



The Balanced Lawyer

Jeff Davidson

Becoming Unstuck

Inertia is a phenomenon whereby a body in motion tends to stay in motion unless acted upon by an outside force, otherwise a body at rest tends to stay at rest. The longer a body is at a rest, or more specifically attached or immobile, the harder it is to get moving. On a personal level this shows up as procrastination.

Human beings, as creatures of habit, custom, and convenience, often become attached to conditions around them, the equipment they use, procedures, and how things are supposed to be. This is true even when their surroundings are not pleasant. Attachment can be defined as fixation on current conditions to the exclusion of new input or ideas.

If you're trying to break new ground, being rooted in the past is a potentially major obstacle for everyone involved!



Accommodation And Its Consequences

While researching for his book, *The Nature of Mass Poverty* (1979) the late John Kenneth Galbraith, Ph.D., a noted economist from Harvard, visited four continents to determine why some civilizations remain poor, sometimes for centuries.

Galbraith found that poor societies accommodate their poverty, which means they adapt to circumstances even when the circumstances are terrible. As hard as it is to live in poor conditions, unfortunately people find it more difficult to accept the hardship — the challenge — involved in making a better living. Hence, they accommodate their poverty, and it lingers from year to year, and decade to decade, and in some cases century to century. An organization or law firm of any size, if not careful, can become subject to this kind of accommodation.

Jeff Davidson, on the web at www.BreathingSpace.com, holds the registered trademark as "The Work-Life Balance Expert®." Jeff is the leading personal brand in speaking, writing, and reflecting on work-life balance issues and he has a passion for speaking to law firms that want to help their professional staff members make rapid progress in this arena. Jeff is the author of *Simpler Living*, *Breathing Space*, *The 60 Second Self-Starter*, and *The 10 Minute Guide to Managing Stress*, as well as 24 iPhone apps in his *Work-Life Guide* series on iTunes. Jeff's books have been published in 18 languages including Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Malay, Turkish, and Russian.

Individually, getting stuck in a rut is no less difficult. Attachment reigns supreme among achievers of all ages.

When my daughter was four years old, her mother and I bought her an old, upright piano. It was a little beat up, a little banged up, and was missing a few keys, but hey, for a four-year-old, it was fine. To our amazement, she played well. At age six, she began piano lessons. The teacher encouraged us that our little girl had a special talent.

Two years later, the piano teacher told us it was time to buy a Grand Piano for Valerie. It would be quite expensive, but she was now winning awards, so it seemed like the right thing to do.

In With The New

We went to a large piano emporium and Valerie tried all of them. Finally we came to a piano that proved to be “the one.” She loved it and we bought it. We told Valerie that the piano movers were going to take the other piano in trade, but it didn’t register with her. Days before the new one arrived, we cleaned up the old one, and then talked to Valerie about how that piano would be leaving and the new one would be arriving.

The old piano had been hers from the age of four and she was now eight. In other words, she had been with this piano for half of her life. She broke into a sob — not just a kid crying, but a deep mourning sob, as if she had experienced the death of a parent or a close friend.

“It’s the only piano I have ever known, I have been playing with it since I was four! Why do we have to get rid of it?” Seeking to be a good father I explained to her that realistically we couldn’t keep both pianos. The house was a good size, but two pianos were a bit much.

Out With The Old?

We took photos of the piano. We video recorded her playing — we made sure we had it covered. I explained to her that once the old piano depart-

ed, she would start to play on the new one and she wouldn’t even think of the old one. But hey, this is not an argument for an eight-year-old. For days she lamented, “Why do we have to get rid of the old one?”

Finally the day arrived. The piano movers came to deliver the new piano and take away the old one. Something in me, I don’t know where it came from, finally got through to her. I was able to communicate with her in a way she could understand and accept. Or, maybe she got there on her own, I don’t know.

After another tearful outbreak I said, “Val, when the piano goes back to the store, then some other parents will see it and maybe they’ll buy it for their little girl. She’ll learn how to play, and she’ll have that piano several years before she gets a bigger one.”

Now, Val’s expression started to change a little. She was still sobbing, but I knew that she was ready to forsake her attachment when she said to me, “Or maybe it will be a little boy.”

Remarkable On A Small Scale

To me, Valerie’s ability to adapt represented an extraordinary chain of events. Here was an eight-year-old willing to give up her attachment to something she had for half of her life. In my own life, I have had far more difficult times with attachment, and so have you.

I have had attachments to objects, to people, and even to opinions (as we all do). I once couldn’t stand Elvis Presley; I thought he was a country bumpkin. One time, 25 years following his death, a TV special about him showed him discussing his acting ability and he said, “If I were as talented as James Dean....”

I stopped in my tracks — I just froze. Elvis Presley had just used the past conditional, “if I were,” which is correct English. I’m guessing that not one person out of 25 knows that this is correct terminology.

Most people would say, “If I was as talented as James Dean,” but “if I were” is correct because he knew he would never be as talented an actor as James Dean (who was alive at the time). Suddenly I was willing to give up my attachment to regarding Elvis as some kind of local yokel. A small issue you say?

What about the dozens of things in your practice to which you are attached right now, many of which impede your ability to embrace more productive ways of thinking and working? Are you so attached to the way you do things that when you’re exposed to another way you fight tooth and nail? Do you resist trying another way and gravitate to what you’ve been doing, even if it doesn’t best support your quest for accomplishment?

Overcoming Neural Pathways

Psychology tells us the older you get, the harder it is to let go of attachments. The way we do things and how we think start to become embedded into the brain in the form of neural pathways. These pathways serve as paths of least resistance that prompt us to take mental shortcuts in response to stimuli.

As one passes 35, 40, 45, and 50 years of age, slowly we each become familiar with thought and activity patterns that form these neural pathways. All the while, we don’t realize what is occurring.

These patterns become second nature to us although *they are not necessarily permanent* — unless we allow them to be. If you’re not careful, the neural pathways you develop will define and eventually rule the rest of your career.

Fortunately, you can change at any age but it requires effort. Simply knowing that neural pathways exist and that they can be re-routed helped to free me from some of my own preconceived notions regarding work, life, and what I want to accomplish.

Years ago I set out on a course which I think has paid off and could work for you as well. I take different paths home, hence helping to form new neural pathways. I listen to classical music occasionally, although it is not my favorite type of music. I read magazines that are outside of my immediate interest area. I attend movies, plays, and concerts that are not necessarily my first choices. As long as I am exposed to different plots, characters, scenery, sounds and other ways of seeing the world, I consider the experience to be beneficial. I visit websites that express viewpoints with which I don’t agree. I read articles by authors whose bias is obvious. Perhaps most rewarding, I ask young people for their opinions and I ask people older than myself for their opinions, too.

How about you?

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