



Whipping Procrastination

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would have written this article earlier, except I was procrastinating. This happens to me a lot, which is surprising since many consider me to be fairly productive. I believe we are all subject to the why-do-today-what-you-can-put-off-until-tomorrow syndrome. I manage to get out of the doldrums most times with a few tricks I've developed over the years. Here are some of those ...

Play the to-do game: I keep a project list and a master to-do list of all the things I think are important. I draw from those lists at the beginning of each day to create a daily to-do list of things I intend to accomplish. I make accomplishing those items a sort of game and challenge myself to see how many of them I can check off by the end of the day. I use paper lists because I like the feel of physically crossing off things off, and therefore I receive the penalty of having to rewrite and relist items I don't do for the next day's list. Finishing items so I don't have to rewrite them is a motivator for me, too.

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Make a promise: If I promise to do something for someone, I go ahead and schedule a later meeting with that person to discuss the results. It's amazing how motivating it is to have a deadline on the calendar where I have to publicly produce something or be embarrassed. I do this now with my subordinates. I assign a task and set a meeting with them to let them show me the results. That gives them firm deadlines, keeps them motivated, and prevents procrastinating.

Chunk the work: I break big tasks down into smaller ones that are not quite so intimidating. Some people get really sophisticated and use outline tools (in MS-Word, for instance) to create a bunch of subtasks for each big job they have. I prefer to create a mind map of the job and all its little tasks, then move these to my master to-do list. If you aren't familiar with creating mind maps, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind_map. Sometimes, though, the thought of the work required to break down the job into its components stops me in my tracks! At those times, it is easier to kick-start myself into

moving ahead. This seems less daunting to me and helps build momentum so I can tackle the harder things. Whether you decide to eat the frog or do the easy task first, choose a method of getting started that works best for you. Remember, the right thing to do is whatever it takes to get going and move your work along.

Practice good time management: I get a lot of things accomplished in the seams between meetings, on my daily train commute (where I'm writing this), and in other situations that would otherwise be lost time. See my three short articles for some good time management tips in the *Defense AT&L* magazine that include:

- Speeding through your reading, and managing your email and smartphones (November–December 2013)
- Using “wasted” time, the evils of multitasking, and going paperless with Microsoft OneNote (September–October 2014)



Next time you are getting nowhere on a particular task, ask yourself, “What’s the very next step?” Doing so may break the logjam and help you focus on the next small step that you can easily do.

action by just thinking about the next step that would move a particular task forward. If I add the next step to my to-do list and then go work on that, it can get me moving in the right direction. Often, the momentum of finishing the next step encourages me to think about—and do—the next step, and the next, etc. Next time you are getting nowhere on a particular task, ask yourself, “What’s the very next step?” Doing so may break the logjam and help you focus on the next small step that you can easily do. Pretty soon, when you can add up all the next steps you’ve completed, your overwhelming task is done. Magic, huh?

Do the hard stuff first (or the easy stuff): Lots of people like to tackle the hardest tasks on their daily to-do list first. They pick the most challenging or even the most dreaded task on the list and try to get that finished first. Brian Tracy, author and productivity guru, calls this “eating the frog,” because once you’ve done that (yuck!), everything else you have to do appears to be a lot easier.

I respect this approach, but it isn't for me. I prefer to take the other tack and start out with a simple and easy task go get

- Using a to-do list and managing your calendar (July–August 2015)

Reward yourself: Promise yourself an appropriate reward for finishing a tough task that has you procrastinating. Plan a trip to the local ice cream shop after you finish cleaning the garage, or lavish yourself with that new computer you’ve been wanting after you pull your dusty old manuscript out of the closet and finish writing that book. Delay your gratification by promising yourself you can spend an hour on social media, but only after you finish that quarterly report for the boss. Use rewards—large and small—as incentives to get important things done and help develop good work habits.

Procrastination is something we all are prone to do, but indulging it keeps you from accomplishing those things you know need to be done. Whipping procrastination is a lifelong struggle, but using tips like mine and developing good work habits will help you overcome procrastination and achieve the things in life that are important to you. 

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