



For Sustained Personal Performance

How to cultivate the essential quality of perseverance

Tim Stevenson

IN 1952 A young woman named Florence Chadwick waded into the cold Pacific. She hoped to set a new speed record for swimming the 26 miles from Santa Catalina Island to the California coast.

Florence had the credentials. She had already swum the English Channel in both directions, the first woman to do so.

It was a cold, foggy morning and the going was rough. The water was choppy and the fog never lifted. Hour after hour she swam. There were times she couldn't even see the boats that

accompanied her. She could only hear the voices of the people, along with occasional rifle shots, as they tried to discourage curious sharks from getting too close.

Muscles aching, exhausted, and discouraged, Florence told her companions she wanted to quit, that she couldn't do it. "No, no, don't give up. You can do it," they coached her, but it was too hard. Giving in to despair, Florence reached out and grasped the boat, officially ending her record attempt.

Within minutes, she learned that she had stopped *one half mile from the shore*.

Why people quit

In an interview following her failure, Florence commented, "I'm not excusing myself, but if I could have seen the land I might have made it."

In other words, it wasn't cold, fear, exhaustion, or the sharks that caused her to quit. *It was the fog*. The inability to see her goal meant she lacked any sense of making progress. She lost hope, and without hope, people quit.



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In this case, failure wasn't final. Two months later, Florence walked off the same Santa Catalina beach again, and was successful. She swam the distance and did set a new speed record.

The underrated virtue

Perseverance is an underrated virtue. We learn about it as children through stories like "The Little Engine That Could." Trying to pull a heavy train up a steep mountain, he kept chugging, telling himself: "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can ..." And he did. There's the familiar fable of "The Tortoise and the Hare." While the hare could run circles around the tortoise, the hare was undisciplined and unfocused. By faithfully plodding along down the road, the tortoise won the race in the end.

These can become comical figures in the eyes of cynical adults, who've learned what the "real world" is like. The more "adult" view for many was well-stated by W. C. Fields:

If at first you don't succeed, try again. Then quit. There is no point in making a fool of yourself.

I don't think most people are that cynical. Cynicism is usually the result of hurtful disappointments and the loss of hope. It's understandable, given some people's life experiences, but it's a trap. Cynicism is a soul-sapping, motivation-quenching frame of mind that does no good to its hosts, or to the people around them. **Hope** — *the belief that the future can and will be better* — **is essential.**

Winston Churchill said,

Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.

Life, both personal and professional, is a marathon, not a sprint. Over the long haul, we

will all experience disappointments and setbacks. What resources can we rely on to keep going when we can't see through the "dense fog"? Here are some suggestions.

Resources to persevere

1. *Locate your personal passion*

Everybody has one. Whether conscious or unconscious, we all have an inner drive motivating us wherever we go, whatever we do. We Sherpa Executive Coaches call it "Why It Matters": the motive that gives meaning to your actions. I like to refer to it as your "Prime Motivator."

For some, it's "Serving others and making their lives better." For others, it's "Building things that last." It can be "The joy of creating something new and different." People organize, build, lead, create, and serve from their prime motivator. It's the difference between one man who defines his job as "cutting limestone" and another doing the same function who sees himself as "building a cathedral."

Look for what really gives you satisfaction in doing tasks you enjoy. Consider what you did as a child, because it's likely the same. Find the common denominator behind why you enjoyed certain activities at age 8, 18, 28, and the present, and you'll get a major clue.

When you can connect your life and work with your deepest motivation, you have an energy source that can help you persevere for the long haul.

2. *Cultivate your support system*

Everybody needs one. We are human beings, not machines. We all need rest, refreshment, and recreation. We need fuel, friends, and fun. I often find myself saying to coaching clients, "It is not selfish to see to your own well-being. It is a necessity."

I work with some people who seem to be non-stop serving machines. I tell them, “Even machines need maintenance. You want to serve others? Great! That’s admirable. But how much good will you do for others if you break down in the process?”

There is a Sherpa Coaching process to analyze the quality of your support system. Break it into three zones:

- Internal — *What do you do for yourself that reenergizes you? Examples: reading, hobbies, exercising, music*
- External — *Who do you go to for things like these? Friendship, encouragement, advice, counsel, accountability*
- Environmental — *Where do you go for peace, rest, and refuge? Examples: den, golf course, bookstore, park*

Would you expect a marathon runner to win who fasted the week before a race? Would you expect a mountain climber to succeed (or survive!) who forgot to take food and water for the climb? Of course not.

We all need *practices, people, and places* in our lives in order to function at our best for the long term. High performers know what maintains them and make sure they work those influences into their schedule.

3. *Mark progress*

Seeing that we’re making progress is one of the greatest motivators, but people and teams fail to stop and notice. Why? Often, they’re simply preoccupied by the speed of their activities. Another reason is that progress is typically achieved by slow degrees. There’s no “quantum leap” calling them to our attention.

For this reason, some of the best leaders I know have a regular time allotted in team

meetings to celebrate progress. People are encouraged to keep on working by stopping to note steps made toward objectives. The same applies to us in our individual roles.

4. *“Make haste slowly”*

Again using the illustration of a marathon runner: How well would she do if she took off at top speed as if it were a hundred meter race? She would burn out and collapse quickly. Life and work are that way, too. Yes, there are “urgent” times when we have to work at top speed. But life — personal and professional — is more like a marathon than a sprint. We need a long-term mentality that isn’t looking for everything to happen this week and certainly doesn’t manufacture unnecessary urgencies. Continuous intensity, especially non-essential intensity, burns people out emotionally.

Caesar Augustus was the chief architect of the Roman Empire. Taking command of a Republic in ruins after decades of civil wars, he had a grand vision of what the Empire could be. The records of history show the results of his visionary genius. I like the motto he worked by. In Latin it is *festina lente*. Translated, it means, “Make haste slowly.” That’s how great creations are built by persistent men and women.

As a wise modern saying goes, **“People tend to overestimate what they can do in one year, and underestimate what they can do in five years.”** I have consistently found this observation to be true.

Persevering effort over time equals solid achievement. To persevere, however, requires continuous self-awareness and deliberate self-maintenance. 