



Welcome to our regular feature, On Track. Training is important to all of us, whether new or experienced. In this section we will feature articles on various aspects of formal and informal training and development and original research carried out by our members. Let us know what you would like to see in future issues. In addition, if you have anything you would like to share with others, please send it to us at Newslettereditor@PIPAonline.org.

How Would It Be To Dare To Be Average?

By: Alison Griffiths, Success Coaching & Development Ltd

Summary

A coaching article to give us some food for thought around self management, preservation and the way to enable real success

As leaders/professionals how much emphasis do we put on ourselves to strive to be 'the best' all of the time? How much energy do we spend worrying that we are not delivering at the level of expectation others (or quite often we) put on ourselves. How often do we question whether we actually want to climb the corporate ladder and live with all that brings? Much anxiety is created with the 'what ifs' – what if I don't start doing better, what if I don't achieve this target, what if I can't develop enough business, what if the team misses the deadline, what if I have to work late again... Well, what if we dared to be average – even for just a day, an hour, a minute?

By 'average' I am referring to a metaphorical 'taking our foot off the accelerator' every once in a while. Letting go of the 'demands' we put on ourselves, so as to allow us to go on to be the best we can be. With the help of case studies, this article explores how we can do this.

When it comes to resilience, coping strategies, supporting team members, work life balance, it's often the 'what ifs' that get in the way. Let's take Geoffrey for example. Geoffrey had chosen to become a self-employed Consultant two years before I met him. He had been doing really well. His business was flourishing, work was in abundance, he was a credible, well respected professional. However, it had recently gone quiet with no firm contracts

in the pipeline. Geoffrey had more than enough money in the bank to support his family for over a year – finance was not the problem. The problem was his fear of no more work and developing new business. Exploring his 'what ifs' he confessed:

- What if I don't get any more contracts?
- What if people hear that I've gone quiet?
- What if I run out of money?
- What if I don't win new business?
- What if people don't give me any more work?
- What if I can't pay the mortgage?
- What if I lose my house?

In this stressed place he was demonstrating a natural fight or flight response - 'fight' – getting angry and frustrated (with himself and others) or 'flight' to give up and look for a permanent job.

When we are stressed, negative thoughts, interpretations and memories become much easier to bring to mind and dwell on, we go for better safe than sorry¹ because we seek certainty. However, what if Geoffrey could stand back from his 'fight, flight' response, recognise his negatively biased state, choose a more realistic view and reposition his 'what ifs'?

¹ Gilbert Paul, *Overcoming Depression*, 8:121; Robinson Publishing Ltd 2000, London



Alison Griffiths

We started to explore what this quiet time was giving him, what its value was. Geoffrey admitted that he had been working flat out since the business started, that to have a break would be really good for his health. He even admitted starting to feel exhausted and aware that his concentration wasn't as sharp as when he first started. In letting go of the worry and choosing a more balanced view, Geoffrey decided it was in fact the best time to take a holiday. When he returned he had 3 contracts waiting for him!

Geoffrey may not have chosen to be 'average' in taking a holiday. However taking the holiday (which could be perceived as an 'average' thing to do) didn't take away the fact that he was still a high performer and credible professional. It was the demands he put on himself based in fear that was potentially threatening this.

So, how does this fit in the corporate world with the expectation of ourselves and others, that to be successful we need to be seen as high performers at all times? Do we have this expectation of top athletes? Maybe we do. However, the one difference is that we also allow them the opportunity for recovery and recharge. Footballers have a break pre-season. Athletes have a break in order to peak at the end of their season. Highly driven professions such as city traders and professional sports people are accepted as having short careers at their peak.

Although I have not conducted any formal research, discussions around high performance, ambition and drive with a cross-section of executives, suggests that many acknowledge that it is impossible for anyone to work at their peak all of the time. An obvious statement, maybe, but day to day behaviour and attitudes demonstrates them continually putting this type of pressure on themselves. Is it a habit we are either not willing to accept or change?

Paradoxically, as with top athletes, if we give 'ourselves' and in doing so, other people permission take their foot off the accelerator and slow down a bit at times, are we not in fact, enabling them to be 'great' when it really matters?

An Associate Director who was both exhilarated and exhausted having achieved a major outcome for her organisation admitted her health had suffered as a result of long hours, fast meals, travelling, lack of exercise. Yet, she was hungry for the next 'high'. She was hungry for it – however, she admitted she was physically not able to even contemplate it and what seemed to be doing her more harm was her belief that this wasn't a good enough attitude. By leading her team this way what messages were being sent out to them and other stakeholders?² and was this the expectation of her manager, their manager, the company or in fact old habits driving her? What if she chose to take a more average pace, focus on maybe two to

2 Alexander, Graham; Tales from the Top, 4:96; Piatkus Books Ltd, London 2006

three top priorities (rather than everything) while she regained her health and energy? The vision and the goal had not changed, the organisation was still on track and more likely to retain an effective leader.

Another client once shared with me that they didn't know whether they wanted to climb the corporate ladder. For what reason I asked, I don't think I want all the politics, the games, the pressure, the travel, work being my main life focus, he said. So, could you dare to be average I asked? He laughed and said – yes that's it, but who would give me a job if I suggested that? We explored what he really wanted and when he explained how he was looking for something that would allow him to be ambitious in a way that broadened his technical experience, share his already well grounded knowledge, enable him to really work well in a team and support other members, I asked him what company could object to that if that's what they need? He was being authentic, clear minded and willing to offer them his best. Is average really so bad? If a company wants someone focused on climbing the corporate ladder, they probably wouldn't select him and he likewise, wouldn't want the position.

So how bad is average if this is what we get when we dare to take the pressure of ourselves every now and then? It doesn't mean we lose our ambition or our drive, it just means that at times when our energy may not be there, we are accepting. I would even go so far as to suggest that it is the vehicle that will ultimately enable us to retain our 'best', achieve even greater things and at the same time keep us happier, healthier and more productive on a long term basis.

Key Messages:

Average – is not about "not being our best" – sometimes, average is our best and by accepting this we can then regain energy for even greater achievements

Attitudes – be aware of our attitudes and whether they are driving us and exhausting us when creating a more balanced, realistic attitude would better serve us.

Less is more – as a leader focus on the absolute essentials rather than trying to do and be everything for everyone

Let go of old habits and beliefs – they may be slowing you down and sapping your energy

Not everyone wants to climb the corporate ladder – it doesn't make you any 'less than'. Be confident in who you are and what you have to offer



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Alison Griffiths is an accredited coach with the Association for Coaching and runs her own practice **Success Coaching & Development Ltd**. Specialising in the pharmaceutical industry she has been coaching and facilitating the development of leaders, managers and teams on a one to one and group basis for over 6 years - supporting and enabling professionals through growth and change. For more information or to request a confidential discussion around one-to-one Coaching and Team Development please contact Alison at: a.griffiths@successc-d.co.uk