THOUGHTS, ATTITUDES, HABITS AND BEHAVIORS

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I've been thinking a lot lately about how we think, what we think, and what behaviors become habitual as a result. I've also been thinking about the relationship between these factors and success. We all want to be successful at what we do. Of course, we may each define success in slightly different terms. For some success is defined by the bank account. For others it's the feeling we get when we do a good job, or help others in need. For yet others success is a reflection of our stature in the eyes of our peers and the community in which we exist. Success in your world may be defined by the heart-warming moments spent with family. Or any combination of the above, or none of the above, may be included in your definition of success.

Regardless of how you define success, the question is how to achieve it. And for that we have to start with the basics: our thoughts and attitudes, and the habits and behaviors they create. The reality is that to a great extent we create our own reality by the things we choose to think about, and how we choose to think about them. That translates into the habits and behaviors that serve to create our success, or diminish it.

Have you noticed that people who tend to create wealth and success tend to accumulate more and more? People who don't, unfortunately, seem to lose even that little bit which they have. What makes the difference? Take a look at the fundamental difference between those who are successful, and those who are not, to find the answer.

People who are wealthy or otherwise successful tend to fill their minds with thoughts, words, pictures and images of wealth, affluence, success, productivity, and solutions to problems, most of the time. As a result of their positive thoughts and attitudes, they tend to develop a habit of setting goals which help to guide them further along the path to success. They become expert in developing the habits of monitoring progress with little effort, and of making course corrections as needed.

They develop behaviors which support their goals. With the achievement of goals comes increased satisfaction and success, which further reinforces the process.

Take a look around you at the people you know. Some are successful, and some not. Take a close look at those who are *not* successful from your perspective. You will find that their habits — the outward manifestation of their often hidden thoughts and attitudes — have much in common with one another. Some examples of those habits include

- § worrying excessively by focusing on the problem instead of the solution
- § poor prioritizing by getting caught up in busy work instead of important work
- § being habitually late
- § operating in a reactive mode to situations
- § doing it all themselves instead of delegating
- § over analyzing and falling victim to decision paralysis
- § failing to finish projects
- § playing the "blame game" when things go wrong
- § working too hard and accomplishing too little
- § working incessantly without breaks or vacations
- § lacking passion about work and life

Now let's focus on those who are successful from your perspective. Let's compare their common habits, some examples of which include

- § being committed to achieving goals
- § thinking proactively and developing solutions to avoid or overcome possible future problems
- § taking decisive action and displaying confidence and trust in their own decisions
- § being on time
- § remaining calm and in control in situations
- § delegating effectively and hiring help when needed
- § completing projects

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§   examining factors and learning how to avoid repetition when things go wrong

§   completing things in a seemingly effortless fashion

§   exhibiting passion about their work and life

§   leading a balanced life with breaks and vacations

These are just examples of the differing habits and behaviors which can result from widely different thoughts and attitudes. The first set of thoughts and attitudes are typical of those who are in "survival mode." The second set of thoughts and attitudes are those which are typical of people who operate in "success mode." There is a continuum from one end of the spectrum to the other. Where do you fall on that continuum?

Make a list of those habits / behaviors you have which are clearly typical of survival mode. Prioritize them by moving to the top of the list those which are either most annoying to you, or are interfering the most with your desire for and attempts to achieve success.

Start with the habit / behavior at the top of the list. Just the first. Try to identify the underlying thoughts and attitudes which produce it. This may take considerable thought. You may need to get insights from some of your trusted colleagues, a consultant, or do some research. There are a multitude of resources available to help you with this critical step. Write it down as you go.

Now that you have clearly identified one habit / behavior which is a roadblock to success, and identified what you believe are the underlying thoughts and attitudes which produce it, give yourself 90 days to change it. And map out a plan to do so.

Let's take one example: playing the blame game. I picked this one to use as an example because I find it so pervasive in the legal industry, and also because I have not written about it before.

When things don't work out as expected our emotional reaction can range from simple disappointment to rage. The outcome can vary from a minor failure to achieve the fully desired result, or a total unmitigated disaster which is nightmarish to correct or which results in severe consequences. No doubt you have experienced failure at some level more than once in your career. The question is how you responded to it, e.g. what habits and behaviors came into play. That is ultimately determined by your underlying thoughts and attitudes.

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So what underlying thoughts and attitudes result in habits and behaviors of blaming? A big one is an inability to accept responsibility for one's own failings, or those of others who act on our behalf. A very strong "not my fault" attitude will always lead to blaming behavior. An inability to be held accountable to oneself or others is another underling attitude which leads to blaming habits and behaviors. They are very closely related, but slightly different.

An attitude that the person to whom the work is assigned is the person responsible to think it through, and therefore no additional time must be devoted to proactively anticipating obstacles and suggesting solutions, is yet another underlying factor. If the desired results are not achieved, blame will be the logical resulting behavior.

Blame doesn't do anyone any good, except for letting the person pointing the finger find some measure of protection in avoiding their own accountability. It does not undo the problem. It does not teach anyone how to avoid a similar result in the future. It doesn't fine tune any procedures. It doesn't necessarily impart any knowledge. It often destroys the morale of the person being blamed. It undermines their confidence and trust in their abilities, and hampers their ability to think and act independently in the future.

For the person pointing the finger of blame, there is no positive lesson learned either. Blaming behaviors become internalized into additional negative thoughts and attitudes which result in a further decrease in delegation, trust, and so forth. That will exacerbate the blaming behavior and make it even more habitual the next time the outcome doesn't match expectations. Eventually we witness the person who you have met —maybe worked with—who always makes a "mountain out of a mole hill" whenever something goes wrong.

Hopefully we agree that blame is not a good thing. That's why it is so often seen as a habit of people who are not as successful as they could be. So how do you go about changing it in 90 days? Well, first let's agree that the 90 day time limit is an arbitrary target. Perhaps nothing will happen in 90 days to enable you to focus on different thoughts and attitudes. But you should assemble your change plan within that time limit, and then put it into play when appropriate.

What you include in your change plan will vary depending on the habit / behavior you are addressing, and what the underlying thoughts and attitudes are. Let's take another look at our example: eliminating blaming habits and behaviors. Here is a suggested plan for change:

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1. Before coming to a decision as to whether to assign work, make a brief list of the desired outcomes (goals) and the objectives which must be achieved to get there. Give some thought to obstacles which might arise, and list them, too.

2. Think about the possible consequences of failure to achieve the goals, and mentally accept responsibility. Tell yourself that you will ultimately be accountable for failure. That will provide you with the impetus to build in some additional safeguards to ensure success.

3. If you are assigning the work, be sure to clearly communicate all goals and objectives. Review the obstacles which might be encountered, and discuss mitigating solutions, eliciting new ideas to add to yours.

    Relate the possible consequences of failure, and discuss the safeguards for communication and tracking which will be employed to ensure progress and eventual successful completion.

    Make sure someone, you or the person to whom the work is being assigned, takes notes. Review at the end to make sure you have overlooked nothing.

4. If the work is not completed successfully, take immediate action to resolve the situation in the best possible way for the client and the firm. That will mean taking time to determine exactly what did or did not happen which changed the desired outcome, before taking remedial steps. Resolve in advance that should this occur, (1) you will waste no time in non-productive blaming behavior; (2) you will waste no time in denial with your partners or client; and (3) you will learn as much as possible about the causes of failure.

5. After the situation is resolved to the greatest degree possible, you must *learn* from it. And then you have to take appropriate action to avoid a similar occurrence in the future. Were the instructions lacking? Were possible obstacles not anticipated? Was there a communication failure? Did the situation change without all parties being alerted? Is additional training required? Was the wrong person assigned to the task? Were procedures inadequate?

    Everything must be evaluated in order to learn and make beneficial changes which will ensure greater success in the future.

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Instead of wasting time and energy on blaming behaviors, you will instead focus on resolving the situation, and then performing a thorough analysis and modifying future procedures and methodologies. Knowing you have identified what went wrong and taken corrective measures will shore up your belief and attitudes about assigning work or performing similar work again yourself. As resulting future outcomes improve, it will reinforce the positive underlying beliefs and attitudes, which will further support more beneficial habits and behaviors.

If you do an internet search on words like habit and success, or behavior and success, you will find that much has been written about the correlations. The problem is that we so often go about our business, literally reacting to our environment from waking moment to sleep, without actually *thinking* about our beliefs and attitudes. As a result, we usually do not control our habits and behaviors in a way which is most conducive to our happiness and success. Successful people know about these things, and actively work to develop the right attitudes and beliefs. In turn, they develop the habits and behaviors which lead to continued success. You can be one of them with a little introspection.

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