Give Me a System, Not a Superstar

Written by T.K. Coleman.

If you want to succeed in any endeavor, you need to adopt a system that reliably produces successful outcomes.

In Goals Inspire Us, but Systems Transform Us, I wrote:

> *Our success is mostly determined not by in-the-moment self-control, but rather by our ability to effectively construct systems that naturally lead to progress.*
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> *Goals inspire us, but systems transform us. The thing about goals, though, is that they have lots of sizzle. Goals often sound so impressive that they can seduce us into feeling like we've accomplished something merely by talking about them. Systems are far less glamorous than goals, but it's the day-to-day rituals that make uncommon achievements truly realizable.*

When many of us begin the process of trying new systems, however, we tend to underestimate the most significant factor: problems. We do this by treating human imperfections and circumstantial inconveniences as if they are variables rather than constants.

When we establish new systems for exercising or eating healthier, for instance, we acknowledge the fact that some days will be more difficult than others, but we treat those days as exceptional. Instead of adopting systems for exercise or dieting that are capable of working effectively during a week from hell, we structure our plans around having lots of "normal" days. The bad days are recognized as legitimate possibilities, but they are usually brushed aside as bridges to be crossed at a later time.

Think about the person who vows to write every day for 30 days. They start off strong, but things begin to feel a little uninspiring somewhere around day 14. Sheer willpower, however, keeps them going for a few more days. Then all of a sudden, they get really sick on day 18. On top of that, a friend calls with a serious emergency. So now they have to get out of bed when they really should be resting and drive across town to help their friend. While on their way, they get a flat tire. The flat tire incident eats up half the afternoon.

Don't forget the part about them being sick. By the time they make it to their friend's place, do all the things a good friend would do, and make it back home, they feel like dying. Exhausted, they collapse into bed. Writing streak broken.

Who wouldn't understand, right? You'd have to be a total jerk to expect that person to produce on a day like that, right? Maybe. Maybe not.

The problem with the above scenario wasn't the existence of problems. The problem was that problems weren't programmed into the plan.

This person's system for writing every single day was designed to work only on non-emergency and non-sick days. This isn't a lazy person. It's an ineffective system. It's ineffective because it only works under conditions when life is fair, or when things go well, or when there aren't any crazy surprises.

The solution: *redesign your system around the assumption that problems are the constant, not the variable.*

Start with the assumption that every day is going to be surprisingly problematic and create a system that's optimized to achieve results on those kinds of days.

Nobel Prize-Winning Economist Milton Friedman wrote:

> *"I do not believe that the solution to our problem is simply to elect the right people. The important thing is to establish a political climate of opinion which will make it politically profitable for the wrong people to do the right thing. Unless it is politically profitable for the wrong people to do the right thing, the right people will not do the right thing either, or it they try, they will shortly be out of office."*

Friedman's observation was about politics, but his insight is just as useful when discussing any system for getting things done: *build your system around great incentives, not great individuals.*

The best kind of system isn't one whose functionality depends on the genius or goodness of the one at the helm. The best kind of system is one whose functionality can be sustained in spite of the lack of genius and goodness of those who take the helm.

A good system builder creates programs and plans that are still designed to work even when people aren't at their best.

It's okay if you need a genius to create your system, but you're in trouble if you always need to be in genius-mode in order to execute your system. It's okay if you need a great person to help you come up with a plan, but your plan is bound to fail if it requires you to always be in a great mental and physical state in order to get things done.

Your plan will always benefit from your A-game, but your A-game cannot be the plan.

The most brilliant kind of system is one that helps you and your team produce the most brilliant kind of results even when none of you are feeling or functioning like the most brilliant kind of people.

Originally published at TKColeman.com.