The case for... and against... Procrastination

Stephen Covey in The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People writes ‘All things are created twice. There’s a mental first creation and a second physical creation.’ Leadership is more about the first creation, and management more about the second. Covey says, ‘Begin with the end in mind’. This means beginning with a clear understanding of your destination, the goals you wish to achieve. Leadership is the ability to influence a group towards the achievement of those goals.

Not all leaders are good managers, nor are all managers leaders.

1. Managers deal with things that are urgent, leaders with that which is important. Leaders are proactive, managers reactive.
2. Management works within the system, within the paradigm—leadership works on the system, creating new paradigms.
3. Leaders are goal orientated; managers are task orientated. Good leaders create, good managers delegate.
4. You manage things—you lead people; managers are highly concerned with day-to-day logistical details of production and the ‘now’—leaders are more concerned with the production capability of the future. Good leaders tend to be people-focused.
5. Managers: ‘Am I doing the right things right?’ Leaders: ‘Am I doing the right things? Another way of stating this is ‘How can I best accomplish things’ vs ‘What are the things that I want to accomplish?’
6. Management is efficiency in climbing the ladder of success, keeping it firmly against the wall—leaders determine the wall against which the ladder should be placed.
7. Managers take instructions—leaders take decisions. Management follows leadership. Leadership is a left-brain activity more concerned about application and output—leadership is more of a right-brained art concerned with input.
8. Managers are risk averse; they tend to go with the flow—leaders often show a willingness to take risks, even gambles.

All leaders need energy, authority and strategic vision to direct their operations effectively. But what are the key factors that truly inspire followers?

Apathy

We would have invited you to the next meeting of the Apathy Society but it has been postponed indefinitely. Apathy is the polar opposite of productivity, and its hallmark is not getting things done or putting them off as long as possible. Which is procrastinating. An obviously undesirable characteristic. People who procrastinate don’t make decisions quickly, if at all. They do not believe in the maxim ‘never put off till tomorrow what you can do today’. They believe rather that the longer you delay, the more clarity of vision will be afforded to you. They believe that big problems will come tomorrow, even smaller next week, and will probably have disappeared completely the week after. They work harder at finding excuses not to do a job than actually doing the job. They are the despair of all about them, the kind of children who drive parents crazy, the kind of staff who get poor references. They are daydreamers and ditherers.

Do something!

When should ‘don’t just stand there, do something’ become ‘don’t just do something, stand there’? When is there no obvious reason for doing something. When there is the risk that doing something will cause more harm than good. Consider the world four years ago: Saddam Hussein was still in power, a dangerous violent, vicious despot ready to destroy the world with his weapons of mass destruction. ‘We must do something’ screamed the moral majority, so they did—they invaded, toppled the despot, and created turmoil in the process.

We dentists, when unsure what to do, should do nothing. We should procrastinate. We should say to the patient ‘I cannot see an obvious cause of your problem, and therefore I cannot see an obvious solution. There are things that I can do, and each of them has consequences. If I don’t do anything, then there may be other consequences, which I will spell out for you. What would you like me to do or not do?’ There is always one thing you must always do and that is to have a good reason for not doing anything, especially if you need later to justify your lack of action (inaction). Inaction may be procrastination but may not be the same as apathy; it may be the same thing as sensible or prudent or cautious.

A case study

Consider the following case: a patient, Miss M, attends with a severe toothache. Only problem is she doesn’t know which tooth it is coming from. ‘I think its top left somewhere, but it could be the lower, I’m not sure.’ You examine; no cavities, no tenderness to percussion, no visible cusp fracture, no negative response to thermal testing, nothing untoward on x-ray. So what do you do? Extract the tooth? Which one? Fill it? Which surface? Prescribe antibiotics? Probably—that’s what most medical professionals do when they don’t know what else to do. What are the consequences? Possible relief. Possible allergic reaction. Possible anaphylaxis (very unlikely). A high risk of sensitisation to the antibiotic, and possible susceptibility to superbugs.