

# Shift focus to what's working instead of dwelling on failures

In his book, *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions*, MIT professor Dan Ariely explains how as humans our capacity for negativity is much greater than it is for positivity. It seems we are pre-wired to focus on what's missing in our lives, the mistakes we've made and the gap between where we are and where we want to be.

This shows up in our lives on almost a daily basis. Just recently, for example, a client of mine started out a conversation by telling me a presentation she delivered went "really well." But the next words out of her mouth were: "But I didn't do X, Y or Z. I should have said this instead..."

High-achieving professionals tend to suffer from this condition even more so since their natural tendency is to continually strive for even greater improvement. The problem with this is that while recognizing what did not or is not working can help us do less of it, what decades of research have shown us is that your focus is much better invested in finding solutions. In fact, by merely shifting your focus to what is going well, you can both boost your energy and feel less overwhelmed almost instantly.

An entire field of practice called solution-focused management is dedicated to this concept. A powerful, practical way to achieve positive change with people, teams and organizations, the practice identifies what is already working and amplifies it to achieve better results. It focuses on what's possible rather than on causes of problems. The reasoning behind it is that knowing what didn't work or what went wrong rarely gives you useful information in developing a solution that will work. In the most practical sense, solution-focused management is about doing less of what's not working and more of what is.

If you're someone who often feels like you're running on a hamster wheel, guilty of adding more and more to your own plate, and continuously setting new goals for yourself, then it's worth taking a close and objective look at what you're focusing on.

Here are some tips that I share with my coaching clients. Give them a try and see if you can't both regain energy and make strides forward faster.

- Document your goals. A common trait among high achievers is that many are self-described perfectionists. Yet, when I ask them what "perfect" would look like, they do not know. If this sounds familiar, then writing your goals down in black and white will help you to clarify exactly what those milestones are so that you know when they have been achieved. Instead of always chasing after an amorphous concept, you'll be able to focus on what you have accomplished.

- Give yourself permission to celebrate when something goes well. One downside to everything moving so quickly in business today is that we rarely allow ourselves time to stop long enough to acknowledge our successes. We say, "Yes, that went well, but what about all these



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other things I still need to do..." This creates a no-win game that can quickly lead to feeling discouraged.

Instead, when you document your goals (see tip above), also outline how you'll reward yourself when you reach that goal. Make the commitment to yourself ahead of time. It doesn't have to be extravagant. Something as simple as taking time to acknowledge yourself, scheduling a massage or buying yourself flowers will deliver positive reinforcement and boost your energy.

By the way, this strategy also applies to your team. Take time to celebrate the big milestones, as well as the small steps along the way. Like good music, there is space between the notes.

- Identify what worked well. After you've had an accomplishment and taken time to acknowledge it, the next step is to clearly identify what went well. Keeping the solution-focused principle in mind, focus on what worked versus wasting time on dissecting what went wrong. Then look at other areas or projects where you could adopt those same principles or strategies to create even more successes.

- Play to your strengths. Logically speaking, we know that no one individual is or can be good at all things. However, sometimes in our hearts – especially if we're a high

achiever or we've been put in a position of leadership – it's easy to fall into the trap of trying to be good at everything. Keep in mind that research is very clear on this issue. Those who know their strengths and play to them perform better and, more importantly, report being happier.

More than likely you already know what your strengths are. If you're not sure, consider doing a strengths-based assessment with a qualified professional. You can also tell your strengths by measuring your stress and joy levels. We usually like doing the things we are good at and avoid or become drained by those where we are not as proficient. Once you know your strengths, you can more easily know what tasks to delegate or at least ask for help with.

Somewhere along the way, you've likely heard that Albert Einstein reportedly said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. The flip side of this, however, is that if you do indeed want the same results, you should continue doing more of the same. The next time you're feeling overwhelmed, stop, breathe and ask yourself, "What's already working?"

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