You are listening to, you've got this episode 338. Welcome to You've Got This, a weekly podcast for higher education professionals looking to increase their confidence and capacity for juggling the day-to-day demands of an academic life. I'm your host, Dr. Katie Linder. On this episode, I wanna share some thoughts on subtracting versus adding.

Now, I was reminded of this concept by a recent inside higher ed article called Leadership by Subtraction. I will link it in the show notes, and in this article there's a chancellor talking about kind of how we need to consider taking things away, taking things off our plates rather than adding, and in this article, Um, the author cites another piece, which is from 2021, that was published in Nature, which I read with a lot of interest at the time that it came out cause it was also something that was kind of, um, uh, like came across my radar.

And that first article basically says that we have a fundamental human bias for adding new things as a strategy for problem solving. Rather than simplifying a situation by removing or subtracting things. Now there is also a book that talks about this called Subtraction, which I will also link in the show notes.

So several people are kind of coming across my radar recently talking about this concept. And I have to say that all of these things really speak to my minimalist heart because I always love the idea of a good declutter. And I do think that many problems can be solved by removing something instead of adding something else.

So first I wanna offer some examples of this. But then I wanna talk about the reality of, is this even possible with everything we have going on in our lives? So, couple of examples from my own life of kind of removing things. I've really decluttered my wardrobe to a very small color palette and it makes it easier for me to get ready in the morning.

Um, everything matches with everything else. I've found that when I have too many options in front of me, I tend to just get overwhelmed. So, one example, wardrobe. A second example is my curated reading list that I do each month, and I can see why some people might find this constraining, but I've actually found that these curated reading lists are really helpful for me because I always know what to turn to next, and I don't waste a lot of time looking through all of the thousands of options between my library, my Kindle shelf, my audible files, my physical shelves.

You know, it's easy for me to narrow in on what I'm gonna read next, and I really like that. And then a third example is how I often try to call down my to-do list by choosing, you know, like the top three things that are the current highest priority for me. Again, this is helping me to focus my attention on what I need to be working on in the present moment, rather than stressing out about all the other things that are on my list.

Now another resource that kind of talks about this is Charlie Gil's book Start Finishing. I will also link this in the show notes and it touches on this concept of subtraction because he recommends only taking on five projects at any given time. Now, when I talk to my coaching clients about this, it's kind of mind blowing for them to think about.

What five projects they might want to focus on. And what's interesting is Charlie Gilkey says that these five projects include both work projects and personal projects. So if you're like planning a wedding or organizing a family reunion, or you have some kind of like big thing you're doing on the personal side, it actually might count as one of the five projects that you would put on your list.

Okay, so real talk. If you listen to a recent episode where I described having dozens and dozens of projects on the go, I would imagine you're kind of thinking that I'm not really walking the talk of this whole subtraction, um, concept that I'm talking about on this episode. And I think you're kind of right.

I feel like I have way more on my plate at the moment than I would like, but I also would imagine that this is probably true of most of us. I think if we live in kind of modern society. We're overwhelmed by a lot of like little minutia things, but also some pretty big projects that we have on our list.

So in looking at this concept of subtraction, I, I wanna offer a strategy that I found helpful. I. And this is for, you know, something for me that allows me to focus and prioritize all of the projects on my plate, even if I can't remove some of them completely. So I wanna acknowledge that, you know, for many of us, we've got a lot going on, and oftentimes we're asked to do things from other people.

So if my boss puts a project on my plate, I can't necessarily say, No, I have to reshuffle, I have to reprioritize and kind of figure out how I'm going to, you know, add all of these things in together. And so basically what I've started to do is whittle down the many projects on my list at work into a smaller grouping of themes or categories that help me to stay focused on the bigger picture of what I want my contribution to be.

So I wanna offer some examples of these categories of my work that are kind of top of mind for me at the moment to see if they might be helpful for you as you're trying to think about how do we. Fit all of this stuff into our brains. And I did talk about, on a recent episode, you know, taking on some new responsibilities at work and trying to share some of the strategies that are helping me as I'm kind of piling more on to what was already a full plate.

So here are some of the categories of my work that are kind of top of mind for me right now. One is helping my teams, cuz now I have multiple feel like their projects and contributions have meaning in how they connect to the larger goals and priorities of the university. Now if you work in a university setting, you know that sometimes you're pretty far down, um, in terms of like the hierarchy of the institution, and it can be really hard to understand on a day-to-day basis.

What is my contribution? Like, how is this meaningful to larger goals that the institution might be trying to accomplish? So I really feel like part of my job is helping people to feel like they have that connection point and they know that what they're doing on a day-to-day basis is like moving a larger needle.

Um, so that they feel like they have that kind of connection and with a larger institutional strategy and initiatives. The second category is shaping projects in ways that have greater impact to larger groups of people. So one example of this is I'm in charge and kind of I'm, I'm co-leading this project to update some of our classrooms, um, in terms of their technology baseline.

And we have gone through over the course of this last year, you know, many conversations with our faculty. This is a collaborative project with our IT department and, um, as we're getting to the point where we're starting to actually implement some of these changes in the classroom, we are, um, trying to figure out what are the classrooms that serve the most students on a regular basis where we're getting kind of the biggest bang for our buck.

And this is especially helpful if we have like a. Phased rollout. So we may not be able to pay for all of this to happen at one time. And so how do we kind of shape the project in such a way that we're kind of impacting positively the largest groups of people? So this is something that's on my mind, especially as we go through budget reduction exercises and realignment exercises where we're trying to figure out where resources can go and be the most effective.

Now the third category of my work that's kind of top of mind for me right now is strategizing with other leaders about how to connect smaller initiatives to a larger multi-year vision. So that we are being efficient with these limited resources that we have, but also really purposeful about how the smaller pieces contribute to a larger hole.

Now, this is kind of similar to the first thing I mentioned about helping my teams feel connected to, you know, the bigger picture I. It's also helping the people who are working on the bigger picture feel connected to the smaller initiatives. So it's kind of going both directions and um, if this sounds like systems thinking to you where you're connecting, you know, like smaller pieces to a larger hole, this is the kind of thing that I really enjoy doing.

And so it's helpful for me to see that from kind of both angles. How do I do it from small to big and how do I do it from big towards small? The fourth category of my work that I feel like is really top of mind right now is thinking very carefully about my own professional development and what skills I can strengthen that are gonna have the most positive impact to the people around me.

So, um, for example, I've been doing some recent reading and exploration of appreciative inquiry. Um, and this is something I just feel like will kind of aid in my work in the coming year, and I feel like, you know, this is an example of something that I've come across, you know, in my coaching experience.

But I wanted to do kind of a deeper dive, and so I've been looking into that a little bit more. Um, but really trying to think about, you know, the limited amount of time that I have to give to others, but also to give to myself in terms of kind of my own learning and professional development. This is also about me thinking about the conferences that I'm going to and the kinds of groups that I'm joining.

Um, this summer I'm gonna be going to a conference that I've never been to before about college and university planning. And this is something that obviously I've been kind of like really involved in in the past, uh, six months or so. Um, but I've never really engaged in that formally from a professional development perspective.

So really just kind of thinking carefully about how I'm investing in my own learning, um, during, um, this period of my professional life has been helpful to me too. And then a final category of my work that's really top of mind me, for me right now is planning for increased time given to relationships.

And this is really about, kind of in my own mind, more communication with a wider variety of people and groups. As well as more of my own energy that's gonna be expended on a regular basis on emotional intelligence and relationship management. Now, I have talked about in other places that I don't necessarily consider these things to be natural strengths for me.

However, they have become strengths over time because I have put so much time and energy into trying to figure them out. Um, but it does mean that they, they do take quite a bit of energy, so really trying to understand. In terms of my own priorities and my energy management, that this is gonna be something that is probably gonna be requiring more energy from me now than it ever has in the past.

And, and what does that mean for my schedule? What does that mean for, um, my recovery time? You know, all of those kinds of things are, are things I wanna be thinking through. So by focusing on these five areas, I can think really carefully about how I'm spending my time. I can also make connections between these different areas and the smaller, more discreet projects that I have on my plate.

And I have found that taking a step back to look for these themes, it does help me to feel less overwhelmed with what I would consider to be an overabundance of work. Um, it is not the same as completely subtracting things off my list, but it does give me a bit more of a. A kind of narrowed focus of the kinds of things I can be thinking about on a daily basis, and I find that to be really useful.

So I am of course very curious. Um, if you were going to identify the themes across your mini projects right now, what would they be? You can always email me at hello dr katie linder.com to let me know what is showing up for you with this exercise, because as you know, I always love to hear from you.

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