



HEALTHIER YOU

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Season 1: Episode 8: Calendar Painting for Organization

Welcome to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health & Wellness, a podcast to help Vanderbilt faculty and staff with their healthiest lives.

DC: Welcome everyone! My name is DeOnna Clark, and I am one of the health educators at Health *Plus*. I am very excited to introduce you to our guest expert today, Gretchen McCullough.

Gretchen, we are so glad to have you here on the Healthier You podcast.

GM: Thank you. So happy to be here.

DC: Thank you for joining us. We would love to know just a little bit more about you, and your role here at Vanderbilt.

GM: Yeah. So, I serve currently as the chief nursing officer at Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital. I have been with Vanderbilt for a little over a year, and it has been a really, really fun journey getting to know the teams across the health system.

DC: Amazing. Well, we are so glad to have you here and we have a really exciting topic to talk about today. It is a new and intriguing one for me, at least, and it is calendar painting. So, if you are anything like me and learning how to balance a busy schedule, and make more time for important things, that can be a challenge. I am excited to learn more about how calendar painting can help establish a healthier work/life balance through time management.

GM: We are going to talk about that today.

DC: So, we'll jump right in. Tell me what is calendar painting, and how did you discover it?

GM: Yeah, so, the thing I love best about calendar painting is it is a body of work that was informed by individuals who are at professional crisis, periods of high rates of burnout, periods of performance issues. I have spent most of my career coaching leaders, failing leaders, on the side of my job and as I started to do root cause analysis with different leaders, I began to find over, and over, and over again that this common thread of work/life boundaries, prioritization of work, and really time management showed up very prevalently across leaders that were struggling. So, we dropped back and used an old, old framework that has shown up in Stephen Covey's work. It is widely credited back to Dwight Eisenhower, but it uses the concepts of urgency and importance to build a four-square prioritization system, and we take that sort of foundational work and overlay it on a calendar budgeting process that allows leaders to load the most important things first - those things that are really important like your strategic planning efforts, what I call through the calendar painting process, 'purple-space time' which is time for yourself as a human being. It is the time that you spend eating meals and exercising, and sleeping - those things that are really important to whole-human wellness. We load those in the budget first, and then build backwards.

DC: That is amazing, and I love the idea of that purple space where you can kind of look at the things that you are doing from work, but also look at the things that are meaningful for you outside of work, so I love that that is built into that.

GM: Yeah. That whole person, right?

DC: Whole-person care, exactly. Yeah. So, it seems like you mentioned that calendar painting is something that you have worked on for yourself, and also for other professionals. Can you tell us a little bit more, dive a little bit deeper into how you have helped other professionals while using calendar painting?

GM: I have taught this program for a number of years, in different formats, in big groups, and with individuals. But it is about giving individuals the methodology to load the highest priority work first, to set effective boundaries, to have effective conversations around what pieces of work they take home, and what they leave at work. And really, to get them to a place where they have really good internal time study habits that allow them to understand where their time is going, and whether it is going to places with intention. There is a lot, I think, in many of our jobs that is incumbered with things that we do not necessarily plan for, they just happen. And, so, it is a whole zero-based balance budget, if you will. So, you are trying to really measure what is happening with all of your time so that you can look at that by category, and make sure that you have adequate time budgeted for the things that really matter long term.

DC: I love that, and I love what you said about setting effective boundaries. I know that that can be very challenging when we are managing many different work/life demands and then you have the things going on outside of work. So, it seems like calendar painting is something that can help budget all of those things.

GM: I think it is particularly important for healthcare leaders and employees. You know, we as a group source for really high achieving, often type A, people who want to give, and when you recruit over and over and over again for that pattern of combined traits, what you see is people with really slippery boundaries. And, then we reinforce that. We reinforce overworking by rewarding it, and so, for me it is about, you know, we have known vulnerabilities in the healthcare space where healthcare workers are

uniquely vulnerable to burnout and fatigue because of what they come to the table with - that combination of high achieving and giving spirit that can leave folks feeling really strapped and strained, and so it is about how we give them tools to engineer their time with intention.

DC: Yeah, I think the giving part of working in healthcare is probably what draws many of us to this space, but it seems like it has a drawback too on the other side. Regarding calendar painting, how is this different from other time management systems that you have come across personally?

GM: You know, I think there has been a lot of work written on how to manage time really effectively. I think for me, especially in this space of healthcare, it is all about how you take care of the human being first. So, Dwight Eisenhower's original work sort of framed off this quote that he attributes back to an old president of Northwestern University which basically says, "The urgent is often not important." Right, those things that are pinging right in front of you, the email that is asking for your attention, the notification on your phone that is buzzing, that is connected to something that is not urgent, and, "The important are seldom urgent." It is very easy, especially in our modern world with the amount of technology signaling that we have, to really prioritize those things that feel really urgent, but may not have long-term importance. The emails pinging in your inbox, or the messages on your phone, and really the work frames on this concept of starting with loading space for the stuff that is really important, but not very urgent – that work that prevents reactivity. You know, I joke if you have really, really strong 'green-space time', which is this high-importance, low-urgency work (it is the stuff that matters in five years), if you drive enough of that, and you measure calendar after calendar, you start to see a reduction in what we call 'red-space time', which is time spent fighting fires. Right. So, in the budgeting process, you can start to shift and impact the amount of reactive work that you end up doing over time.

DC: I think that is really powerful. You know, just being able to kind of differentiate the difference between something that is urgent and something that is important in figuring out how that translates to your day-to-day time and activity. I mean, that's a powerful tool to use. It is certainly something that I can use for myself.

GM: I like it because it is simple. When we are talking about something as complicated as every hour of our lives, the framework that we use has to be fairly straight forward.

DC: Absolutely. Well, Health *Plus'* theme of the month is "You deserve a break." How can calendar painting help someone who needs to take a break?

GM: I mentioned that the first thing we teach students to do is to load their 'purple-space time' in their budget, which is that time that is spent caring for you as a whole person. So, when I teach this, I ask folks to look at how many lunch breaks they are taking without working at their desk, or whether they are taking calls on the ride home. Where do they have work sort of encroaching on periods of time that would otherwise be pockets of respite throughout the day, and those are very different person to person. You might recover with exercise. I might recover in a good book. My yoga mat is over there in the corner. I do yoga at lunch most days. But it is about protecting that time and then treating that time that you have budgeted for yourself in your calendar, as though it is a meeting with somebody really important in your organization. What I find with a lot of leaders particularly is they will hold the time, but then they give it away very quickly because someone asks for something. That is that giving nature that healthcare workers so often bring to the table, but it is really teaching them to respect that as a meeting with self just as you would, you know, if you had a meeting with Dr. Balseer, right? You probably would not cancel for a small thing. So, it is honoring the time that you hold in your time budget as

though it is that important, because it is. Ultimately, our entire work, particularly as healthcare leaders, is caring for people who care for people. And, if you are at the bedside, it is caring for families and patients, and you cannot do that well if you are pouring from an empty cup. So, for me, it is about how do we engineer those breaks in so that they happen on purpose, and we give folks tools to really respect the time that they plan to give to those activities.

DC: Thank you for sharing that. You know, what struck me about that is honoring the time that you set aside for yourself just as important as the other time that you have set aside for those tasks that we deem important at work, but our well-being and our health, and how we are doing as leaders, or as healthcare providers is the way that we are effective with the work that we do, whether it be with patients or administration, or whatever work that you do, so I thought that that was very powerful. Very powerful. Knowing how to get started with any skill can really feel like the hardest part. So, what is the first step someone could take if they wanted to get started with calendar painting today?

GM: There are some really good books available in the market that speak around the edges of this theme. Stephen Covey's work which is as old as the hills at this point, is really grounding in foundational. Simon Sinek has written a really beautiful book called *The Infinite Game*, which speaks to this concept of the artificial finite limits that we put on things as human beings - everything from fiscal years to our time budgets. The ways in which we think about work and think about prioritizing the things that are really important and that would drive change five years down the road. So, reading source material like that, I think, is really helpful. Here in Monroe Carrell, we have opened calendar painting training opportunities to all of our nurse leaders and ancillary clinical leaders so that they can participate in a class. And then after that class, participate in an open discussion forum to make sure that they have a connection into peers who are trying to do like-work. It is nice to build accountability partners and when those accountability partners understand the language you are speaking, it can be really, really helpful. I think the first step in this work, is to understand the framework, which is that urgency and importance spectrum, and then you know, really doing some of the early time study work, which we walk through in the training to help folks get connected to how to measure their time and where it is going.

DC: Thank you for sharing that. It seems like, you know, learning about calendar painting right here at Vanderbilt is something that is accessible and perhaps even easy to tap into. So, I think that is very encouraging for our listeners who may have not heard about calendar painting, or are wondering, "Where do I start? Where do I begin? How do I get going exactly?"

Well with that, if someone wanted to end this podcast and get started with calendar painting right after listening, where would you recommend that they go first in terms of resources?

GM: Yeah. So, there are a couple of options. On the learning management exchange, we have recorded one of our sessions that we did here inside Monroe Carrell. So, for individuals who are interested in learning by themselves from preprepared format, that is available, and it includes the discussion afterward with a group of nurse leaders. So, you can actually hear folks talk about the kinds of concepts that they hope to transfer into practice after the training. The other thing that I will offer, we have done this in a couple of different settings, is to come to teams and actually present this material. So, I have done that for years where we will bring either into large groups or small groups, the content, because it is very helpful to learn with teams, because it is ultimately connected to behavior change. When we talk about things like email boundaries after hours, and building really thoughtful time budgets and supporting one another, if you work in a team with a lot of people, it can be helpful to have the concepts

that are taught be learned alongside folks that you work with every day, because then you can help to support one another in upholding those boundaries.

DC: And, we know that with any type of behavior change or when we are just trying to start a new habit, having that accountability, that support, and really just knowing where to start are sometimes the first things that are the ways that people can start to build new habits. So, thank you for sharing that and certainly we can drop some of that in the show notes of our episode today so that people can know where to go, and where to connect.

Well, our goal here at Vanderbilt Health & Wellness is to promote healthy lifestyles for employees and I am positive now after hearing about calendar painting that this can be an excellent tool to promote health, wellbeing, and especially during the summer season.

Gretchen, thank you so much for joining us today.

GM: Yeah. Thanks for having me. It has been fun to chat about this and happy to connect with anybody across the community offline, who is interested in the topic.

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