

## **Practical Strategies On-line! Spring 2002**

The email and Web newsletter on organization and management issues for business.

From Michael H. Smith, Ph.D. and Associates

### **Coping With Procrastination (or "I'll Read This Later")**

"I have a lot of work to do. So I'd better get started putting it off."  
Frat boy on Dawson's Creek

A friend recently gave me a tip to check out [www.procrastination.com](http://www.procrastination.com). When I looked at the site, it said: "Work in Progress, Coming Soon."

Procrastination is actually a very serious problem that affects most of us in one way or another in both our work and private. Procrastination drains our energy, lowers our morale and distracts us from what we really need to do. It makes us feel bad about our lives and ourselves.

We often set good goals. We really want to eat less, exercise more, get particular projects done at work, etc. But we rarely do what we intend to do.

I recently found a very useful book called **Following Through** by Steve Levinson, Ph.D., and Pete Greider, M.Ed. Although it is a self-help book and I usually believe that most are rarely worth the paper they're printed on, this book has a number of good points to recommend it.

First of all, the book disproves the "It's all my fault" approach to procrastination. We tell ourselves, "If only I had a stronger will or more energy or . . . ." We believe that we are somehow lacking what it takes to get things done. Then we blame ourselves for not having that mysterious quality.

But the authors make the fascinating point that we're just not wired right to have an easy time accomplishing our goals. They explain that our brains undercut our best intentions.

They call the part of the brain that gets in our way the Primitive Guidance Systems (the PGS). It is very oriented toward our most immediate needs.

It focuses on the desire for food, sleep and stimulation when we're bored, etc. It is also good in getting things done in an emergency. But it has to be an emergency; that's why we do last-minute work so well.

The authors call the other part of the brain that creates our good intentions the Intelligence-Based Guidance System (the IGS). It knows what we really need to do. But it constantly gets in to conflicts with the PGS over setting our immediate priorities. So when we sit down to do something, hunger, fatigue, boredom, the telephone ringing, etc continually distract us.

Since the authors were rather general and somewhat nebulous in their description of the brain, I emailed them for details. Steve Levinson got back to me in hours demonstrating that he does, in fact, follow through on things. He said that they intended to be general in their book geared toward a popular audience. He also confirmed my intuition that the PGS is the old reptilian part of the brain that is the most ancient aspect of the brain. The IBS is the newest mammalian part of the brain. It is, as the author's say, the rational part of the brain.

The authors' second useful point is that we have to find some way of tricking the old brain into making the new brain's goals a real priority. They offer a number of very simple practical techniques for overcoming the old brain's resistance. One good idea is shifting the context. For example, a couple wanted to walk every day as a form of exercise, but they couldn't make themselves do it. They decided to get a dog so that instead of exercising, they had to walk the dog a few times every day. This was an end run around the old brain's resistance.

The authors also suggest ways to make the goal matter to the old brain. For example, one man set a goal of ten cold calls every day and shredded a \$10 bill for every call he missed. He became motivated very quickly.

Another example is an employee who told all of her coworkers about an important goal she had set. This motivated her because she would have been too embarrassed to announce that she had blown it.

They also suggest using cues to remind yourself to say or do certain things. For example, you might set your watch to beep yourself twice per day to remind you to work on that long term project you've put off.

From a psychological point of view, these are very straightforward behavioral techniques for changing your actions. What I like about them is how simple and effective they are. Rather than endlessly beating yourself

up, you can set things up in a way that encourages you to do what you want to do.

Interestingly, as I was finishing this review, there was a column in the local newspaper in which the writer described using one of these methods. One of his friends came up with the idea (independently of the book) that his tennis buddies would set weight loss goals for them to meet by the Spring. Whoever didn't meet their personal goal would have to pay about \$150 for the rental car they got to reach their tennis camp. He reported that he was very motivated by this approach and had become a conscientious dieter. The pounds were dropping off.

Procrastination is usually not an easy thing to deal with. But following through will help you deal much more effectively with this vexing problem and meet your goals.

Dear Readers:

Another part of procrastination-office cleanup or what to do with paper on your messy desk-is explored in a new book, **The Myth of the Paperless Office** by Abigail Sellen and Richard Harper. In a review in the New Yorker, 3/25/02, Malcom Gladwell notes that the author's debunk the myth of the messy desk (and the paperless office) by demonstrating that paper allows a certain type of critical thinking. What most people have directly in front of them is a clear space about 18 inches square. What covers the rest of most desks are piles, folders, journals, binders, etc. The piles look like messes but make sense to most of us.

Apple Computer did a study on compiling behavior and found that most people make sense of their piles and can tell you precisely where things are. More significantly, piles represent the process of active, ongoing thinking. The desk holds things that cannot be currently categorized and that we are still deciding how to use. The messy desk is actually a sign of complexity. We use the papers as cues that help us "recover a complex set of threads without delay". The moving of things mirrors our brain activity and that rearranging process ultimately leads to better decisions.

So the next time you're procrastinating about cleaning your messy desk, you can claim that you're being creative.

**New article:** "Recovering From Workplace Trauma." Email me for a copy

Hoping your Spring and Summer brings you new challenges and adventures.  
Mike

Michael H. Smith, Ph.D  
Michael H. Smith, Ph.D. and Associates  
Conflict Management and Productivity Specialists  
mhsmith@michaelhsmithphd.com  
3718 Grand Ave. Ste.14  
Oakland, CA 94610  
510-272-9069  
510-272-0525fx  
email:mhsmith@michaelhsmithphd.com

Visit our World Wide Web site at:  
[www.michaelhsmithphd.com](http://www.michaelhsmithphd.com)

Bringing Peace to the Workplace

Michael H. Smith, Ph.D  
Michael H. Smith, Ph.D. and Associates  
Conflict Management and Productivity Specialists  
5801 Leona St., Ste A  
Oakland, CA 94605  
510-530-7900  
Fax: 510-530-7922  
email:mhsmith@michaelhsmithphd.com

Visit our World Wide Web site at:  
[www.michaelhsmithphd.com](http://www.michaelhsmithphd.com)

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