

BEING PRESENT AT YOUR OWN LIFE



Recognizing that the distractions that can keep managers out of "the zone" are habits of thought leads to the kind of patience that enhances productivity.

There's a feeling described after practically every championship game, no matter what the sport. The athletes on the winning team attribute their success to being focused, "in the groove," "in the flow," or "in the zone." They talk about eliminating distractions, getting priorities straight, putting extraneous things out of their minds. They say how clear everything seemed.

Case in point: Super Bowl XXIII in 1989, in which the San Francisco 49ers came from behind in the last quarter of the game with a 92-yard touchdown drive to beat the Cincinnati Bengals, 20-16. Later, star receiver Jerry Rice said that he had felt so focused that he heard no noise from the sell-out crowd from the first huddle of that last drive, through a series of plays down the field, until teammate John Taylor caught quarterback Joe Montana's pass in the end zone with 34 seconds left. Then, and only then, Rice heard the roar of the crowd.

In other interviews, Montana also talked about feeling focused. Of course, he was known as "Joe Cool" for his ability to stay calm under pressure, leading his team to 31 fourth-quarter comebacks during his 16-year career; as a matter of fact, it has been well reported that he was calm enough at the start of this famous drive to lighten up the mood of the huddle by calling attention to a celebrity watching from the stands. But as Montana brought his team near to the goal line, he found himself thinking about what it all meant - the biggest game of year, if not his career; time running down; just three more chances to try to make a touchdown, to win football's greatest prize or to spend the winter and spring going over and over what went wrong. Because all those thoughts threatened to push Montana out of "the zone" as he came up to the line of scrimmage, he deliberately threw the ball away. That action wasted a down, a precious opportunity to try to force a score, but it allowed Montana to quell his turbulent thoughts and to focus anew. The next play was the soaring, game-winning touchdown pass.

At moments like these, it's obvious that accomplishment simply requires defining the essence of the task and then, without over-analyzing, doing it the best you can. The task itself guides you in the best way to perform it. Knowing this "essence" is what enables all of life's performers to access his or her full creative faculties and talents. It's what enables us, in the middle of delivering a PowerPoint presentation for the 32nd time, to suddenly be bowled over by fresh insights about the material or audience that cause us to change our tone or expression in ways that are refreshing to our listeners as

well as to ourselves. The material may be exactly the same. But we have become responsive in the moment, and our presentation achieves spontaneity and grace that transcend our spoken words.

This kind of spontaneity begins when we become aware of our feelings, for they are the windows to inspired thought. Actors need this awareness, for they are trying to create an artificial environment by using their consciousness (about their character, the other actors and the script) to tap the unconscious (to find and portray a truth about life).

As business people, we face a similar challenge every time we try to create something out of nothing; in other words, virtually every day. We often try, or example, to serve the needs of customers who may not even be able to articulate those needs, for example, or to direct a team's action in ways that are inspiring and not controlling. Like the actor, we can unleash the power of spontaneity as we go about our own work.

The first step is to turn our backs on all the distractions that creep into our days. It's the art of being focused, not in the sense of concentrating intently, but more in the sense of keeping our minds on the most important thing. Paradoxes may seem to be at play: focus does not require intensity; it is calming even though it actually unleashes productive energy.

When we move through our days immersed in distractions, it's like we're trying to find our way through the wilderness with our heads bowed, wearing blinders to which we've become so accustomed that we've forgotten that we have them on. We have a rigidly limited view of possible paths, but keep pushing our way forward - no matter how many vines we have to cut through or how many rocks we must climb over, we're going to make it! And because we're tough and smart and determined, make it we do. But at what cost: often, we've so exhausted ourselves and everyone who is trying to follow us that there is little joy even in reaching our goal.

What if we ease up just a bit, allow the blinders to fall away, free ourselves to really look around, to see and hear and experience the moment? At first, we may feel disoriented; we may panic, even yearn for the false security that the blinders gave us. The first steps we take in exploring the openings that appear may be tentative. But as soon as we relax, obstacles look less forbidding; the path seems clear.

After each experience when we are "present," we are less content to put the blinders back on. We become more comfortable being open to everything around us. We recognize when distractions are acting as blinders; we turn, instead, to clarity, moving more quickly to free ourselves so that we can fully tap the possibilities of the present.

What are the distractions that bind you to the past or the future, that blind you to the present? Some of our favorites are:

Anger or resentment. This encourages us to focus on how "right" we think we are, perhaps giving us a comfortable illusion of having some control over the flow of the unknown. But being "right" doesn't mean we can avoid changing; the unknown keeps on going, dragging us behind like a fallen water-skier clinging to a tow rope, kicking and swallowing water.

Worry. In its misguided way, this is another attempt to control the unknown: thinking about all the things that might happen. As if we can stop the tide just by our thinking.

Second-guessing. We're so busy re-living the past that we're missing the present, like trying to row a boat with only one oar - going 'round and 'round in circles.

Guilt. Saying "I've screwed up and there's no redemption," guilt makes us give up hope. We're so busy beating up ourselves that we never even get our boat to the starting line of the race.

Desire for approval. We live as if we were constantly performing to an unseen audience, so wrapped up in wondering how we look to the people on shore that we don't enjoy the wind in our hair.

This list of distracting habits of thinking could go on and on; each of us engages in our own favorites. But all have the same, universally available solution. Patience.

Patience is staying easy and alert as things unfold. To achieve this state we must drop our expectations of what should be, or has been. We must stop comparing to what has happened before, or to what someone else has done or is doing.

Patience is not about suffering in silence or holding steady until things get better. Instead, it empowers us to notice and accept whatever is happening - good, bad, indifferent - with curiosity, with interest, with confidence. Patience means not acting on the urge to kick into effort or control. The more effort and control we try to exert, the more we limit the number of possibilities available to us; it's like a trick knot that gets tighter the harder we pull against it, or like quicksand which sucks us in deeper the more we flail and fight.

If we are frantic, other people react with agitation. They cannot connect to us. Even worse, we cannot connect to our innate creativity, inventiveness, originality. We cut ourselves off from the possibility of a latent solution emerging. In a sailboat race, watch the skippers who are calm as opposed to those who scream and yell. Yelling usually means that things are going wrong; people are looking for whom to blame, or they're second-guessing decisions, criticizing performance. The skipper has lost his bearings, but his yelling simply intensifies feelings of insecurity among his crew. They're no longer sure where they are headed, or how they are going to get there; this may make them clumsier and more prone to mistakes, leading to more problems, and more reasons to yell. More times than not, the yelling skipper loses to the composed captain.

Patience makes room for the interplay of thinking, clarity and connection. Some would term this a state of profound concentration - of being completely aware of yourself and others, and being able to perform something completely familiar and routine with ingenuity, verve and spontaneity. It is the power of presence that allows the leader to fulfill her fundamental responsibility: sustaining an environment in which people feel confident enough to do their best.

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