

Becoming a Proactive Leader

by Denis Waitley

The knowledge era's new leaders, many of whom are immigrants and women, are managing change by conceiving innovative organizations and novel ways to attract and motivate employees.

They are learning to be proactive instead of reactive, and to appreciate the full importance of relationships and alliances. They also have a healthy aptitude for risk and perseverance, and know how to gain strength from setbacks and failure.

Life's Batting Average

Baseball's greatest hitter grew up near my neighborhood in San Diego. When Ted Williams slugged for the Boston Red Sox, my father and I kept a record of his daily batting average. And when I played Little League ball, my dad told me not to worry about striking out. In Williams's finest year, dad reminded me, the champion failed at the plate about 60 percent of the time.

Football's greatest quarterbacks complete only six out of ten passes. The best basketball players make only half their shots. Even with satellite mapping and expert geologists, leading oil companies make strikes in only one out of ten wells.

Actors and actresses auditioning for roles are turned down twenty-nine in thirty times.

And stock market winners make money on only two out of five of their investments.

Since failure is a given in life, success takes more than leadership beliefs and solid behavioral patterns. It also takes an appropriate response to the inevitable, including an effective combination of risk-taking and perseverance. I meet many individuals who are seeking security at all costs, and avoiding risk whenever and wherever possible.

Knowing that certain changes would make success much more likely for them, they nevertheless take the path of least resistance: no change. For the temporary, often illusory comfort of staying as they are, they pay the terrible price of a life not truly lived.

Parable of the Cautious Man

*There was a very cautious man,
who never laughed or cried.

He never risked, he never lost,
he never won nor tried.

And when he one day passed away,
his insurance was denied,

For since he never really lived,
they claimed he never died.*

In other words, missed opportunities are the curse of potential. Just after the Great Depression, Americans, perhaps understandably at the time, took many steps intended to minimize risk. The government guaranteed much of our savings. Citizens bought billions of dollars worth of insurance.

We sought lifetime employment and our unions fought for guaranteed annual cost-of-living increases to protect us from inflation. This security-blanket mentality has continued in recent decades as executives awarded themselves giant golden parachutes in case a merger or takeover took their plum jobs.

These measures had many benefits, but the drawbacks have also been heavy, even if less obvious. In our eagerness to avoid risk, we forgot its positive aspects. Many of us continue to overlook the fact that progress comes only when chances are taken. And the security we sought and continue to seek often produces boredom, mediocrity, apathy and reduced opportunity.

We still hear much about security, especially from federal and state politicians. But total security is a myth except, perhaps, for those six feet underground in the cemetery. We may indeed ask our government for guaranteed benefits.

But we must be aware that when a structure starts with a *floor*, walls and ceilings will follow. And herein lies a paradoxical proverb:

You must risk in order to gain security, but you must never seek security.

When security becomes a major goal in life – when fulfillment and joy are reduced to merely holding on, sustaining the status quo – the risk remains heavy. It is then a risk of losing the prospects of real advancement, of not being able to ride the wave of change today and tomorrow.

Had the founders of Yahoo, Amazon.com and America Online been concerned with immediate profits and return on investment, we would not be enjoying those Internet services today, each of which has a greater market capitalization than IBM or General Motors.

Procrastination Doesn't Make Perfect

Perfectionists are often great procrastinators. Having stalled until the last minutes, they tear into a project with dust flying and complaints about insufficient time. Perfectionist-procrastinators are masters of the excuse that short notice kept them from doing the quality job they *could* have done.

But that's hardly the only variety of procrastination – which is one of my own favorite hiding places when I try to blame external conditions instead of myself for some difficulty.

Mine comes with a gnawing feeling of being fatigued, always behind.

I try to tell myself that I'm taking it easy and gathering my energies for a big new push, but procrastination differs markedly from genuine relaxation – which is truly needed. And it saves me no time or energy.

On the contrary, it drains both, leaving me with self-doubt on top of self-delusion.

We're all very busy. Every day we seem to have a giant to-do list of people to see, projects to complete, e-mails to read, e-mails to write. We have calls to answer and calls to make, then more calls to people with whom we keep playing voice-mail tag.

Henri Nouwen's classic book *Making All Things New* likens our lives to "overstuffed suitcases that are bursting at the seams."

Feeling there is forever far too much to do, we say we're really under the gun this week. But working hard or even heroically to solve a problem is little to our credit if we created the problem in the first place.

When most people refer to themselves as being under the gun, they want to believe, or *do* believe, that the pressures and problems are not of their own making.

In most cases, however, the gun appeared after failure to attend to business in good time. Instead of being proactive early, they procrastinated until the due date became a crisis deadline.

By the Inch Life's a Cinch, by the Yard it's Hard

One of the best escapes from the prison of procrastination is to take even the smallest steps toward your goals. People usually procrastinate because of fear and lack of self-confidence – and, ironically, become even more afraid when under the gun. There are many ways to experiment and test new ground without risking the whole ball game on one play.

Experience has shown that when people go after one big goal at once, they invariably fail. If you had to swallow a twelve-ounce steak all at once, you'd choke. You have to cut the steak into small pieces, eating one bite at a time.

So it is with prioritizing. Proactive goal achievement means taking every project and cutting it up into bite-sized pieces. Each small task or requirement on the way to the ultimate goal becomes a mini-goal in itself.

Using this method, the goal becomes manageable. When mini-mistakes are made, they are easy to correct. And with the achievement of each mini-goal, you receive reinforcement and motivation in the form of positive feedback.

As basic as this sounds, much frustration and failure is caused when people try to "bite off more than they can chew" by taking on assignments with limited resources and impossible timeline expectations.

Two major fears that sire procrastination are fear of the unknown and fear of rejection or looking foolish. A third fear – of success – is often overlooked.

Many people, even many executives, fear success because it carries added responsibility that can seem too heavy to bear, such as setting an example of excellence that calls for additional effort and willingness to take risks.

Success, without adequate self-esteem or the belief that it is deserved, also can create feelings of guilt and the result is only temporary or fleeting high achievement. Playing it safe can seem more tempting than a need to step forward with determination to do it now and do it right.

Moving from Procrastination to Proactivation:

Here are some ideas to help make you a victor over change rather than a victim of change:

1. Set your wake-up time a half hour earlier tomorrow and keep the clock at that setting. Use the extra time to think about the best way to spend your day.
2. Memorize and repeat this motto: "Action TNT: Today, not Tomorrow." Handle each piece of incoming mail only once. Answer your e-mail either early in the morning or after working hours. Block out specific times to initiate phone calls, personally take incoming calls, and to meet people in person.
3. When people tell you their problems, give solution-oriented feedback. Rather than taking on the problem as your own assignment, first, ask what's the next step they plan to take, or what they would like to see happen.
4. Finish what you start. Concentrate all your energy and intensity without distraction on successfully completing your current major project.
5. Be constructively helpful instead of unhelpfully critical. Single out someone or something to praise instead of participating in group griping, grudge collecting or pity parties.
6. Limit your television viewing or Internet surfing to mostly educational or otherwise enlightening programs. Watch no more than one hour of television per day or night, unless there is a special program you have been anticipating. The Internet has also become a great procrastinator's hideout for tension-relieving instead of goal-achieving activities.
7. Make a list of five necessary but unpleasant projects you've been putting off, with a completion date for each project. Immediate action on unpleasant projects reduces stress and tension. It is very difficult to be active and depressed at the same time.

8. Seek out and converse with a successful role model and mentor. Learning from others' successes and setbacks will inevitably improve production of any kind. Truly listen; really find out how your role models do it right.
9. Understand that fear, as an acronym, is False Evidence Appearing Real, and that luck could mean Laboring Under Correct Knowledge. The more information you have on any subject – especially case histories – the less likely you'll be to put off your decisions.
10. Accept problems as inevitable offshoots of change and progress. With the ever more rapid pace of change in society and business, you'll be overwhelmed unless you view change as normal and learn to look for its positive aspects – such as new opportunities and improvements – rather than bemoan the negative.

There is actually no such thing as a "future" decision; there are only present decisions that will affect the future. Procrastinators wait for just the right moment to decide.

If you wait for the perfect moment, you become a security-seeker who is running in place, unwittingly digging yourself deeper into your rut. If you wait for every objection to be overcome, you'll attempt nothing.

Get out of your comfort zone and go from procrastinating to proactivating.

Make your personal motto: "**Stop stewing and start doing!**"

Credit Statement to be Included in Reprints

Reproduced with permission from Denis Waitley's Weekly Ezine. To subscribe to Denis Waitley's Weekly Ezine, go to www.deniswaitley.com or send an email with Join in the subject to subscribe@deniswaitley.com Copyright © 2005 Denis Waitley International. All rights reserved worldwide.