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# THE NEUROSCIENCE OF PROCRASTINATION

## HOW BRAIN SCIENCE CAN HELP LEADERS BE MORE PROACTIVE AND PRODUCTIVE

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**Y**OU arrive at your office on a Monday morning ahead of your colleagues. Deciding to get a head start to the workweek, you come in at least an hour earlier than usual, and start on that financial report you held off last week.

Then there's that difficult client you need to ring up today. Let's not forget that backlog of emails flagged for follow-up last Friday evening. You leaf through your contact cards for the client's phone number, but given the disorganised mess your business card folder is in, you decide to start on that financial report instead.

You see numbers with lots of decimal points. Now you remember why you put that report on hold. Well, clearing emails shouldn't be too difficult – an easy task to start the workweek, you think. You log on only to see 50 new emails added to your backlog of previously-flagged messages.

That difficult client has also sent you an email marked "urgent" and judging from the preview of that message, he doesn't sound too happy. It's not even the start of your official hours yet, and you are already yearning for the weekend to come sooner.

Your colleague comes in a short while later and you think, well, it wouldn't hurt to ask about her weekend. You join her for coffee. You've effectively made the situation worse for yourself, and deep down you know it.

You really should have started on one of those tasks. It's already half past 10 in the morning, and you feel guilty for not having accomplished anything despite clocking in early.

### WE ALL DO IT!

At some point in life, most of us have procrastinated – generally defined as putting off an undesirable task despite knowing the negative implications. Procrastination affects between 20% and 25% of adults worldwide. In a local study published in the *Malaysian Psychology Journal* last year, 22 out of a sample of 310 students reported they almost never procrastinate but 92.9% acknowledged to procrastinating in study-related activities. Of course, there may be good reasons to leave certain tasks for later. The problem arises when procrastination tempts you to repeatedly do so.

If you are in a leadership position, you may have procrastinated over a series of important decisions. Indeed, leaders often procrastinate about important decisions – that proposed merger, who to hire for a senior management position, important budgeting consideration, and other things – that make up a leader's portfolio.

Leaders need to make those important calls, and yet, they too, are prone to putting off all the tasks they need to complete before a decision is made.

When leaders procrastinate, the delay often results in poor, sometimes even damaging outcomes to the organisation. Procrastination limits a leader's ability to be proactive – to develop the necessary foresight for making tomorrow's decisions today.

To a leader, time is a sunk cost; how well the leader uses his time determines the quality of the decisions made. Procrastination is a thief of the leader's time.

Procrastination is rife in all spheres of

our work and personal lives, but it can be overcome. Some interesting insights on how to do so come from neuroscience – the study of the nervous system, and how it influences our thoughts and behaviours.

**Procrastination can be managed despite having a neural or genetic susceptibility to it – especially if we become more aware of how our environments trigger our tendencies to procrastinate. Knowing why we procrastinate can help in its management. This can include reframing or breaking timelines into manageable chunks**

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### THE NEUROSCIENCE OF PROCRASTINATION

Neuroscience studies the brain, but its interdisciplinary nature offers revealing perspectives to many fields. Our brains are wired to integrate, predict and automate – each experience leaves a neural footprint, so future responses to similar events would be faster and more efficient.

This outcome was advantageous to our ancestors, where rapid reactions increased survival. The primitive hindbrain, an older part of our brain; drives this process to develop habits.

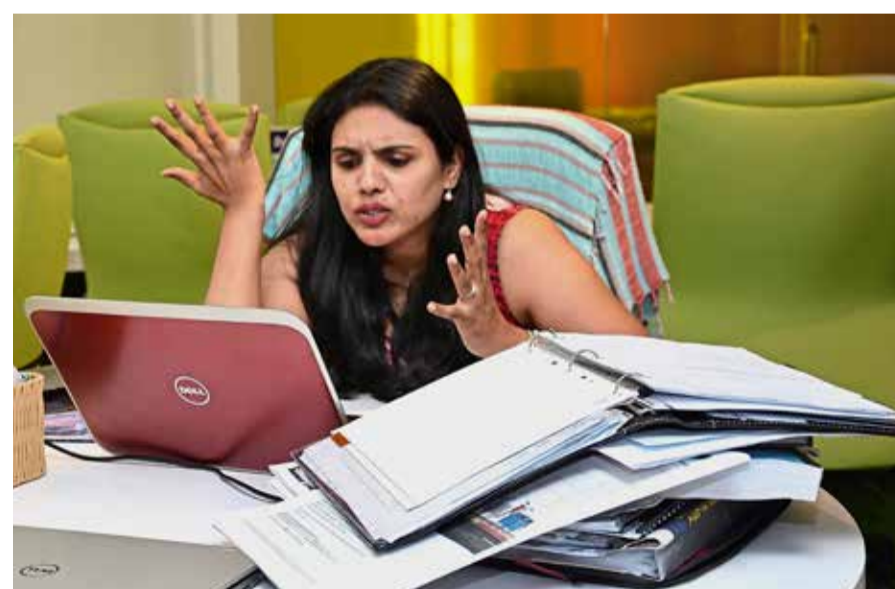
Newer regions of the brain – like the forebrain – enlarged and became dominant as we evolved, and when instinctive behaviour became more purposeful. This shift was necessary to adapt to modern, complex settings, where voluntary deliberation is more beneficial than instinctive drives.

The pre-frontal cortex of the forebrain is key in this voluntary process, in charge of decision-making, organising and inhibiting inappropriate behaviour. It is this same region that matures in our mid-twenties, accounting for the decline in reckless and impulsive behaviours when we come of age. *How is all this related to procrastination?*

In the past, the instinctive system promoted survival through immediate drive satisfaction with minimal consideration of its consequences. However, this system can clash with modern circumstances and the voluntary system.

Procrastination occurs when we succumb to instant urge gratification (e.g. having coffee instead of working on that report) despite knowing the consequences (e.g. not having the report in time for management's review).

In short, the instinctive system overrides the voluntary system, even when it is disadvantageous to do so. Current neuroimaging research shows that procrastination occurs when various pre-frontal regions of the brain fail in regulating impulsivity.



The stress of juggling deferred tasks increases the risk of mental health challenges. Pic by Fariha Harith/LEADERONOMICS

### YOU CAN CONTROL IT

Interestingly, selectively stimulating another part of the brain – the medial frontal areas, actually lowers the likelihood of procrastinating. What this all means is that while it is tempting to conclude that the brains of the procrastinators "made them do it", the reality remains that we are ultimately still in control of our actions.

While the instinctive and voluntary

systems can be at odds, they are not mutually exclusive, nor is it always detrimental to give in to our instincts. As such, one way to overcome procrastination is by strategically delaying gratification rather than suppressing or giving in to it. At no point are procrastinators oblivious of the negative repercussions of procrastination, reflecting awareness and choice over their actions.

One study showed that while procrastination, poor self-control and

goal management share similar genes, this genetic overlap may not directly cause procrastination. If anything, it leads to procrastination via interaction with environmental factors.

Put simply, procrastination can still be managed despite having a neural or genetic susceptibility to it – especially if we become more aware of how our environments trigger our tendencies to procrastinate.

Knowing why we procrastinate can help in its management. This can include reframing or breaking timelines into manageable chunks, maintaining mini rewards at regular intervals to stay motivated, removing or minimising distracting situations, or having procrastinators work closely with disciplined peers to stay on track.

For work cultures where procrastination is deeply entrenched, researchers have suggested major systemic "rebooting" (e.g. changing key performance indicators or assessment formats), so that employees are forced to abandon their habitual routines and start again on a fresh slate. In doing so, the voluntary system takes precedence and the instinctive system is reset.

In this regard, our brains are like car engines in that they drive procrastination tendencies. The drive itself can be impacted by engine malfunctions, weather and road conditions. If all else fails, the engine can be recalibrated or restarted.

### DANGERS OF PROCRASTINATION

#### ANXIETY

The stress of juggling deferred tasks increases the risk of mental health challenges in susceptible individuals.

#### FATIGUE

Sleep deprivation and rushing to keep up with deadlines lead to both physical and mental exhaustion.

#### LOWERED SELF-ESTEEM

Procrastination often causes underperformance, in turn triggering feelings of self-doubt and worthlessness.

#### DAMAGED RELATIONSHIPS

Missed deadlines and appointments can wear on both personal and professional relationships.

#### CAREER SETBACKS

Chronic procrastination keeps individuals from realising their full professional potential, delaying – if not derailing – career progress.

Reference: PsychologyToday.com and lifehack.org

## 10 TIPS TO BECOME PRODUCTIVE

PROCRASTINATION can be overcome. We can short-circuit our natural impulses to delay tasks, and direct our minds towards being productive and proactive. Here are 10 simple tips to beat procrastination and become a proactive leader:

### 1 FIND YOUR POWER HOUR

When do you do your best work? There really is such a thing as being either a morning, afternoon, or evening person. Find the hour that makes you feel at your very best, at your most optimal mode of functioning, and set aside the time to do your most urgent and demanding tasks then. The power hour could simply be one hour of intense focus and productivity.

### 2 EAT THAT FROG

Mark Twain suggested that if the first thing you do in the morning is to eat a frog (meaning to perform the most challenging task) then, any other tasks that follows for the day will seem less distressing. Do the task you find most demanding, or most likely to have you procrastinating over it – and do it. Knowing that you've confronted the most difficult task on your list not only takes you a step closer towards actually completing it, but also gives you a nice motivational boost.

### 3 SET SPECIFIC GOALS

Tasks seem threatening when they are broad and vaguely-defined. Deciding to "Complete the review of business plan" is just another way of saying, "I'll review that business plan when I can." Make your goals specific, and set a deadline while you are at it. "Set aside one hour to review the market analysis of the business plan by 3:30pm today before meeting with senior management" makes the same goal more precise and appealing.

### 4 SET BITE-SIZED GOALS

Smaller does not mean less important. Instead of setting a goal that says, "Decide on a replacement for the regional sales coordinator", set smaller goals of reviewing a number of possible candidates, conducting a phone interview with some of them, and perhaps shortlisting names from your initial pool of possible candidates. Doing any of these three smaller tasks brings you a step closer to eventually completing your larger goal.

### 5 FLEX YOUR SCHEDULE

Make your schedules less rigid and restricting. Some days will be busier than others, but you don't have to be bound to completing a list of a hundred things, just to be productive. Prioritise, and delegate when necessary. A rigid and inflexible schedule not only tempts you to procrastinate, it also makes your daily plans seem more daunting. If your schedule leaves little breathing room and you find yourself hurried and stressed because of it, it might be time to revise your plans.

### 6 DISCONNECT

I think I'll just check the news, or my Facebook feed for a bit. That brief lapse and redirection of your attention could very well stretch out into another full hour of non-productivity. Try limiting your distractions – and that includes people who draw your attention away from the task at hand. Disconnect from the Internet, put your phone on silent, and tell others you are not to be disturbed during this time. Your brain will look for reasons to pull away from that important and demanding task; don't give it an opportunity to do so.

### 7 DEVOTE TIME TO GETTING THE RIGHT INFORMATION

Decision-making time should be part of every proactive leader's schedule. Don't underestimate how much time it will take to make a good decision. Excellent decisions take even longer. This important time slot could be devoted to simply searching for the necessary information, consulting with those who have the data you need, or setting aside an hour to collate and summarise facts before committing to a course of action. That said...

### 8 DON'T TRY TO BE PERFECT

Perfectionism is the partner-in-crime to procrastination. "I won't start because it won't be perfect until I say it is." Wanting to do a good job is great, but striving for perfection rarely helps. Paralysis by analysis occurs when we absolutely must have every single instance of information before making decisions. Economists will tell you instead that our rationality is bounded – we can never have all the information needed to make the optimal decision. Decisions may not be made at all if we only ever spent the time searching for information.

### 9 REWARD YOURSELF

Celebrate small victories for having completed your tasks. The reward may be a short water-cooler conversation with a colleague, a stroll to a nearby café for a coffee pick-me-up, or maybe a larger reward such as treating yourself to a movie. Let your brain know that you will reward it for focusing and being attentive.

### 10 DON'T PUNISH YOURSELF

We will still end up procrastinating on occasion. It happens to the best of us. Don't punish yourself when you do. Re-evaluate your goals, do a bit of self-reflection on the times in which you work your best, and try again. Your leadership responsibilities and demands are challenging enough. Cut yourself a little slack.

