

CLARITY



Resist the urge to kick into effort or control to maintain mental equilibrium.

Last month in this column, we met Joanne, a call center manager promoted to regional VP.

Joanne celebrated, as so many of us do, her mastery of multi-tasking. She assumed that keeping her mental activity high all day long was a good thing.

In reality, despite her best intentions, busy-mindedness kept Joanne at the surface of issues, like an insect skittering across a pond, rarely probing the deeper questions that might have led to better ways of doing the job in the first place. Her racing thoughts never let her stop to rest, much less see something through to completion.

Joanne began to see busy-mindedness as an energy-draining habit with inherent dangers. She realized that in higher states of mind, we all have unfettered access to wisdom, common sense, and creativity. Insights, intuition, and perspectives flow as easily as breathing in and out. All the relevant experience that we have acquired is readily accessible; so, too, is the universal intelligence that lies just beyond the frontier of what each of us already knows on the conscious level. Once we become aware of this dynamic, new possibilities seem obvious.

Among the hallmarks of the requisite higher states of mind are profound feelings, such as gratitude, compassion, joy. To save herself from burn-out, she "tuned" her internal sensors to notice and cultivate such feelings. She changed her behavior patterns to make it easier to sustain higher states of mind. Soon she reaped the benefit of mental well-being: Clarity.

Before, Joanne's thinking had been jumbled, thoughts coming so fast that she could not keep up. As she guided her mind towards tranquility, Joanne found it easier and easier to focus her attention, like a spotlight, on whatever needed to be resolved. Extraneous thoughts occasionally flitted across her mind; but she learned not to pay much attention to them, so they quickly passed. More and more, she could hold her mind in a certain direction, toward an important issue or even a trivial matter, such as lost car keys. An insight would be revealed, and in that instant she would know exactly what to do or where her keys were hiding.

To act with clarity 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 struggle.

If we are frantic, other people react with agitation. They cannot connect to us. Even worse, in this mood we cannot connect to our innate creativity, inventiveness, originality. We cut ourselves off from the possibility of a latent solution emerging.

Betsy used to see the power of clarity at work in sailboat races. Some skippers are quiet and contained; others scream and yell. Yelling usually means that things are going wrong; people are looking for whom to blame, or they're challenging decisions and criticizing performance. The yelling skipper has lost his bearings. His agitation 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 shouting skipper loses to the composed captain.

Clarity is a state of profound but effortless concentration of being completely aware of ourselves and connected with others, and then being able to perform something familiar with ingenuity, verve, and spontaneity. It is the power of presence that allows leaders to fulfill our fundamental responsibility: sustaining an environment in which people feel confident enough to do their best.

Everyone knows this feeling. Perhaps you find it when showering, driving the car, praying, playing with your children or your pet. Or perhaps when you wake up and walk outside. Warmth flows through your body; you feel relaxed, yet attentive. As these feelings become more positive or elevated, your entire mental framework shifts. Fresh ideas emerge without effort; they just pop into your head. Problems that seemed overwhelming in a lesser state of mind suddenly seem like "nothing at all."

Joanne found that by making the mental space to quiet her own thinking, she actually multiplied her management energy. She got better results for far less effort.

Working with other people also profoundly changed. The more present Joanne became, the more engaged and clear-minded her direct reports became. Within six months, her "magic" rubbed off on others a natural consequence as her leadership evoked calm feelings among her staff. More and more people discovered the ability to focus their thinking, and the insights necessary to ever-improving results.

Joanne found herself saying less and less as the staff solved more and more of the issues themselves. Many tasks that she used to take on were accomplished by others or, in fact, simply went away because they did not really need doing after all.

Not having to deal with everyone's mental chatter, the team could find a creative solution quickly, and put it into action smoothly, when a real opportunity arose or big decision needed to be made.

Deepening energy's wellspring

Joanne had tapped into the mental capacity that emanates from the life force, which makes virtually any dream possible while making day-to-day living an easy joy. Leaders who count on this wellspring see that it helps them discharge their work responsibilities with supreme effectiveness, without imposing stress or strain on others.

We tap into this power by paying attention to the quality of our thinking. But the process of mental awakening is one that presents new challenges. As old habits die, deeper questions surface:

- "What selfish desires separate me from myself and others?"
- "Do I harbor any ill-will towards others?"
- "Am I being compassionate to those I care about?"
- "What is the meaning of my life?"

None of these questions is easy, each person who decides to respond to them must find his or her own answers. The process takes some measure of perseverance. Willpower is necessary because changing long-standing habits takes practice. It's not enough to simply wish one's mental state were more elevated. As Joanne learned, once having tasted the "quiet minded experience" and finding her common sense, she had to make changes in her routines to help her stay mentally balanced (see last month's column). Of course, when Joanne started to feel wonderful and work much more easily, she got a nice incentive to stick with this path.

In addition to having willpower and commitment, operating consistently from a high-minded state requires the good sense to recognize when our thinking has slipped off center. Inevitably, we fall off the beam from time to time. After all, we are only human. Thoughts come too fast for us to be able to stop them, much less deflect them before we experience them as reality.

We may become conscious of busy thoughts only as they appear as uncomfortable feelings. When we notice ourselves reacting negatively, saying harsh words, feeling pressure, that is the clue that we have lost our mental goodwill and, therefore, our open channel to the source of energy. But we also know that no thought, no matter how poor one's state of mind, can exert negative energy unless we pay attention or dwell on it. Pretty soon our thinking clears up, and we re-gain our mental equilibrium. Our mood lifts, and we notice that even small actions provide true satisfaction. Answers emerge, and we find deep contentment and inner peace.

That is the secret Joanne learned over the course of those months as she was changing. Managing will never be the same old uncomfortable task it once was.

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