



Never put off till tomorrow...

By Stuart White
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I can't remember who it was who wrote that "the difference between successful people and unsuccessful ones is that successful people do the things that unsuccessful people don't want to do. They don't want to do it either but their dislike is subservient to their sense of purpose" I guess it's not too significant who said it – the message is what's important.

It's a point that I try to put over to my kids constantly – but when you are young you don't really get it do you? It's all about delayed gratification. Instead of getting the 'horrible' stuff out of the way – mostly homework and other chores - there is always a pull to something more pleasurable, more immediately gratifying. It's not untypical for children to have the 'pain now reward later' principle completely reversed and replace this with putting off what they don't want to do – procrastination. There are countless examples - put a healthy and balanced plate of food down in front of a child and inevitable it's the 'good' (read bad) things that get gobbled up first leaving all the bad (read good) stuff left on the plate. But when they start going to school they get introduced to this notion that doing the fun things first isn't the way.

Throughout primary school the early capacity to delay gratification is encouraged by parents, particularly to enhance the performance of school work; homework now, TV later. But there are some who form part of this norm who stick in it. They take longer to learn. The poor students' grades are poor not because they are stupid but simply because they don't work. A play now, pay later motto if you will.

In his book 'The Road Less Travelled', Scott Peck illustrates the problem with procrastination when he recounts the story of his work with a client who had a tendency to put things off. 'Do you eat cake', he asked her? She replied that she did and through further questioning admitted that she ate the icing first. From her cake eating habits he went on to examine her work habits from which he discovered that she routinely tackled the parts of her job that she found most gratifying first each day and then spent the remainder of her day dealing with the objectionable remainder - icing first, cake later.

Peck challenged her to swap the approach around, asking her to consider dealing with the unpleasant tasks first, arguing that surely it was better to have one hour of pain, followed by six hours of pleasure as opposed to having one hour of pleasure followed by 6 hours of pain.

Says Peck "Delaying gratification is a process of scheduling the pain and pleasure of life in such a way as to enhance the pleasure by meeting and experiencing the pain first and getting it over with."

So how do we deal with issues of this nature in the workplace? It's a tricky business, I can tell you, because we know that in the world of work, motive and skill are two different things. For example you may well know how to discipline employees and as I know few who enjoy it, I know even fewer who do it. The skill is there but the motive to handle it is lacking. Skill with no motive equals no action. So we put off dealing with bad behaviour, poor results and other disciplinary issues in place of having an easier day at the office and less angst.

Procrastination is a mechanism that kicks in when your motivation is low. You will find every excuse not to get to the 'rather not do' stuff. If you really want to get a handle on your procrastination-schedule it comes down to the basics of all effectiveness teaching and time-management training. Take this message on board yourself and if you have employees, stress to them too the importance of getting the unpleasant tasks out of the way so that they can relish the parts of the job they like.

But real procrastination is not always easy to pick up on because we disguise not doing critical tasks through apparently busy activities. So we aren't procrastinating, we are busy not getting to it, rather like those Disney dwarves trying to find lots of things not to do. And it's becoming a more widespread problem. According to an article in the US Guardian, "Time-wasting is not just an irritating habit. It is an affliction that ruins millions of lives and often requires therapy and other treatment for sufferers, psychologists have warned. According to new research, one person in five now suffers from the problem so badly that their careers, relationships and health are threatened." Many researchers blame computers and mobile phones for providing too many distractions for people, a plethora of electronic toys offering up a plethora of pleasurable programmes, websites, games and socialising.

Procrastinating on important tasks means that you have less time in which to complete them, which invariably leads to rushed, poor-quality work. Leaving things until the last minute results in anxiety and time-pressure as you go all-out to complete tasks before the deadline. Failure to achieve important goals can be one of the most depressing and frustrating aspects of procrastination. Earl Nightingale has said that success and happiness can be defined as the progressive realisation of a worthy goal. The problem is that while procrastinators have goals and aspirations like everyone else, they never get around putting the process into practice to pursue them and can therefore never attain them. Procrastination causes you to miss wonderful opportunities that you never even consider or explore. This can lead to guilt and regret as you realise, perhaps too late, what you are missing.

Seize the moment, not just the day so as not to let those opportunities slip away. Discipline yourself to deal promptly with the dreary or difficult issues on your agenda so as to free up time for the fun stuff, the creative, satisfying side of your work and life. Find out how much more enjoyable everything is when you save the best till last. Put a proviso on Marie Antoinette's misplaced advice to 'Let them eat cake' with a strong suggestion that they save the marzipan and the icing till last. Discover that you really can have your cake and eat it too, as long as you eat it in the proper order...[Tweet this article](#)

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