

How Do I Move from “I Have To” to “I Choose To”?

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Do you find that you “have to do” certain activities, even though you hate them? Sure, we all face those kinds of demands. Some are definitely a pain, and you’d really rather not be bothered.

Sometimes you repetitively put off “to do” items that you loathe. Time passes. Then that “have to do” item becomes a “must do NOW” urgent demand. You’ve lost control. You grit your teeth, and you put off something else to scramble to complete this particular activity you detest.

When I work with leaders, I listen closely to their words. Language is merely a collection of symbols (words) representing concepts. The words “if only,” “I must,” or “I have to” indicate that the speaker feels out of control, a victim of circumstances.

When I hear “I choose,” “I prefer,” “I want,” or “let’s consider our options,” those words indicate that the individual realizes we humans have multiple alternatives when facing a demanding situation. None of the options may be attractive, but how you respond to the situation is within your span of control.

Which sets of words do you more frequently use? I speculate that whatever your answer, it’s the result of a habit formed many years ago. If you find you use “I have to” frequently, you can break that habit. How? By becoming aware of it, catching yourself when you start talking (or thinking) that way, and intentionally identifying multiple options for how you might respond.

A compelling vision will surely eliminate your “have to” thinking. When you can imagine something that is not yet so--but is very desirable and could exist if the right actions were taken--the vision itself will pull you into executing the proper behaviors. And you’ll tend to do them willingly and joyfully.

So, if you find yourself thinking “have to,” reset the context. Imagine a desirable outcome that likely will result from the necessary behavior. Focus your energies on that imagined favorable consequence and get started. The task may just be completed before you can think much about your misery!

Creatively generate options. It’s true that there are at least five ways to respond to any situation. If you feel especially stuck, and you don’t like any options you’ve considered yet, you’ve just not been sufficiently inventive.

Imagine yourself as Thomas Edison, Rube Goldberg (look him up if you don’t know of him), or anyone else you admire for their ingenuity. Force yourself to come up with two or three crazy ideas for accomplishing your objective. Then enjoy how additional ideas just offer themselves up to you.

Have fun. How do you do that when you are facing menial drudgery? It’s surprisingly easy once you try it a couple of times. Break the activity into extremely small tasks and make a game out of each of the trivial activities. Generate a competition, or devise a special reward for accomplishing some modest piece of the obligation.

The more ridiculously you define the task, the easier it will be to get through to your desired objective. Caution: amusing yourself may stimulate you to start looking for additional burdensome activities!

Talk with a colleague. It’s amazing how another person’s perspective can help you accomplish any of the above. Collaboration doesn’t receive the credit it deserves in our world. Just go to another person and confess that you are facing an onerous “to do” chore. Ask for some help in creating a compelling vision, creatively generating options, or thinking of how to make the arduous task a fun activity.

A side benefit of this approach is that you will actually strengthen your relationship with this individual. Working through demanding situations is a powerful way to build camaraderie. You will have transformed a “have to do” task into a pleasant memory that you will forever share with your colleague.

Become sensitive to the language of others. Once you’ve mastered this ability, you’ll become sensitive to other individuals struggling under the burden of “have to do” obligations. Start using your leadership influence to share the above and help them realize their awesome freedom to choose!

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