

Cope With Procrastination — Today!



You can break the habit and help others in the process

by Barbara Carnes

Jim threw up his hands in exasperation. How was he going to get June to finish that report on system downtime? He thought of his alternatives. This wasn't the first time she had repeatedly missed a deadline, claiming she had been "too busy." He had meant to sit down with June to discuss her use of time. Then he smiled to himself. He realized that he had been procrastinating about talking to June about her procrastination!

What is procrastination? We procrastinate when we choose to do lower priority activities in favor of higher priority ones. Many people do low priority activities such as reading mail, completing paperwork, or attending meetings instead of performing higher priority tasks such as gathering and analyzing data for a complicated report. Like Jim, many managers find themselves "too busy" to have performance discussions with employees, even though the formal responsibility of all managers is to get results through other people.

Why do we procrastinate? There are many reasons. No doubt Jim was avoiding the unpleasant by putting off a discussion with June about her procrastination. Often people find other activities to keep them busy rather than do things that are distasteful to them.

Perhaps June was avoiding the system downtime report because it was a difficult or complex task. Easier jobs are often more attractive to us than complicated or difficult ones, especially when we are not sure how to do them.

Some people procrastinate because they prefer not to take a stand on an issue. They may believe that they don't have all the information needed to make a decision, or they may think that the consequences of making any decision are worse than not making a decision at all. Middle managers are particularly vulnerable to this type of procrastination because often their decisions risk alienating either top management or subordinates.

Fear of making mistakes is also a reason for procrastination. Many people find it easier to avoid doing something than to risk making a visible mistake. They assume that if the boss doesn't see a mistake, they will continue in good graces. What many people don't realize is that their procrastination itself may cause them to lose favor.

Putting things off may represent a type of passive aggression, or a desire to control, stemming from deep-seated feelings about authority. Lacking the courage or ability to confront people or situations openly, some people seek to control by not doing what is expected. Passive aggression often is a complex psychological problem (too involved to discuss here) that, depending on the situation, may require professional attention.

Some procrastinators purposely wait until the last minute and then feverishly scurry to get something done. Their satisfaction comes from the gratification that they were able to do it, and from the "high" they experience while in cri-

sis mode. More often than not, however, the result of their feverish efforts is not nearly as good as it would have been had they devoted adequate time to the project. People who are under-challenged or bored often are guilty of this type of procrastination.

Our definition of procrastination assumes that people set goals or directions to determine a task's priority level. People who appear to procrastinate may not actually have goals and objectives to judge the relative priority of their activities.

How To Cope With Your Procrastination

First, accept the fact that you procrastinate from time to time. All people do. Occasionally, you may even legitimately choose to delay something until you have had more time to reflect on it. Procrastination becomes a problem only when it is practiced habitually and frequently.

Second, remember the definition of procrastination. If lower priority activities go undone in favor of higher priority items, you are not procrastinating. You are simply trying to do too much.

However, if you believe procrastination is a problem for you, try some of these techniques:

Break things into "bite-sized pieces." Often people faced with a difficult or complex task overwhelm themselves by thinking in terms of one large task. Divide the project into subsections or subtasks. When installing a new order entry system, for example, subtasks could include: planning before programming, breaking down the order entry system into discreet tasks, and writing specific programs in sequence. Many people find that a project is much more "approachable" when it is broken down this way.

Set deadlines. People who avoid decisions often find that setting a deadline provides the "push" they need to make a decision and take action. Put the commitment date someplace where you, and perhaps others, will see it often, letting it serve as a reminder and reinforcer. Share your deadline with someone else, someone with whom you do not want to "lose face."

Promise yourself a reward. When you complete a difficult or unpleasant task, one you might have procrastinated, give yourself a reward. The promise of a reward also may replace the emotional high of last-minute, feverish ac-

tivity. Your reward might be something tangible such as a book, a cassette tape, or an article of clothing. Or the reward may be intangible, such as taking your full lunch hour to relax or take a stroll. Be sure to take your reward only if you earn it.

Focus on the results. Instead of thinking about the unpleasant or difficult task itself, think about how good it will be to have the job completed. Think also about the positive results or rewards that will come from completion. Set goals and priorities. If you are not able to judge the relative priorities of your activities, you won't know whether or not you are actually procrastinating. Focusing on your goal also will help you overcome the fear of making a mistake. Remember, 80 percent of the things we worry about never happen.

Start with a "leading task." A leading task is an initial activity "to get the ball rolling." Examples of leading tasks include: talking with end users early in a software project's analysis stage, making an "easy" telephone call before placing a "difficult" one, or booting up the PC and opening a file before working on it. When you hesitate to start a project because it is big or difficult, or you are concerned that you will make a mistake, get things rolling with a leading task. Promise yourself you will do the leading task only, and then decide whether to continue. Once you have started it is usually much easier to continue. Even if you decide to stop after doing the leading task, you will find it is easier to get started another time.

How to Cope With Others' Procrastination

Although we tolerate our own procrastination all too well, other people's procrastination annoys us because we have less control over their behavior.

When other people's procrastination affects us, a cycle of frustration begins. First, we feel a loss of control or personal autonomy because of our dependency on the other person. We feel frustrated, and this often leads to anger. The anger, held inside or expressed openly, leads either to a strain or a breakdown in communication with the other person. This barrier then causes both people to become further entrenched in their respective procrastination and frustration modes, intensifying feelings of dependency, loss of control, frustration, and anger.

Remember — you can't change another person's behavior. You can, however, alter your behavior, which in turn may cause that person to change. You can also increase your ability to cope with behavior you cannot change.

Establish clear deadlines with consequences for not meeting them. It is better in most cases to do this jointly with the other person, but you may need to do it unilaterally. When the procrastinator is your boss, take the initiative to set mutually agreeable deadlines and then use diplomacy to check with your boss periodically.

Set small, interim goals. For example, if the task is to develop an MIS problem-tracking log, interim goals might be to meet with system users who have experienced inadequate or less than timely MIS responses to system problems, to clarify these issues with users and establish a preliminary analysis, and to draft an initial problem-tracking log.

Help the other person be realistic. Will his or her other responsibilities interfere with this deadline? Anticipate possible problems and together develop contingency plans.

Don't hang over the other person's shoulder once the deadline has been established. It's okay to inquire how he or she is doing from time to time or to offer help, but give the other person enough latitude to finish the job without feeling as if his or her every move is being scrutinized.

Be a consultant, not a director. The more unilateral orders you give, the more likely you will be to meet with passive resistance and an intensified cycle of frustration.

Reward progress as well as end results. A pat on the back and a word of praise provide powerful positive reinforcement.

If you get angry, be up front about it. Tell the other person that you are angry and why. If your temper is out of control, however, wait until you have composed yourself before discussing your feelings.

Have a contingency plan in place for yourself. What will you do if the other person doesn't come through? Having such plans removes much of the loss-of-control feelings. Is there someone else you might ask at the last minute? If the order entry program, for example, is due on Monday, you may choose to hold Friday (or the week-end) open on

your own calendar, just in case you need to take over. If you have made commitments to others based on this deadline, you may want to explore possible alternative options with them.

Once Jim realized he was procrastinating about talking to June, he had a discussion with her about missed deadlines. During the conversation, June admitted that she was somewhat unrealistic about deadlines, and that she needed to establish clearer priorities in her own work. Another program she was working on for the marketing department had picked up pace unexpectedly, and this compounded the problem. Jim first sympathized with her situation, then helped her anticipate possible future problems and how she might deal with them. He discussed the relative priorities of June's various responsibilities, and together they set interim goals so Jim could check her progress periodically.

Jim also decided to talk with his boss to apprise him of the project's current status and to get a feel for his boss's flexibility. He then sat down and made his own contingency plan. He decided that he would ask Sam, one of his best and most reliable programmers, to jump in and complete the order entry program if it became necessary.

In the next few months Jim found that he became less frustrated with June's procrastination. Once he realized he had been avoiding discussions with her because they were uncomfortable, he made a special effort to discuss her progress with her more often. June still tended to put things off and miss deadlines, but Jim found he was able to catch the problem and deal with it earlier, before his frustration and her late work got out of hand. ■

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