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What's Stopping You?

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No doubt you're aware that by being more productive you'll improve yourself or your situation in some way; you'll be wealthier or wiser, happier, healthier, or less stressed. But whatever aspect of your life you're hoping to improve, one thing that's for sure is that being more productive means you'll be doing things effectively and efficiently; you won't be wasting time, effort, resources, or money. You'll feel more on top of things and more in control of your life.

But if you already know that being productive will improve your situation, what's stopping you? What's stopping you getting things done efficiently and effectively? There are a number of reasons why you might be struggling.

Which of these situations is familiar to you?

- I'm not always clear about what, exactly, I want to achieve.

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- I'm not always clear about what does and doesn't need doing.
- I often have too much to do and don't know where to start or what to do next.
- For any one task or number of tasks, I don't plan out what I'm going to do. I just jump in.
- I have little in the way of structure and routine in my day.
- My time often gets cluttered with unimportant things.
- I spend too much time dealing with interruptions and distractions.
- I'm prone to procrastination; I keep putting off getting started.
- I'm indecisive.
- I tend to overthink what's to be done and I make things complicated.
- I have low expectations; I don't have much confidence in my abilities. I simply don't think I'm capable of achieving much in the way of being productive.
- I don't recognize and make use of my strengths.
- I tend to try and do things when I'm not at my best; when I'm tired or stressed.
- I have clear methods and routines that I stick to. I don't like to change or adapt them.
- I'm a perfectionist; I get hung up on details and I won't make compromises.
- I often underestimate the time, energy, and resources I need in order to get things done.

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- I don't persist. When I come across problems and difficulties with what I'm trying to achieve, I give up too easily.
- I don't get help and support from other people.
- I'm stubborn! When I come across difficulties and challenges I carry on doing something despite the evidence that things aren't working out. I don't try and find a different way to get things done.

Whatever it is that's thwarting your attempts to be more productive – to get things done efficiently and effectively – the good news is that it *can* be overcome.

A Productive Mindset

When it comes to being productive, the way you think – your attitude and approach – makes all the difference. You need a productivity mindset.

The key characteristics of a productivity mindset are on the one hand, persistence and determination and on the other hand, a positive, open mind; a willingness to be adaptable and flexible.

Without persistence, not only do you achieve less than you're capable of, you don't get to discover what you *are* capable of achieving. And you don't get the confidence that comes from pushing through and eventually succeeding. Persistence provides its own momentum.

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If you can just keep going, you'll eventually get results. And results motivate you to continue.

There's a difference, though, between being persistent and being stubborn. Being stubborn is being determined *not* to change your attitude or approach to doing something despite the evidence that things aren't working out.

But as Albert Einstein once said: 'Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.' Being stubborn means it's less likely that you'll step back to get a broader perspective on what is and isn't happening and become more strategic. In contrast, when you're persistent, although you're determined to succeed, you can see when something is not working. You're flexible; you're able to adjust your plans and actions and are prepared to listen to suggestions, ideas, and advice. You're open to new ways of doing things so that you can keep moving forward, making things happen, and getting things done.

Admittedly, the line between stubbornness and persistence is thin and can be difficult to distinguish. But stubbornness leads to stagnation; it struggles on and it doesn't accept other possibilities, other ways of doing something. Persistence is a more uplifting experience; periods of difficulty are interspersed with small gains and measures of progress. These small gains inspire you and give you hope; you recognize and build on them.

It's likely that you've been both persistent and stubborn at some point in the past.

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Think of a time when you've achieved something through persistence – passed your driving test, learnt to speak a language, play a musical instrument, or some other activity. No doubt it wasn't easy, but you achieved it because you were persistent; when things became difficult, you found a way to overcome the challenges and you moved forward.

Now think of a time when you clung onto something – a job or relationship. Rather than recognize it wasn't working out and that nothing was changing, you hung on in there. Or remember a time when you got lost walking or driving somewhere. Rather than ask someone for directions, you kept going but ended up even more lost. That was you being stubborn.

Stubbornness is delusional thinking. Persistence is positive thinking.

Having a positive outlook doesn't mean denying the challenges and difficulties of a situation. Rather, you acknowledge the difficulties and challenges and then, instead of letting them drag you down into a spiral of negative thinking, you move on to work out how you can now respond in positive, constructive ways. And you use the difficulties as learning experiences for the future.

Letting Go Of What's Not Important

So, to be more productive requires a productive mindset: persistence and determination and a positive, open mind;

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a willingness to be adaptable and flexible. But before you can start doing anything, let's look at what you could stop doing.

Steve Jobs – the cofounder of Apple – once said that what made Apple Apple was not so much what they chose to build but all the projects they chose to ignore. It's true, what you *don't* do helps determine what you *can* do. For many of us, it's not that there's not enough time in the day; it's that we've got too many commitments getting in the way of doing the things we most want to do and really need to get done.

Maybe you're the sort of person who overcommits when you're feeling particularly enthusiastic and optimistic about what you're able to do. Or you just want to help someone out. At the time, when you decide to take it on, you think you'll be able to manage. You agree to more chores and tasks, errands, assignments, and projects. You take on more duties, responsibilities, and obligations.

Which of your commitments have become a burden? Whether it's a local cause or you've simply agreed to walk your neighbour's dog or look after their cat, you've taken on a new project or some extra work, or it's always you that does the coffee run, are there things you can drop so that you have more time for the important things? The things you really want to get done?

Of course, taking a step back and disengaging from some of your commitments isn't always easy. It may be

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that you're thinking about sunk costs; the time, effort, love, or money you've already put into something. Even though you now regret having got involved, instead of letting go, you struggle on.

Perhaps you tell yourself you just can't; you'll let people down if you drop out. You said you'd do something, so you feel obliged – you feel it's your duty – you should keep your word, stick with it, and put up with the difficulties. Or maybe you're worried about the response you'll get if you pull out; the other person will be upset or angry. You feel trapped, but you don't want to let people down and you can't face handling their reaction if you back out. And maybe you don't want to call it a day because you don't want to admit that you were wrong to have committed to it in the first place.

It doesn't have to be like this!

At the time you decided to get involved or to do something, you made the right choice. Now, however, you realize it's not what you want to do; you've had a change of heart; your feelings have changed and you realize it's getting in the way of what you'd rather be doing.

For each commitment, ask yourself: 'Is it that important to me; in line with what I really want to get done?'

Have courage! You may well feel concerned – worried and anxious – about telling someone else that you're going to stop doing whatever it is you said you'd do. That's ok – it's okay to feel some trepidation – but rather

than focusing on how anxious you feel, think of how much better you'll feel for having taken action. Unless you signed a contract, there's nothing to stop you from walking away. You may feel uncomfortable – you've got to explain your change of mind to friends, family, or colleagues – but having a few uncomfortable conversations is a small price to pay for freeing yourself from commitments that are no longer of interest or that you don't have time for. Other people might need someone to fill your role but it doesn't have to be you. If you left the situation tomorrow – left the committee for example – in three months' time, what do you think would happen to those people who 'need' you? They'll adjust, and quite quickly they will be fine. People can and will sort it out. But if you stay in that situation because you think that you 'should' or you 'have to', in three months' time, will you be fine?

How to tell them? Just be honest, clear, and succinct. Avoid waffling, rambling, or giving excuses. Don't blame someone or something else, just be honest. You only need one genuine reason for saying no. Just say what you need to say. Say, for example, 'I'm sorry, I'm not going to be able to continue ...'. Or 'Next month I'm going to stop ...'. Once you've said what you've got to say, say no more. Just listen to the other person's response. Then acknowledge their response but stand your ground.

And the time, energy, or money you've already invested? That's all now in the past. Don't let the past dictate the present. Think about what you have to gain rather than

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what you have to lose by pulling out. If you can let go of some of the things you do, you'll feel less stressed and you'll have more time and energy for the things you really want to do.

Think like Beyonce. As she once said: 'Thank God I found the good in goodbye.'

Is there something or some things that you can let go of; not do, or not go to, or get someone else to do? (More about getting help from other people in Chapter 5.) Whatever it is, let it go knowing that what's left is more in line with what you need and want to do with your time.

In a nutshell

- Whatever it is that's thwarting your attempts to be more productive – to get things done efficiently and effectively – the good news is that it *can* be overcome.
- The way you think – your attitude and approach – makes all the difference. You need a productivity mindset: persistence and determination and a positive, open mind; a willingness to be adaptable and flexible.
- There's a difference between being persistent and being stubborn. Being stubborn is being determined *not* to change your attitude or approach to doing something despite the evidence that things aren't working out.

- But with persistence, although you're determined to succeed, you can see when something is not working. You're able to adjust your plans, are prepared to listen to ideas and advice, and are open to new ways of doing things so that you can keep moving forward to get things done.
- Stubbornness is delusional thinking. Persistence is positive thinking.
- What you *don't* do helps determine what you *can* do. Is there something or some things that can you let go not do, or not go to, or get someone else to do?
- Think about what you have to gain rather than what you have to lose by pulling out. If you can let go of some of the things you do, you'll feel less stressed and you'll have more time and energy for the things you really want to do.