



Persistence Pays Off

Leveraging relentless small actions can yield great results

Tim Stevenson

WE ARE A few weeks into 2020. Do you know where your New Year's resolutions are? Perhaps you've made some positive changes, but we all know that for many they've already gone by the wayside. It's an annual ritual.

Why is this such a common experience? One of the hardest things for human beings to do is to make lasting behavioral changes. That's why it can be so helpful to have an executive coach. That's what we teach people to do.

Besides the inherent difficulty of changing our behavior, there is another reason: People tend to choose goals that are unrealistically large. You will do far better to choose small changes that you will practice daily with persistence.

The power of persistence

Back in 1977, an Indiana man named Mike Carmichael decided to paint a baseball. Why, I'm not sure. He just did. Then he painted it again. And again. On average, throughout the following years, he added two coats of paint a day to his baseball.

A baseball measures just under three inches across, and weighs about five ounces. How much difference could a little paint make? The last time I checked, Mike had applied over 25,000 layers of paint to that baseball. It was 4 ½ feet in diameter and weighed more than 5,000 pounds.

That's what you call the Power of Persistence.

Mike's Ball of Paint became quite a sensation and a roadside tourist attraction. There is a website devoted to it, and Mike's hometown of Alexandria, Indiana honored him by declaring "Ball of Paint Day."

Setting aside the fact that this enterprise is slightly wacky, doesn't it show you the power of doing a little bit every day for a long time? Imagine applying that kind of persistence to



Tim Stevenson • Certified Executive Coach
E-mail: csc.tstevenson@yahoo.com • Phone: (469) 585-3982

www.StevensonCoaching.com

some goal that would make a difference in your personal or professional life.

Persistence in little things gets little respect, but there is great power available through it.

The Quick Fix vs. the Long Haul

People are seduced by the fantasy of The Quick Fix. You see it in sports. A baseball team falls behind by 9 runs. The batters typically get worse as they try to do the impossible. In baseball language, every hitter is “trying to hit a 10-run homer.” What they should do is concentrate on getting on base: Hit a single, draw a walk, even get hit by a pitch. Their best chance to get back into the game is to simply chip away persistently, bit by bit.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to lose weight, but there is no reasonable way to lose 20 pounds *this week*. The best approach is small changes of lifestyle: A little less eating, substituting items, and a little more exercise will add up over weeks and months to weight loss. The results will be more likely to last.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to get out of a deep hole of debt. But people often fantasize about a magical answer like hitting the lottery, rather than returning to the fundamentals of spending less than you make, paying down the debt over time, and saving.

In business it is the same. The Quick Fix is the ultimate fantasy. Rather than looking for a magic answer, it is better to return to the basics and apply them with persistent effort.

What you can do

I’ve found this little proverb to be true: “People tend to *overestimate* what they can do in one year and *underestimate* what they can do in five years.” What we do day by day adds up, sometimes to surprising levels of benefit.

Here are some suggestions:

- ***Dedicate 15 minutes a day for thinking and planning***

Everywhere I go, I hear the same complaints about “time management.” The root of that problem is an *attitude* I call “passive reactivity.” People step into the current of their day and they are swept along *reacting* to other people and stimuli. They step out of the current after 10 or more hours very tired but having accomplished little of importance.

Rather than launching in and letting your day “happen to you,” put some thinking and planning time in first. How much difference could 15 minutes make? Work out the math. If you just scheduled yourself for 15 minutes of thinking and planning time every day, you would have 75 minutes per week. Multiplied by about 250 workdays a year, the annual return would be approximately *62 hours*.

How much more effective could you be if your annual output was shaped by 62 hours of deliberate thought? Your chances of identifying and focusing on truly important things would be much, much greater.

- ***Dedicate 15 minutes a day to reading***

People tell me all the time, “I don’t have time to read.” I answer: “You don’t have time *not* to read. If you are not expanding your knowledge bank, you are falling behind.”

Mark Twain said, “The man who *doesn’t* read good books has no advantage over the man who *can’t* read them.” High achievers push the envelope of their knowledge and sharpen their thinking through a lifestyle of reading.

So why not devote 15 minutes a day to reading? How much could you accomplish? It may surprise you to learn that someone reading at an average speed for 15 minutes a day can read *15-20 complete books in a year*. Over five years, that would be 75-100 books.

It’s one of the simplest ways to improve yourself. It’s been said: “**Today a reader.**”

Tomorrow a leader.” I concur. I’ve never known a highly effective leader who wasn’t a regular reader.

To those who insist they do not like to read, why not try audio books? Or what about other sources of listening learning: TED Talks, YouTube videos, or podcasts?

Self-improvement doesn’t happen by accident. Leaders and high performers build *habits* of learning and stretching.

- ***Apply persistent attention to solving a problem***

Why is it so common in organizations to find problems that are well-known and regularly discussed, yet continue to go on and on? Typically, it is a lack of intentional focus.

Focusing on problems can be discouraging and tiring. That’s why we’re so tempted to mentally wander, to “chase rabbits” (allow the conversation to go down irrelevant trails), or to mix up the issue with other problems. We get tired and decide table it for another day. Sometimes we have too many things on the agenda to discuss any of them with any depth and persistence.

In Sherpa coaching we use a problem-solving process called Dig-Up. It’s a method for an individual or a group to focus their attention on a problem with the intention of finding an answer. The leader’s job is to make the group stick with the process all the way through to making a call, committing to action, and assigning a person to be accountable that it is done.

The attitude is, “If we can’t *solve* this problem, we are at least going to do what we can to *improve* it. A “Ready–Fire–Aim” approach is better than inaction or recycling what is evidently *not* working.

In my experience, a team of intelligent people with positive attitudes and the determination to cooperate can put their heads together and come up with good answers. The trick is applying *persistent concentration with the intention to make something better*.

- ***Apply persistent actions to improve behavior***

Your basic personality profile is not going to change significantly through life, but *behavior* can be changed and improved. As Sherpa coaches, most of the tools we use to address behavior change are small things:

- The “7 second rule” for those whose impulsive speech makes them seem domineering
- A 3-step body language process, for those who seem unapproachable and uncaring
- The “3 sentence rule” for those who talk too much
- Scheduled LBWA tours (Leading By Walking Around) for those who never get out from behind their computers and need to connect with their people

These are just a few examples. My point is that it is the **little things** plus **time** and **persistence** that make the largest impact.

Give it some thought. What are some little things you can do that can be leveraged into great results when acted on persistently? **L**