



DO IT FAST OR DO IT RIGHT – YOUR CHOICE

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We're raised to believe in the instant fix. From our earliest childhood memories of our mother, who had an incredible ability to kiss the boo-boo and make it all better, to the Good Fairy on TV who could evoke a magical transformation with one wave of the wand, we've come to believe that if we just look hard enough, and persistently enough, we will eventually locate the instant fix. Deep down we're smart people. We know that there probably aren't any instant fixes; we remind ourselves with sayings like "No Pain, No Gain" lest we forget. Then we turn right around and start that search all over again. What's the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome the next time.

We all know the golfer – maybe you? – who thinks that new, expensive golf clubs will improve his game. Collectively, these golfers spend millions each year on equipment that far exceeds their level of talent, hoping this will quickly fix their shortcomings. And how about those who are overweight? How many dieters do you know who try one fad diet after another, sometimes with only moderate success, and always with a rebound effect that leaves them as heavy, or even heavier, than they were to begin with?

Ask someone you know who is an accomplished golfer, with a single digit handicap, how they got to their level of skill. None will tell you that they were a horrible duffer until they bought their current set of golf clubs, or watched a video. In fact, none will tell you about anything other than consistent dedication and practice devoted to developing their skills. Many will admit that there were lessons learned from pros, without which they would not have had the ability to rise to the next level of performance. All will admit that time, patience and dedication, a willingness to learn from others, and many hours of practice all led to their current level of performance.

Do you know someone who used to be overweight but is now slim and has been able to maintain the more svelte appearance for years? Ask how it was accomplished. He or she will not tell you that they ate only grapefruit, or drank cabbage soup for a month, or guzzled diet malts, and have been thin ever since.

Instead you will hear about permanent lifestyle changes which gradually took off the weight and helped to maintain the loss.

Perhaps they joined a group for educational information and emotional support. Probably they added consistent exercise to their life. In fact, what you will hear every time is that they embarked on a path of altered and new behaviors which must be continued in order to maintain their success.

No quick fixes. No easy answers. Real success is brought about by hard work and consistent dedication. Yet, as smart people who recognize this on a fundamental level, we sometimes fail to apply this to the business side of our practice. I know because I encounter the resulting frustrations and failures every day.

I recently had the pleasure of sharing the podium at a seminar presentation with someone I have had the pleasure to know for many years. I know this person is actively working to build her practice. I was pleased to provide her with an opportunity to hone new marketing skills.

In our half hour final prep meeting immediately preceding the presentation, she confided in me that she absolutely hated doing presentations. In her limited experience she was always exceedingly nervous, and came off stiff and monotone. I was both surprised, and reminded of my first presentation experience, which I related to her, as follows.

While attending Temple University I was fortunate to land an undergraduate teaching assistantship in my freshman year. Undergraduate Teaching Assistants back then didn't really teach. Mostly we helped type lecture notes, prepare and duplicate handouts, and grade tests and papers. But one day early in the first semester of my sophomore year, my professor informed me that he was not feeling well. He handed me his notes and instructed me to present his lecture.

When I took the podium in the lecture hall – an amphitheater with about 150 students eagerly packed in – I experienced a fear I had never known before. My knees were rubber. My legs were leaden. My hands were sweating profusely as they attempted to grasp and hold onto the podium for dear life. There was a sound similar to rushing water inside my ears. My eyes seemed to see only indistinct fuzzy shades of black, white, and gray. I remember squinting to try to bring the notes into focus.

As I began speaking, my voice was cracking like an adolescent boy. I started



slowly stumbling my way through the notes. I was aware of unrest in the lecture hall, evident from the creaking seats of people shifting uncomfortably. I knew I was doing a terrible job. My mind was reeling. I already knew this was an experience I would never willingly repeat. I just wanted to survive it without permanently disgracing myself by fainting, losing my lunch, or creating a puddle on the floor. All were distinct possibilities.

Then something amazing happened. I have always instinctively used humor when faced with tense or awkward situations. This situation was no different, and I suddenly ad-libbed a hopefully humorous comment in a desperate attempt to break the tension. There was a smattering of laughter here and there in the lecture hall. And it felt good. Not enough to magically transform the experience from one of sheer horror to one of pleasure, let me assure you. But nonetheless, it helped. Before the lecture ended, I had gathered the courage to add a few more amusing comments here and there. Each were rewarded with a slightly more noticeable level of laughter.

Apparently word got back to the professor that I did all right, because thereafter he regularly asked me to present his lectures. Now, many of you reading this article have heard me present a seminar from time to time. And you're probably amazed to find out how hard it was for me to do it in the beginning. You thought I was a natural, didn't you? Well, nothing could be farther from the truth.

When I took the podium the first time I ventured so far outside my comfort zone that I experienced extreme physical discomfort, in addition to all the psychological symptoms of sheer terror. I remember having repeated dreams later about fainting while presenting, or about presenting and discovering in the middle that I had forgotten to put on my clothes, (yes, this is a common dream for those who must present publicly), or about just tapping the podium microphone and asking in a Henny Youngman-like way "Is this thing on?" because no one was responding.

Despite the discomfort, I didn't give up. I needed the fellowship, and didn't want to disappoint the professor. But I needed to overcome my fear and master this new activity even more. It was a challenge I could not turn down.

I went to the library and did some reading on public speaking. I asked a couple of professors about their experiences. And I kept accepting the speaking assignments. And I kept improving, little by little.

I read somewhere that if you can picture your audience naked, it takes all the



fear out of presenting. That didn't work for me. I had to concentrate so hard on it that I got distracted and kept losing my place.

One evening I was sitting around with a group of very good friends having an animated conversation about a lot of things, one of which was entertaining them about my speaking fears. "Well", one commented, "you never have a hard time entertaining a group of your friends with all eyes watching you as you speak, so what's the difference?"

That observation hit home. And it was a turning point for me. What *was* the difference? Well, with friends I am not presenting anything overly prepared. I am having a conversation about something I know or feel. I am usually quite passionate about most topics of conversation, and therefore come off as entertaining and informative. So, approaching a presentation as though I was just having a conversation about something I know and want to share with people I like, was the key. And it worked. Not overnight. But with increasing confidence over time.

As you might imagine, as I shared the above journey with my imminent co-presenter, she was both amazed and amused. Like many of you, she just assumed I was "a natural" and that she was not. I suggested she try my approach. After all, they were all her peers. She knew many of them personally. They had come to hear what she had to say, and she knew her topic well. Just focus her eyes, I advised, on the friendly faces she knew, and imagine they were just sitting around while she shared some information in a casual setting.

I thought she did a great job. But what really mattered was how she felt about it. "I started off stiff and nervous like I used to," she said, "but then I kind of relaxed a little and it really wasn't horrible. The time passed a lot faster than I thought it would." In fact, she concluded that perhaps a few more presentations were a possibility in her future. And she could tell that it would get easier, and that she would get better at it. I felt proud of her, knowing she'll keep at it, and that this is a skill she'll eventually master.

The truth is, nothing replaces dedication, diligence, and practice. It doesn't matter whether you're trying to develop new marketing skills, or better manage your practice.

If you're a new lawyer starting out you probably won't get a slam dunk on your first major courtroom appearance. Ask your mentor and you'll find out that you probably won't draft the best contract the first one, two or maybe even dozen times. But on the professional side, you know that you shouldn't, and probably



don't, just throw up your hands after the first or second go-round and say "that's it, I'm not going to be a lawyer anymore!" Heck no, you grind your heels in, grit your teeth, pour more coffee, and get more determined about doing it, until you get it right, to your own exacting standards.

As I say so often, progress isn't about taking a giant leap forward. Real progress is about taking continual baby steps in the right direction. If you expect or require yourself to think only in terms of leaps — and no one expects the extraordinary of themselves more than lawyers — you will rarely if ever make significant progress. And you will view that as a shortcoming on your part. It may cause you to question whether you are in fact capable of achieving your goals. It can cause decision paralysis. It can demotivate.

Instead, take a step back, take a deep breath, and determine to shorten your step, and take more of them, to reach your goal a little further out on the horizon. Think a little longer term. Think out the intermediate steps to get there. They should offer short hops in between, which will lead to success. Which will lead to more hops. Which will translate into significant progress and success. Do it fast, or do it right — your choice!

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