaming up high-frequency hares with slow-and-steady tortoises really can win the race.
- Commit to tracing back to the source of all the fires. Is it really all out of anyone's control? What are common factors? Is this a systemic problem or a personnel issue? In other words, are these actual crises or perceived crises?
- I whisper, to myself, "Don't react, respond." I fear my internal sense of urgency has me jumping into fire when 99% of the time the situation just needed a little breathing room to sort itself out. I didn't need to save everyone.
- Just switch everybody to decaf in the late morning without their consent. Sure, that's playing dirty, but it cuts back on garden center martyrdom.

There's such beauty to a job well done in the normal time it's supposed to take to do it (but I'm trying to not get addicted to that, too). **GP**

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