From the Research: Myths Worth Dispelling
Procrastination—Not All It's Put Off to Be

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*T*he purpose of this column is to examine evidence for myths that have been repeated so often that they start to take root. The reason for revisiting these ideas is so that we can avoid using myths as the underpinnings for design- and performance-oriented decisions. Instead, we can select alternatives based on more current evidence to give ourselves a firmer foundation for the choices we make.

How many times have we told ourselves that it's okay to put off something that needs to be done? We might accompany this advice with one or more of the following thoughts:

1. "I work best under pressure. The adrenaline rush that happens at the last minute is helpful."
2. "I always do my most creative work when there's time pressure to get it done."
3. "I'm putting this off because I'm a perfectionist, and I just can't get started."

Many of us indulge in procrastination, defined as "intentionally deferring or delaying work that must be completed" (Schraw, Wadkins, & Olafson 2007, p. 13). Steel (2007) writes that "Procrastination is a prevalent and pernicious form of self-regulatory failure" (p. 65), where we irrationally put things off despite expecting to make them worse instead of better (Steel, 2010). Although common, with 95% of us procrastinating at least sometimes, for the 25 to 40% of people who routinely procrastinate (Steel, 2007, 2010) the practice of doing so can create serious health, financial, and performance problems (e.g., Surowiecki, 2010).

Although procrastination has devastating negative effects on performance, many of us employ common myth-like justifications for it, thereby attempting to alleviate the guilt and stress that commonly accompany putting things off when we know we should not. Working better under pressure, being more creative at the last minute, and avoiding tasks because of perfectionism are three rationalizations that we often give for delay. The consequences of procrastination include missed deadlines, health and financial problems, guilt, stress, and work that isn't our best. To overcome a tendency to procrastinate, focusing on avoiding it is not the best response. Instead, adopting a task-oriented, problem-solving focus or set of strategies can work even for people with a long history of putting things off. These strategies include increasing the perceived value of a task, adjusting expectations for success, reducing impulsive temptations, and approaching larger projects or those with longer timelines in smaller segments with progress checks along the way. Procrastinators can learn how to change their approach to getting work done and thereby reduce their tendency to delay.

So, what about the idea that it's okay to procrastinate, that in the end we'll be better off, or perhaps no worse off, for it? Should we just learn to live with it?

Where These Ideas Came From

The justifications we use to explain procrastination do not appear to trace back to some faulty or misunderstood article published in an informal or peer-reviewed journal. Instead, these ideas are common myths (or rationalizations) that pop up repeatedly, invented anew from time to time by procrastinators everywhere (Senécal, Koestner, & Vallerand, 1995; Solomon & Rothblum, 1984; Steel, 2010). Their function is to help us feel better by alleviating the guilt and stress that we feel when we put things off ("Procrastination," n.d.; Steel, personal communication, September 11, 2011).

Procrastination is not the sensible delay of one task in favor of another that is more urgent or important; instead, it is the internal decision to delay something that we feel should be done now. If we are conscientious or achievement oriented, procrastination is an irrational practice.

In pre-industrial times and in cultures not steeped in the Protestant work ethic, procrastination may have been seen as less of a problem (van Eerde, 2003). However, in cultures oriented toward achievement, procrastination often leads to a number of negative consequences:

- *Psychological:* feelings of guilt and negative affect
- *Moral and social:* judgments about dependability
- *Performance:* lower grades for students and a decrease in timeliness and quality for workplace activities

There is an exception. Time pressure (which can obviously be intensified by procrastinating) can lead us to tackle easy or boring tasks with increased efficiency (van Eerde, 2003). It is possible that the myth of doing better or more productive work under pressure is the result of noticing this exception. The danger is in overgeneralizing this increased efficiency for less challenging tasks to all types of tasks, even those that require extra time, effort, or reflection.

What to Consider Instead

For each of these myths, researchers in motivation, procrastination, and creativity offer helpful suggestions.

I Do My Best Work Under Pressure

The answer to thinking that we work best under pressure is, "usually not." A certain amount of positive stress can be motivating, but that last-minute, "I-have-to-get-this-done-or-else" mode is often accompanied by a feeling of fear or anxiety. Both of these emotions make us less capable, not more so.

They take up important room in working memory that could be better applied to getting things done.

College students who wait until the last minute to complete their assignments routinely receive lower grades than those who do not (Beswick, Rothblum, & Mann, 1988; van Eerde, 2003). Those who succeed anyway are doing so *in spite of* procrastinating, not because they waited for the fear of failure to trump their desire to do anything but study for a test or write that term paper.

To help ourselves, or those we manage, tackle a project before putting it off for way too long, one answer is to set up a series of *proximal goals*. Instead of one big overwhelming goal, break a project into smaller pieces with specific deadlines (Steel, 2010). Creating proximal goals is one part of planning and self-regulation that can help to make the work appear more manageable and also increase the sense of self-efficacy (Wolters, 2003). Making work more manageable, with smaller, more achievable deadlines, is a good way not only to avoid procrastination, but also to improve motivation (Clark, 2003).

I Work Most Creatively Under Pressure

People working creatively find that taking breaks during the creative process helps them to find just that right word, note, approach, or idea. But working on something for a while and then taking a break to let the creative process *incubate* in the background is not the same as putting it off until the last minute and then pushing through to completion in one big binge of productivity. In the latter scenario, there isn't time to take those creative breaks. Although people may *feel* that they are more creative under pressure, the evidence suggests the opposite: They are less creative on days when time pressure is high (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996; Silverthorne, 2002).

Teresa Amabile (Silverthorne, 2002) suggests another approach:

1. Focus on your own experience of intrinsic motivation from the work itself (e.g., interest, challenge, enjoyment), rather than on external motivation (e.g., from deadlines or positive or negative consequences).
2. Start working on creative projects as soon as possible, and map out strategies for getting them done.
3. Work hard on the project for a while and then set it aside for a few days (or more), nurturing new ideas by giving them time to incubate.

When short deadlines are unavoidable, she suggests:

1. Focus on the reason for the urgency.
2. Accept the challenge as a "mission" to get the project done on time.
3. Set aside stretches of time to get the work done.
4. Protect yourself from distractions.

She cautions against adopting this second, time-condensed strategy as a norm, because burnout is a common result of continually doing creative work in an urgent mode.

I'm a Perfectionist, So I Put Things Off

Many people blame perfectionism for their tendency to procrastinate. They believe that perfectionists delay working on projects because they are

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concerned about not being able to do them perfectly. Instead, it turns out that perfectionists procrastinate *less* than other people (McGarvey, 1996). Perfectionists often want to overcome any perceived inclination to procrastinate because they recognize it as an imperfect approach: They want to be perfect, not only in the work they are doing, but also in meeting deadlines. So perfectionists tend to seek help, if they need it, to ensure that they complete their work on time (Steel, 2010).

Four Ways to Help Yourself and Others

Piers Steel (2010) and others provide concrete suggestions to help us to meet our goals rather than to procrastinate. For each of us, even for those with attention-deficit disorder, the fact that we have procrastinated in the past does not have to be a hallmark of our future performance (R. E. Clark, personal communication, August 27, 2011). We can learn and adopt better strategies:

- *Value: Find a way to care.* We are more likely to invest effort if we value doing something for its own sake or even if we just value the end result (e.g., Clark, 1998; Senécal, Koestner, & Vallerand, 1995). Focus on what you do value about a task, and this should help you to get started and to persist in working on it.
- *Expectancy: Tell yourself, "You can do this."* If we expect to fail, then getting started is almost impossible. Consider similar tasks or projects that you tackled successfully, and use your sense of self-efficacy from those successes to fuel your motivation to tackle the current task (e.g., Bandura, 1977). Conversely, if the task seems too easy to even bother starting, then create a challenge for yourself to make the task seem more inspiring (Amabile et al., 1996).
- *Impulsiveness: Avoid distractions.* At any given moment we can be seduced into procrastination by an attraction to some readily available or more enjoyable pursuit. It turns out that we can, through practice, improve our ability to exercise willpower, but that we possess it in limited amounts (Surowiecki, 2010). To protect ourselves from ever-present diversions, it's useful to identify our favorite ones and then to schedule them in appropriate doses, remove them from our environments to avoid temptation altogether, or manufacture rewards for pursuing desired goals or negative consequences for giving in to distractions (Steel, 2010).

- *Delay: Avoid thinking in terms of long time-lines.* The more time we have to reach a goal, the more we tend to procrastinate (Steel, 2010). Again, the answer is to create interim, proximal goals and then to attach deadlines and progress checks to each task. The closer a deadline, the more likely we are to get to work.

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Why We Care

Procrastination has a tremendous impact on performance. Putting something off while expecting negative consequences for doing so not only provokes internal suffering, but it also results in missed deadlines and opportunities, suboptimal work, and reduced creativity.

When people procrastinate, they often spend their time on impulsive pursuits (Steel, 2010). Often, these spontaneous choices result in unimportant (to us) achievements, like higher computer game scores, an overly clean house (when we mean to work), or an over-analyzed project (when we mean to exercise). While breaks are important, with procrastination we go beyond the judicious use of downtime and instead prevent ourselves from getting things done.

Trying to "stop procrastinating" is an avoidance goal, which is not so powerful as focusing on more positive intentions, such as being conscientious, productive, or on time with specific tasks and goals. For most people, focusing on specific achievement goals (Wigfield & Eccles, 1992) will be more successful than trying to concentrate on avoiding procrastination (Steel, personal communication, August 19, 2011).

Rather than assuming that we work best or more creatively under pressure, we will do a lot better if instead we set goals, review past successes, figure out what we value about what we're putting off, and reduce the temptation to be delayed by impulsive actions.

Acknowledgments

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