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Jim's Profit Accelerator 62: Procrastination—Friend or Enemy?

If you're a successful leader, you procrastinate. The issue is that it's often prudent, sometimes harmless, and occasionally disastrous. The trick is not to stop procrastinating (not possible), but to choose it as a leadership skill.

Procrastination has a bad rap. Regardless of whether we're perfectionists or impulsives, we likely procrastinate and hide self-criticism of it with either blame or impassive ignorance. Instead of hiding, consider the latest facts:

1. Everyone procrastinates.
2. It's necessary for high-functioning health.
3. It's risky behavior.

The CliffsNotes version is that emotional self-regulation is essential for successful leaders, and procrastination is a useful tool in the self-regulation toolbox. It's a way to let off pressure, make space for others in the problem-solving process, and allow the right side (creative) of your brain to wander in search of a better solution. Wandering is essential food for creative thought, critical when obstacles block known avenues of progress.

Procrastination includes an emotional "payoff" that's different for different folks. It's replacing a desirable activity with a short-term pleasure.

Which of these is your payoff of choice, when you procrastinate?

1. **Doing something that's good** (healthy, generous, kind)—for example, going to the gym.
2. **Doing something useful**, but not the task at hand.
3. **Doing anything else that's popped up** and looks interesting.
4. **Doing something that takes your mind off bad feelings**—for example, eating.

Leadership Payoffs for Procrastination:

- **It can shift problems from leader to team.** Winning teams take most problems away from their leaders and solve them, seeking help when they are stumped. This is an economical use of a leader's skill and time, and multiplies her impact on the organization.
- **It creates space for others** to solve the problem on their own initiative, which provides deep satisfaction to most folks. It's also a powerful growth tool that takes little leadership time, unlike most training which requires more time from the leader.
- **It morphs the problem** in a good way. With time, the current problem often changes into one of two better forms, accelerating a solution:

- Dissolved into nothing.
- A clearer problem that's easier to solve.

Here's how problems get better with procrastination:



For the leader who is anxious and impulsive, procrastination is a special blessing. It replaces low-value targets with the higher-payoff targets that appear with time. Instead of jumping to solve the problem at hand, waiting usually enables a better solution that is:

- Faster
- Cheaper
- Higher impact

SPEED BUMP: Procrastination is actually an acceleration technique.

SPEED BUMP WARNING: Some procrastination costs more than its benefit.

These high-cost procrastinations usually are the fruit of anxious impulsiveness in the face of turtle-speed progress. All leaders encounter this. Since impulsiveness is one of the two prime drivers of procrastination, observe your impulsiveness and delay action for a better solution.* This can be harder than it looks, since there's a fine line dividing impulsiveness and action orientation. This simple answer works most of the time: When it's a hot question, slow down, ask questions, and wait a bit. Let it come to you. Your creative brain emerges when your impulsive brain hits a wall, so put up a temporary wall for better results. In this way, a bit of procrastination can make room for a payoff.

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Jim Grew is an expert in CEO-level strategy and executive leadership whose clients refer to him as the Business Defogger and Accelerator. Jim helps leaders swiftly discover the hidden opportunities within their businesses and exploit them for dramatic results. Nearly three decades of success as a COO and CEO coupled with his experience running nine thriving

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