

The Procrastination Boost: Doing Less To Get More Done

Jenna Goudreau, Forbes Staff 1/3/13



“No idleness, no laziness, no procrastination: Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today,” Lord Chesterfield famously said.

But is procrastination always the enemy of productivity? Not according to Carson Tate, the founder and managing partner of management consultancy Working Simply, who believes mastering the art of “high-performance procrastination” can set you apart from your peers.

“Procrastination is a dirty word in the corporate vernacular,” says Tate, “but it can be a productivity tool. It causes us to slow down and think—two things in our frenetic, always-on culture that don’t happen a lot.”

In today’s fast-paced knowledge economy, workers struggle with competing deadlines, never-ending to-do lists and constant distractions. Tate believes procrastination serves as a mechanism of focus in the whirlwind, shedding light on what’s really important and empowering others to solve problems. She explains how doing less might just help you get more done.

Procrastinating Clarifies Priorities

Later. Not now. Maybe tomorrow. That pesky task on your to-do list keeps getting pushed down. Your procrastination is valuable information, says Tate. “It helps you get clear on what you want to do or need to do.” Consider why you’re avoiding the task like the plague. Is it out of alignment with your skills, personal goals or the goals of the company? Do you have the tools to tackle it properly? Is it just a time-suck with limited payoff? If you understand the source of your avoidance, you can use it to cull your to-do list, Tate says. Strike off the tasks that are meaningless, seek resources for those that are overly complicated, and focus on what’s really important.

Procrastinating Empowers Others To Solve Problems

Sometimes not acting immediately creates the space for others to step up and solve problems, says Tate. Consider what happens when you receive an email from a colleague or direct report and choose to sit on it for a few hours. Oftentimes the problem resolves itself without your input. “[Not acting] enables others and helps develop your team,” she says. While being frequently unresponsive would likely backfire, strategic procrastination can build people up. One of Tate’s clients, a sales executive, had a new team member who continuously came to him with questions about resolving issues. The first couple times the executive asked what the sales rep thought, and they talked through the scenario. The next couple times, the executive waited to respond. Soon, the sales rep became more confident and self-sufficient, and the emails stopped entirely.

Procrastinating Identifies Your Energy Cycles

Lack of motivation may also signal that your scheduling is off, says Tate. Complex tasks that require a lot of mental effort, like writing and analyzing information, need to be completed when your energy is high and your brain is rested. However, if you’re a morning person scheduling high-intensity projects in the afternoon, or vice versa, sluggish energy levels will likely lead to procrastination. Tate recommends using these signals to tap into your body’s natural rhythms, so that you can get the most out of your day. For those times when you don’t have the energy to start a big project or you find your energy waning, she suggests using a five-minute list: A to-do list of easy, low-intensity

tasks that you can do in less than five minutes. Whether it's an internet search, printing out and sorting documents, or light research, it helps you stay on track through dips in concentration.

Procrastinating Leads To Creativity

Hesitancy to start a project may also be a sign that the idea is not fully formed or inspired. "Ideas need time to percolate," says Tate. "Inspiration strikes when your brain is at rest." Procrastinating—whether it's watching a silly YouTube video, lingering by the water cooler or pushing off a difficult task and doing an easy one—is a time-out for your brain. A relaxed brain more easily connects disparate ideas in new, creative ways. Ever had a big idea in the shower or while taking a run? "High-performance procrastinators use another task or project to stimulate their thinking on all of their projects and tasks," Tate says. "Procrastination actually assists us in getting the work done at the ideal time."

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