



Hello everyone,

Below you will find some notes about the things I talked about in my presentation at the 2018 WIMWA Summit. I had in mind those of you who did not see the lecture, and of course, it will be a good review for those of you who did. We are living in a time when managing our own motivation is more important than ever. There is just not the same level of external positive tension to keep you focused and productive when you are working from home.

As I talked about in the presentation, change is highly problematic for humans. At that time, I focused on when this is applied to:

1. Improving existing professional practices
2. Adopting newly learned professional skills on the job

Now, we should add a new one: Doing familiar activities but in a new environmental context.

One would think this should be an easy subject with a tidy list of prescriptive strategies:

- Do this ...
- Do this too ...
- Don't do that ...
- And so on ...

Unfortunately, it is not so simple. Anything to do with humans changing, improving or adopting new behaviours is HIGHLY PROBLEMATIC!!

In order to grow our skills, utilise new ones or work in a new environment, we have to DO things:

- Be organised
- Plan activities
- Sit still for the time it takes to accomplish tasks
- Get the hard stuff done
- Manage distractions
- Be disciplined and persistent

DOING new things at the start, or in our current situation, doing familiar things but in a new environmental context, are uncomfortable. They can be:

- Anxiety provoking
- Boring
- Frustrating
- Painful
- Frightening
- And, initially they may cause a performance decrement

In regards to that last one, they are RISKY

We have all experienced this at different times of trying to grow both personally and professionally...

So, what's the problem? The problem is that humans are wired up to:

avoid - stop - delay - procrastinate

actions that trigger negative emotional or physical effects.

Many of us are unconsciously driven by the instinct that goes something like this:

If what we are doing doesn't feel good, STOP

We seek to stop the bad feeling and we can most easily do that by stopping whatever we are doing that is causing it.

STOPPING the actions, STOPS the learning or work process.

We jump back to what is comfortable. Of course, at home there are a myriad of activities that are more comfortable! Even doing the dishes can feel good when compared to writing a report. We feel better, but the work tasks are still there to be done. We can easily become stuck.

The 1st part of the session

So, the first thing I did in the WIMWA session was to:

1. Build a model of failing to improve and change as a natural consequence of being wired up the way we are.

And, then to ...

2. Outline the theory that supports that assertion.

I basically left the attendees to ponder the notion that without strategies to override these instincts to stop, delay, avoid or procrastinate we are not going to be better in the future than we are today, or again in this situation, to be as productive as we were in the office.

I then said, there ARE 3 cognitive strategies that those who seem to persist in growing their behaviour and getting the hard stuff done use consistently and with good effect. These are learned behaviours, meaning the attendees could learn them well enough to use with immediate effect.



The 2nd part of the session

Then, I discussed the 3 cognitive strategies that were uncovered in my PhD research back in the late 90s.

These strategies are easy to see in action, as we use one or more of them many times every day to do things that we find less than pleasant: That can be things like taking out the rubbish, going to the gym, giving difficult feedback, starting a report and so on.

Any time we stick with some activity that doesn't feel good to us, or we start an activity we imagine will be unpleasant, one of these strategies is involved.

But because these strategies are not illuminated as such, they are often not accessible to us with any control.

What these cognitive strategies do is this:

They affect what we are thinking about (or not thinking about) when we are doing an activity or when we are thinking about doing an activity later.

In that way, they change the emotional significance, how we FEEL, about doing the activity long enough to get us started. They in affect interrupt the natural process that triggers avoidance, stopping and so on.

Once an activity is started, humans, who don't much like changing direction, will usually continue on until the task is done.

The 3 strategies are:

DON'T THINK ABOUT IT

Shutting off thoughts and the images of doing a task will stop the associated negative emotions. Many unpleasant things we don't like doing are accomplished by stopping any thoughts about doing it beforehand or dismissing those thoughts if they intrude when we are doing the task.

DO THINK ABOUT IT, BUT BE SPECIFIC

There are some times within every activity that ARE pleasant, like when it's complete. So many people will think about HOW GOOD they will feel when it is over, or HOW BAD they will feel if they don't get it done. That "good" or "worse" feeling makes starting easier.

JUST START AND DECIDE LATER

Often it is just about getting going, getting into action. If I have a book that I need to read and have been avoiding for weeks (this happens a lot), I know if I open that book on a coffee break, read a few pages, telling myself that after 10 minutes if I want to stop I can. I JUST START and the majority of times at the 10 minute mark I am into it and will continue.

We ended the session wrapping all of this back toward our theme of performance behaviour: improving our practice or adopting newly learned skills. I wanted to make real what the participants will experience, can expect as they develop their skills into the future. I wanted to make real that there are real world ways of interrupted the effects of avoidance, procrastination, quitting and delaying.

ANOTHER WAY OF SAYING ALL OF THIS

Below you will find an article from my website on this subject. It's been modified slightly. In this case, I cast the theory and strategies in the context of "goal achievement". This is another way of saying what has been said before, but I think this piece very much enriches the message. I hope you enjoy it.

Article 1: Goal achievement requires a new perspective

My work departs from many others in the thinking about achievement in its emphasis on the natural human tendencies to avoid activities that elicit negative emotions and/or unpleasant feelings. What is problematic about the achievement of goals is manifold:

- 1) The action is not urgent;
- 2) The action has no immediate consequence; and,
- 3) The action is by nature unpleasant.

In the face of taking actions that have these features most of us do two things simultaneously:

We do something else instead while ...

- 2) We construct a good enough reason to justify our avoidance of the goal action we should have taken.

In doing so we do not do the action related to the goal, and we neutralise the possible negative emotion associated with this decision. Namely, the emotion of guilt.

Let me give you an example of the different decisions we might make in the moment right before taking action and the behavioural results.

Let's say you have a goal to exercise by taking a walk in the mornings, and at the same time spend some time with your pooch. You plan to wake a bit earlier each morning to do this activity. Setting a goal like this is not difficult, nor is planning the actions. But I suggest, that for many people, getting out of bed in the morning to do it, can indeed be difficult. It depends upon what we 'think' or 'imagine' in that very moment of initiating the action of getting out of bed.

The person who begins thinking about how good it feels to be in bed, or how bad it will feel to get out of bed, will likely roll over and stay there.

Once the decision is made to not get out of bed this person will begin to construct a good sounding reason or excuse about staying in bed so they do not feel bad or guilty about it. They tell themselves, 'I will do it after work', or 'It's going to be nicer weather tomorrow morning.' I say, "Your poor dog!"

The person who is likely to get out of bed is the one who instead thinks about how good they feel after the walk is done, or how happy the dog is to see you up and ready to go for 'our' walk.

These different thoughts stimulate different emotions and feelings, and hence a different behavioural response. The second approach will not make getting out of bed any easier, but the point is it will get you out of bed. And, YOU can control what you think about!

When I teach goal achievement strategies, the participants are made to be super sensitive to those thoughts they have before taking or avoiding an action by observation. They become consciously aware of these processes at work within themselves. My work is about installing as a habit a new 'thought' strategy that motivates them to initiate and sustain actions that are necessarily unpleasant (e.g. frustrating, boring, nerve-wracking) for the sake of the long-term benefit of achieving a significant goal.

Much of this work is centred upon an understanding of the biological imperatives of human behaviour. For instance, my work on learning effectiveness was based on how to best use the brain and body for learning. One thing we all have in common is the biological imperatives related to survival, protection, connection, energy management and so on.

What of these is important in relation to goal achievement are the biological urges driving us to do what feels good or less bad from the range of choices available to us. We use our thoughts, images, internal dialogue and body state to inform our decisions about what choice we make. You can learn to control these types of thoughts to motivate yourself to do what is perhaps not 'liked', for the sake of doing what is, in the long run good to do.

My work on goal achievement describes what is problematic about goal activities. It uncovers the strategies that people use to avoid action and those they use to motivate action. The face-to-face program I conducted on goal achievement allowed the participants to experience the problem in everyday goal situations and then coached them through the process of learning new strategies that lead to frequent and consistent action toward their goal.

Defining willpower and procrastination

Self-determination, discipline and willpower are all the labels used for a person who has a strategy to do a thing that he or she does not like doing.

Defining procrastination, laziness and lack of willpower

The labels applied to a person who lacks these strategies.

The one thing to remember about all goals, no matter how large, is that they only require small actions taken consistently and frequently.

Books are written one word at a time. Getting fit is done one day at a time. Clearing our debts takes making small payments regularly. Therefore, goal achievement is about having the ability to initiate small actions and sustain them over time.

In closing ...

Delaying action toward our goals until we can take a big action makes little sense, because there are no big actions, only lots of small ones. People who succeed in achieving their goals do not let not being able to do a lot be a good enough reason to do nothing. This is why daily short-term and long-term goals benefit from the same strategies. The same cognitive activity leads to initiating the action of changing a burnt out light bulb and initiating the action of saving your first dollar for a long-awaited vacation.

Stay tuned,
Stef