
Subject: Are You Afraid To Succeed?

Date:

From: National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity (sent by National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity <MondayMotivator=FacultyDiversity.org@mail152.atl101.mcdlv.net>)

To:



The Monday Motivator
National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity



Monday, July 10, 2017
Are You Afraid To Succeed?

Dear,

I recently ran into a former colleague whom I'll call Dick. He was always one of my favorites because I love scholars with big and intense personalities. Dick completed his doctorate at a top program in his discipline, struts around huffing and puffing like an ever-agitated intellectual, and aggressively attacks any professor who dares to present work-in-progress (as opposed to polished work) at his department's brown bag. Interestingly, Dick has neither written nor published a single thing during the five years he has been on the tenure track. His bluster and verbal acuity have kept people from asking him about his self-sabotaging behavior and record-breaking procrastination. His lengthy rationalizations about how his project's scope and depth are far too complex for daily writing are so exhausting that they have a numbing effect on the very people who might press him for details. Inexplicably, Dick has somehow managed to get through one review after another without having made any tangible progress.

Staying Stuck

I've met a lot of Dicks in my academic career! By that, I mean people who have all the right credentials, have received multiple fellowships to focus on writing, who perform the role of an intellectual with perfect precision, and yet never produce a single publication. Instead, they engage in various types of self-sabotaging behavior because they fear that the publication of their work will expose them, make them vulnerable to other people's criticism, or reveal that they're not really as smart as others believed. These scholars are often paralyzed by uncertainty about their current skills and abilities and the possibility that they won't be able to sustain any future success they may achieve. They feel that no matter what they do, it will never be enough to earn tenure, get promoted, and/or win the respect of their senior colleagues, so they don't bother putting themselves through the work and exposure. They focus instead on the things that they can easily and readily engage in (such as the verbal exchange of ideas).

Not all Dicks have the blustery air of intellectual arrogance that my former colleague exudes. An alternative version involves aggressively avoiding face-to-face contact lest the individual be asked if they have written anything lately. That said, it's not difficult to identify resistance that is driven by a fear of success.

Ask yourself:

- Are you writing for at least 30 minutes every day, or have you created a story that you can't possibly write in short periods of time?
- Do you fail to prepare for presentations until the last minute, stay up late the night before, and/or go out drinking prior to presenting your work?
- Do you talk a big game about your project but never actually engage in the work to make that project become a reality?
- Do you luxuriate in negative talk about the state of academic journals, the abysmal job market, and/or the shrinking proportion of tenured faculty positions at universities to the point that you convince yourself there's really no reason to bother writing because your manuscript will never get published -- and if it does it will only be read by five people -- or that you'll never get a job, tenure, promotion, respect, etc.?

In short, procrastination, destructive behavior, and excessively pessimistic thinking all provide the same outcome -- a safe and justifiable reason to blame a lack of performance on so that you will always have an explanation about why you didn't do well.

Looking Below The Surface

To be perfectly honest, of all the various types of resistance to writing I have described this summer, I have the greatest compassion for those suffering from a fear of success. My compassion stems from the fact that this type of fear often drives scholars into such deep isolation and avoidance that they are the least likely to reach out for help. I also know that such fear is grounded in profound insecurity, not feeling good enough, and a lack of confidence in one's own skills. I've seen some tragic breakdowns among faculty who are paralyzed by the fear of success. Unfortunately, they only occur after their situation has deteriorated so far that their career is in serious jeopardy (Dick's empty-handed tenure case may invoke just such a crisis). If any of this sounds familiar, I want to suggest a few ways that you can begin to move through the fear of success before a crisis arises.

Imagine Your Future

I'm a big fan of planning. Not because it's fun (it's not) but because the process of writing down what you want and mapping out the steps to achieve your goal is transformative. It requires you to: a) ask yourself what you really want, b) acknowledge that the road to getting it is filled with lots of small steps, and c) get honest about the fact that taking no action guarantees failure.

Create Accountability

While it is the last thing that any paralyzed writer wants to do, what you need more than anything else to overcome your resistance is weekly accountability for your writing. Because you are capable of generating sophisticated levels of denial and complex rationalizations for not writing, you need a group of people who won't allow you to babble on endlessly about how you have a "slow process," but who will instead hold your feet to the fire in a spirit of firm and loving support. If you don't have people in your life to do this, it may be time to plug into an [existing program](#).

Start Writing And Preparing

Work with your accountability group to set deadlines for presentations and drafts that occur far in advance of the actual deadlines. This will help you to break the habit of last-minute sabotage so that you can focus any evaluation of your performance on the actual substance of your work. The trick is that these deadlines will have to feel consequential, so set up other people who are expecting to review, edit, or collaborate with you on your work so that you can't

just slide through the advanced deadline without any consequences.

Reach Out To Your Mentors

It's time to start having serious conversations with your mentors and role models about the reality of academic life. The difficulties you are experiencing are common, and asking your mentors to share how they got to where they are today and what types of failures they have experienced will give you a clearer picture of their path to success. I've never had a conversation with a successful person that didn't involve devastating failures that were critically important to their eventual success.

Consider Starting The Inner Work

If you are unable to unravel why you keep sabotaging yourself by not writing and you just can't imagine reaching out to your departmental mentors for help, it may be time to find a good therapist and start doing the inner work that's necessary to determine what's standing between you and getting what you really want.

Each of these suggestions is aimed at a single outcome -- breaking you out of your paralysis to take one concrete step forward. Taking any one of these steps will help you to explore what's holding you back, connect to the support of a community of people who want to help you, and get you back to your writing. It doesn't matter how long it's been since you touched your manuscript; it's never too late to re-engage.

The Weekly Challenge

This week, I challenge you to do the following:

- Write every day for at least 30 minutes.
- If you're unable to do so, ask yourself, why?
- If your response goes beyond organizational errors, consider the list of self-sabotaging behaviors described above, and determine if your resistance is driven by a fear of success.
- Spend 30 minutes imagining your goals and mapping out the steps that would be required to achieve them.
- Call one of your mentors, and set up time to discuss your blocked writing.
- Join a writing accountability group to support your re-engagement with your writing project.
- If you feel like I've described your situation but you can't begin to imagine trying any of the suggested ideas, consider contacting a therapist who specializes in working with academics.
- Resolve to take one step forward this week.
- Consider registering for our next session of the [Faculty Success Program!](#) We have coaches trained to move faculty members through resistance.

While fear of success is an incredibly difficult type of resistance to face, I hope this week brings you the clarity to identify why you're stuck, the wisdom to know what first step makes the most sense for your situation, and the strength to reach out for whatever help will get you back to your writing.

Warmly,



Kerry Ann Rockquomore, PhD
President and CEO
National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity



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Register

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07/27 - 08/17 (Thursdays) 12:00 - 1:30pm ET

Facilitator: Erin Furtak, PhD

Register

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