

Articles for Managers

Raise Your Gaze Staying Energized in the Daily Grind

by Ian Cook



Ian Cook, trainer, consultant, keynote speaker and Principal of Fulcrum Associates Inc., helps managers and supervisors get more from their people and teams through modern leadership approaches. Contact Ian to discuss the ideas in this article or to find out about related training programs, facilitation and coaching services, and keynote presentations for your organization.

It is mid afternoon. You are sitting at your desk trying to pull together this important proposal for your boss. It is due the day after tomorrow. As you wrestle with how to incorporate a complex spreadsheet from the finance department, you wonder when your quality analyst will bring in those last two key pieces of production information. Then there is still your own summary piece to write. But what will you write? The recommendations just aren't coming from your brain.

We have all been there. You hit a point when it feels like you are trudging through quicksand. Everything is difficult. Your energy and enthusiasm for the task is dropping rapidly. It's no longer any fun. You begin to question your own ability to do this work. You just want it off your plate—done!

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How do we typically respond in a situation like this? When we finally stop procrastinating, we typically just grit our teeth, hunker down and try harder to focus on the detailed steps and problems, one-by-painful-one. All the while we talk to ourselves, allowing our silent critic to castigate us for our incompetence or inviting our-reluctant-cheerleader self to give us a pep talk... "Go get 'em. You can do this. No sweat, piece of cake." Instead of focusing on our work, our thought dwell on ourselves and how we are (not) performing.

Of course, this is not a productive state-of-mind to be in. In fact, it is the polar opposite of what researcher Michael Csikszentmihalyi calls the "flow" state.

Flow is an optimal performance mental mode where you forget about yourself and merge with your activity. You feel challenged yet in control. It is a timeless state—you don't notice the clock. People often experience it in sports, at play or when truly engaged by work. Above all, flow is a productive place to be.

There is a way to climb out when you are mired in a "mental valley." Try it out yourself and coach your employees to do the same.

You must get in touch with two images. First, consciously remind yourself what the goal of your activity is and picture how you will feel when it is done. In the opening scenario, your goal is the finished report. You could decide to replace your self-defeating, negative thoughts with images of handing it over to your boss and how great and proud you feel doing it.

Secondly, remind yourself why you are in this line of work in the first place. This gets you back in touch with your overall purpose and with the real meaning behind your efforts. Again, in the opening scenario, you would tell yourself why this report is important and how it will contribute to the organization and positively affect people.

When you raise your gaze above the sometimes draining details of your job, you will rekindle your energy and begin feeling creative, confident and motivated. Best of all, you will get the job done and achieve the results you are seeking.

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