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Lessons From a Garbage Dump: How to Say 'No'

By Michael Preston
UCF Forum columnist
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It was a symbol of excess and waste in 1980s New York City. The massive 2,200-acre Fresh Kills Landfill in Staten Island, N.Y., was once the largest garbage dump in the world.

And it smelled.

Each day as much as 29,000 tons of New York's garbage rolled across the bay on massive barges and it just stacked on top of each other until there were over 150 million tons of solid waste. The garbage was coming so fast and furious that it never had the chance to decompose.

In the late 1980s, college researchers drilled holes into the massive garbage dump and what they found was amazing. They found that nothing had decomposed: Newspapers still as crisp as the day they were purchased 20 years before, a ham sandwich that looked deli ready but was made in 1967, baseball cards, cans of soup, and countless banana peels.

Because the trash came in and was dumped on top of the other garbage it never had a chance to decompose because oxygen and microbes could never break down the organic material. It was left to just sit there and stay in a festering animated state forever.

The issue was real – the city had to do something.

The first thing they did was begin to say “No!” In 2001 the Fresh Kills garbage dump took its last barge of garbage. Then scientists, environmentalists and interested citizens went to work.

In just 15 years the place is transformed. The garbage dump has been allowed to naturally decompose. The gas produced from the rotting garbage is harvested and used in city buses, the landscape has been reshaped. The Audubon Society has worked to make it a bird habitat, local leaders have made it into a park for visitors, and many aquatic reptiles have returned. Fresh Kills has gone from eyesore to treasure by a city ready to reprioritize.

So where did the garbage go? Well, New York has become a model for separating refuse into recyclables, and better distributing the rest into compost and more responsible elimination of solid waste. The result is a city that smells a lot better and everyone's quality of life is much, much better.

Many of us live our lives like the Fresh Kills garbage dump.

We add and add new things to our lives without thinking about the impact. We know we should learn the art of saying no. It is hard but it is essential.

Today's working professional gets less sleep and feels more stress than our peers reported even 20 years ago. The advent of email, social media, Skype, GoToMeeting, and cell phones was supposed to make us more efficient – and that may be true.

But what we have done is just added more and more to our list of things to do. Add to it the flood of news and information telling us just how much more we need to do and soon enough exhaustion sets in. Seems every day there is a new recommendation on how much exercise to get, whether I should be gluten-free, and if I did not catch the latest Game of Thrones episode then I am missing out!

But just like the Fresh Kills Landfill, there is a liberation in saying "No." While it is important to know that there are some things you cannot say no to, the important first decision is learning to say no to the things you can. By being more selective you can then prioritize your life in a way that makes sense, you can concentrate on those things you find most beneficial, and the weight of busyness will dissipate and allow oxygen to get back to you again.

But how to get started?

Try starting this Sunday. For many of us, the weekends are a time we can control. While there may be a few things we need to do (think church and dinner with the in-laws), we

can begin to say no to a lot of the noise of the week. That way we can fill that day with a project we have always wanted to get to, spend a few hours reading a book we have always been interested in, maybe even take a nap.

The power of no can liberate our time to focus on things we value. Once we feel our Sunday has its proper dose of “No,” then we turn to Saturday, Friday and so on.

What can happen is that we transform our personal ecosystem and create an environment where we are more productive, less stressed, and ready to say “Yes” again.

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