

PUT AN END TO PROCRASTINATION!

By Steve McClatchy



Are you a procrastinator? Do you live by mantras like “I do my best work at the last minute” or “If you wait until the last minute, then it only takes a minute!” If you do then you’re not alone. But if you take a step back and look at the impact of living by these statements they just don’t deliver on what they promise.

Let’s say you have a report due by the end of next week. You could carve out some time today. You decide to wait. It’s now Monday morning of the week the report is due. You check your email first thing and there is a lot that needs to get done today. No report will get done today. You make these same kinds of decisions on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday and now it’s the day the report is due. The adrenalin rush of missing the deadline comes over your body, you come to life with energy, complete the report and hand it in on time. “Whew, it’s over!”

Sound familiar?

Procrastination is something we can all relate to with varying degrees. Some people put things off until the last minute only to let a deadline help them bring the task to completion. Others let procrastination get completely out of hand to the point of losing relationships, jobs, homes or businesses. Procrastination is not a time management problem as much as it is a decision making problem.

When you procrastinate you’re making a decision to put something off that you have agreed to do or think you “should” do. We don’t procrastinate things we don’t have to do. For example you’re not reading this article procrastinating a hot air balloon ride. If you are it’s because you either made a commitment to someone to go on a ride or you believe that a hot air balloon ride is something you should be doing right now. We use the term procrastination to describe putting off tasks we have agreed to others we will do or agreed to ourselves that we will or should do.

When you make a commitment to someone else that you will do something at a time other than now, the commitment is time flexible. Time flexible tasks, although flexible, still have deadlines. You have a choice as to when you are going to do the task up until you reach that deadline. Once you reach the deadline the choice is no longer yours. When the deadline arrives you now have to race against the clock to complete the task. Not only do you lose control of your time when the deadline arrives but I believe the quality of what you produce is diminished and in some circumstances, at the last minute, the task can actually take longer to complete than it would have if you had done it earlier.

Quality or Quantity?

Have you ever heard anyone say “I do my best work at the last minute.” If I were to ask the five people that work most closely with that person would those five people agree with that statement? I bet not. Why do we believe that we do such great work at the last minute? Well, we did a lot of work in a little bit of time, it must be good! We’re not really measuring quality, we’re measuring quantity. At the last minute, you certainly produce more quality than not doing the task at all but do you produce better quality than getting to the task ahead of time?

Let’s say you have a performance appraisal due today and you are going to write it today. Contrast that with an appraisal for which you have been taking notes over the course of a year and you’re writing it in stages over the course of a month. Would there be a difference in the quality of these two reports? Even if you are the best writer in the world it would be hard to argue that the report written the day it’s due would be a better report. What’s missing the day the report is due is perspective, thought, reflection, research and other people’s input. Perhaps these things aren’t necessary for the appraisal you’re doing. If so, make that decision ahead of time and stop letting the deadline do it for you.

I have witnessed million dollar proposals, completed at the last minute, sent to clients with the wrong client name on them. I have been a part of meetings that wasted the time of everyone involved because they were put together at the last minute. I have witnessed legal action taken against companies because numbers were miscalculated in tax reports that were done at the 11th hour. When you wait until the last minute you can produce work but it's not the same quality work you can produce when the task is completed in the appropriate amount of time. This does not mean that you should give tasks more time than they deserve. It just means that you should decide ahead of time the kind of quality you want to be associated with and not let the deadline decide for you.

Waiting until the last minute is making a decision to let the quality of what you produce be left to chance. You may get away with this for some things in life but with other things it can spell disaster. Decide in advance the amount of time needed to produce the appropriate quality and set aside that amount of time before the deadline arrives. If you want to live by a mantra that will serve you well throughout your life, make it "I do my best work when I decide my best work is needed."

Shorter or Longer? Deadline or Best Time?

Another mantra I hear a lot is "If you wait until the last minute, it only takes a minute." When you wait until the last minute does a task actually take less time? Certainly tasks like taking a shower, doing the dishes or paying the bills can take less time when you add some urgency and put a hop in your step, but this does not work for everything. In most circumstances, at the last minute, the task will actually take a lot longer than it ordinarily would. Let me give you an example.

Let's say it's Wednesday morning and you're leaving on-time for work or an appointment you have scheduled. When you get in your car you notice that your gas light is on and your mileage indicator reads three miles until empty. You didn't plan any extra time this morning to stop and get gas but you fear if you don't stop you won't make it. You know what, if you pop in really quickly, make a couple of green lights and avoid some school buses you might still be able to make it on time so you start to rush. You take a back road that dumps you out right near a gas station that is close to your home. You make two green lights you didn't expect and it must be a holiday of some kind because the school zone sign that normally blinks "15 mph" is turned off. You see the sign for the gas station up ahead and you are two minutes ahead of where you expected. This might just happen! You get into the right lane and no one in the line of traffic ahead of you pulls into the station,

yes! You put on your blinker, you pull into the station and all your hopes come to a crashing halt. You now know why none of the cars in front of you pulled in. Not only is every pump busy, there are two cars staring you down waiting for the next available pump and three of the cars at the pumps are empty with no drivers in them. Now, because you're late, you decide to only put five dollars worth of gas in your car so you can leave faster, which means what? You'll be doing this all over again tomorrow. Did I mention that the gas price is \$.18 higher than it was at a station you passed on your way home yesterday? Ouch!

In most cases the deadline is not the best time for a task to get completed in the least amount of time. This principle applies to more than just getting gas. Have you ever tried to do a report at the last minute and found out you need information from someone who is on vacation today. Tried to grocery shop the day before a holiday or attempted to get a car wash the Friday before a three-day weekend or ventured to make reservations for Valentine's or Mother's Day the same day? If you have then you know that at the last minute these tasks take more time to complete, not less. When you wait until the last minute you relinquish your ability to choose the best and least amount of time for a task to take.

How about this one? Have you ever run out on the day of a party to buy a gift for someone? This is certainly not a situation that will save you time. Making a separate trip to purchase any one item is a big waste of time. By adding that gift purchase into a trip you already had planned you would have saved a lot of time. If you wanted to save even more time you could make your purchase on the internet and with enough advance notice, the shipping would be minimal. If you wanted to take it one step further you could even make several gift purchases on the same website and depending on where you're shopping you can often receive free shipping above a certain dollar amount. You would have saved a lot of time, kept your costs the same and had the gift arrive at your doorstep.

Waiting until the deadline doesn't save you time, it only creates an urgent environment that feels like things are being done more quickly. When you look at the total picture "the last minute" doesn't save time, it wastes it.

If you want a new mantra that will serve you well adopt this one... "Ahead of time saves time!"

Benefits of Planning

Mantras are serious business because they drive a lot of our decision making. Be careful of the mantras you live by and think them through before you commit to one. "I do my best work at the last minute" and "If you do it at the last minute it only takes a minute" are mantras that cause a lot of

people to make bad decisions.

The key to moving away from procrastination and a reactive lifestyle is simply planning. When we are planning we are deciding the best time for tasks to get completed and not letting the deadlines decide for us. This not only improves quality and reduces the amount of time each task can take; it reduces urgency, fear, stress, pressure, anxiety and even costs.

When you look at achieving results, selecting the best and most appropriate amount of time for a task to be completed beats procrastination hands down. If you have time to have things take longer than they should then procrastination is for you. If you don't have the time or the desire to be associated with quality that is not up to your standards then planning can take you there. Take time each day, week and month for planning and put an end to the wasted time and poor quality associated with procrastination.

Steve McClatchy is a speaker, trainer, consultant, New York Times Bestselling author and entrepreneur. He founded Alleer Training and Consulting out of his passion for continual improvement and his belief that when we stop growing, learning, gaining experience, achieving goals and improving, we stop living. His firm focuses on helping companies and individuals improve performance and achieve outstanding results in the areas of Leadership, Performance, Personal Growth, and Work/Life Engagement. His client list includes Pfizer, Microsoft, Disney, Comcast, Accenture, Super Bowl Champions Baltimore Ravens, DHL Europe, Tiffany and Co., Wells Fargo and many others. He is a frequent guest lecturer in many of America's top business graduate schools including Harvard and Wharton. Steve's book, *Decide: Work Smarter, Reduce Your Stress and Lead by Example*, debuted at #2 on the New York Times Bestsellers list and also was named a New York Times Bestselling Business Book for February 2014. Steve is the eleventh of twelve children and grew up outside of Philadelphia. He lives with his wife and four kids in Malvern, Pa. He has a BA in Finance and a BA in Economics and has been involved in the Big Brother/Big Sister program for over 25 years.