

Guest Post Guidelines

*We are not accepting submissions without an explicit invitation.
Unless you have an established relationship with Charlie,
please do not send us an unsolicited guest post query.*



If you're reading this, you're one of the few people we've asked to be contributors to Productive Flourishing. This means two things: We trust you, and you're a good writer who has ideas that our readers will enjoy or find valuable.

We've written these guidelines in the hopes that they help you write rather than keep you from writing. The guidelines may change as we co-create better ways to collaborate and share your work.

Suggestions for Your Posts

These suggestions are just that — they're not set in stone. You're a good writer, so you know that rules generally help you express yourself, but sometimes they get in the way.

If you're looking for examples of content on our site, skip to the very end of this document to read a few (most from other guest contributors and a few examples from Charlie).

Here are a few basics:

Length

As much as you might like us to say "between 300 and 1,000 words," you can probably guess that we're not going to. Some of our most well-received posts are around 300 words, yet others are 2,500 words. The best thing we can say is, write to the topic and make sure that every word counts.

That said, posts that are in the 700-1500 word range tend to do best. That seems to be the sweet spot of enough to flesh out a thought but not so long that it's a serious commitment to read the post.

If your post is more than 2,000 words and can be split into a series, we might suggest it. However, sometimes you just need more space to finish the thought — and finishing the thought is more im-

portant to us and our readers than keeping it short.

On the lower end of the length scale, if you'd like to try your hand at meditative, reflective pieces, give 'em a whirl. Those account for the shorter posts, and they can be just as insightful, meaningful, and well received as a "normal" post.

Voice

We encourage you to write in your natural voice. We want to hear your voice and your ideas, so don't feel like you have to write like someone else.

Tone

You don't have to be super blog-friendly. If writing in a blog-friendly way comes naturally to you, great! But don't feel like you have to write a list post if you'd much rather write discursively.

Links

If your post touches on something you've written before, feel free to link back to your blog. In fact, please do — that's one of the reasons we're asking you to contribute.

That said, please don't write a post that someone can't understand without reading your blog, and don't outlink excessively. Two or three links in an

800-word post is cool; eight in that span is probably pushing it.

While we're talking about links, please do *not* use affiliate links in your posts, because following FTC guidelines would require us to have a disclaimer about the links and it can get awkward to disclaim *someone else's* use of affiliate links. We'd prefer that you link back to a post of yours that talks about the product or service you're referring to.

Exclusivity

Generally, any content you submit in your guest post should not be submitted or posted anywhere else unless you're republishing the post you submit here elsewhere with a canonical link. An exception is content that comes from one of your products, but we ask that such content be a *part* of your post and not the post in its entirety. (If you'd like us to promote a product, it's best to discuss it with Charlie directly.)

Copyright

Productive Flourishing owns the copyright for any post you submit and we may re-use and re-purpose the content in other formats, including ebook compilations, republication, and so on. In the unlikely event we want to use the content in a for-pay product, we'll discuss it with you beforehand. Our goal

is to *always* find the ways to share your work that builds the most abundant set of possibilities for us all.

Images

Feel free to include a picture in your post by submitting it through the editing panel. Be sure to include proper attribution as necessary.

A Quick Note About Critiques

We are fans of reasoned critiques, but we ask that you be charitable to the person and position you're criticizing. Begin from the position that the idea you're criticizing is coming from a smart and well-meaning writer like you. Do the best you can to respect the original author and his or her ideas; this might mean that you need to strengthen the person's position or provide additional context that makes it more plausible, rather than dismiss it completely.

More important, though, we ask that you advance a *valuable, positive alternative*. It's easy to point out the problems in someone else's ideas but really challenging to come up with something on your own. Include your alternative even if you haven't fleshed it out completely — we learn more through continual expression and revision than from waiting for an idea to come out perfectly.

More Info About PF Readers

More important than what you should write is whom you're writing for. PF readers are [Creative Giants](#) — smart, compassionate, and creative people who have shown that they'll give you the space to finish your thought.

PF currently has about 50,000 subscribed readers, with the majority of them being email subscribers. Our reach is in the 8 million range by the time you count our friends, influencers, and other promotion channels that may pick up your post. That can be motivating for some people and scary as hell for others. Our best advice is to focus on writing to the

specific Creative Giants you know.

Writing for them can be really easy and really difficult at the same time. It's easy because they are very charitable; it's difficult because they have high expectations. We're hoping this guest post will give you a chance to push your limits as a writer.

We've had a few more-influential bloggers say that Productive Flourishing is one of the few places where authors can get away with writing really long posts about seemingly unrelated topics and have people read and enjoy every word. It's absolutely true.

PF readers typically want or like several things:

- They want to become more effective and productive.
- They want to channel their abundant creativity better.
- They want to be able to pursue multiple interests and embrace their multi-dimensionality.
- They want their creative businesses to be successful.
- They like to be inspired.
- They like to read posts that make them think.
- They like to have complex stuff explained to them in a way that makes it clear and relevant to their lives and businesses.

The point of the content here at PF is to help people think more clearly, ask better questions, and do the things that actually matter. If your post passes one of those tests, you're good to go. Even better to hit all three!

Step 1: Getting Started

Before we begin, let's start with who this "we" is:

1. Shannon is our master scheduler and communications expert. She'll be your main point of contact while you're deciding what to write about and when we'll be publishing your piece.
2. Josephine (Jo) is our blogrunner. She will be the one actually publishing your post AND will be your point of contact once you submit your piece.
3. Erin is our editor. She is who you will see pop in to make edits and suggestions on your post. If she has more in-depth questions for you, you may see an email from her, too.
4. Jess is our digital media producer. You may see



her pop in to your Google doc to cross-link to other PF posts, add a Click-to-Tweet, and/or add a lead banner. She'll also be creating social media content to go along with your post.

Our goal is to do the best we can to help you have a smooth process (Shannon & Jo) to amplify the brilliance of your ideas (Erin) and promote your genius to the world, starting with our audience (Jess).

Here's the process for first-time contributors:

1. We'll setup a login and password for the PF site, but we do the editing and collaboration via Google Docs because, let's face it, WordPress is terrible for editing and collaboration. Jo will get this set up for you.
2. If you don't already have a Gravatar account setup, please do so [here](#). WordPress pulls your photo from Gravatar, that way if you ever update it there, it will automatically update on all your posts for us.
3. Shannon will reach out with topic ideas and a rough deadline so that the blank screen and someday/maybe's don't get in the way.
4. When you have a draft you're ready to share, jump to Step 1 in the Drafting and Editing section below.

Here are some (very) rough guidelines on which categories we discuss on which days:

- Monday – Productivity; planning; and action-oriented creativity and innovation
- Wednesday – Small business; thought leadership; strategy and leadership; entrepreneurship; and more theoretical creativity and innovation topics
- Friday – Inspiration; character or personal development; relationship insights; mindfulness, meditation, or spirituality; success mindsets; and story-based reflective essays

If having someone provide topics for you is helpful for your creative process, let Shannon know. *We get it* — if someone asks Charlie to “write a guest post,” they may get it in a year, but if they ask him to “write a post about X” or ask him to answer a question, they’ll get the post within a couple of weeks.

If you need your post published on a certain day or at a certain time, let us know — we’ll do what we can to accommodate your needs, if at all possible.

Step 2: Drafting and Editing

1. As a contributor you will be expected to have a post drafted and ready to edit 1 week before your publish week (earlier is better).
2. Shannon will send you a reminder email 2 weeks before publishing if we haven’t received a draft from you before then.
3. When you’re ready for us to review your draft, email Shannon with the link. Please make your sharing settings such that anyone with the link can edit the post.
4. During the editing process, you may receive emails from Jo or Erin with editing queries. Please respond promptly so we can publish your post on schedule.
5. Once your post is edited, we will move and format your post in WordPress and Jo will confirm the publish date.

We believe that creative people should have the space to create without having other people look at what they’re doing while they’re creating *unless* the person doing the creative work specifically asks for feedback. So we’ll stay out of your way while you do whatever you need to do to get your post drafted.

Please note that our editorial team expects to see your final draft before we start editing. A good rule of thumb is that if you wouldn’t feel comfortable posting the piece you submit to us as is on your site, it’s probably not quite ready to be submitted to



us for review. Again, if you need a creative partner on this, email us and we’ll do the best we can to be good midwives for your idea.

Editing and SEO

We’ll review and edit the post and add metadata. Be aware that all posts will go through an editor (Erin) who will occasionally send email queries to clarify points or ask questions about significant edits to your piece. There is the potential for heavy edits and we’ll correspond via Google Docs to get your approval before we make significant changes.

We offer this service so that we can add value to your overall writing experience with PF and so the piece that gets published is well-received by our audience.

Although this process can sometimes be time-consuming and add additional back-and-forth, it makes you look better and ensures that we get your piece in front of as many eyes as possible.

You don't have to worry about keywords, tags, or categories, but you're welcome to offer suggestions.

As far as editing goes, here's what we'll be looking at:

1. **Headlines** – We are likely to edit your title or subheads, mostly for SEO purposes.
2. **Link anchors** – For SEO purposes, we'll try to edit your links so that they're Google- and people-friendly.
3. **Formatting** – We'll just be making sure the format is in alignment with the blog posts typically posted on PF. Avoid over-linking, super long paragraphs, and long chunks of text without subheadings.

4. **Image formatting** – We do this just to make sure the post looks pretty! We also might have our designer create a custom image for the post.
5. **Copyediting** – If we catch typos or grammar goofs, we'll edit them. We'll also be making sure the post fits within our own editorial guidelines for the blog (ex. We put a space on either side of Em dashes)
6. **Line editing** – If your intended meaning isn't clear, Erin will send you a query within the Google doc.
7. **Developmental editing** – If we think your post needs developmental editing, Erin or Jo will reach out to you directly via email to start a conversation.

If you'd like, you can read more about the different types of editing [here](#).

Step 3: Promotion

On your publish date, Jo will send you an email with the link to your post.

PF will also share the post on Twitter and Facebook (Jo will email you separately with all of the posts we plan to make on social media).

We ask that you share your post as if you were sharing your own blog post on your own site.

We also recommend that you schedule social media posts in advance for up to two months (if you have

the capability) to keep eyes on the piece after the publish date.

Comments

Responding to comments is encouraged and we'd appreciate your efforts in replying to thoughtful responses (and to every comment if you can). We want this conversation to be as much yours as it is ours.

Fill out my [online form](#).

What Did We Miss?

If we missed something or you have questions, please [let Shannon know](#).

And one more thing: We're very excited that you're contributing your insights here. Thanks for helping our readers start finishing the stuff that matters!

Example Guest Posts



How to Be Creative and Productive in Every Stage of a Project

by Cath Duncan

Editor's note: *This is a guest post from Cath Duncan.*

Every project is also a change on some level. The phenomenon of change within individuals and bigger systems has been studied widely, and it's been found that change isn't as chaotic and random as it often feels. There appears to be a pattern of psychological experiences and corresponding challenges that we go through when we're negotiating change. Martha Beck has summarized this pattern into a very accessible model of change that corresponds with the project management cycle.

Here's what it looks like, what the challenges of each phase are, and how you can leverage each phase of change to be more creative and productive in your creative work:

Stage 1: Death and Rebirth

The Death and Rebirth phase is the phase in which something has happened to trigger the realization that you have to change something. It may have been an instant realization that you're going to need to change in order to adapt, because of a specific event like a change in the market, or it may have been a gradual realization that change is needed. Either way, you know that life can no longer go on as before.

This recognition tips you into a world of uncertainty, anxiety, self-doubt, and confusion because you don't yet know how you'll solve the problem or what you want to create. Depending on the scale of the change that you're going to be navigating and the degree to which you yourself are going to be required to change, you might find yourself needing to grieve the life and way of being that you're leaving behind before you can begin to conceptualize a new way of being.

This stage is usually not recognized as part of a project management cycle, but it's a prominent part of any high-change, agile business, because we return to this phase every time that we hit an obstacle and realize that the plan we had for our project isn't working. It's also a natural part of clearing your priorities to make space for new projects, and it's in this state of confusion and frustration that many of our most creative ideas first germinate.

How to Be More Creative and Productive in the Death and Rebirth Phase

- Unfortunately, because this phase feels bad, and because we've been taught that it's not okay to be uncertain, we tend to try to avoid it. This avoidance only closes down our creativity and gets us more stuck. Learn what anxiety feels like in your body and become aware of the mental stories and fears you tend to habitually return to in this stage. This will help you to notice when you're feeding your anxiety, and you can learn to stop and relax into those moments so that you become more comfortable with anxiety, uncertainty, and confusion.
- You can get more comfortable with this phase and open yourself up to more creative stimulation by giving yourself more novel experiences where you can practice feeling confused and uncertain. With practice, you'll soon take these emotions in stride.
- Use the self-doubt and general uncertainty you're experiencing to question the assumptions you've been making about the way you've been trying to solve the problem you're working on. As you question your assumptions, you'll find new perspectives and unexpected new ways forward.
- Create space in your work life so that you can tolerate the seemingly unproductive nature of this

phase. If you've over-scheduled your day, you're going to be urgently trying to make decisions and move your projects on, and there will be no space for the uncertainty, contemplation, and resulting creativity that the Death and Rebirth phase offers.

- Realize that you can take action and begin developing a vision for what you want to create even before your anxiety, confusion, and self-doubt have cleared. Don't get stuck on trying to eliminate anxiety, confusion, and self-doubt before you move forward.

Stage 2: Dreaming and Scheming

The Dreaming and Scheming phase is the phase in which you begin to conceptualize what you want to create. You start off with a few vague ideas, dotted here and there. At first, the dots don't seem to connect, but as you research and explore more, you start to notice themes and you begin to pull them together into a more detailed, consistent vision. Finally, having clarified your vision, you're able to break it down into a step-by-step plan to make it happen.

How to Be More Creative and Productive in the Dreaming and Scheming Phase

- Have a [structure for collecting your ideas](#) and guiding your thinking and planning. [Charlie's planners](#) are a great way to break your big project vision down into little steps.
- Be willing to explore and play. If you try to rush through this stage, you're going to shut down your creativity and end up thinking smaller and creating a plan to create something mediocre.
- Rather than trying to figure it all out on paper or in your head, get out into the real world and test out your rough ideas. This will let you gauge the response and level of interest from other people, feel for yourself what resonates with you, and get feedback that will enable you to refine your idea.
- Give yourself a diverse range of novel experiences – this will expose you to more opportunity to figure out what resonates with you and to come

up with ideas for your project. Cross-pollination with other industries often sparks innovation.

- Realize that you'll probably still experience some anxiety and lack of clarity at this stage. True confidence is created only when you're taking action and gaining real-world experience, and there are things that you can learn by taking your project out into the real world that you can't figure out otherwise. So be willing to take action even before you have all of the future steps laid out.

Stage 3: The Hero's Saga

The Hero's Saga Phase is named after the stereotypical hero's tale, in which the hero sets forth on his or her journey, and no sooner has s/he left home when a monster of some sort gets in the way. The hero fights and slays the monster, sets off again, and soon bumps into another monster. This pattern repeats itself and the hero persists on his/her journey, dealing with each monster and setback as it arises, until s/he finally gets to the prize at the end of the journey.

The Hero's Saga starts when you begin taking your ideas out into the real world, and you're focused on implementing the plan that you carefully drew up in the Dreaming and Scheming Phase.

How to Be More Creative and Productive in the Hero's Saga

- [Schedule reviews of your plans](#) and progress regularly (weekly and monthly) so that you can adjust frequently to prevent big investments in the wrong direction. Every month or so, pop back and remind yourself of the big picture that you're trying to accomplish.
- Link up with other solopreneurs and creatives and set up a supportive community and mastermind group that you can turn to for support, accountability, and advice when you're tired, distracted, frustrated, stuck, or feeling like giving up.
- Work hard, but schedule time to play hard, too. Restore your physical, mental, and emotional energy by exercising regularly, sleeping well, stay-

ing connected with your friends and family, and regularly taking time to do leisure activities that you enjoy.

- Celebrate all of your accomplishments – big and small.
- Record all your new, unrelated ideas in your [idea garden](#) – ready for you to harvest them when this project is complete.
- Consider outsourcing the procedural tasks that you don't enjoy.

Stage 4: The Promised Land

The Promised Land is that enviable and often illusive place where your project or change journey is complete and you get to celebrate and enjoy the fruits of your labor.

How to Be More Creative and Productive in the Promised Land

- As with the Death and Rebirth Phase, our sense of urgency often drives us to rush past the Promised Land Phase as we jump into another project. Take some time to consciously celebrate your completions and achievements before you move on to the next thing.
- Look for ways to share your successes and the lessons you learned along the way with others – it's a great way to build your network and your brand.
- Stay ahead of the curve and don't get complacent. If your project has launched and needs ongoing maintenance, schedule progress reviews regularly (monthly) so that you can keep tweaking and improving on your delivery.
- As soon as you can, let go of the project by closing it or training someone else to maintain it, so that you have space for new creative projects.

Which Phase Do You Enjoy Most?

Did some of the phases sound unappealing to you? That's normal – most of us prefer one stage of change over the others:

- **If you enjoy the Death and Rebirth Phase most**, you're probably great at coming up with new ideas and love re-inventing the wheel. You're good at questioning what other people are doing, but you might find it harder to think big and create your own vision or to take action to implement your ideas.
- **If you enjoy the Dreaming and Scheming Phase most**, you'll love generating big visions and exploring new project ideas. You probably have vision boards and planning sheets up the ying-yang, but you might find it harder to nurture your ideas in the real world and get them shipped.
- **If you enjoy the Hero's Saga Phase most**, then you'll enjoy being given a vision and project plan to implement and manage. You're probably great with details, resource management, and getting stuff done, but you may struggle when it comes to finding new ways of doing things and generating creative solutions.
- **If you enjoy the Promised Land most**, then you're probably great at tying up loose ends, and tweaking and maintaining projects in the long term, but you might not be very good at questioning the status quo, handling major changes on a project, innovating, or big-picture strategizing.

Ideally, you should look to leverage your strengths, stick to doing what you love, and find team members who can cover the parts of the change/project management cycle that you don't enjoy. But as Charlie talked about in [the Four Dimensions of Business](#), freelancers and entrepreneurs are often wearing many hats and having to be the full board of directors for their business.

What If You Don't Have the Cashflow to Outsource Yet?

If you haven't got the cashflow to outsource the parts of the project change cycle that you don't enjoy, then here are some tips for managing your project successfully through all the stages of change:

- **Awareness goes a long way.** We like to linger

in the change phases that we enjoy most. If you know which phases of change you enjoy most, you'll be more likely to catch yourself if you're unconsciously avoiding progressing your project into the next phase.

- **Plan for the whole change cycle.** Schedule time to do big-picture, creative thinking and time to plan the Hero's Saga details, so that you'll do both. Schedule time to restore yourself and to celebrate along the way.

- **Get a coach** who will help you with awareness and growing in greater flexibility to manage all of the stages of change.
- **Form a mastermind** group with a good mix of folks – or just informally use your network of friends to coach each other through the stages that you don't love.
- **Look for opportunities to do joint ventures** with people who are great at the parts of the change cycle that you're not so great at.

3 Growth-Oriented Ways to Explore Your Creative Edge

by Larry Robertson

Editor's note: *This is a guest post from Larry Robertson.*

If you've ever dreamed of creating something new, you've probably wondered some or all of the following: [How do I start?](#) How do I finish? And what do I do in between the two?

When we are pushed to the edge between what's familiar and what's possible by questions like these, it feels uncomfortable at best, forbidden at worst. Such emotions are precisely why so many often turn back. But that edge is the very place where we form the habits of creativity. It's also the ground on which we hone the skills necessary to start, finish, and grow.

In such moments we are presented with two alternatives: come closer to the edge, explore, and grow or back away and return to the known. If your dream is [creating something new](#), you simply can't pick the second alternative (and you know it). But advancing forward, coming closer to the edge of what's possible, can seem daunting. We picture the creative edge like a cliff. In reality, it's more like stepping off a curb — if you understand and employ three essential acts of creation: choice, reaction, and improvisation.

Choice

In every single thing we do we possess a great power: choice. ([Tweet this!](#))

It is no different in the rote actions we take every day (rising to the alarm clock before the sun comes up to work out, rather than hitting the snooze button; or reaching out to someone to ask for help, when that self-satisfied little voice inside our heads says, "Meh. Why bother?") than it is with the seemingly bigger choice to pursue something new. The only differ-

ence is being conscious of choice or not.

Each and every choice we make is a two-branched decision tree: one direction is a choice to move forward, the other to stay put. In those instances when we choose to move forward, we do so with the hope that it will bring us something better. But in truth, we ought to apply this same analysis to any decision, including the decision to stay put. Even sticking with things we know has consequences. Assumptions we made in the past, facts we considered, even the value we derive from doing what we do is subject to change. Without reconsideration of all this, making a decision to stay put could be as risky as a decision to move forward to something new.

Choice is powerful. And when we are conscious of it and active in making it, choice begins to establish the fertile ground necessary for creative thoughts and actions.

Reaction

Think about any time you've made the decision to try something new. What got you past your fear? Odds are it was the expectation of something good following that choice. But there's no guarantee. What if the outcome isn't good, then what? For that matter, what if it is? Again, then what? It's stunning how often we fail to see reaction as a conscious act, just like choice. But reaction is just as vital to your ability to create and advance.

Suppose you choose to do something new, expecting the outcome to be good ... [and then it's not](#). Say the whole thing falls flat on its face or worse, you get burned or laughed at. What happens next? If you haven't thought about reaction, there's a good chance you'll never make the same choice again and retreat back into what you know. What a shame!

But if you're unconscious about the reaction that follows a choice, the outcome could be just as bad if everything that follows your choice goes right. When things go right we have a great tendency to exhale, take it easy, get lazy, or otherwise lose the focus we brought to the initial choice. In short, it's easy to let your guard down. When you do, you are almost guaranteed to be less tuned into possibilities, less open to new information and new ways, and as a result, more likely to drift away from the possible and back toward the familiar. Reaction, and treating it as thoughtfully as choice, matters. It is effectively another form of choice to advance and explore.

Improvisation

Being conscious of choice and reaction is powerful elixir when it comes to creating something new. It isn't, however, a precise answer to the questions of how to start, how to finish, and what to do in between. There are no such answers. Disappointing as the truth may feel at first, knowing and embracing that there are no precise answers is where things get creative and fun.

But first a quick explanation as to why there are no preset answers: because the territory is new! You're not supposed to know for sure. If someone could tell you exactly what to do, it wouldn't be new. And if you knew what the outcome would be, you'd be clairvoyant.

But here's the rub: even though you intuitively already know this, there's a good chance you're still operating as if how to proceed should be knowable like some kind of tried and true recipe awaits you if you can only find it. Stop. Improvise instead.

When you step across the edge into a new land, you

invariably bring with you the habits of the world you know so well. That includes the habit of thinking you ought to know everything well and have clear paths and answers at the ready. But traveling in new territory requires you to do some testing. You take what you know but then you have to bend it, augment it, and reshape it to meet the situation.

Want some good news? We, humans, are built for this. Secretly, we long for it. It's in our evolutionary make-up. But having the ability to improvise naturally in our toolkit doesn't mean it's a skill ready to go and turnkey with a moment's notice. Improvisation takes practice, but it's also about play.

As much as we may anticipate it with fear, coming to the edge has an innate element of fun. Tapping into that by being ready and willing to improvise, actually increases the odds of success. When there's fun we are better able to see the upside and attraction of launching into something new. When our approach is purposeful yet playful, we are also able to weather and react to the natural cycle of stumbling around a bit, adjusting, and re-engaging.

This is the nature of the land of the new. We wonder, we choose to explore, we prepare to react so that we are ready to reconfigure and re-engage, and along the way we develop something original, wholly ours, and satisfying. What fun!

Choosing to pursue things new is serious business. But in order to realize what we dream of creating, we can't let the seriousness of our purpose strangle our innate ability to shape something novel. It's a balance. Always. But in the end, it's why we're here — to perpetually choose a path, old or new, that [moves us forward](#). It's how our lives answer that vital question of what it means to be human.

How to Recover from 10 Types of Demotivation

by Cath Duncan

Editor's note: *This is a guest post from Cath Duncan.*

Motivation is central to creativity, productivity, and happiness. Motivation is what causes us to act, and when we act, we create movement, growth, and change; we feel involved, masterful, and significant; we feel powerful through experiencing how we can change the world; and we create more of what we love in our lives. And all of this gives our lives purpose and happiness.

Demotivation is like snow

It's said that Inuit have multiple words for snow because snow is so familiar to them that they can appreciate the subtle differences between different types of snow. These additional distinctions enable Inuit to respond differently to different types of snow, depending on the challenges and opportunities that each particular type of snow is presenting them with.

Most of us have just one conception of demotivation, which means that whenever you're unmotivated, you're likely to assume that you're struggling with the same problem, when in fact demotivation is a category of problems, containing many variations. When you have just one kind of demotivation, you'll apply the same old strategies whenever you feel unmotivated; for many people, those strategies look like this: set goals, push harder, create accountability checks that will push you, and run your life using GTD methods and to-do lists. These strategies are ineffective with most types of demotivation, and in some instances they can even make you more unmotivated.

At its essence, demotivation is about your not being fully committed to act, and there are many reasons why you might be in that position. **Having more ways to categorize your demotivation will help**

you to identify the real reasons for your unwillingness to commit to action, so that you can pick the right tools and strategies to get motivated again.

Here are 10 types of demotivation and the strategies that will help you to get motivated again ([Tweet this!!](#)):

1) You're demotivated by fear

When you're afraid, even if you're entering territory that you've chosen to move into, a part of you is determined to avoid going forward. Fear slows you down and makes you hesitant and careful, which can be beneficial to you, but sometimes your fears are based on your imagination rather than on an accurate assessment of the risks in your reality. If your fear is big enough, even if you're also excited to go forward, the part of you that wants to keep you safe can successfully prevent you from going forward into territory that's both desirable and safe.

How to get motivated again: To get motivated, you need to deal with your fear. Start by naming your fears so that they're out in the open. Remember to say a gentle "thank you" to your fears – they're trying to protect you, after all. Then question your fears: "Why am I afraid of that happening?" "What are the chances that would really happen?" Some of your fears will slip away now.

Look at the fears that are left. What are they telling you about the research you need to do, the gaps you need to fill, and the risk management strategies you need to put in place? Honor that wisdom by building it into your plan. Finally, consider breaking down the changes you're wanting to make into smaller steps and focusing on just the next few small steps – this will calm your fears.

2) You're demotivated by setting the wrong goals

[Martha Beck](#) has a great model for understanding motivation. She explains that we have an Essential Self and a Social Self. Your Essential Self is the part of you that's spontaneous and creative and playful, the part that knows what's most important to you. Your Social Self is the part of you that has been developing since the day you were born, learning the rules of the tribe and working hard to make sure that you're safe by making you follow the rules of the tribe.

We're all surrounded by so many messages that feed into our Social Selves and we're keen to impress our tribes. When you feel unmotivated, it's because you're setting goals based purely on what your Social Self wants and this is pulling you away from the direction your Essential Self wants you to take. Your Essential Self uses demotivation to slow you down and to detach you from the toxic goals you've set.

How to get motivated again: Take some time to review your goals. Because your Essential Self is non-verbal, you can easily access your Essential Self through your body. Notice how your body responds as you think of each of the goals you're trying to work on. When your body (and particularly your breathing) shows signs of tightness and constriction, that's a pretty good indication that you're trying to follow toxic goals. If you get a constricted reaction, scrap your current goals and question all your stories about what you "should" do with your life. Notice what makes you smile spontaneously or lose track of time, and set goals related to that stuff instead.

3) You're demotivated by lack of clarity about what you want

When you haven't consciously and clearly articulated what you want, your picture of your future will be vague. We like what's familiar, so we resist what's unfamiliar and vague and we stay with and re-create what's familiar to us. If you're not clear about what you want to create, then it makes sense that you'll

lack motivation to act because you'd rather stay with your current familiar reality.

How to get motivated again: If you want to create something different from what you've been experiencing, it's not enough to just know what you don't want. You need to know what you do want, and you need to articulate a clear and specific vision of what you want to create so that you can become familiar with that new outcome and feel comfortable moving toward it. Take some time to articulate what you want and why you want it.

4) You're demotivated by a values conflict

Your values are what's important to you in life. If you have a values conflict, it means that there are two or more values that are important to you but you believe that you can't satisfy all of those values in a particular situation. This situation causes you to feel conflicted and pulled in different directions as you try to find ways to get what's important to you. You might have brief spurts of motivation to work on something and then lose motivation and start working on something else, or your motivation might dry up altogether because the effort of dealing with internal conflict quickly tires you out and saps your energy.

How to get motivated again: You need to unpack your values conflict and play mediator to get the parts of you that are advocating for different values to play on the same team again. Start with acknowledging the internal conflict. Grab a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle so that you have two columns. Write about the two different directions you feel pulled in, one in each column, and summarize it with a statement of what each part wants. Now pick one column and chunk it up: "Why does this part want that? What does it hope to get as a result of having that?" Keep asking the questions and writing your answers until you feel that you've hit on the result that this part of you ultimately wants. Now do the same for the other part, and notice when you get to the level where the answers in

the two columns are the same.

Ultimately, all of the parts of you always want the same thing, because they're all you. Now that you know what you *really* want, you can evaluate the strategies that each part had been advocating for and decide which strategy would work best.

Often, once you're clear on what you really want, you spot new strategies for getting it that you hadn't noticed before. Sometimes by doing this exercise you'll find ways to satisfy all of your values, but sometimes that's not possible. If you've taken time to think through your values and you've consciously chosen to prioritize a particular value over your other values for a while, this clarity will ease the internal conflict and your motivation will return.

5) You're demotivated by lack of autonomy

We thrive on autonomy. We all have a decision-making center in our brains and this part of us needs to be exercised. Studies have found that this decision-making center in the brain is under-developed in people who have depression and that if you practice using this part of the brain and making decisions, depression often clears.

In his book [Drive](#), Daniel Pink writes about the research that shows that when it comes to doing creative work, having some autonomy to decide what we do, when we do it, how we do it, and whom we do it with is core to igniting and sustaining motivation, creativity, and productivity.

How to get motivated again: Consider how much autonomy you have in relation to the goals you've been trying to pursue. Are there areas where you feel constricted and controlled? Consider how you could gradually introduce more autonomy in your task, time, technique, location, and team, and then, if you're employed, have a discussion with your manager and ask for greater autonomy in a few specific areas of your work.

6) You're demotivated by lack of challenge

Challenge is another crucial ingredient for motivation that authors like [Daniel Pink](#) and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of [Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience](#), highlight. When it comes to dealing with challenges, there's a sweet spot. Too great a challenge, and the fear becomes too great and saps our motivation (see point 1), and if the challenge is too small, we quickly get bored and struggle to stay motivated. We're designed to be living, growing creatures and we need constant challenges and opportunities to master new skills. Without challenges, our Essential Self steps in and demotivates us as a way of telling us that we've departed from the path that's right for us.

How to get motivated again: Review your goals and the projects you're working on. Are they challenging you? Are they going to require you to grow in order to achieve them, or are you treading water in your comfort zone, doing only the things you know you can do? Try tweaking your goals to make them a bit more challenging, take on projects that will require you to grow, and find a new thing or two to learn to stimulate yourself.

7) You're demotivated by grief

At the beginning of any change, we go through a phase of wondering if we should or could hang on to the way things were and grieving what we'll be losing if we make significant changes. Confusion, self-doubt, mistrust of the world around us, and feeling lost are common symptoms, and the bigger the change, the more powerful these symptoms. Sometimes we even go through a bit of depression and social withdrawal. Martha Beck calls this phase the "Death and Rebirth" phase of change in her book [Finding Your Own North Star](#). With all the grieving and fearing and feeling lost that go on in this phase, it's normal for your motivation to dry up.

How to get motivated again: If you've just experienced a trauma or loss, or you're going through a

major change and finding that there are days where you're hit hard with Death and Rebirth symptoms, don't try to make yourself motivated and proactive. You can't rush grieving or the undoing of your old life and ways of thinking, and you can't skip the Death and Rebirth phase and go straight into Dreaming and Scheming.

You need to give yourself a lot of space for nurturing and reflection. Look after your body with good food, rest, and exercise. Express your grief, confusion, and fears with people who can listen lovingly. Spend time in nature and with calm, loving people to center yourself. Accept every feeling and thought you have – they're all normal and safe. Take one day at a time and go easy on yourself. Confusion, forgetfulness, and clumsiness are all normal in this stage. The grieving will end when it's ready, and if you relax into it and express your grief, it'll be sooner rather than later.

8) You're demotivated by loneliness

This is an especially important one for those of us who work alone from home. You know those days when you feel a bit cabin-feverish, you just don't feel like working, and you'd rather be out having a drink with a friend or playing a game of soccer? Well, perhaps it's because we're designed to be social creatures and sometimes your Essential Self is just longing for some connection with other people, and so it steps in and hijacks your work motivation so that you'll take a break from work and go spend some time with other people and give your Essential Self what it needs.

How to get motivated again: Take a break and go spend some time with someone you enjoy. You may be surprised at the [motivating impact](#) this has and find yourself much more clear and productive when you return to your work. And then look for ways that you can begin to build more [networking and joint venturing](#) into your work.

9) You're demotivated by burnout

I attract overachieving Type A's, and as a recovering Type A myself, I know that sometimes we're banging on about wanting to get more done even after we've exceeded the limit on what's [sustainable](#). If you're feeling tired all the time, you've lost your energy for socializing, and the idea of taking a snooze sounds more compelling than the stuff you're usually interested in, then you've probably pushed yourself too long and hard and you may be burned out.

Your Essential Self will always work to motivate you to move toward what you most need and away from goals, projects, and ways of working that take you away from what your Essential Self craves. So if you're burned out and needing sleep, your Essential Self may even sap the motivation from the things that you're usually really ignited about – just to get you to meet your core needs again.

How to get motivated again: Sleep. And then when you're done sleeping and the quality of your thinking has been restored, check back in with your Essential Self about what's most important to you, hang out here on Charlie's blog, and start building sustainable ways to do more of what's important to you.

10) You're demotivated by not knowing what to do next

Your end-goal might be nice and clear, but if you haven't taken time to chunk it down into smaller goals, you'll get stuck, confused, and unmotivated when it's time to take action. Some projects are small and familiar enough that they don't need a plan, but if you're often worrying that you don't know what to do next and you don't have a clear plan, then this might be the source of your demotivation.

How to get motivated again: If you want to keep your motivation flowing steadily through all stages of your projects, take time to create clear project plans and to [schedule your plans into your calendar](#).

Use your fears to point you to the potential risks you need to manage in your plan. Write down all of your “I-don’t-know-how-to” concerns and turn these into research questions. The first part of any planning stage is research, and you’ll find new research questions along the way, so realize that conducting research should be part of your action plan at every stage of your project. Finally, ask yourself what smaller goals need to be achieved for you to achieve your end-goal, and schedule deadlines for yourself.

Goal-setting and pushing are rarely the answer

Goal-setting, planning, organizing, and accountability structures are often touted as the big solution to

demotivation and the silver bullet that will get you creative and productive again, but notice that it’s a useful strategy for dealing with only some types of demotivation. With many other types of demotivation, goal-setting, planning, organizing, and accountability structures will only make your demotivation problem worse.

Over to you...

- Have you been able to pinpoint the types of demotivation that you tend to struggle with most?
- Are you stuck in demotivation right now?
- What do you need, and which motivation strategy is going to give you what you need right now?

The 3 Tribes Within Your Tribe *by Marissa Bracke*

Editor's note: *This is a guest post from Marissa Bracke*

We all know that our businesses depend on people, and much of the advice about growing your business focuses solely on getting more people to know, like, and trust you or your business. Scaling communications and relationships is incredibly challenging, though, and what adds to the challenge is that the kinds of people coming through your door changes.

As your blog or business grows, there are three identifiable tribes of people who will surround it:

1. The people who have been around since your early days and humble beginnings,
2. Those who have joined your tribe as the blog or business developed and are solidly your "right people,"
3. Those who show up when you start getting Big and getting some social media attention, and bring a lot of buzz and excitement with them.

Understanding each of these tribes is essential, not just because of the marketing or sales implications (though those exist too), but because of the impact each group can have on your energy level as you approach your work each day.

Tribe 1: The Core Supporters

Your tribe of Core Supporters consists of those people you can email, DM or call when you're energetically tapped out, creatively mired, or simply stressing over the day-to-day grind. Tribe 1 folks are the pillars of your business because they're usually the first to know about, buy, and promote the heck out of all you do – but they're also pillars because of the intangible support they offer. In the times when business is rough, blog traffic is down and you're unsure whether you should keep trudging forward, Tribe 1 is there to [give you a boost](#) and help you regain momentum.

Tribe 1 is a permanent fixture. They stick around – and you're really glad they do. This isn't a huge tribe; in fact, it's probably relatively small. If you were a rock star, these are the folks who wouldn't even need a backstage pass to get past your bouncers, because they're such a mainstay of your crew. When you think of the people without whom you'd feel downright lost, you're thinking of your Core Supporters.

Tribe 2: The Fans

Tribe 2 is much larger than Tribe 1, and a bit more fluid. The people who create Tribe 2 are those who get past your Red Velvet Rope. They're your [True Fans](#) and your happy, returning customers or clients.

Your Fans are also a pillar for your business, because they're the ones financially supporting what you do. Without Tribe 2, you'd still be appreciated, cared about and creatively nurtured (by Tribe 1), but you'd probably be cash-poor. Tribe 2 is the heart of your financial viability.

While less of a permanent fixture than Tribe 1, the people of Tribe 2 are slow to move on once they're in the tribe. They eagerly anticipate your products and services, and they're in no hurry to rush off to an unknown "next big thing" when they feel at home in your tribe. When you think of the people for whom you tailor your services and without whom your rent would go unpaid, you're thinking of your Fans.

Tribe 3: The Flash Mob

Tribe 3 is huge – it easily dwarfs Tribe 1 and Tribe 2. Its size alone means that Tribe 3 carries a great deal of energy, traffic and power. One day of Tribe 3's attention can spike traffic to a blog more than a month of Tribes 1 and 2's loyal page clicks.

Tribe 3, however, is also the most fleeting and dynamic tribe.

Tribe 3 is the Flash Mob of the internet. Its people flock to the latest Big Idea, ReTweet the day's hot articles, send previously unknown hashtags into Trending Topic status, and create "buzz." But Tribe 3 moves quickly, and has an notably brief attention span. There's a lot of action and hullabaloo around Tribe 3, but not a lot of staying power. When you think about that elusive but sexy flurry of ReTweeters around a "hot" blog post or topic, or all of those one-time-only commenters on that one post that got more hits than any other on your whole site, you're thinking of Tribe 3.

The Three Tribes & Your Energy Investments

When you first begin your endeavor – your business, your blog, your rock band, etc. – you've got Core Supporters. As soon as you start making your product and your art available to the world, you'll develop some Fans. Both Tribes will probably expand as your endeavor develops. But what you won't have, at least not immediately, is a Flash Mob.

So initially you invest your energy in your interactions with Tribes 1 and 2. Your Energy Investment in Tribe 1 always pays off tenfold – you give and receive brainstorming exchanges, challenging conversations that push past boundaries, and endeavor-furthering advice and support. Your Energy Investment in Tribe 2 is your work on products, expanding your services, and broadening your reach, and in return you receive sales, an attentive audience, active affiliates, traffic growth, and consistent social media interactions.

Then, one day, a Flash Mob arrives. Perhaps you've caught the eye of a Big Name blogger who linked to you. Or maybe your latest post got a whirlwind of ReTweets. Or it could be that your product just got highlighted in a national magazine. Whatever the catalyst, the Flash Mob has arrived. You see unprecedented traffic spikes, a rush of sales, and flurries of comments. Congratulations – you just got your Tribe 3.

This is exciting, because Tribe 3 generates a lot of conversation and aforementioned buzz. But this is also a tenuous position, because you'll be tempted to significantly alter your Energy Investment.

Don't.

The Fatigue of Growth Comes from Energy Expended on Tribe 3

Unlike your Energy Investments in Tribes 1 and 2, energy you invest in chasing Tribe 3's attention is seldom proportionately returned. Unlike the steady but less explosive returns on your Energy Investments in Tribes 1 and 2, you can spend inordinate amounts of time and effort trying to target and please Tribe 3 and have no real gain to show for your trials.

The problem is that once the Flash Mob arrives, we tend to change what we're doing in accordance with what we think will keep it near us – we forget (or we just don't see) that Tribe 3 is, by its nature, temporary and amorphous. It's a great burst, but it's not a pillar of our endeavor.

Tribe 3 is, however, very vocal. When Tribe 3 arrives at your doorstep, your inbox and your Twitter stream will show it. And because you're used to the interactions you have with Tribes 1 and 2, you respond to Tribe 3 in the same way. You attempt to forge the same levels of personal interaction and attention with the Tribe 3 people that you have with Tribes 1 and 2. But because Tribe 3 is less invested in you and your endeavor, they don't stick around or give back to you in a way that balances the energy you're expending.

It's only when your inbox reaches an unmanageable girth, you're weeks behind on responding to DMs, and you're feeling completely unable to connect to people or get your creative juices flowing like you used to that you start to realize something's gone awry.

That *something* is your Energy Investment. When

you feel the fatigue of growth, it's often because you're spending a lot of energy on Tribe 3. And that isn't an investment with a steady enough return to sustain you over an extended period of time.

Enjoy The Flash Mob – But Don't Burn Out Striving For It

The Tribe 3 Flash Mob brings with it distinct benefits: those traffic spikes, those sales rushes, that glow of social media attention. Enjoy it! Revel in it. Soak it in.

And then go back to what you were doing before the Flash Mob arrived.

Keep your Energy Investments focused on Tribes 1 and 2. They're your pillars and they're the people who will be there after the Flash Mob has flown to its next target of momentary interest. A few folks from the Flash Mob might make the transition to a Fan and stick around. But if you're no longer investing your best efforts and gifts in Tribes 1 and 2, you'll never notice.

Remember: the Flash Mob didn't show up because you would be hip if only you altered what you were doing; rather, the Flash Mob appeared because what you were doing already was hip, and they wanted to be a part of it. **By returning to the solid, consistent work you were doing before they arrived, you'll give them something to return for later.**

So when you're feeling bulldozed by the clamor for your attention and time, pause to consider from what tribe that clamor stems – remember, Tribe 3 is loud but fleeting.

Ultimately, your success depends not on your ability to hold the attention of the Tribe 3 Flash Mob, but on your continued investment in the pillars of your endeavor: your Tribe 1 Core Supporters and your Tribe 2 Fans.

Have you noticed a difference in your own energy when you invest it in your Core Supporters and Fans versus the elusive Flash Mob? What are your strategies for refocusing on your endeavor's pillars?

Why You're Undervaluing Yourself (and How to Stop)

by Ali Luke

Editor's note: *This is a guest post by Ali Luke of [Aliven-tures](#).*

Do you feel uncomfortable charging for your creativity? Maybe you're an illustrator – you draw because you love to, but you can't bring yourself to ask people to pay fifty dollars for something which, to you, seems like a glorified doodle. Perhaps you're a writer and you can't understand why anyone would pay you fifty dollars or more for a blog post. Or you're a coach, a programmer, a graphic designer, a cake decorator, a social media expert...

Whatever it is you do (or *want* to do), there are a couple of things you should know:

- You are *good* at this – even if that statement causes knee-jerk resistance
- There are a lot of people who cannot do what you do and who are more than happy to pay you

So why does it feel weird to charge someone for your particular skill? Why does the voice in your head ask *Who in their right mind would pay for THAT? And who do you think you are to sell yourself as a writer, an artist, a coach, a designer? Who made YOU an expert?*

Since leaving my day job and striking out on my own – first as a writer and website handy person, now just as a writer – I've talked to a lot of people who find the idea of freelancing intriguing and attractive, but in one way or another feel that it's not for them. Three main issues crop up – which are probably causing you discomfort about charging a fair rate, or even preventing you launching into business altogether:

- Taking your skills for granted
- Wondering why people pay for your skills, given that you wouldn't
- Focusing on your flaws

I want to explore each of these – and suggest some ways for you to start getting a more accurate perspective about the value of what you do.

Taking Your Skills for Granted

I've always enjoyed writing, experimenting with stories, essays and journalistic pieces at school, then studying English at university. Words come naturally to me: I think best with a pen in my hand, I've been blogging on and off since the age of eighteen, and the only online game I've ever played was entirely textual...

I imagine that you might have a similar story about your chosen area. Many of us get started in childhood: perhaps with drawing, singing, or dancing. Others find their passion in their teens: a musical instrument, acting, computer programming, even teaching. **When you've been doing something for so long that it's become second nature, you tend to take it for granted.**

You also enjoy whatever it is you do. Of course, there are times when it's tricky, frustrating or requires a lot of creative energy – but, in one way or another, you wouldn't be you if you weren't a writer, or an artist, or a coach, or a singer, or a musician. You'd carry on using your particular skill, in some form or another, whether or not you were being paid for it. In a very real way, [your art is simply what you do](#).

So how can you step outside your own experience, the utter naturalness of being an artist, writer, coach, etc?

Look at the time you've invested.

How long have you spent learning, practicing and using this particular skill? Chances are, it's taken years of your life. I can't say exactly how many hun-

dreds of hours I've spent writing – not to mention reading great books, reading about writing, and listening and talking to writers – but it's a *lot* of time.

You weren't born with the ability to draw, sing, act, program a computer or play the ukulele. You've built up your skill over time – whether through formal training or, more likely, hours of experimentation and play.

You Wouldn't Pay for Your Skills – But Others Will

Perhaps you've not yet consciously acknowledged this hang-up, but I suspect you have it. You wouldn't pay for your own skills – which makes it very hard to judge what they're worth to other people.

Since writing comes easily for me, the thought of *paying* someone to write is seriously hard to get my head around. When I create a website, I write all the copy myself. When I want a press release, again, I work it out myself. So charging people a professional rate for my writing automatically causes some level of anxiety: I wouldn't ever pay \$50 for a blog post – I'd just write one myself – yet some of the blogs I write for pay upwards of that.

Your sellable skills probably began as hobbies, and the idea of paying someone to do something enjoyable is *weird* – especially if you're in a culture [where work focuses on the money, rather than on doing something fulfilling](#).

So how can you step outside your own set of circumstances, interests and skills to see yourself from a different perspective?

Well, you *know* that there are people who would find that what you do impossible. I've met people who struggle immensely to express themselves in writing. Recognising the truth of this may mean **translating what you do into another field**. For example, I have little skill with visual design or illustration, and I have no particular interest in this area. If I wanted a logo, I'd happily pay for one. However,

I know that there are plenty of people who draw for fun (my butt-kicking partner, [Willie Hewes](#), is one of them).

What looks like hard, thankless and difficult work to you is someone else's play. Your particular creative skill is fun and natural for you – but there are millions of people out there who'd be all too glad to pay you for it.

Most People Can't See Your Flaws

As you advance in a particular creative area, you'll find yourself more and more aware of what you *don't* yet know. You'll be able to see the flaws and imperfections in what you create. And because you know it's not perfect, you'll have some resistance to charging for it.

What many creatives don't realise is that, to someone who's a complete newbie in your field, your skills are indistinguishable from an expert's. Plus, they don't need (and can't afford) someone who really is a guru.

Unless you actually trying to defraud people, you have no reason to see yourself a fraud. You have certain skills you can offer the world, and whether or not you don't appreciate them, other people can. You may not see yourself as a 10 on the old sliding scale, maybe you're a 5, but let me tell you this: To people who are a 0, 1 or 2, your 5 might as well be a 10. You have value they need.

(Dave Navarro, [7 Steps to Playing a Much Bigger Game \(With Workbook\)](#), The Launch Coach)

This came home to me when my younger sister showed me a painting she'd done. She's been drawing and painting since early childhood: I'd spent weekend afternoons writing; she'd get out a sketchbook and draw. To me, her painting looked perfect. To her, there were (apparently!) obvious flaws – the brushwork, the composition.

You see the flaws in your work *because* you are highly skilled. Depending on your field, a high skill level may not even be required. I'm a better writer than

I am a “techy” person, but I was able to charge for website services because the limited skills I have are useful to people who are baffled by buying a domain name. Don’t wait until you’re perfect - your skills are already of value.

One of the best ways to get over your sense of your own flaws is to simply carry on. **Keep providing your services or putting your creative work out there – and take the feedback you receive seriously.** Trust the opinion of those who hire you. Many of the editors I write for have praised me for doing a “great job”. That’s the reality, however much I recognise that I’m no Pulitzer Prize winner.

Revaluating Your Skills

Here are three questions to think about:

- How long have you been practicing your par-

ticular skill(s)? (How many years have you spent writing? When did you start drawing? etc...)

- Why do you feel uncomfortable charging for something which you would do for fun?
- Who would be delighted to pay you for your skills?

And just as a postscript here – I know that when I read this sort of post, I think that I must be the exception. I’ll nod along in agreement, and see how the advice applies to everyone else ... just not to me. But here’s the truth: you are not the exception. Everything here applies to you.

I’d love to hear your thoughts on any of this – whether you’re still considering how to make money as a creative, whether you’re uncomfortable about the idea of raising your prices, or whether you’re completely at peace with what you charge for what you do.

How Being Busy Means Not Being Creative

by Ali Luke

Editor's note: This is a guest post by Ali Luke of [Aliven-tures](#).

Here's a word: *productive*.

Here's another word: **busy**.

All too often, we act as though those two words mean the same thing. But they don't: being *productive* doesn't equal being *busy*. And the correlation between *productive* and *busy* is weak at best: being busier doesn't necessarily make you more productive.

Here's a third word: *creative*.

Add that one into the mix, and things turn sour. I'll spare you the Venn diagram, but *busy* and *creative* don't tend to overlap.

You've probably experienced this first hand. You have a creative *thing* which you do, a process where you make something unique and put something of yourself, your individuality, into it. When you're busy, that creativity stalls. When your mind is on the dozen other things you need to get done, you're locked out from that creative zone.

Busyness is antithetical to creativity. If you've ever tried to *force* creativity, you'll know this. Chances are, you can push onwards, cramming your creative work into thin slices of time, but it's like driving with the handbrake on: it's not doing you, or your work, any good.

Busyness is Shallow

When you're busy, your attention is constantly on the moment. You obsess over this half-hour, this email, this task on the to-do list, and your focus isn't on enjoying each task and giving it the value

it needs – but on getting through it so that you can get on with the next thing.

You end up focusing on what needs to be done today – rather than on what you want to achieve this year. Busyness can be seductive: it offers a caffeine-like buzz of scrambled thoughts; it can be a way to show off to the people around you; it may even reassure you that you're a good and productive person.

Being busy means adopting tunnel vision, constantly focusing ahead, with no time to deviate, to wander, to glance at the richness and the possibilities all around you.

When you're busy, you miss out on getting any real depth. Maybe you end up cutting out time you'd spend in meditation, prayer or reading. You find yourself putting off creating until another day. That novel stays in the bottom drawer. That painting gathers dust in your studio.

Busyness Stops You Dreaming

My creative material is words, and a good portion of those are spent on fiction. I'm taking a part-time MA in creative writing, learning from some great and generous authors. One theme which comes up often is the need to dream. Creativity activity is fundamentally different from much of what we do when we're busy. Whether you work with words or paint, pixels or code, your creativity comes from somewhere beneath the surface chatter of conscious thoughts.

During your life, you'll have had ideas come to you at the most unexpected times, often when your mind isn't on anything in particular. Whatever does it for you – country walks, long baths, meditation, exploration, daydreaming – there's a fair chance that, when you're busy, those gaps of time get crushed out of your life.

When you go into a creative session, it takes a while to get into flow. If my mind is too clogged with what's already happened in the day, or if I know I've got other things to finish before bed, it's very hard to enter that creative zone.

Productivity Isn't About Outputs

When we get in a tangle and try to match up creativity with productiveness with busyness, it's often because we've been taught to align productivity with outputs – particularly measurable outputs: words written, hours worked, widgets cranked.

But being productive isn't about being able to point to items ticked off on a to-do list. **It's possible, indeed, easy, to be very busy and active without producing anything worthwhile.** You could train yourself to type faster and write two thousand

words an hour, but they'll never be great literature; chances are, they'll never even be publishable.

Creating a single stunning painting, or a single haunting piece of music, is far more "productive" than trying to make ten mediocre ones.

Being truly productive often means eschewing busyness. That may mean making sacrifices (financial or otherwise) for the sake of having the necessary space to create. It may mean being deliberately, even brazenly, counter-culture by insisting that more is not better, and by finding your own meaning rather than letting society dictate your life to you.

What would you rather leave when you're gone – an empty inbox, or a masterpiece that touches the lives of people you'll never meet?

Launch Fatigue and How Not to Be an Infomercial

by Marissa Bracke

Editor's note: *This is a guest post by Marissa Bracke.*

I'm *exhausted*. I spend more time trying to discern valuable, stand-alone content and content that's pushed primarily to hoist an offer on me than I do enjoying the content. It's as if someone coopted the watercooler for advertising space. **What I've got is a bad case of launch fatigue.**

The same streams we turn to for communication and connection are flooded by a relentless stream of products. It used to be that blogs were primarily vehicles for [conversations](#) and suggestions and general ponderings, and sales were confined to service or product pages. But of late, people use their blogs to ramp up their launches with a series of product-oriented blog posts... which is fine, except *everyone* is doing it, and everyone is feeling pressure to do it.

At the same time, we're all leaning heavily on our Twitter networks (or being leaned heavily on) to tweet the living daylights out of every single product and service we offer. Which again is fine... except everyone is doing it. *All* the time.

The pre-launch blog post (and guest post) spree is the new mass email. It's the blogosphere's version of a press junket for celebrities. The twitter launchfest is the new flyer-on-every-windshield. It's heralded as The Way To Succeed, so everyone does it. And if you're not currently doing it, you're feeling pressured to do so.

It seems that Launch Fatigue has set in, and entrepreneurs are feeling it, both as launchers and as audience members.

To launch, and to promote launches via blog or Twitterfest, is not inherently negative. The reason it's heralded as The Way To Succeed is that it is, in fact, a good way to succeed.

What has many folks—me included—waving a white flag of launch surrender is the ubiquitousness and unrelenting, suffocating volume of it all.

If we're all constantly launching, and we're all constantly supporting one another in our constant launches, it stands to reason that before too long, our communication ports are going to be jam-packed with... launches.

And they are. From blogs posting about the author's products to blogs posting about affiliate products to pre-launch tweets to mid-launch tweets to post-launch thanks-for-the-tweets... it's all launching, all the time. It's as if someone secretly replaced social media's conversation and connection with a steady drip of infomercial and hoped no one would notice.

I'm noticing. I suspect I'm not alone.

Don't fatigue me, bro

As an audience member, it's easy to reach a point of launch saturation. You've gotten several emails from different people about offers—theirs and their affiliate partners'. You've been bombarded by Tweets with links to the same offers. You've been on teleclasses promoting the offers. You've read blog post after blog post touting the products. While part of you is thinking, "This must be a good product if it's got so much momentum behind it," another part of you is thinking, "I am so sick of hearing about this product, and it hasn't even been released yet." (Or, "I'm so sick of hearing about *offers* in general!")

Part of the reason your audience subscribed to your blog or followed you on Twitter or signed up for your newsletter is that they liked what you had to say. They connected with you. They got value out of the conversations you lead.

It's vital that we not inadvertently dismiss that core connection in our attempts to Never Stop Launching. We need to make room for the conversation that originally brought us together with our followers or friends or subscribers. And because the opportunities to launch and promote launches are plentiful (and increasing every day), it's imperative that we consciously make room for that conversation so as to avoid allowing our launch fervor to squeeze it out.

If you know you've got a big launch coming up next month, then ease up on the affiliate pushes for a couple of weeks. If you've been pushing affiliate products every single week for the past month and a half, give your audience some down time before you start your Here Comes My New Product pre-launch blog post series.

Acknowledge that your followers/fans/friends/list members are getting walloped with offers. Realize that *even if you really, truly believe that your offers are stupendous and vital*, they are drops in an ever-more-quickly-filling bucket of offers being dumped on the social media sphere, and that what your followers/friends/audience may need more than anything—even more than your stupendous and vital and awesome offer—is a breather. A chance to converse with you with no subtext and no underlying launch timeline. An opportunity to read your blog without looking for the “buy here” or “sign up if you want to be the first one notified!” links.

What your audience might benefit most from is the chance to be people to you again, instead of just “audience” or “potential customers.”

The difference between you and an infomercial

You don't have to stop launching. But pausing the *push* of products and offers in order to make room for that core conversation and connection to thrive is the only thing that separates you from being an infomercial.

Infomercials, after all, can be thought-provoking and personable. They can be humorous and timely. They can be useful and informative. What they can't be is genuinely anchored in connection or conversation, because their ultimate, sole and unyielding purpose is selling you something. They cannot connect with the audience members as anything other than potential sales. Any connection with the audience is connection for the sake of sales, and as the audience we know that. There's a tacit understanding that even if the infomercial host is likeable and engaging, they're really just after our wallets.

If you never take a break from *selling*, you become an infomercial. You might still provide useful content and humor and a personable front, but eventually, your readers/audience will come to understand that it's all surface, and that you interact for the sake of their money, not for the sake of actual connection. (And maybe that's absolutely fine with you. That's a business model too, and it serves some folks well. There's a reason infomercials are so prevalent.)

But if you're a connection-oriented entrepreneur for whom it's important to maintain the connections and sustain the conversation on which your business is built, your interactions with your audience must sometimes be from a place other than The Launch. You must sometimes relinquish the dollar value of a few affiliate sales in favor of the perhaps less tangible—though arguably no less rewarding—value of connection for connection's sake. You've got to interact with your audience as individuals and not as potential sources of commission or sales. Otherwise, you eventually become just a really talented infomercial host.

Launcher Fatigue

As creative entrepreneurs, the pressure to always be selling and never stop launching is significant. While many of us pay lip service to the idea of slowing down, simplifying and fostering our connections, we tend to jump at the chance to promote every launch within our network, fearing that if we don't, the person launching will dismiss us from his network or affiliate program. We tend to view any downtime

in our own creative cycles as space that “should” be filled with active promotion.

And then we collectively lament our exhaustion, yearn for a solution, and soon wind up promoting the latest manifesto on simplification or e-book about slowing down. (Wash, rinse, repeat.)

The pressure to promote, to launch, to hype the latest offering *is never going to subside*. A little of that pressure is good: it keeps us motivated, aware of the necessity of forward motion, and juiced for good opportunities. But too much of that pressure is stifling and fatiguing. Trying to work at the speed of that pressure is unsustainable.

The only solution is to draw your own line of when enough is enough, both for you and your audience. What’s enough for you and your audience might vary greatly from what’s right for me and my audience. But here’s a tip: If you’re feeling launch fatigue, your audience probably is too.

Draw your own line

Do you suffer from launch fatigue, either as bombarded audience member or as weary launcher? How do you draw the line and create space for conversation and connection?

12 Simple Ways to Be Present

by Charlie Gilkey

Learning to be present cures a lot of ills and prevents them from happening in the first place. ([Tweet this](#))

Frustration, anxiety, regret, and worry often come about because we're consumed by thinking about the past or the future. Past-focused thinking anchors onto what we coulda/shoulda/mighta done, whereas future-focused thinking latches onto worries and fears of uncertainty.

But we can't change the past, and as Thomas Jefferson remarked, "How much pain they have cost us, the evils which have never happened."

As with [meditation](#), there are more ways to be present than by lighting incense and sitting in the lotus position. This post explores other ways of bringing yourself back to where you are in this moment, and (gasp!) some of them may actually be things you want to do.

I have these ordered by how simple they are to do. Items earlier on the list are things you can do pretty easily and won't require any major disruption to your work or whatever flow you're in. Items further down on the list require a little more effort but also will likely have a bigger presence payoff.

As I mentioned in [21 Ways to Quickly Short-Circuit a Funk](#), look for ways that you can stack these tips. For instance, "step away from all electronics," "get some nature therapy," and "play with kids and animals" all go really well together. "Play with kids and animals" and "take a meditation moment," not so much.

1. Drink Water

My military trainers apparently went to the same school of life as my football coaches, because for anything that ailed you, the instruction was always "drink water."

Headache? Drink water.
Sprained ankle? Drink water.

Homesick? Drink water.
Nervous? Drink water.
Confused? Drink water.
Sore? Drink water.
Hungry? Drink water.
Hot? Drink water.
Cold? Drink water.

As asinine as it may seem, they were right. For every one of the items above, drinking water has a positive effect, but I'm going to focus on emotional states like being homesick.

Drinking water works because:

- it makes sure your emotional state isn't a reflection of your being dehydrated
- it makes you slow down and breathe
- it gets you to take a mini-break from whatever external situation you're in

So I'll just join my lineage of coaches and trainers. Want to be more present? Drink water. (20 ounces / .5L is a good guide.)

2. Breathe Deeply

Speaking of my lineage, there's a technique known as [combat breathing](#) that has you breathe in while counting to 4, hold for 4 counts, and breathe out for 4 counts. Repeat for 3--5 breaths.

The technique is used by athletes, first responders, police officers, soldiers, and other people in high-stress environments. You don't need to be under fire to be in a high-stress environment, and there's no need to reserve a perfectly good presence technique for only when you're in a high-stress situation.

You can use the technique between every email you send or perhaps after doing 10 minutes of [email processing](#). Or maybe it's between meetings. Or during meetings when you're not talking.

Again, the trick here is that it's hard to do it without being present, so it makes for a great way to slide into being present.

3. Wiggle Your Toes

Seriously. Our toes are anomalies from the rest of our bodies, for they're one of the movable parts of our bodies that we don't reflexively move or incorporate into the rest of our motion or lack thereof. Our toes are just there, not moving.

Rather than over-thinking this one, trust me and do the following:

- Scrunch your toes up to make a toe fist
- Wiggle them
- Stretch them out
- Focus on moving your big toes without moving the rest of them
- Now do whatever feels right for your toes
- Did you notice that you couldn't really think about anything else while you were actively moving your toes? You might also be noticing other parts of your body.

The great thing about wiggling your toes is that you can do it in social situations and no one will notice. I've had breathing and toe-wiggling in my grab-bag of responses to social stress for years now -- so much so that I almost forgot to include them here.

Toe-wiggling is also a reminder for me about the love, presence, support, gratitude, and forgiveness that are available to me if I were only to be present to and activate them. The fact that those reminders are tied to something as silly as toe-wiggling reinforces my experience that spiritual insight comes from being silly and joyful as much as from being "focused" on doing my inner work.

4. Stretch

No list like this would be complete without including stretching. A stiff, constricted body leads to anxiety, and it's hard to be present when you're anxious.

William James remarked that "we don't smile because we're happy; we're happy because we smile." His insight was that we can use our bodies to create moods. Stretching helps us be present in the same way that smiling helps us be happy.

Why? Our "fight or flight" response is triggered not just by outside stressors but also when our bodies are tense. This response can lead to a feedback loop whereby we're anxious because our bodies are tense and we're tense because we're anxious.

Stretching short-circuits this loop, so we're more likely to be present. Aside from the general relaxing of your body, focused stretching also incorporates breathing deeply.

5. Take a Meditation Moment

As I discussed with Susan Piver in [Demystifying Meditation](#), there are some misunderstandings about meditation that prevent a lot of people from benefiting from it. Chief among those are that it's something that requires a lot of time to do and that people just don't know how to meditate because they believe there's some particular way it must be done.

That said, I know it can be hard to sit somewhere for 5--10 minutes with your own thoughts.

If you don't have a meditation practice, I highly recommend using Insight Timer because it has guided meditations of varying lengths. Tara Brach's "Gateway to Presence" guided meditation is 10.5 minutes long and, while short for my normal practice, is great for taking a meditation moment. (Her other meditations are quite good, too.)

Susan also shares a new 10-minute meditation every week in her [Open Heart Project](#) and you get access to the last four of them, so just follow along every week and save your favorites on your computer or phone so you have some go-to, accessible meditations at the ready when you want to take a meditation moment and be present.

6. Take a Jam Break

Have you ever been belting out your favorite song in the shower or in the car and realized that for the last 45 seconds, you were 100% in the moment? Or have you busted a move because you simply could not not-move while listening to that song, only to realize that you've been dancing in front of strangers?

It's good stuff, embarrassment aside.

Let's be intentional about it, though. Depending on where you work, cranking up the music and dancing may not be an option, but some creative thinking and recon may illuminate places you can go to have a jam party. (If I could find safe jam spots while being deployed, I'm sure you can find safe jam spots in your environment.)

Your jam break may include listening to music, singing, dancing, or playing an instrument. Bonus points if you can do all four.

What's important here is that it's music that you really feel and it sinks you into that special place that only your favorite music can take you. For musicians, I'm not talking about practicing - I'm talking about playing. (You know the difference.)

Whether it's one song or 10 minutes of jamming, it's a great way to be right in the music and in your body. And have fun while doing it.

7. Step Away from All Electronics (Including Your Phone)

You might think that it's just the notifications that are pulling you out of presence, but it's deeper than that. Given the ways that our brain works, when we touch tools, we start to reflexively do the activities that those tools help us do.

Pick up a hammer and you start looking for things to hammer AND your arm is primed to do the hammering.

Try this: touch your phone and pay attention to where your mind and fingers start to go.

When I do this in live workshops or with my clients, most of them notice that they start reflexively thinking about checking stuff on their phone, and their fingers start moving to those apps.

So, next time you're wanting to be present, step away from all electronics (including your phone) so that you're not priming your mind and body to do all of the activities that are probably what's keeping you from being present in the first place.

You might be wondering how you're going to keep track of time. Consider getting a for-real watch so you're not tied to your phone. You might also consider getting an iPod Nano or a Fitbit, which help you listen to music or exercise (respectively). They're much better servants without the chance of becoming your master like smartphones are. (When's the last time you wanted someone to look up from their watch to have a conversation with you or had to practice not looking at your watch at the dinner table?)

8. Shut Off All But Critical Notifications from Your Devices

I mentioned notifications above, so let's wrap back around. You've probably already heard tips about shutting off email notifications, and that's sound counsel. I want to take it a step further and think about all notifications from all of your devices.

I'll start with a question: does knowing that someone just liked your Instagram photo or Facebook post really nourish you? Does it matter in a deep way?

If not, then why get the notification that will pull you out of being in the present?

Same with emails. The fear keeping us tied to email is that we'll miss something important. The truth is that being tied to email means we're missing out on something even more important -- ourselves and the mundane magic right in front of us.

Try removing all but critical notifications from your devices for a week. If you don't like it, go back. If you miss something really important that could not wait until you looked for it, go back.

But take that week to come back to yourself.

Quick tip: if you use a Mac and an iPhone, create a "DND Passthrough" (DND = Do Not Disturb) list in Contacts on your computer and add people who you always want to be able to reach you. On your iPhone, go to Settings > Do Not Disturb > Allow Calls from [DND Passthrough]. Now you can leave your phone on Do Not Disturb without worrying that you'll miss calls and texts from your kids, family, friends, and others who you want to always pick up the phone for. Then batch-process your voicemails and texts just as you would your email. (I'm sure other phones can do this, but I'm not sure how because it's not the tech I use.)

9. Get Some Nature Therapy

There's a growing body of scientific literature that's showing a correlation between happiness and getting outside. For instance, in "[The Cognitive Benefits of Interacting with Nature](#)," the authors state that "[their] experiments demonstrate the restorative value of nature as a vehicle to improve cognitive functioning." Their hypothesis is that the types of stimuli that exist in nature focus our attention in ways that relieve stress, whereas the types of stimuli that exist in urban environments tend to induce stress responses. More simply put, interacting with nature allows our minds to restore and replenish.

In a similar vein, the authors of "[Environmental Preferences and Restoration: \(How\) Are They Related?](#)" show that viewing natural environments made people feel better and concentrate better than viewing built environments.

Yes, it takes some effort to get out of your house, car, office, and stores, but it's worth it. The constant buzzing, whirring, honking, and concrete mazes of modern existence take their toll on us.

10. Play with Kids and Pets

Aside from the exercise components and the way they get us to unplug, there's another really good reason to play with kids and pets: they fire up our oxytocin factories. Oxytocin -- sometimes called "the love hormone" or "the bonding hormone" -- is a key hormone that promotes trust, relaxation, and happiness in humans.

For instance, the authors of "[Oxytocin-gaze Positive Loop and the Coevolution of Human-Dog Bonds](#)" show that merely gazing at dogs increased oxytocin levels in their subjects. Many activities with children releases oxytocin as well.

While being happier and more trusting are good things, you might be wondering how they help you be present. [One theory](#) posits that oxytocin causes us to pay closer attention to socially relevant stimuli -- in short, it helps us be present with the people we're with.

Note: If having kids and pets isn't in the cards for you now or ever, you don't have to miss out on the oxytocin fun. Parents need some adult time and, in my experience, are quite happy to have unpaid sitters to get it. Borrow your neighbor's dog. Watch their cats. As every great uncle and aunt knows, you get to have a lot of fun and turn over the kids and pets to their real parents at the end of the day. Everybody wins!

11. Declutter Your Space

Clutter affects us in two ways: 1) it forces our brain to chunk clutter areas into one unified mass (to make sense of it), and 2) it reminds us of unfinished business. The stacks of papers, books, random wires in the closet, and other miscellanea tug at us more than we think they will. Even when we close the closet door, we know the stuff is there, waiting for us.

It's hard to be present in a cluttered space. One of the reasons many people have to leave their houses to actually think and reflect is that all of their unprocessed stuff is at their house and they can't think

with it all there.

If you want to explore decluttering without diving too deep, check out Joshua Becker's [The Simple Guide to a Clutter-Free Home](#). You don't have to be a minimalist to benefit from decluttering, but I've found that the less excess stuff I have, the more I'm able to be present with the stuff that really matters.

12. Ask "What Really Matters Now?"

While we're on the subject of clutter, consider your cluttered To-Do list. One great way to thwart your ability to be present is to be overwhelmed by everything you have to do *right now*.

I've worked with hundreds of people with their goal-setting, planning, and To-Do list-making, and I've rarely come across a "clean" list that's focused only on what really matters to the person right then. Usually, it's a hodge-podge of want-to's, need-to's, shoulds, might-do's, and need-to-think-about's. Throw in the tasks related to projects that are effectively dead and you get a cluttered, unfinishable, crazy-making list.

Sometimes the best thing that you can do to be present is step away from the list and ask "what really matters now?"

Here's how I suggest going about this:

1. Grab two clean pieces of paper or notecards.
2. Step away from your desk or working area.
3. Ask yourself "what really matters now?" without looking at your To-Do list.
4. Write down whatever comes up.
5. For each item on the list you just made, ask your-

self "does this really matter right now?" Scratch through any items that don't get a resonant yes from you.

6. Transfer the remaining items to the other piece of paper.
7. If nothing is time-sensitive for the next 30 minutes, do something else on this list. (Make sure to look at your calendar first.)
8. Come back, look at the list you made just before leaving, and work on whatever matters most. If you do this at the end of the day when you're really just looking at the screen and clicking buttons, consider not coming back at all.

To be clear, time-sensitive, important stuff on your list can matter. Important stuff that isn't necessarily due today can matter, too.

Many people find that when they get grounded in what really needs to happen now, there really aren't that many things that have to get done right now or at all. Remember: eliminating things from your list is a better strategy than learning a way to organize stuff on your list.

Any Presence Practice Will Work

If you're wondering which of the tips above are right for you, I have some very good news for you: any would be right for you. You can't go wrong with any of them AND some are more simple for you to do *right now*.

So, pick whichever tip most calls to you that you know you can do right now and go from there.

Over to you: do you have any tips or go-to practices that help you be present? I'd love to hear about them so I can explore them, too. :)

7 Ways to Write Better Action Items

by Charlie Gilkey

Do the items on your action lists tell you what actually needs to be done?

A routine observation from facilitating workshops and coaching people on issues related to productivity and strategy execution is that the way people are formulating action items simply isn't helping them. A well-written action item contains enough information to spur you into action rather than just serving as an anchor for you to then remember what needs to be done.

That's fairly abstract, I know, so an example here will help. Take the person who wants to write a business plan. Oftentimes, when I look at their action item for this, what shows up is something like "TPS Report."

That's it.

Now, imagine that they look at this list three weeks later. How likely is it that they'll remember what they were supposed to do with the TPS Report? Was it to review it? Edit it? Start it? Get some help on it? Send it to Manager Rob?

Rather than doing whatever they were supposed to do, they're now trying to figure out what they were supposed to do. All of this may sound obvious, but take a look at your action lists and see where these types of problems show up.

I use "action lists" rather than "To-Do lists" or "task lists" because sometimes we're talking about tasks and other times we're talking about projects and objectives that need to be completed. The same rules apply; an action is an action and you always complete the big things through discrete actions anyway.

Here are some great ways to write better action items:

1. Remember that the capture phase is different from the process phase.

Whether you use a formalized productivity system like GTD or a more intuitive, home-grown way of getting stuff out of your head, there are two discrete phases: capture and process. "Capture" is where you get stuff out of your head, whereas "process" is where you actually analyze what you've gotten out of your head. This distinction is much like the distinction between drafting and editing; the main goal of the capture phase is to get it out so you can see it, and the process phase is needed so that you can make sense of it.

The items below are all about what you do during the process phase after you've gotten your items captured.

2. Write each action item as if you were writing it to someone else.

Our action items are often shorthand codes for our current selves and are meant just to jog our memory. While this may work for things we might need to do today, what often happens is that a task we mean to do today gets booted into the future. Not to go metaphysical on you, but the person who reads the action item two months from now is a different person, who may not remember what that shorthand code meant.

I've found that when people write the items as if they were writing them to someone else, they write them the right way. That means their lives are easier in the future when they get to those action items, as well as in the now when they see the items and don't have to do a bunch of guessing about what needs to be done.

3. Use verb-noun constructs *at the beginning of the action item and all the way up.*

A verb-noun construct tells you what needs to be done to what; it automatically spurs action, which is what we want. In our “TPS Report” example above, adding a simple verb like “Draft TPS Report” creates a useful verb-noun construct. You now don’t have to guess what needs to be done; you’re left with figuring out how to do it, which is a substantial improvement.

“*All the way up*” means to use it not just for your tasks, but also for your projects, objectives, and so on. Whether you’re talking about something that’ll take you 10 minutes or 10 months, there’s still a verb in front of whatever it is.

Another thing to recognize about the power of verb-noun constructs: They make it apparent when you need to chunk a project into doable parts because the immediate question that comes up is “what needs to be done to do that?” If you know that you need to email Mike to ask him to send his QLM Matrix before you can finish the TPS Report, then it’s easy to see that the TPS Report is actually a multi-step project with sub-items. What other items are there? Not only that, [but the verbs that go in front of tasks and those that go in front of projects are normally different](#), again giving you a signal about how much work it’ll take to complete the thing in question.

4. If it needs to be done by a certain time, include the “when” in the task.

Do yourself a favor and make the default habit be that items with a time requirement always contain their due dates so that you develop the practice of immediately being able to distinguish between what needs to be completed anytime versus what needs to be completed at some specific time.

Also consider distinguishing between when something external is due and when you need to have it

completed. Again, back to our example: “TPS Report” could now be “Draft TPS Report by Thursday (due to Manager Rob by Friday).”

5. In team environments, always assign ownership for the action item.

This one can be tricky, because sometimes it’s clear who should do an item and you can make them responsible for it. However, in some cases, you’ll need to assign ownership just so that it gets done. Many managers and leaders fail to understand that if someone else isn’t assigned the item, then by default, the manager or leader is responsible for seeing it through, which often isn’t the intent; they want “somebody” to do it.

Remember, “somebody never does anything” – specified people do specified things.

6. Be clear about relay items.

Many action items are meant to spur the action of someone else in the chain of a project; think of a multi-person project as a relay race, wherein one person runs a piece of the race and hands off the baton to the next person. In our example above, Mike’s completion of the QLM Matrix enables the next step in the process, but if he completes it and doesn’t send it, then we have a relay fail. A lot of time is lost by poor handoffs, and days easily become workweeks. (Relays are one of the first things I look for in team workflows because streamlining them yields immediate and lasting benefits.)

When handling relays, you can either split the items into two discrete items – e.g., “Update QLM Matrix for Sarah by Wednesday” and “Send Updated QLM Matrix to Sarah by Wednesday” – or develop the internal habit of automatically sending the item to the next person in the chain. Well-functioning teams with effective people usually opt for the latter because they trust each other and the process.

7. Give context as a comment or note.

Giving context about the task – such as stating why the task is important or giving background information – can help you and whoever gets the task complete it better, and often motivates the person to do it. A whole horde of tasks can often appear as busy-work, but knowing where and why your work fits in can be incredibly helpful. You'd be surprised how much taking an extra 10 seconds to write a couple of sentences can affect the quality and timeliness of execution.

These steps are listed in a logical, sequential order that'll help you process each action item. You'll notice that the order moves from "What needs to be done?" to "by when?" to "by whom?" to "what next?" to "why?" You may not have a "by whom" if you work for or by yourself, but the rest of the steps are still relevant; on that note, many solopreneurs have trouble delegating precisely because they automatically assume that everything that needs to be done needs to be done by them.

Writing Better Action Items Is a Practice

[Most things that are worth doing take continual practice](#), and writing better action items is no different. I've ingrained these things as habits after doing and teaching them for so long and figuring out what works and what doesn't. Does it take some extra time? You bet. But much more time is usually wasted by poorly formulating action items because they're not spurring the actions needed to complete them.

Take the verb-noun construct rule. When there aren't verbs in front of action items, I actually get confused and immediately correct them mentally. It's a bit sad to admit that it causes me a bit of anxiety to see them because it opens an unhelpful curiosity loop. Years of practice make them pop out like misspelled words do to an editor.

And, like any other practice, it'll eventually become a habit. Getting stuff done is a lot easier when you have habits like these because it's one less thing you have to think about and make decisions on.

Over to you: Of the items listed above, which is the most challenging for you?

Get Up and Take Care of Your People

by Charlie Gilkey

The explosive blast and flash of the IED brought the convoy to a screeching halt. I sat in my Humvee for about 90 seconds before I decided to get out and see what was going on.

As I scurried up to the front of the convoy from the rear, I saw many airmen crouched underneath the hubs of the Humvees and five-ton trucks they were driving. They had dismounted properly and were trying to hold a secure position, but it was quite clear that they were terrified, confused, and lost.

Even more disconcerting than their sheer terror, though, was the fact that nothing was going on.

No one was moving. No one was shouting battle commands. There was just an eerie silence.

When I reached the third vehicle in the convey, it immediately became clear why the convoy was silent and motionless. The IED had taken out the Humvee with the convoy commander in it. Despite everything we had told them to do, the convoy commander had his senior sergeant — the assistant convoy commander — in the vehicle with him.

I had seen this time and time again. An inexperienced convoy commander pulls in some additional help in his vehicle, thinking that they'll be better able to figure out what to do. They almost never consider the contingency that their vehicle will be the one that's hit, and more often than not, theirs are the vehicles that are targeted. Any experienced veteran can immediately tell which vehicle is the command-and-control vehicle, and you always strike at the head of the snake. *Always.*

This whole convoy was stopped because the only people who knew what was going on were dead.

I continued to move to the front of the convoy to see whether the convoy was in a defensible position. The lead gun truck was standing by, waiting for orders.

At least this convoy still had some teeth to it, even though it didn't have a brain right now.

Since by now it had been two and half minutes since we stopped, I figured that we had about three minutes before the IED strike team would start ambushing the convoy. I'd seen this before, too. They would work from the back of the convoy, where no one was looking, and slowly but surely take out every single vehicle until they reached the front of the convoy. We had about three minutes before an orchestra of death and chaos would interrupt the still sound of these huddled soldiers.

About two-thirds of the way into the convoy, I saw the highest-ranking sergeant still alive huddling under the wheel wells of his Humvee.

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I walked up to him and asked, "What's going on, Sergeant? Why aren't people moving?"

He looked back at me and said, "I don't know, sir. I don't know." He was clearly confused and scared, had no idea what to do next, and was just waiting for somebody to tell him what to do. (He was calling me "sir" because I was an officer who outranked him.)

I looked around and looked back at him and said, "Who's the highest-ranking person around here in your convoy?"

He looked around and sheer terror came into his eyes. "I guess it's me, sir."

"All right. Who's in charge here?"

"I guess it's me, sir." His voice and chin quivered as he said this — he was barely holding it together.

"All right, Sergeant," I replied. "Here's what's going to happen. You've got about three minutes before this convoy gets eaten alive. You are the highest-ranking person here and you need to get up and get these people out of here. What's your next move, Sergeant?"

He replied, "I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"The captain and the first shirt didn't brief us." ("First shirt" is what airmen call the senior sergeants in their units.)

I had already anticipated this response. I'd seen the two leaders together, and that's usually a sign that they were hoarding information. **Now this lone sergeant had no idea what to do.**

"Well, Sergeant, you're in a bad situation. You can't stay here. You don't quite know where you're going to go, but if you stay here all of your soldiers will die. If you get them moving, you might live. Get up and get them out of here."

He looked more ready to act but not the least bit more clear about what to do.

It was time to get going, so I gave him a head start: "Get accountability of your people first. Figure out who you've got left."

"Oh, right!" Finally, some wits were coming back to him. "Smith, are you okay? Silverton, get a damage report from the rear of the convoy – I'm moving up front. Travis, grab your medical kit and come with me."

It was awkward but beautiful to behold. As he started galvanizing his team, they started helping him get the plan together. They were going to make it.

As I walked back to my rear vehicle, I called in to the IED strike team. "We're going to need to cancel that third engagement. They've had enough and have learned what they needed to learn."

Luckily for that sergeant and his team, this was just a training environment that I had sculpted for a large

Joint Force training exercise. Despite the fact that it was a training environment, it presented the terror, the confusion, and the brutality of what happens when a convoy is ambushed. The point of the training was to get teams to experience this before they went overseas – I didn't want them to learn the hard way like we had. My job was done.

The Battleground of Business

A lot of the entrepreneurs and businesspeople I talk to aren't that much different from that sergeant. They're scared, they don't know what's going on, and they're stuck under the wheels of their own business and creativity.

My heart reaches out the same way that it reached out to him. Their leaders didn't prepare them for this and instead sold the dream of entrepreneurship and business. When things go smoothly, it's all glory, campfires, and tall tales.

Or perhaps their leaders didn't have the time or capability to tell them. In the midst of the busyness of business, we all have to make some tough choices about what we will and won't share. People *like* the campfires and tall tales, and it's also pretty hard to share your moments of "weakness" when people expect you to be strong.

At the same time, people weren't told about the dark parts. They weren't trained in what to do when their business isn't working, or when their markets aren't responding, or when someone they thought was a friend steals the idea for an offer they were developing.

There are plenty of good parts to this life, but sometimes [it sucks](#). The truth of the matter is that at some point in their path, it's been bad for everyone that it's good for now. It's not you – it's just the life of business.

Fear, confusion, and inaction are valid responses to what's going on, and it's okay to feel them. In fact, it's probably necessary that you do so.

But you can't stay there and make any progress. The

longer you stay under the hub of that wheel, the easier you make it for the strike team of time to pick you and your business apart one piece at a time. You can move on your own, or time will move things for you.

The way ahead for you is the same as it was for that sergeant on that summer day: **get up and take care of your people.** Sure, the way you do it may be awkward, but it may be beautiful as well.

It would be better if you were properly trained, confident, and prepared for this, but you're not there. Welcome to the club of just about every other entrepreneur throughout history. You don't get to pick what you start with – you only get to pick how you use what you have.

Get up and take care of your people. *Now.*