

COLUMNS

Advice for the executive: Focus on what you can affect

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Eyes on the prize

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The best piece of advice I ever got: focus on the things you can affect. This is advice I have drawn on again and again in my career. It has been a challenge to master, and it is still a work in progress.

The first time I heard this advice was early in my career.

I was working in sales at Accrue Software, and I had a highly successful colleague who never seemed the least bit stressed, not even at the end of the quarter. I asked him what his secret was.

"Well, I focus on the things I can affect," he said. "If it's late in the game with a sales prospect, I make sure I know who's signing and that I've provided everything they need.

"If they decide not to sign or the person is out sick, there's nothing I can do to affect that. I'm not going to get all worked up and stressed about it. All I can do is focus on the pieces of the chess board I can move."

I put his advice to work for me in sales.

But it was not until 10 years later that it came back to me in another, more challenging situation.

Being eaten alive

I had just sold a company that I helped to build, Pilot Software, to a much bigger software company, SAP.

At Pilot, we decided to reduce the number of products we sold and supported from more than 20 products to just six where we could have the most impact. This was extremely difficult to do, since it meant walking away from a significant amount of revenue. But it was the launch point for a growth trajectory that made the company an attractive target for acquisition.

Little did I know that I would need even more focus after the deal closed.

In my leadership role at Pilot, I could affect a lot of different things.

But when I sold to SAP, I lost most of that control and influence. The acquirer was doing things I never would have

...from people who, frustrated at the cost and inefficiency of the system, had done things I never would have done, and undoing things that I had spent years building up. They were not always asking me for my opinion, and when they did, they did not always appreciate my input or follow my guidance.

There were a lot of great people at SAP, and some great coaches and mentors for me, but Pilot was my baby. I was getting extremely frustrated. I was at an inflection point, wondering, "How do I find happiness in this current situation?"

The advice, "Focus on what you can affect," came back to me. I had no other choice. I had to do it for my own sanity, because watching what was happening was eating me alive.

What I ended up doing was running a small sales team showing people how to sell the Pilot solution, rather than telling SAP leaders how to do it or telling them what the value of the Pilot solution was to SAP customers.

It gave me great satisfaction because now I was focusing on something that I could affect. That lent credibility to the things that I had been saying, and how SAP was using and selling Pilot changed as a result of that.

Daily dose

Many years and jobs later, I still think about this piece of advice almost every day.

Most of my professional roles have to do with building, or rebuilding. I do not like to go slow, and it is my nature to never be satisfied.

But in roles like those I have taken on, there usually comes a point where I have pushed my agenda as far as I can, on every front that I can, and people need time to absorb everything and work through their own change processes.

At those times, I pull back into my shell and re-focus on the things I can affect. That helps me to recharge my batteries. Eventually I'll be overflowing with energy and I will try to expand my area of influence again, and see what else I can affect.

I see lots of people who have that same drive and motivation, and who get frustrated and embittered by banging their heads against the wall trying to affect things over which they have no control. You can waste a lot of time and energy that way.

I ALSO SHARE this advice with somebody almost every single day, be it with my kids, my coworkers, or others with whom I interact. This is great advice for everybody.

In everything that we do in our lives, we have a tendency to get caught up in things we have no ability to impact or influence.

Whether you are running a business or raising a family, you have limited cycles. That is where the power of focus really comes in.

Focusing on the things you can affect also means letting go of the things you cannot. That is the key to living with less stress, and more happiness.



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