

PART ONE



# THE POWER OF PAUSE PROCESS

HOW TO SHIFT FROM  
RUNNING ON AUTOMATIC

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## CHAPTER 1

# RESTORING THE ABILITY TO CHOOSE



**A**s an attorney representing public service workers, Bob Tobias became known for listening to both sides in a dispute and finding common ground. Today he is director of public sector executive education at American University, having retired as president of the nation's second-largest union in the federal sector. This is his story about the day he discovered the power of a single pause.

∞ When I first started negotiating collective bargaining agreements, I was very young and inexperienced, representing leaders who were twice my age. I was also facing the other side's chief spokesman, who was a grizzled veteran.

I felt compelled—by my fear and need to impress—to interrupt and respond to any statements by the other side's chief spokesperson that disparaged my side to any degree.

Although I did not smoke cigars, all of the members of my team did. So to be one of the “boys” I bought cigars, lit them, and then let them go out.

One day while I was lighting a cigar, the chief spokesperson started a diatribe, but before I could speak, he ended the diatribe with a concession.

It occurred to me that it might be a pattern; diatribe followed by concession. During the next diatribe, I overcame my fear and need to impress by lighting my cigar. A concession followed.

It was the first time that I noticed that I had a choice whether or not to respond. It was the first time that my emotion did not drive my behavior.

Bob Tobias took advantage of that pause to generate a better result. That is the “gap advantage” you gain when you exercise your power to pause.

## How Do We Work When We’re Living at the Edge of Time?

When we’re up against a challenging person or a deadline, we’re primed and instinctively programmed to react. Yet having the ability to shift gears under pressure and give ourselves the gift of a pause is one of the keys to being effective and making the best choices.

We live at the edge of time. It’s the one thing most people agree on: *I don’t have enough time*. Time to think. To decide. To get to the bottom of things. To get the job done right. To deal with upsets. To build quality, dependable relationships. To figure out which top priority is the *real* priority. Yet it’s hard to resist the pressure to just decide, or to shake the addiction to “time-saving” devices. The ubiquitous use of instant communication technology, including cell

phones, PDAs, BlackBerries, or laptops, encourages spur-of-the-moment, often ill-considered responses—like the kind you fire off just before departure when the flight attendant announces all electronic devices must be turned off, or when you are interrupted or distracted, perhaps when taking personal time with friends and family. Yet we feel pressure to respond immediately because that is what clients or colleagues—even family members—expect.

Why do we live this way? Because we don't think we have a choice! However, we *can* change the way we look at who and what's coming at us, and the way we respond by using the Power of Pause methodology. It offers a sequence of practical steps to manage our reactions and to prevent them from taking control of our decisions. First let's look at some typical situations in which our judgment is tested and we risk being overpowered by our circumstances. Remember Bob Tobias's experience and the results he achieved by choosing to pause.

## What Happens When We're on Automatic?

Misunderstandings and decisions happen at the speed of our emotions. We find ourselves in this bind whether we're employers or employees, customer service agents or customers, healers or patients, or even when we're working on a virtual team with colleagues we've never met.

We're quick to say yes to someone's request because we don't think we have a choice. We just hit the Reply All or Send button on an e-mail instead of considering our options,

picking up the phone, or walking down the hall. We jump to conclusions based on assumptions, expectations, or wished-for outcomes that are frequently far from reality. Then, working just from what we think we know, we fast-forward to make decisions, set out to prove a point, simply get rid of the problem, or take our business elsewhere. We're asked to do more with less, especially less time. We cope with these demands by shifting to automatic decision-making behavior, and we:

- Have knee-jerk reactions—emotions drive us to act before we reflect.
- Go with our gut—we follow that instant “go or no-go” feeling.
- Fall into habits—“That’s how we’ve done it in the past.”
- Persuade or delude ourselves—“I’m the boss: it’s my call.”
- Take it personally—“*I can’t believe they did that to me!*”
- Assume we have no choice—“That’s the best that we can do with what we have.”
- Hear what we want to hear—“Maybe” means “Yes”; “No” just means “Not now.”

Think about it: What did it cost you, your team, your organization, your customers, or your relationships the last time someone was misunderstood or made a snap decision that backfired? There is another way to handle what life throws at you. It starts with changing your outlook by changing what you plug into and what you tune out. I’m not talking about unplugging from technology or abandoning your to-do lists. The Power of Pause process offers a practical way to rewire your overloaded human “software” and tap back into your

long-lost common sense. The following story shows what a seasoned professional decided to try when her to-do list was overwhelming.

## Making Time Count

**How do you make the most of the time you have—when you don't have the time you need—and end up being more successful than ever?**



“Are you out of your mind?” said the nurse, as I was presenting the Power of Pause process as a quick and helpful way for busy nurses to be more effective in caring for their patients.

“Don't you know what's going on?” she cried. “There's a nursing shortage, patients need more care these days, the doctors are always busy, and now there are six different kinds of nurses on a floor, and you can't just ask anyone to help you out because they might not have the training or they might have a different degree than you and not feel it was their place or job to help! To make matters worse, when a patient gets sicker or dies, there isn't even time for nurses to deal with our own emotions.”

What she was saying between the lines was clear to me and to everyone else in the room: How was she supposed to pause in the midst of all that and get her very long patient care to-do list done?

I took a deep breath, asked everyone to do the same, and then slowly let it out. Clearly this nurse was very upset at the idea of taking even a moment to catch her own breath, let alone to be with her patients or colleagues when they needed a few minutes of her time.

“It sounds like there's no way you have a minute for yourself, or anyone else,” I said.

“Yes, you heard me loud and clear,” she replied.

Then I asked her, “Would you do me a favor? I’m not sure that I have the right answer for you at this moment. I’d like to share something that I learned in preparing to speak to you today. If it answers your question, let me know. If it doesn’t, we’ll go from there.”

The nurse nodded, sat down, and waited for me to tell my story. Here’s what I said:

When I was preparing tonight’s class for your group, I was intimidated. I asked myself, *Who am I to be giving nurses any insights?* After all, I wasn’t trained as a nurse, had never worked in a hospital—what was I thinking? Even though my mother was a nurse and my sister is a nurse, I knew I needed more insight than the anecdotes they’d shared with me about the challenges nurses face.

So I called my friend Barbara, who had spent the past two years in and out of hospitals. She’d been diagnosed with appendiceal cancer and given six months to live. Undaunted, she was doing everything she could to live as long as possible. I told her I was teaching a professional development workshop for nurses and that they would be getting credit for it, so it had better be good. I asked her, “What is the one thing you wish I could help nurses understand better from a patient’s perspective?”

Barbara thought for a few minutes and then said, “Tell them that the most important thing to a patient when a nurse comes into the room—before they stick that needle in or ask us how we are doing: Could they stop and see me as a person first and a patient second? I realize they don’t have enough staff to help them take care of us. And I know that they care. Here’s what would be so healing that won’t take but a moment. Could they soften their gaze as they look at me? As they approach my bed, could they consider whether I need a gentle touch or a positive thought that would

remind me that I am more than an item on the checklist in their understandably difficult day?”

A murmur moved across the room as the nurses were reminded that this was why they had gone into nursing. Some acknowledged that they, too, had felt like “procedures waiting to happen” while hospitalized. The nurse who’d asked the question said she appreciated my honesty and said she would think about what she could do differently.

One year later, I was back teaching another group of nurses. When I asked whether there were any questions, suddenly that same nurse raised her hand; she’d slipped in while I was speaking.

“Do you want to know what I learned to do differently?” she asked. “Here’s what I do now each time before I enter the patient’s room. I pause. By that I mean, all I have time for is to take a deep breath and let it out. That’s all it has taken for me to remember to see the person first and the patient second. Sometimes I gently stroke their arm or shoulder before I give them medication or check to see how a wound is healing. Sometimes it feels right to give them a smile or a knowing look that acknowledges I realize that they would rather be home. That’s all it takes—the time it takes me to breathe.”



### *Putting Ideas to Work*

This story is about what we need to be able to do for ourselves—before we can bring our “best selves” to work or to the situation at hand. This becomes increasingly important when people feel overwhelmed by information and conflicting roles and responsibilities. We are pushed to the limit by demands that test our patience and values, and that interfere

with making the right choices—whether there are too many competing interests and alternatives or too much conflicting data to process.

The nurse found a way to incorporate a pause into her routine while barely skipping a beat. In return, she was appreciated by her patients and felt more in control of a job that had seemed beyond her control. She could feel less stressed and more present and empathetic because she had found a way to take better care of her patients *and* herself.

- As a manager or a colleague, you will encounter coworkers and clients who feel overwhelmed. One way you can help them move past that feeling of paralysis is to identify a single action they can choose to take. This helps restore their sense of self-control and ability to take one step at a time.
- What kind of example could you set for others by building a strategic pause into your work routine? For example, a general manager known for always being at her desk and available to her team began routinely taking fifteen minutes for herself in the middle of the day—to regain perspective and a sense of humor, to better handle the stress she and her team faced from increased competition. As a result, her managers took the initiative to help one another solve problems during her “off-limits” pause and increased their problem-solving abilities.