

THE HOT SAUCE PRINCIPLE

How to live and lead in a world where everything is urgent all of the time



— BRANDON M. SMITH —

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— CHAPTER 1 —

Monday Morning



Kate's hands shook as she pressed them against the marble countertop. She stared at them closely, wondering if she could will them to stop.

She didn't have time for this. Kate looked up and saw her furrowed brow in the bathroom mirror. It was 5:30 a.m. on Monday. This was not how Kate had wanted her week to begin. She slowly closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Unfortunately, this was not an uncommon start to her days, particularly Mondays.

Kate released her deep breath and tried to logically assess the situation. "Okay, Kate," she said to herself, "on a scale of one to ten, what level would you score the anxiety you're feeling?" She was channeling her therapist, Eileen, as she mouthed the words. The answer immediately popped into her mind: 8.5.

Not the score she wanted today, of all days. Kate opened her eyes. She wasn't sure how she was going to get it all done. Her mind quickly inventoried all the to-do's and demands that were facing her this week.

There was Martin. Kate had worked for Martin for the last year, and it had been one of the more difficult years of her professional life. What made it particularly complicated was that Kate liked Martin. He wasn't a bad guy. Martin had three

kids just a few years older than Kate's and he regularly joked with her about the challenges of parenting teenagers. He would regularly open meetings with a funny *dad joke* or a story about one of his kids.

Martin really was a good guy, but as a boss, if Kate was gut-level honest, he made her life miserable. Kate oversaw a new technology upgrade across the company and Martin was the Chief Technology Officer. From a technology standpoint, Kate's company was behind. It not only lagged their competitors' offerings, but there was also a pressing need to upgrade how customer data was protected. The Board was pushing hard on senior leadership to make these changes yesterday. And while Martin meant well, he pushed all that pressure and urgency down to Kate and her team.

Kate paused from brushing her hair to look down at her phone. It was now 5:35 a.m. and her phone flashed with a new email from Martin. The subject line was: "Emergency meeting today at 8 a.m. to discuss status of technology upgrades." Kate grabbed her phone angrily and flipped it over so she couldn't see the screen. She hoped that if she couldn't see it, she wouldn't feel the pressure. "Out of sight, out of mind," she sighed.

Martin's email sent Kate's mind to the events of the prior week when Martin had called another one of these last-minute, "emergency" meetings to discuss the status of her team's projects. It had been Sunday afternoon when Kate received his meeting email. She and her team were still in the office trying to get ahead for the week, when Kate had looked down at her phone and saw Martin's meeting invite. She'd sighed and in exhaustion, flipped her phone over.

Almost simultaneously, there had been a light knock at her door. She had looked up as Amanda, her most trusted direct report and most competent team member, entered her office. “Kate, can I talk to you for a minute?” she had asked.

Immediately, Kate had felt her stomach begin to clench. Sure enough, Amanda had proceeded to tell her that she could no longer take the pace that they had been running at for the past nine months. Amanda had two children under the age of three and was hardly seeing them on the weekends let alone during the week. Her husband was doing the best he could to juggle his own work commitments and the kids, but after a very long conversation the night before, Amanda and her husband had come to the decision that something had to give.

As Amanda finished her explanation, she handed over her two-week notice to Kate. To be honest, Kate had only really heard half of Amanda’s explanation as her thoughts raced ahead. How was she going to get everything done without Amanda? The team was already behind. Kate also knew that asking for more help was a non-starter. The entire organization had instituted a hiring freeze across the board, even including open positions that were the result of critical employees leaving the company for better opportunities. Just getting Amanda’s role backfilled was going to be a fight.

The next day, Kate had met with Martin at 8 a.m. to review the status of her team’s work. “Kate, I just met with the senior leadership team,” Martin began. “We are experiencing tremendous pressure from our investors to get our technology platforms up and running this quarter.”

Kate had sat back and listened quietly, hoping that if she was quiet enough, Martin wouldn’t add any more to her plate. That

strategy never seemed to work. Martin paused and appeared to look out the window for a moment, and then returned his gaze to Kate.

Martin continued: “I want your team to not only accelerate your timeline with this initiative, but I also want the customer data protocols set up at the same time. In addition, I need your group to investigate how you can be gathering more data on our customers for the sales team. This is a new request that has come up from the Board. They believe that we need to be doing more to gather customer data and, in addition to protecting it, we need to be conducting more sophisticated analysis to anticipate market trends and customer needs. I need your team on that right away.”

Martin paused and looked at Kate. Kate looked back and flatly said, “Amanda just gave her two-week notice.”

Kate gauged Martin’s face to see if he got the magnitude of her statement.

Without missing a beat, he responded, “That is a real loss. Amanda is a strong team player. Any chance we could keep her?” After Kate explained that Amanda had made up her mind and that the pace and volume of work was the reason, Martin began to appear defensive.

“Martin, I need to not only replace Amanda’s position ASAP, but I need approval to hire two more people,” Kate offered.

After appearing to consider Kate’s request, Martin shook his head and replied, “I’m sorry Kate. My hands are really tied. You are going to have to do the best you can with what you have.”

“Do the best you can with what you have.” Martin’s words echoed in Kate’s mind as she moved from brushing her hair to giving her face a more serious examination. Her eyes did look tired. As much as she wanted to blame the poor bathroom lighting, she had to reluctantly admit it. Kate peered more closely and could see the bags under eyes.

“Mom, you need to get more rest,” Kate’s 14 year-old daughter Ainsley had commented just days ago. Kate was exhausted and she wasn’t too proud to deny it. She also knew that when she got tired, her first mental move was to beat herself up for her failures as a parent, real or imagined. That soundtrack of nagging worry was a familiar one: She hasn’t been involved enough. She hasn’t been preparing her kids enough. She hasn’t been present enough. The barrage of school e-mails she received on any given day only made it worse. Emails such as:

Hi Parents. This is your child’s ninth grade math teacher. We move fast in my classroom to prepare your child with the opportunity to take post-calculus, college-level mathematics for engineers by their junior or senior year. If your child is in my classroom, it is safe to assume that they are probably already behind. Our goal is to get them caught up with the goal of equipping them to get into the dream school of their choice...

Hi Parents. This is your seven-year-old child’s baseball coach. I’m excited to be coaching your child this season. Our goal is to grow your child’s skills so he can not only grow his love for the game, but also so he can become a highly skilled player. It is important to know that I coach my teams to win. In order to accomplish that goal, I will need your full participation. We practice a minimum of

three times a week in addition to games twice a week. While this schedule is more than most coaches in our league, I have found that it pays off in the long run. Many of my former players have gone on to play travel baseball and ultimately get college scholarships. I am committed to helping your seven-year-old get there too...

Kate wanted to say that none of it really mattered, but all her friends seemed to be caught up in the same race. When she got the rare opportunity to go to one of her book club gatherings, the conversation inevitably turned to all the things that the rest of the moms were doing to get their kids a leg up in applying for college. Never mind that most of their kids haven't completed elementary school yet.

Kate fished out her concealer from her drawer and began to work on the bags under eyes. She might be able to admit to herself that she's tired, but she definitely didn't want anyone else to notice.

Her phone began to vibrate. Kate rolled her eyes. It was probably Martin again. The week ahead looked about as bleak as any of the weeks she had endured in recent memory. Full days of meetings, late nights and an increasing pile of "urgent" items that she and her team would never be able to get to.

Kate's hands began to shake again. She put down her concealer brush and let her eyes drift back to her hands. She felt perpetually behind with not enough time in the day or week to meet everyone's expectations and demands. No matter how hard she tried, it never seemed good enough. Kate reached for

the bottle of anxiety medication that Dr. Sheth had prescribed her, realizing even that didn't seem to be helping any more.

She popped the pills in her mouth and washed them down with water from the cup next to her sink as her hands continued to shake.