

**“No, I’ve Never Heard of Kim Kardashian”:
Change Your Work (and Life) Priorities**
by Charles Wendel

A few weeks ago over dinner in the Zimbabwe jungle I was speaking to one of the safari guides. He had just finished pointing out Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn in the super-clear sky as well as multiple constellations, something I could never see in the light-polluted skies of most cities. He knew the stars and he knew the jungle as well as anyone could. But, he had never been out of Zimbabwe.

- He had never heard of Kim Kardashian, although another guide had (“Is she the one with the big butt?” he asked.)
- He had never heard of Starbucks.
- He used no social media.
- He survived with limited and sporadic Internet service. (In contrast, a UK-based study estimated that the average office worker spends about 6.5 hours a day in front of a computer).
- When an American brought up the subject of gender-neutral pronouns he was puzzled to say the least.

In other words, he was a lucky person, or at least a person who does not waste a lot of his time on the things many of us waste time on.

When I first arrived in the Zimbabwe jungle I learned I would be Wi-Fi-less for six-seven days. My first reaction was shock and even sadness and, stupidly, a bit of anger at my routine being disturbed. By day 7 when we were in Capetown and the Internet was available again, I quickly erased 99% of the hundreds of messages I received (not yours, of course). And, it took very little time to catch up with the news (such as it was) from the U.S. and our continued “scandal” stories. Basically, I was concerned about mostly meaningless news and mostly meaningless emails. (I read one survey that said the average person checked his email 74 times a day! Another suggested we had a codependent relationship with our smart phones.)

In contrast Zimbabweans were concerned about having a fair election and being able to rebuild their destroyed country. South Africans news (beyond the McKinsey scandal) focused on concern that the land of the old guard white farmers was to be taken away from them without payment, potentially throwing the country into a Zimbabwean-like food crisis. Fundamental issues related to growth, survival, and human dignity. No time for mindless junk.

In recent years one of my more unusual (and brief) projects was for a bank Chairman who wanted me to help him free up his time by reducing the meetings he held and shifting some of his activities to others. As his Executive Assistant could have told me before the project began, while the client was happy, it was destined to

be one of my least successful projects in terms of impact. Basically, he did not want to change what he was doing even though on some level he knew he should.

Among our clients, we see poor priority setting and time wasting all the time: too many meetings that go on too long and that include too many people and that result in too little happening. This is more a bank and credit union phenomenon in contrast to the decision making process at newer companies and digital providers. They lack excess people and have too many demands on their time, whether from their customers, prospects, or investors.

Many banks have replaced empowerment, to the extent it once existed, with a CYA-mentality that is hard to break away from. Some bankers view taking initiatives not as a path to job success but as a threat to personal job survival. One senior banker recently was bemoaning the unwillingness of one of his people to move proactively on an issue. When confronted, the more junior but well experienced banker said he was never told to act and was waiting for explicit instructions on whether to proceed. He was clearly concerned about overstepping his bounds and getting slapped down by his boss.

Priority setting, both for each of us as individuals and for our businesses, needs to receive greater focus. None of us should consider going through 100s of cc'd emails as meaningful nor is sitting in routine meetings. Work entails accomplishing something for our clients and ourselves.

This is the planning season for banks. As part of this year's planning process there should be an explicit discussion of what is essential and critical for a business and its personnel. Banks need to push back against the internal and external groups that request reports and information without understanding the time and customer experience impact of those requests.

The pendulum needs to swing back to a focus on sales and the customer experience from compliance and regulations. While bankers may never be as blissfully unaware of cultural garbage as was the safari guide, they can eliminate many non-essential and sometimes soul crushing activities. This planning cycle could provide a good starting point for change and bank renewal.