

Burning desire

By Stuart White
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After a few weeks break from gym, I have started a regular work-out routine again. While I was going through the programme this morning I was wondering whether it was my fear of getting fat and sagging that was motivating me, or the quest for the perfect body? Since that's unlikely at my age, if there has been no trace of it yet, I concluded that I was being driven more by the stick than the carrot in this instance.

This fear of failure and a flawed, flabby body is not a typical way to motivate for achievement. In fact it goes against everything I believe and have been taught. But it is backed up by research from the Centre for Experimental Social Science at New York University. In an experiment, 3 groups were given 15 dollars and asked to bid in an auction. The first group was told that if their bid was unsuccessful they would lose the money, the second group were told that if their bid was successful they would double their money and the third, a control group, were given no incentive or disincentive. Time and again with different participants, the first group routinely outbid the others and the unexpected conclusion was that fear of loss, not desire for gain is the greater motivating force. So perhaps that's why I really don't think that my workouts will give me the body beautiful but will at least save me from the body bulging?

But am I making too much effort? I am currently reading a book called 'The 4-hour Body' by Timothy Ferris who purports that you can reach your physical and genetic potential with as little as four hours of effort per month. There's a little of the Pareto principle in his approach - the 80/20 rule that 80 % of our results will come from 20% of our efforts. It's all about getting the biggest results with the tiniest effort. As a person who invests at least 20 hours a month on exercise, I was happy to fork out the P250 book price to learn the secrets.

Ferris turns a lot of our accepted and assumed views of exercise and diet on their head and helps us to see things slightly differently by suggesting we do things in excess and it is in fact wasteful. To illustrate this he uses the example of boiling water. To bring water to its boiling point, it is necessary to raise it to a temperature of 100 degrees centigrade at standard air pressure. Boiled is boiled and higher temperatures will not make it more boiled! It will only result in evaporation and water loss.

It won't reach a higher temperature because that goes against the natural laws of physics so using more energy is a futile attempt. The only effect is to consume more resources that could be used for something else more productive. And we know this to be true in everything - more is not always better...

Back to my gym dilemma of figuring out what was driving my 45 minute work out every morning, the carrot of a beautiful body or the stick of being fat and repulsive. The curious results from the NYU study, combined with Ferris's suggestions of too much time and effort wasted through overkill, had me thinking differently of how we might motivate people in the workplace. Would you rather work harder to earn P100 or to avoid losing P100 and just how hard should you work to achieve the required result?

Our best workplace practice/good management paradigm tells you it's the carrot that will win but that rather flies in the face of the NYU study. Their results were analysed by a diet product company and used as the basis for a group weight loss effort. The results indicated that peer pressure and natural competitiveness within the group were the major motivators. When challenged, participants would strive to do better than those they perceived to be weaker-willed or inferior in any way than themselves. If Ms. X can lose half a kilo in a week, I can do better and lose more and If Mr. Y managed to reach his goal loss I can reach mine a lot quicker.

But here's the deal; without a measure of self-motivation, there can be no personal growth, no matter how much latent potential there is to begin with. There again, it's good to be driven but are you wasting a lot of time and effort trying too hard when you could have been there, done that and moved on to something else by now? And a little fear of failure (the stick) can produce a useful shot of adrenalin which pushes you on to succeed and reap the rewards on offer (the carrot).

So I'll keep on with my workout routine, not in pursuit of an unattainable body shape but to keep the one I have in its best shape. And if I go for the burn I'll keep in mind that steam won't scald more than boiling water so I might as well stop and move on to the next machine. And if those are good principles to work out by, there's no reason they won't translate just as well to the workplace too.

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