



The Effective Organization

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Routine Matters

In my years as a competitive fencer and as a jujitsu instructor, I've noticed a common theme: right after someone executes a really slick move, be that a piece of complicated bladework that lands a touch, or a really clean throw, their first reaction is to identify everything wrong with the maneuver. This often becomes such an ingrained habit that they don't even realize they are doing it. As anyone who has ever been criticized knows, it doesn't typically feel good, even - or perhaps especially - when it's self-criticism. By building up an expectation that every move will be inadequate and subject to criticism, the athlete creates a routine that puts them in a "failure" mindset.

Once I became aware of this phenomenon, I started looking for it in a business setting. Sure enough, I quickly found that people created all sorts of daily routines. Most of them, however, served only to waste time or create a failure mindset.

The problem for both the athlete and the businessman is that their routines just "happened." Sometimes when a routine just happens, it works out very well: the routine serves to focus and calm the person down, putting them in the right mindset to work

or compete. Most of the time, though, accidental routines are neutral at best, highly damaging at worst. So what's going on?

Routines are just habits that lead us through a sequence of events and produce a particular mindset at the end. For example, some people will always drink a cup of coffee and read the newspaper each morning. That puts them in the mental frame to begin the day. Successful athletes almost always have pre-competition routines that they practice religiously as part of their training. Like a habit, a routine becomes so ingrained that a person might not even realize that they are executing the same sequence of actions over and over. This is particularly true with an accidental routine. Unlike a habit, however, routines tend to fill the mind and thus guide the person from action to action.

With repetition, the mindset that is experienced at the end of the routine comes to be the expected mindset; the person starts to anticipate it as they move through their routine. Because the brain can only think about one thing at a time (yes, some people claim they can think about multiple things at once. In fact, they are switching between tasks very rapidly), the resultant mindset becomes the mental reality, and

Upcoming Events

November 29, 2007 -- *Building an Effective Development Organization*. At the Game Institute (www.gameinstitute.com).

January 9, 2008 -- *Dealing with Conflict in Client Organizations*. At the Society of Professional Consultants (www.spconsult.org).

January 31, 2008 -- *Exploiting the Constraints of the Medium -- Applying Lessons From Tabletop vs. Live Roleplaying to Computer Games*. At WPI Interactive Media and Game Development (www.wpi.edu).

For more information, please visit www.7stepsahead.com.

Publications

Start with Good Grapes, in the Worcester Business Journal.

The Use of Structured Goal Setting in Simulation Design in the Journal of Interactive Drama.

eventually the expectation filling the mind as the person contemplates beginning the activity.

Some people refuse to adopt any routines. This can be even worse. Without a routine, it becomes hard to focus on the tasks at hand. An effective routine helps someone

concentrate on what is important – the paper to be written, the customer, the software bug, etc – and ignore what is irrelevant – the loud coworker, construction noises from next door, the Dow Jones, etc. Without that focus, it becomes easy to be distracted from the task by whatever random stimuli happen to be in the local environment. When a large number of activities need to be fit into a day, a routine helps to organize the day and shape the time so that each activity leads into the next. Each block of time becomes a space in which a particular activity is the center of attention. Even in business settings where the day is full of unpredictable events, short routines can help restore focus and concentration after an interruption.

There are any number of ways to create an effective routine. A few key elements include:

- Decide ahead of time what you want the result to be.
- Imagine the outcome in as much detail as you can.

- Practice the routine religiously, always reminding yourself of the desired outcome.
- If you are setting time aside for a particular task, then always execute that task at the end. If you are creating a success mindset, imagine what success in your particular situation would feel like.
- Keep it simple. An effective routine may be nothing more than closing your eyes and breathing deeply for a few minutes.
- If you find yourself consistently in a bad mood, distracted, or discouraged at a particular point or after a particular routine, change the routine. It's hard to break a habit, but it's easy to start a new one.

Whether you fill your head with positive thoughts or with negative thoughts, that's all that there's room for when it's time to act.

If you're thinking continuous improvement, you're thinking...



About 7 Steps Ahead



Stephen R. Balzac is the president of 7 Steps Ahead, a consulting firm specializing in increasing individual, team, and organizational performance.

Steve has over twenty years of experience in the high tech industry and is the former Director of Operations for Silicon Genetics, in Redwood City, CA.

He serves on the boards of the New England Society of Applied Psychology (NESAP) and the Society of Professional Consultants (SPC). Steve is a member of the Operations Committee of the American Judo & Jujitsu Federation. No stranger to the challenges of achieving peak performance under competitive and stressful conditions, he holds a fourth degree black belt in jujitsu and is a former nationally ranked competitive fencer.

Building effective development organizations, improving team morale, focus, and enthusiasm, developing effective communications between team members, reducing employee turnover, helping businesses identify and attain strategic targets, and applying sport psychology techniques to business have been some of his most successful projects.