

PERSONNEL NOTEBOOK

For Your Most Important Resource

PROCRASTINATION

It May Be Our Greatest Labor Saving Device

What is procrastination?

Procrastination is not time management, but it is one of its elements. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines procrastination this way: “To defer, to put off action, to delay, to postpone until another time”; “A procrastinator is one who habitually delays or puts off attending to matters.” Let’s go with this description and take a look at the issue of procrastination on the job.

Few things in performance management show up as a problem as often as procrastination. It has been identified as one of the more significant causes of unfinished projects, missed meetings, and reports not being completed on time or completed poorly at the final deadline.

What Causes Procrastination?

Some people are simply disorganized and fail to manage projects or functions in an orderly, progressive manner. Some analyze each step of the process to an extreme. The saying “Over analysis leads to paralysis” applies to these people.

According to industrial psychologists, some people are so confident in their ability to think fast at the last minute, that they subconsciously delay actions just to prove their abilities, even if only to themselves, by producing necessary work at the last minute.

Some people feel that the pressure and stress of the lateness of the project produces the best

results or that they cannot get focused until the issue is threatening and looming large in their vision. The quip “If it weren’t for the last minute, I’d never get anything done” was coined for these people.

There is probably an element of truth in all of these observations. But not getting work done on time is not only bad for the company, but can be disastrous for any individual’s career. Work done at the last minute is seldom ever as good as if it had been done with more time for research, analysis, preparation, and review.

Let’s look at procrastination from two perspectives, first that of the employer, and then of the employee.

The Employer’s Corner

Following are some ways to spot and deal with a procrastinating Employee:

- The employee is always saying he or she is working on it, but never gives you a true update. The status described by the employee is vague and very general.
- You notice that the employee is always rushing at the last minute.
- Upon examination, completed work is not up to the level of this employee’s performance.

After observing these behaviors, you now need to have a private meeting with the employee to discuss the following:

1. Ask the employee if she also has observed these patterns. Listen to her response.
2. Look for indications that she is ignoring the problem, blaming others, or minimizing her poor work performance.

Help the employee to focus on those elements that are in her control and what changes she can make. Provide her with any prepared literature about procrastination. If you have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) ask the providers to supply you with literature on this subject or use this *Personnel Notebook*. Ask the employee to read it and schedule a meeting for one week later.

At that meeting, listen to the employee's concerns; seek to identify personal or family problems or anything else that may be affecting her performance. Seek to identify solutions. End by highlighting positive aspects of the employee's performance and the potentially brighter future. Keep it positive but focused on improvement.

The Employee's Corner

Analyze your actions to determine if you are a Procrastinator.

- Do you set unrealistically high standards?
- Do you get lost in details and find it difficult to complete projects on time?
- Do you leave projects until the last minute, hoping that time pressure will motivate you?
- Do you take on so many projects you can't focus on what needs to be done?
- Do you avoid doing projects because you are angry that you have to do them?
- Do you sometimes avoid a task because you fear doing it?

There are many reasons for procrastination. The basic reasons have been identified as

perfectionism, fantasizing, fear, crisis making, anger, overdoing and pleasure seeking. By analyzing each of these, you may be able to see which apply to you. Suggestions for improvement follow each category.

Perfectionism

This is one of the more common reasons for procrastination. The perfectionist avoids starting a task because he worries that he might fall short of his own high standards. A perfectionist will become absorbed in the details, attempting to control every aspect of the task and ignore moving a project along until the very last minute. He will not have to face the fear of imperfection if the task doesn't get done.

Suggestions:

If you feel that you procrastinate because you worry about not performing up to your standards, then you need to start looking at the "shoulds," "oughts," and "musts" that are telling you how much perfection (if any) is actually required for the task. Substitute the word "perfect" with sayings such as, "It would be nice," "Hopefully it will turn out," and "Let's see how it will turn out." Set yourself up with two deadlines. The first *you* will set for the project, and this date will be earlier than the actual deadline. Your goal then becomes to aim at meeting *your* deadline. Your reward is that when you complete it on your deadline you now have the extra time to stretch toward a better result.

Fantasizing

These individuals are better at creative dreaming than at dealing with reality. They find it difficult to turn their vision into clear concrete plans of action. They can make bosses happy with optimistic ideas, but they can also frustrate them with their lack of results.

Suggestions:

Work at coming down to Earth a bit (or a lot) more. Your goal is to monitor your talk so you avoid biting off more than you can chew. Fantasize more in your head rather than out loud at a meeting. If you find you are not able to produce all you have promised to someone, let them know that you need to break your project into smaller tasks in order to get the whole project done. Then, set up earlier personal deadlines than what the deadline actually is for the project.

Fear

These individuals actually procrastinate because they fear the task or project at hand. The task has moved them out of their comfort zone and the thought of doing it just freezes them into immobility. You can often see this occur when people procrastinate about making phone calls. They often fear that the other party may not like what they have to say.

Suggestions:

First say to yourself that fear can be good. Go ahead and say it out loud: “Fear can be *good*.” Fear can help us stretch and grow. When we face and overcome fear, we conquer it. So, it is better to defeat fear earlier rather than later. It will grow like a snowball rolling downhill if it isn’t stopped early. As soon as you sense fear, that’s the sign to GO not to stop. Just do it. Your reward is a sense of relaxation that the fear is gone and almost certainly wasn’t as bad as you thought.

Mark Twain is quoted as saying, “I’ve suffered a great many catastrophes in my life, most of which never occurred.” You can safely assume that 90 percent of what you worry about never happens and most of the other 10 percent was not as bad as you thought.

Crisis Maker

These people believe they cannot get motivated until the very last minute. They make others

mad because they manufacture a crisis, and then solve it at the last minute, making themselves look good in the process. To start a task early is often just too boring for them.

Suggestions:

Your goal is a difficult one because you have probably spent many years feeling thrilled (or rewarded) for getting things done on time. Maybe you have had a recent failure that is causing you to think about giving yourself more time to prepare. Perhaps you made a speech for which you were not very well prepared and were unhappy with what you perceived to be a negative response. You need to begin setting earlier deadlines for yourself and identify other ways to satisfy your need for approval or recognition. If you need an adrenaline rush, try skydiving or bungee jumping, not job risking.

Anger

The angry person resents having to do the task in the first place. He therefore does not do it out of spite and anger because he feels that by doing it, he will be giving in to the person at whom he is angry. If he does the task because he has to, it is likely to be done wrong or incompletely.

Suggestions:

Work to shift your focus of anger away from your job or its tasks and relate it to the person or issue that is actually the cause of your anger. That may mean that you should talk to that person or address the issue that is at the center of your anger. If that is not practical, then attempt to see a personal value or reward in the project you are tasked with. Attempt to see something that you can gain by doing it. Consider the pride you will feel when you review the completed project with your supervisor.

Overdoer

The Overdoer avoids completing the task by taking on tasks or projects of lesser importance, but never admits it. She avoids the task by taking on more tasks. Her excuse for why she is late is that she just has too many things to do.

Suggestions:

Overdoers have the hardest time recognizing themselves as such because they tend to make *everything* important. “How in the world could I ever let this go?” they ask. “Just who else would do it?” These folks usually have a hard time delegating or prioritizing. They also have a hard time saying “No” to anyone for anything. But, that is precisely what they need to do. They need to stop feeling that the world will stop spinning if they’re not the ones spinning it. They should stop taking on every task that presents itself and all at the same time. It’s time to sit down with paper and pencil and prioritize what is really important, what is business and what is just busy-ness. They need to get away from the crutch that “I just don’t have the time to get all my projects done on time.”

Pleasure Seeker

The priority for these individuals is to seek positives over negatives every time. They delay because there are too many interesting and fun things that provide more immediate gratifications than the project at hand. They usually turn in projects that show that their heart was obviously not in it.

Suggestions:

Are you the grasshopper that played music all summer long while the ants stored away food for the winter? Remember, just as dessert comes after dinner, rewards come after work and not before. Doing the work often is seen as “Pain.” Change the word pain to “temporary inconvenience.” Then, visualize how good it will make you feel to have the task done. Next, reward yourself double by not only enjoying the completion of the task, but also by actually

granting yourself a personal reward: that double ice cream sundae, movie or dinner you wanted to attend, new shirt, or even a weekend trip. If you can accomplish that life-changing procrastination’ problem, you deserve and will relish the earned reward. So don’t give up if you don’t succeed the first time. The rewards are worth it.

“The time, the people, and the individual never converge more than once”

Helene Cixous

Bill Cook

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