

GROWTH STRATEGIES

The Science of Success

5 tips for creating mental momentum for you and your business

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We are like dogs. We respond better to success than we do failures. Scads of platitudes have been written about learning from failure, and while it is possible to learn great lessons from life's clunkers, neuroscience now shows us that nothing succeeds like success. Have you ever had that golf game, presentation or some other challenge where everything you do with that challenge is golden? Then, the next day, you go at it again and you mess up one time and--bam! You can't seem to get in the groove. There is a brain-based reason for that, and the more aware of it you are, the more you can create success momentum in your business.

Earl Miller of MIT and Mark Histed of Harvard found that our neurons retain memory and become more finely tuned when we succeed, but they don't when success isn't present. There is a difference between the absence of success and the presence of failure. For instance, when a mistake leads to a negative consequence, we have a tendency to learn from it and veer in another direction. We don't necessarily learn what to do, but we learn what not to do. On the other hand, when there is absence of success but no apparent mistakes (you lose money in the stock market but have nothing tangibly to do with it), nothing appears to change in the brain, and relatively little--if any--learning takes place.

Here's what goes on that makes success so...well, successful. When you're

learning something new and you have a success, even a small one, your brain gets a little reward bump of the pleasure neurotransmitter dopamine. Dopamine is used to thicken the neural pathways needed to learn a new skill. Your brain is drawn to activities that give you those little pleasure bumps. You can actually become addicted to success. But the big news is that the more you succeed, the longer your brain retains the proper information to help you succeed again.

The implications of this seem enormous for you and your business. We now know that what you celebrate (typically success) gets repeated, and the more you celebrate it, the more of that behavior you get. We used to think this was part of the psycho-babble voodoo of niceness in business and that it really wasn't necessary. It is and now it's proven. Look for low-hanging fruit in your company--small successes that everyone can participate in--because it's a good way to get the snowball of success and high morale rolling when things are going badly.

Following are five things you can do to take advantage of this science in your organization and get the snowball effect of success breeding success.

1. **You're looking to experience success, not to learn from mistakes.** It might sound like semantics, but it is a different framing that works to keep you going. When you discuss mistakes, make sure you don't just focus on the what-not-to-do part of it. If you want to head down the path of success, you have to understand what is correct and try the successful behavior until you have a positive outcome.
2. **Get your head positively in the game.** When you make a mistake, don't allow negativity to rule you. As "new-agey" as it sounds, stay positive. Your attitude should be that you get another chance to make it right. Focus on the next turn. Put in neuroscience terms, when you become mired in negativity, the stressor hormone cortisol bathes your brain and blocks access to the part of the brain that breeds success. You become more and more frustrated and will continue to make mistakes. Take a

break! When you can come at the challenge with a new and positive perspective, you are primed to try it again.

3. **Nothing replaces practice.** When you achieve success, mimic the very same behavior again relatively quickly after the last success. You'll build thicker neural pathways for the successful behaviors. In essence, practice and practice and practice the art of success. That's why you see golfers hit ball after ball on a driving range. Focus on the attempts you get right; ignore the wrong ones.
4. **Celebrate.** If you're trying to teach someone a new skill, celebrate their successes and ignore their mistakes unless the failure is going to be harmful.
5. **Positive feedback is like cash in the bank.** The old adage is true: "People have a tendency to become what we encourage them to be, not what we nag them to be." As a leader, catch people doing things right and make sure they know you've witnessed it. Give them on-the-spot feedback on it so that they get a big dopamine hit. Don't wait for company meetings or the next time you see them walking down the hall. One of your most important activities as a success chief will be to immediately dole out feedback when someone does something right. Get good and consistent at it.

There are few things as exciting as breeding success, especially when you know you can do it deliberately. If you want to be the titan of your industry and have a high hit rate at success, keep hitting. Notice when you and others get it right and do it again and again. We really are like dogs. Sit. Roll over. Good entrepreneur. Celebrate.

