

Distractions . . . A word that, in English, carries two different meanings and has two, divergent implications.

Please read both columns below and see what we mean.

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The Leader Within

When I served as a ship's officer, I became acutely aware of the danger of distractions. Imagine yourself on a ship at sea. In a marine environment, there are multiple and simultaneous stimuli: a variety of sounds, the changing scenery, the movement of the vessel, the conversation of crew members, distracting thoughts about home, lapsing into daydreams. Get distracted and it could result in personal injury to self or to others, in cargo damage or vessel damage.

As an officer and a leader, I couldn't afford distractions. Focus on what is happening. Focus on what needs to be done. How about you? Sure, you don't work on a ship—it's an office, a plant floor, a restaurant, a retail sales establishment—conditions are different. But what are the consequences of distractions?

Perhaps the distraction costs a lost sale, a lost customer, a lost employee, a slump in performance, a shortfall in production?

On the job, the leader has, as one responsibility, the need to stay focused and on track—for the sake of self, for the team, for the customer/client and for results. Distractions can undermine that responsibility.

How might you withstand distractions?

- Consciously remind yourself of your responsibilities at the beginning of each day—each shift (“I am here because . . . “I have responsibility for . . .”).
- Keep in mind the outcome that you want to achieve.
- Be aware of the strengths (and weaknesses) of team members.
- Be aware of possible causes for team members to become distracted.
- Regularly communicate the focus of your activity (what, when, where, why, how).
- Have others hold you accountable (a team member, supervisor, coach).

If the object of your proper attention is bigger and of longer term, working with a professional coach can help you to keep focused and stave off distractions.

In the adjacent column, The Coach Within takes a look at distractions from a completely different perspective—*“an entertainment that provokes pleased interest and distracts you from worries and vexations”* (definition from www.wordweb.info).

Bret Maukonen

The Coach Within

Distractions. What comes to mind when you hear the word? Seriously! And I wonder how many people would say it describes their day. Also, I wonder how many things/people could never be considered a distraction.

I believe that, as never before, we live in a world of distractions and this theme attracts a lot of attention when people are discussing time management. Here I want to talk about the upside of distraction for there most certainly is one.

Have you ever found yourself concentrating on something but making no progress whatsoever? Here is an example of a great time to enjoy a distraction—it is an opportunity to clear your mind of whatever has been occupying it and turn to something completely different. The result, often, is a fresh perspective when you return to the original task.

Another good use for distractions is to replace a thought or image that is negative or unproductive. Distraction can be so easy to arrange that it is often considered the first line of defense for dealing with negative thoughts.

So, we know that distraction happens easily enough when we don't plan on it—what about when we want it to happen? How can we intentionally distract ourselves? Here are some suggestions, although your own list will only be limited by your imagination:

- Sensory awareness—pay close attention to the messages received at that moment by each of your senses in turn.
- Play with a puzzle that requires your concentration.
- Describe an object in precise, explicit detail, as if your life depended on it.
- Turn on some music and sing along.
- Do something physically strenuous—aerobics, walking, etc.
- Tackle something you have been avoiding, e.g., cleaning out a drawer, writing a letter.
- And, a contemporary favorite—check your e-mail!

Summarizing the value of distraction, I suggest it can both stimulate creativity and defeat negativity. Try it sometime. For a change!

Lynne Maukonen

To Ponder . . . On one hand, what are some things that I have wanted to accomplish and what has distracted me from attending to them? How do I manage distractions? On the other hand, what do I have as a distraction that provides a pleasant break from routine or stressful work?