



Procrastination



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The moment I mention the word ‘procrastination’ at my seminars, I get a groan from the audience, as they collectively acknowledge their own perplexity at this human dimension. Can you do anything about it? Well, yes, plenty – if you appreciate its varied origins and driving forces.

From a practical and philosophical point of view, procrastination has a lot of ‘bads’: it is bad for your business, bad for relationships and bad for your health. The ‘bad-for-business’ is signaled by the groans from my seminar audiences and will be our topic shortly. It is bad for relationships because it unfairly shifts extra burden onto one of the partners. It is bad for the procrastinator’s health because it creates a higher level of stress in the procrastinator and the procrastinee (I know, I know, it’s not a real word) and all those stress hormones take their toll, wearing out the body faster; thus it weakens the immune system resulting in more colds; and it often keeps procrastinators awake at night. Studies show that procrastination appears to reside more with men than with women.

A. Causes and Solutions

1. Lazy

Lazy is the easy one to deal with. That is because we are simply too busy, too tired or wish to avoid the action or decision at this moment. (This is not really procrastination, but many people think such delays are ‘procrastination’.) It is easy to deal with because such individuals will usually do the task tomorrow when they feel better or more energized. So, don’t worry about it.

2. Delayed gratification

Delayed gratification is a serious concern because the individual procrastinates a task in favor of a more immediate reward. This can be personal or it can be cultural. There is a battle between the limbic system in the brain (unconscious) and the prefrontal cortex (conscious) – and the limbic system (more basic system) constantly wins. Such people will choose fun over difficulty¹. They will select the task with an immediate reward over one less likely to reward. The problem is that a pile of ‘difficult’ tasks starts to accumulate.

¹ *The Organized Mind*, Dr. D. Levitin, Allen Lane Penguin Group, 2014, Toronto ON

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Because you, as the manager, lose control of the 'delayed-gratification procrastinator', your solution would be to begin your 'remedy' for such an employee by interrupting the 'difficult' task with fun tasks – fun, according to each individual. At work, tell the individual to begin just the easiest part of the task – and do the rest later. Thus, psychologically, the task seems less difficult and more doable. When we ask individuals to find more clients, we don't say "Send in as many friends as you can." We say "Can you recommend one friend?" They find that task doable, whereas a request for 'many friends' would get delayed indefinitely. Amazingly, once they locate one friend, they often latch onto two or three more! If the procrastinator is at home, break up the 'difficult' task with cooking, gardening, sports, playing music or being in nature.

3. Poor business methods

You may not have your business act together fully. What if there is no formalized follow-up system at the office? Many tasks become delayed. The solution is to introduce the concept of an Action List² with a single person responsible for the outcome of each task by a certain date.

4. Fear of Failure

The most difficult procrastination issue to deal with occurs when a person has a huge fear of not getting things done right (often a perfectionist or a person lacking in confidence). So, avoiding the task (procrastinating) means the person will never be judged on the quality of the work. The longer they delay the task, the less chance of facing the judgment of failure. One solution is to transfer to an Action List method. The fear of failure will be matched to some extent by the fear of being seen by peers to have not completed the task on time (hence another fear of failure). The person, now confronted with two fears, one of which has a more concrete date (the Action List), will likely opt for overcoming the inevitable realizable fear first (the peer pressure to meet the task delivery date).

B. General Solutions

While each case above suggests its own solution, there are some generalities that apply everywhere. The first is to 'do it now' approach – get any task you estimate to take less than 2 minutes to complete out of the way now! Secondly, "eat the elephant one bite at a time", that is, just do one phase of the project; you will find the next phases much easier to tackle. Third, start the day with the most unpleasant task – first thing in the morning – then the rest of your day will be more freed of stress.

Bill

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² Ask CCCC about its no-charge Action List system: www.caswellccc.com