

MAXWELL MOMENT**Initiative**

by Dr. John C. Maxwell

It's cliché to say that every journey begins with a single step, yet it's true. Leaders don't wait for everything to be perfect before they move forward. They don't wait for all the problems or obstacles to disappear. They don't wait until their fear subsides. Leaders take initiative.

Leaders know the secret of momentum: once you take the first step and start moving forward, everything becomes clearer and easier. If momentum gets strong enough, problems begin to take care of themselves and new opportunities arise. But the benefits of momentum only come into play once a leader takes initiative.

As leaders, why are we sometimes timid or tentative when we should be taking action? In my experience and observation, there are six root causes of our procrastination.

SIX SOURCES OF PROCRASTINATION

1. We hesitate to do chores we don't enjoy.

For me, yard work has always been draining. I don't find pleasure in it, and there's a million other things I'd rather spend my time doing. When I was first married, I would procrastinate mowing the lawn until it grew into a small jungle. I knew mowing would make my home look nice and would please my wife, but I abhorred giving it my time and attention.

2. We hesitate to do activities we aren't good at doing.

I enjoy the arts, and I am fascinated by highly creative persons. However, I'm not particularly gifted in painting, drawing, or designing. That's why I avoid decorating. I enjoy a finely manicured Christmas tree, or an exquisitely decorated room, but I simply have no talent at making things look good. As a consequence, I will put off decorating as long as possible.

3. We hesitate to do what isn't on our agendas.

Human nature tends to be set in its ways. When changing circumstances make our plans obsolete, we resist making adjustments. We stubbornly hold to our old course of action and avoid altering our behavior.

4. We hesitate to solve situations that are likely to be messy

A prime example is confrontation. It's difficult to tell someone what they don't want to hear and probably won't respond well to being told. Dreading the possible outcomes, we dawdle and delay rather than initiating confrontation.

5. We hesitate to tackle a task that is high-energy and low-return.

As leaders, we are hard wired into getting the most bang for our buck. The same holds true with our time. We want to invest it profitably. As such, I have always been hesitant to put energy into relationships with high-maintenance donors or investors who aren't substantial contributors to the organization.

6. We hesitate to step into things we don't understand.

Hence the saying, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." My generation has had to come to grips with fast-moving technologies, and it hasn't been easy. I don't understand many features of GPS systems, iPods, or PDA's, and, as a result, I procrastinate adopting them into my life - even though I know they could be helpful to me.

VISION AND VALUES - THE ANTIDOTES TO PROCRASTINATION

Author John Kotter, says, "Most people don't lead their lives, they accept their lives. Leaders are the exception. In their mind's eye, they have a vision of exactly where they want to go. By keeping that vision in the forefront of their minds, leaders develop priorities, maintain focus, and, acquire a sense of urgency. The vision becomes the driving force behind everything a leader does.

Leaders with a vision are active rather than passive. Whereas most people follow the path of least resistance, visionary leaders refuse to settle for what's comfortable or easy. They shape their world rather than fitting into its mold.

In addition to following a vision, leaders relentlessly schedule their lives around their core values. Leaders are attuned to what they feel is important in life, and they align their activities to reflect those beliefs. Values dictate what they will do, what they will avoid, and where they will invest their most precious commodity - time.

THE POWER TO QUIT

You may have heard the saying, "Quitters never win, and winners never quit." Nothing could be further from the truth! Leaders are strategic quitters. They ruthlessly avoid activities that don't align with their vision or values. They know the power of "NO" when faced with opportunities that threaten to drift them away from their purpose.

I've quit a lot of things during my leadership journey: counseling, administrating, controlling, people-pleasing, and more. Quitting has been healthy for me because I've always quit for the right reasons.

VALID REASONS TO QUIT

- You quit something you don't do well to start something you do well.
- You quit something you're not passionate about to do something that fills you with passion.
- You quit something that's doesn't make a difference to do something that does.

SUMMARY

To acquire more influence, taking initiative is a prerequisite. Leaders step forward when they clarify their vision and values. Knowing their purpose gives them a starting point, and a reason to act. By clearing out the clutter in their agendas, leaders recognize the power of quitting. Free from the handcuffs of over-commitment, leaders are able to choose the dreams they chase rather than drifting down the current of life's circumstances.

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INSPIRATION & ASPIRATION

Black Spirituals

The life of a slave was a life of suffering. Who can fathom the brutal humiliation of being treated like an animal? Every day the slave was degraded and dehumanized. Every day the slave endured toil and hardship. Every day the slave was tempted to abandon hope. Every day, life began to look less attractive and death more appealing. Every morning, the slave awakened to bondage, and every night, the slave closed his eyes under the weight of oppression.

Yet, out of the suffering came singing. Out of despair, arose melodies of irrepressible hope. These songs, the black spirituals, carried the slaves through the misery of their circumstances. Importantly, they played two big roles: 1) Inspiration - they motivated slaves to persevere from day to day, and 2) Aspiration - they voiced the slaves' dreams of a brighter future.

Inspiration

In days when the work was hard and the rest was short, the spirituals inspired slaves to press on. Painstakingly picking over 200 pounds of cotton each day, the slaves needed something to help them endure the drudgery of work on the plantation. The spirituals reminded the slaves of their faith, and their faith gave them the strength to persist. The music also unified the slaves in their suffering. Although life was hard, through song, the slaves shared in one another's sorrow. By lifting their voices together, the slaves realized they were not suffering alone.

Aspiration

Rich in imagery, the black spirituals expressed the slaves' aspirations of a better future. Through songs like *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* the slaves dreamed of heaven. In other spirituals, the slaves longed for freedom. Rooted in biblical accounts, these spirituals told tales of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage, Daniel escaping death in the lion's den, and Joseph rising out of slavery to become a mighty

ruler. By painting a picture of a brighter future, the spirituals kept the slaves from accepting their chains or surrendering their dignity.

The Negro spirituals played a significant role in the lives of slaves because they addressed the human needs of inspiration and aspiration. Both needs are deeply embedded in the human spirit. People desire to be inspired, and they are longing for an aspiring leader to show them a vision of a better tomorrow.

Storytelling

To be successful, leaders must find a way to mix inspiration and aspiration into their leadership. However, today's manager probably won't get the desired effect by belting out "Get Down, Moses" (or any other black spiritual) in the office. Rather, leaders inspire people and help them aspire for greatness by telling stories.

Peter Guber, CEO of Mandalay Entertainment, places storytelling at the heart of influential leadership. Having produced Hollywood blockbusters like *Rain Man* and *Batman*, Guber can appreciate the power of a good plotline. "The leader of the company must narrate the story of the company," says Guber. "He must narrate the product, the people, the information into a set of rules, tools, values and beliefs that trickle down all the way through the culture of the company." According to Guber, storytellers elicit excitement by sweeping those they lead into a compelling drama. In the light of a larger story, the daily tasks of work are infused with significance.

Sweaty and exhausted from being overworked, the slave laborers of colonial America must have been tempted to give up every day. However, stories from their tradition of faith inspired them with metaphors of courage, strength, and hope. Upper management or entry-level, white collar or blue collar, work saps energy and depletes the worker. "The idea for the company and its leadership," writes Guber, "is that... more than perspiring, they must inspire." At times, leaders must roll up their sleeves and help with the tasks at hand. Yet more importantly, leaders must communicate the broader context of why the work is worth doing.

A Jewish proverb says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." For African slaves, this maxim took on literal significance. On the plantation, a slave unfit for work was deemed unfit to live. In dire times of injury or ailment, the vision of freedom sustained the slaves, strengthening them day-to-day. Fortunately, in today's workforce physical death isn't an imminent consequence of burnout. However, a visionless person nonetheless pays a price. That price is a hollow, lifeless existence of passionlessly collecting paychecks. Such a person flips the calendar each month with no spark, no joy, and nothing to look forward to in life. Without aspiration, claims Guber, "the company is going to run out of fuel very quickly."

Leaders pump energy into the workplace by phrasing their vision with captivating imagery that allows their people to touch and taste the future. Through stories, they weave each individual's dreams and desires into the narrative of the business. Workers cease to view themselves as a box on the organizational chart, and begin to see themselves as protagonists in the evolving drama of the company.

The words "aspiration" and "inspiration" both contain the Latin stem, *spirare*, which literally means, "to breathe." Much as the black spirituals breathed life into wearied slave laborers, a leader's story has the power to resuscitate a downtrodden

organization. When leaders master the arts of aspiration and inspiration, they free their organization from the chains of the mundane, and they inspire their people to explore the vastness of their potential.

To read the full text of Peter Guber's conversation with Matthew Kirdahy of *Forbes*, access the article ["When Not to Stick to the Script"](#).

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BOOK REVIEW

The Age of Speed: Learning to Thrive in a More-Faster-Now World by Vince Poscente (Bard Press, 2008)

Society's addiction to speed has left once-common activities in the dust of history. For instance, when was the last time you rewound a VHS tape, used a typewriter, or had your camera's film developed?

As speed has permeated our lives, it has ruthlessly eliminated inefficiencies and ushered in new ways of living. In *The Age of Speed*, Vince Poscente endeavors to help readers embrace the surging pace of life rather than fighting against it.

As a former Olympic speed skier, Poscente has hurtled down mountain slopes at speeds in excess of 135 mph. Uniquely qualified to comment about quickness, he now carries his love of speed into Fortune 500 companies to help them do business faster. An accomplished speaker, Poscente proves his merit as an author with his thoughtful and sanguine appraisal of our accelerated pace of living.

As technology has quickened the pace of life, speed has been vilified for bringing clutter, imbalance, and busyness to our lives. However, Poscente claims that speed actually allows us to live less stressfully with greater freedom and control of our lives. Speed enables us to plow through the dull tasks of our day so that we can devote a bulk of our time to doing what we love. In addition, speed gives us unprecedented convenience along with access to information in a matter of seconds.

In order to seize the advantages of speed, Poscente advises readers to differentiate "repetitive chores from passionate pursuits." While he would agree that some things in life are best enjoyed slowly, Poscente is an avid proponent of cutting down time spent on tedious tasks and minutiae.

Throughout the book, Poscente cites examples of companies that neglected to grasp the implications of The Age of Speed, others that profited by speedily embracing change, and still others that prospered by putting speed at the forefront of their business strategy.

For instance, Kodak didn't keep up with industry frontrunners when digital cameras began to supplant traditional film models. As a result, they found themselves lagging behind in a market they had once dominated. Conversely, Pepsi has sped around the learning curves of the beverage industry by pouring money into nutritious drinks. As health-conscious consumers increasingly bypass sugary sodas, Pepsi rapidly has developed and distributed new product lines of juices and energy drinks. Likewise,

Geico has tapped into the demand for speed with their advertising slogan, "15 minutes could save you 15% or less on car insurance." By offering time savings in addition to cost savings, Geico has won over a loyal base of customers.

Readers mining *The Age of Speed* for takeaways should focus on Chapters 12 and 13. In them, Poscente examines the work-life tension that comes when we feel constantly connected to our jobs. Rather than building fences to prevent work from encroaching on life, Poscente advises his readers to search for ways to align their leisure time and personal passions with what they do on the job.

Intuitively attuned to speed, Vince Poscente has an innate grasp of its benefits. In *The Age of Speed* he persuasively depicts speed as an ally rather than an adversary. With a clever and succinct style, Poscente will appeal to readers who prefer brevity and simplicity. Overall, *The Age of Speed* is a smooth read, replete with helpful tidbits for thriving amid the frenetic pace of modern life.

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QUOTES

Progress

"Discontent is the first step in the progress of a man or a nation." ~ Oscar Wilde

"Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything." ~ George Bernard Shaw

"Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals." ~ Martin Luther King, Jr.

"The best way to be ready for the future is to invent it." ~ John Sculley

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