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FROM IDEAS TO ACTION: Overcoming Self-sabotage

"To put your ideas into action is the most difficult thing in the world. " - Goethe

"Inaction kills," states a middle manager in a major telecommunications company. Making the same point, while discussing why he replaced one of his top executives, Board President and CEO of the Swiss Rieter Group, Kurt Feller said, "He was not action oriented... The most important thing is that you do something. If you only think about it, that's not enough."

Thinking is useless without action. Percy Barnevik of ABB says that it's easy to agree on what it takes to be effective, but many of these good ideas never get implemented. The culprit usually is said to be the cussedness of human nature: "If they weren't so stubborn...", "If he could see things rationally...", "If she were more committed...", and so on.

But very often, too, the human nature that blocks effective action lies in ourselves. We sabotage our own ideas. We fail ourselves to bridge the gap from merely having good ideas to taking real action. As in golf and tennis, what happens after the initial inspiration - the follow through - is crucial.

Why do people so often fail to follow through on so many of their own good ideas? Common explanations include: there's no time; the organizations won't support it; my boss won't allow it; my direct reports are too resistant to change; I tried, but it didn't work out; it's too risky; people are unwilling to take initiative, to take responsibility.

Sometimes, these explanations are valid. But sometimes, they are rationalizations, abdications of responsibility, insidious forms of work avoidance and self-sabotage.

Building the Bridge

Why do people engage in self-sabotage? How can they avoid it, and span the gap between idea and action? We must build the bridge, and we must cross it. Building the bridge includes moving from having a good idea to formulating a true intention, exercising self-control, understanding how to execute, making the time, and seizing the opportunity.

Formulate a true intention. Nothing matters more than a goal. A goal is far more than a wish, a hope, a desire, a dream. It is a true intention to achieve a desired outcome. It is a clear decision to take action and succeed.

Believing in your idea is important, but it is not enough. It is essential to raise the idea to the level of a true intention to act. Just as companies can benefit from raising their most important issues to the level of strategic objectives, so can individuals in their own strategies of personal effectiveness.

If you have seen the recent hit film, *Apollo 13*, the true story of an aborted moon landing in 1971, you may recall many vivid, dramatic moments of high adventure, great leadership, and superb teamwork. But one of the best lines in the movie was not delivered in an action-packed moment. Shortly before the mission, the lead astronaut, Jim Lovell, and his wife were gazing at a full moon on a beautiful, romantic night. Ms. Lovell remarked wistfully at the miracle of actually walking on the surface of the moon. The commander responded, "It's not a miracle. We just decided to do it." Not very romantic, but it is a great example of the difference between a dream and a goal, between an idea and a true intention. The rest is history, the impact extraordinary.

Exercise self-control. Robert Luciano of Schering-Plough was one of the first chief executives in the pharmaceutical industry to see the potential of biotechnology and invest in it. He knew a good idea when he saw it, and he acted - despite knowing that the payoffs were far down the road, and having no illusions about short-term returns. He and other far-sighted executives and entrepreneurs exercise a crucial type of self-control: they are capable of ignoring negative short-term consequences by keeping an eye on the positive but more distant future.

Long-term gains often require pain and sacrifice in the short run, and short-term advantages can distract us from longer-term interests. Consider any unpleasant action that you know you "should" be taking: chores at home, going to the dentist, dieting, exercising, intervening to deal with a nasty conflict at work, or making a difficult strategic decision. If you always do these things when you know you should, you are an excellent self-manager, showing a lack of procrastination and a high level of self control. If you don't, because their immediate impact is unpleasant, you are falling prey to this very human cause of self-sabotage. Of course, we all yield sometimes to the short-term consequences, but doing it on a regular basis insidiously invites longer-term, more negative consequences, perhaps blocking our wishes and ideas from becoming realities.

Similarly, any time we succumb to small, fleeting, short-term pleasures, at the expense of larger, longer-term positive outcomes, we are doing the same thing: sabotaging our own long-term goals. Examples include smoking, drinking, recreating when we should be working, and a wide variety of time management mistakes, as when we spend our time on easy or enjoyable tasks instead of on tasks that might be more important but are more difficult and less enjoyable.

This is the fundamental challenge of self-control. We must maintain motivation toward larger goals even when the short-term consequences are painful. We can make progress here by reminding ourselves of the long-term payoffs, visualizing success, creating sub-goals, and setting deadlines for ourselves. And it might help to remember that Garry Kasparov, who recently lost his chess match to IBM's Deep Blue computer, believes that the turning point in the match - and perhaps a revolution in computer science worthy of the Nobel Prize - came when the computer refused to move to a position that gave it a decisive advantage. But the advantage was merely short-term, one that would have sabotaged its long-term position.

Determine how to proceed. We also must understand how to build the bridge. That is, we need a strategy, or at least the framework of a strategy, for achieving our intention. One form of self-sabotage trap that can prompt people to stop thinking and close off learning opportunities occurs when they say to themselves, "Sure, I understand what X is" whenever they hear a concept or idea that they have heard before. This is a particular problem in the current business environment, so afflicted with the pursuit of the latest fad. Learning organization, visioning, empowerment, customer responsiveness, you name it, hearing a

buzzword can sound trite and make us think we're in familiar territory. But we may fail to understand that ideas having brief definitions in fact can be highly complex and profound, particularly when we need to practice them in customized rather than off-the-shelf ways. It is vital to really understand the nature of your intention and the skills and tactics required to achieve it.

It is impossible to elaborate in detail here on skills and strategies and tactics for the infinite variety of ideas, goals, and intentions that might be in readers' minds. But fortunately, chances are there's a book or a useful article out there somewhere that discusses in detail the actions needed for whatever it is you want to accomplish. So find one, read it, think about it, adopt what's useful and reject what's not applicable to your situation. Then customize, refine, talk to other people about it, seek the necessary resources, learn the needed skills... and you will develop an understanding of how to proceed.

Make time. When people are asked why they don't accomplish the things they set out to do, they often say they don't have the time. If an idea is important, you need to make the time. Most of us are overloaded at work; but the great achievers are able to find the time to work on the most important things.

If you have a good idea, but find yourself thinking there's no time to work on it, then take active steps to find or make the time. Find ways to delete activities that don't add value. Delegate some tasks. Be less of a perfectionist on the less important tasks that don't require perfection. Say no, more often. Or don't nominate yourself for so many roles; volunteer more strategically than you have been. These actions help make time for something you find truly important.

And if lack of time is a perpetual, serious problem? Then maybe the most important idea for which you need to build and cross the bridge is, "Become a better time manager." And there are plenty of products on the market to help you learn how.

Seize the opportunity. For ideas to be translated into reality, we must seize the right opportunity for action. Sam Pitroda's vision was to deliver digital telecommunications to every village throughout India. Working long and hard to gain entry into the Indian telecommunications bureaucracy, he finally was granted a ten-minute appointment with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi - an invitation often taking years to obtain. But he turned it down, because he believed he needed a full hour to get his message across. After five more months of intense effort, he was given a one-hour interview with Ms. Gandhi. Taking full advantage of this self-created - and bigger - window of opportunity, Mr. Pitroda was then able to begin modernizing Indian telecom.

Sometimes we realize too late that we have missed a great opportunity. Then, perhaps we decide to wait for the next opportunity, and hope that we don't miss it again. Or perhaps we vow to look harder for it, to be more vigilant, so we won't miss it next time. If we don't want to self-sabotage again, we must make sure we are ready to act the next time the opportunity arrives.

Think about past opportunities you know you missed. Describe the characteristics of those opportunities. What were the elements in the situation, the people involved, the timing, the issues? How can you identify opportunities next time they appear? Can you acquire the needed resources now, and develop an action plan now? Then you are ready to actively seek opportunity rather than just wait for it to appear, or to seize the opportunities the next time they arise, even on short notice.

Better yet, create your opportunities. How to do that depends on your idea and your circumstances. But think about it now rather than later, and develop a plan, and make opportunity creation not just a nice idea but a true intention. To repeat an earlier but

essential point, if it's a mere wish or dream or hope, we are more likely to miss the next opportunity than if our idea has achieved the more elevated status of a real goal, a true strategic intent.

Crossing the Bridge

Now that the bridge is built, taking action includes taking the first step, showing courage and persistence, and applying the principle of equifinality.

Take the first step. You've started the engine, now put it into gear. Having done some thinking and planning, it's time to start acting. You'll never have all the answers, all the steps preplanned; there will always be some uncertainty. At least, there should be. Uncertainty is realistic, given the complexity of the world, changing circumstances, and the inability to predict and account for all contingencies. Don't try to eliminate uncertainty, even psychologically - bear in mind the mistaken motive in the line, "I'd rather be certain than right." But do recognize that uncertainty is realistic and inevitable, and don't equate it with "too risky." And don't let it prevent you from taking the first step.

"Just do it", the well known sports apparel company Nike says. If you're tired of that slogan in the context of consumer marketing, at least don't lose sight of its potential ability to help you cross the bridge. "Just do it" doesn't bridge the entire gap from idea to successful execution, but it can help inspire the first step. Or remember how Erich Fromm, the great psychoanalyst put it: "Jump into the pool."

Show courage and persistence. Virtually no good ideas have ever been realized in practice without struggles, resistance from others, resource obstacles, or outright rejection. Many great authors were rejected by dozens of publishers. Many successful enterprises were initially turned down by funding sources. Most scientific research studies end in failure or modest findings, before a great breakthrough. Most new ideas are greeted with skepticism, disagreement and ridicule from others.

Setbacks cause discouragement. But the great achievers bounce back. They learn from their setbacks, and try again. You've heard this, and know it intellectually, and embrace the idea of learning from failures and trying again. But many people agree in principle without really implementing. They don't cross the bridge from failure to real learning and renewed action.

We've been admonished before to exhibit courage and to be persistent. But where do courage and persistence come from? They begin with the realization that setbacks truly can be sources of new learning, helpful the next time around. They also come from a continued focus on the vision or goal, and of its longer-term payoffs. And they come from deep-seated philosophies, values, or convictions; perhaps from an outrage based on some previous experience; from seeing role models in action; from our desire for self-esteem; and from our private and public commitments to other people.

Try different approaches. Finally, it should help to know the principle of equifinality: there usually is more than one, single way to reach a goal. You have a vast array of strategies and tactics you could try. Some are more likely than others to work, of course. But the point is that you don't have to find the one that works, you just have to find (pardon the grammar) a one that works. If your first attempt doesn't work, learn from it, adapt, and keep experimenting until you find yourself in the larger set of workable solutions. And apply multiple approaches at once, not just one at a time. Don't ever let a good occasion remain an "insoluble opportunity".

The news here is very good. If you want something badly enough - if the goal is important, the intention strong - chances are you'll find a way to make it happen.

Conclusion

George Bernard Shaw said there are three types of people: those who make things happen, those who watch what happens, and those who wonder what happened. Crossing the bridge from ideas to action will help place a person in the first type; failing to cross the bridge is an all too-common self-sabotaging experience for the other two types.

The focus of this discussion has mainly been on self-management, about how we tend to sabotage ourselves and what we can do to increase our chances of successfully implementing our best ideas. But these recommendations apply equally to managing others. Perhaps you wish your people would show more initiative, take on more responsibility, and take decisive action. The things described above influence their ability to do so. As a manager, you can educate people about the obstacles and the recommendations, so they can be more effective at crossing important bridges themselves.

Sounds like a good idea? Had any other good ideas lately? If so, challenge yourself: pick one, and translate it into real action.

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