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“A” Player human capital leadership by

How to Sabotage Your Success



As an executive coach, I am privy to clients’ stories of success and failure. I’ve noticed over the years that they commonly share one highly destructive behavior: self-sabotage.

Few of us realize how frequently self-sabotaging beliefs creep into our decisions—sometimes even daily. As the following example illustrates, the root cause may be habitual.



Marty is a creative, intelligent professional who’s on his way up the organizational ladder. One day, he complained to me that he’d been passed over for promotion. He said he was better qualified than the person his bosses chose and that the position would have been his dream job, with more money, flexibility and opportunities to showcase his personal strengths.

“So, why do you think this happened?” I asked.

As we talked, Marty admitted he’d never let anyone know how badly he wanted the job. He assumed his bosses would consider him, but he never actively talked to them about his qualifications or desire.

Marty revealed numerous reasons for his inaction, most of them self-sabotaging. Like many gifted professionals, he exhibited a behavior that psychologists call self-handicapping: anticipating a real or imagined obstacle that might get in the way of success and using it as an excuse to do nothing.

Self-handicapping allows us to protect ourselves from the pain of assuming responsibility for our failures—and we do it all the time.

This behavior is often so subtle that we don’t notice we’re doing it. Consider the manager who has to give a big presentation and fails to practice ahead of time. How about the people who procrastinate on projects and wind up “not having enough time” to do a good job?

In a July 2010 Harvard Business Review article, Stanford University business professor Jeffrey Pfeffer identified self-handicapping as one of three major barriers to building professional power. As he explains, people avoid the pain of failure by refusing to build power in the first place.

Wise Quote

“Never let the fear of striking out get in your way.”

George Herman
“Babe” Ruth”

10 Ways to Self-Sabotage

Ten errors in thinking lead to self-sabotaging decisions and actions:

1. Resting on laurels (positive thinking to avoid risk-taking)
2. Negative thoughts (“not-good-enough” thinking)



3. Silence (not speaking up at all)
4. Freezing (not taking, or delaying, action)
5. Making excuses (no time, no resources)
6. Blaming others instead of accepting responsibility
7. Not trying or risking (staying in one's comfort zone)
8. Focusing on the small picture (i.e., to-do lists), while avoiding big-picture thinking
9. Focusing on feelings instead of facts
10. Allowing distractions to derail purposeful pursuits.

- 1. Spot the warning signs.** Are you holding back? Coming up with a list of excuses? Fixating on potential obstacles?
- 2. Clearly state your goals and avoid excuses.** Don't play the "what-if" and "if-only" game. Instead of obsessing over potential hurdles or what could have gone better, identify factors within your control and manage them effectively.
- 3. Take control of negative emotions.** It's normal to feel disappointed, angry or frustrated when



executive coach, who can help you navigate your blind spots and develop greater self-awareness. Be sure to give yourself a pat on the back for being courageous enough to turn weaknesses into opportunities for growth.

Also recognize that putting your best foot forward means you'll occasionally step in some mud. It's up to you to decide which is more perilous: the risk of disappointment or the prospect of never reaching your potential.

Self-handicapping will prevent you from reaching your career goals

Four Key Steps

When faced with a challenge, you may be tempted to dwell on the barriers that stand in your way and use them as an excuse to defer action. But self-handicapping will prevent you from reaching your career goals.

In an October 2012 Harvard Business Review blog post, coaching expert Susan David identifies four ways to conquer self-sabotage:

problems occur. Don't beat yourself up as you experience these inevitable emotions. Shift your focus to what you can control.

- 4. Go for mastery.** Self-handicapping usually kicks in when you're trying to avoid negative feedback. Instead of worrying about colleagues' reactions and criticisms, work toward mastering a domain that you value. By recognizing what matters to you, you'll be motivated to move in the right direction.

It's always helpful to work with an

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