

When You Know You Should, but You Don't

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What is it that you know you should do, but aren't doing? Maybe complete that project you've been putting off? Perhaps do some repair work on your relationship with your parents? Your colleagues? Eat healthier and exercise more? Fewer hours at work and more focused time with the family?

Why is it that we can't accomplish some of the many things that we know we should be doing?

Eric Berne has a possible answer. Berne was a psychiatrist who, fifty years ago, proposed a way of understanding human behavior. Though his concept was simple, he called it by the imposing name of "Transactional Analysis." (Put those words into any internet search engine if you want to learn more.)

I often use Berne's concepts as I support organizational leaders. The idea is that within each of us resides three "ego states," any one of which might interact in a given situation with any of the three "ego states" of another person. So, there are nine possible "transactions" between any two people.

Although common terms are used to describe the three states, Eric Berne assigned specific meanings to the terms. To remind users of this, the capitalized first letter is used.

When your Child state is dominant, you feel like the child you once were. The Child resists logical requests and is emotional, self-centered, and irresponsible. The Child can be impulsive, hateful, playful, sad, excited, fearful, creative, ashamed, loving, compliant, or complaining---and can change instantly!

Your Parent is like a digital recorder, having collected judgments and values about what is good and bad, right and wrong, appropriate or not. Your Parent can be nurturing and supportive or critical and controlling. The Parent resolves situations by using its pre-recorded ideas of how people "should" be.

Your Adult ego state is the rational, analytical, fact-processing predictor of outcomes, evaluating his or her (and others') behaviors in the context of desired goals. The Adult operates on data, not emotions, and makes decisions and solves and prevents problems based on cause-and-effect logic.

In my coaching, I find individuals who experience an internal struggle between their demanding Parent and their uncooperative Child. They express that they want to accomplish certain tasks (they think they "should" for whatever reason). Yet when it comes to behaving in ways that would generate that desired outcome, they find other things to do (and sometimes do the opposite of what they know would be productive!). This behavior is often as disconcerting to them as to others they affect.

In supporting these individuals, I often find that when they were growing up, they had an authoritative parent. Their response was one of two extremes. They either rebelled outright, refusing to obey, or they worked to keep a low profile, complying to the extent necessary to stay out of trouble.

Unknowingly, as this individual grew to fill responsible positions, he or she carried the demanding Parent and rebellious (or passively compliant) Child with them. The familiar script continues to be enacted by the individual who is oblivious to what's happening. Setting challenging expectations for themselves, something seems to prevent or interrupt the accomplishment of the task.

If this is happening to you (or someone under your authority), here is a way to potentially break the unproductive pattern. The first step, of course, is to become aware of the concepts I've described.

Recall how you responded to the demands of your authoritative parent when you were young. Allow the memories to resurface and note how similar they are to the feelings you have when you don't do what you've told yourself you MUST do, HAVE TO do, or SHOULD do.

Recognize that there is a third alternative to the demands of your Parent and the uncooperative nature of your Child. Your Adult understands the cause-and-effect principles by which the world functions. Yet operating comfortably in the Adult “ego state” is unnatural for many folks, especially those who had no role model to teach this rational, analytical, problem-solving, and problem-preventing alternative.

The Adult ego state requires a conscious, intentional effort that is anything but automatic. Choosing to access this “cause and effect” part of you, however, is always an option. I encourage you to find an understanding colleague to support your experimentation with thoughts and actions that may feel very different from choices you’ve made in the past.

Is it really that easy? It could be, except that habitual ways of thinking and acting are very hard to change. The first step, however, is your expanded awareness. Once you know what’s happening, you can catch yourself quickly, as soon as you start thinking “I HAVE TO do...” or “I don’t want to do...”

Instead of allowing the internal struggle to remain an obstacle, focus instead on the outcome you desire. Consider several actions that will likely lead you there. Select a small action step and execute it well. Then celebrate your progress in making your first incremental improvement.

Repeating this simple process will slowly build a new habit that will serve you far more effectively.

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