

### Mindfulness and Being Yourself

The concept of "Mindfulness" is an important aspect of Buddhism, but it is also now used by western therapists and psychiatrists to help people deal with anxiety and depression. Basically, it means being aware of your thoughts and actions in the present moment, without passing judgment. Mindfulness while eating, for example, would mean savoring your meal without outside distractions, whereas lack of Mindfulness would be to eat dinner in front of the TV and not even remember what you ate.

In a client meeting, you would be practicing mindfulness if all of your attention were focused on that conversation and what was happening in the room at that moment-without thinking that what's happening is either "good" or "bad." The opposite-which many of us experience all too often-is thinking about your next meeting or worrying about your child's first day at school while the client is explaining his problems to you.

This summer, I trained for and competed in my first triathlon, and I learned a few things about mindfulness that I want to share with you. These are ideas that I believe are very relevant to successful professional practice:

#### 1. Training mindfully

**As you go about your daily work, are you really getting better at what you do? Or going through the motions? In preparing for the Los Alamos Triathlon, I learned that simply going out running and biking (or swimming, the third part of a triathlon) were not enough to get me in the proper shape. Just "putting in the miles" won't result in a good performance. In running, for example, you have to do fast runs, slow runs, short interval workouts on a track, runs on varied terrain, and so on. You cannot just jog the same route over and over again at a snail's pace. And when you run, you have to really be focused on what you're doing. Is your stride too long or too short? What part of your foot are you landing on and pushing off from? How's your breathing? Are you drinking enough? You can only observe these things if you are mindful and "in" that particular moment.**

**With clients, our "training" consists of all the small things we do leading up to a big meeting, workshop, or speech-reviewing client documents, interviewing people, writing a memo, doing analysis, etc. We all sometimes go through the motions, doing a good job but not really focusing on the task and on how we could make the outcome different or better. How often do we stop and challenge ourselves to come up with a better idea or with more ideas? To really think through the best way to run an upcoming meeting? When we read a client report, do we ask tough questions-for example, have they used the right assumptions? Is this report focused on the right issue? Is the thinking thorough? What ideas are missing?**

**In a sense, everything leading up to the big client event is just as important-and worthy of your attention-as the event itself.**

## 2. Being Yourself

Occasionally, people in their 20s or 30s will casually enter a race for fun. I have discovered, however, that few individuals over the age of 50 (I am 52) just "casually" decide to compete in a triathlon. On the contrary, the over-50 group is possibly the most competitive category you can have the misfortune to end up in for any type of competitive athletic event!

At the triathlon-and in other running races I entered this summer-some of the competitors in my age group were like testosterone-charged bulls who finished at or near the same times as elite athletes in their 20s. They had the best equipment, and, seemingly, the time and money to train constantly. One of these hyperactive 50+ competitors, for example, introduced his coach to me-later revealing that he actually employed THREE separate coaches for different aspects of his training. Despite being a pretty good athlete myself-and in the best shape of my life-I still had to suffer the indignity (and resulting depression) of watching a few competitors five or even ten years older than I am pass me as we struggled up one of the steep hills at the start of the triathlon.

So I am learning to let this go and be myself. I accept that I don't have five hours in each day to train. I'm not a quasi-professional triathlete. Someone will always pass me on the hill, no matter how fit I become. Similarly--and here we get onto the slippery slope of comparing one's professional "success" to that of others--I didn't start a technology company and sell it for an large sum of money (like some of my friends), thus retiring to a life of large boats, philanthropy, and personal investing. There are many things I'm not, even though they might have some crowd appeal, and I've learned to accept that and focus on what I am and want to be.

It's easy to choose to only "compete with yourself" (heard that before?) when no one else is around. But it's much harder "being you" when you're getting passed on the hill! If you can do it, though, you'll be far more mindful and certainly more tranquil.

## 3. Just Doing It

Sometimes, we think too much about what we're going to do, and we get paralyzed. I did, and I was.

During my triathlon, the 5-kilometer run was the last event. I emerged from the water in somewhat of a daze, having already gone all-out for nearly an hour on the most grueling bike ride (steep hills ascending to 8,000 feet) I had ever experienced. I was in back of the 50+ year-old group leaders, but well in front of another cluster of slower racers, and as a result I found myself entering the starting gate for the run virtually alone. Then, I made a big mistake-I started thinking. Where is everyone, I wondered? Why can't I see the other runners? What direction should I run in? Do I have everything I need for the run? (uh, like are my legs still attached?). And on and on, as the clock was ticking away. I had literally stopped moving, frozen by my thoughts.

As I stood there motionless, thinking really, really hard about what to do next, I heard a voice scream out from the crowd lining the racecourse. It was my coach, Jay. He yelled, simply, "Andrew. RUN!" Nothing more, nothing less. "RUN." So I started running, and finished that final portion of the triathlon in good time.

If my coach hadn't screamed, "Run," and if I hadn't decided to blindly obey his exhortation, my race time would have been five minutes slower. Either that, or I would still be standing there.

Most of us live by thinking, but sometimes, you have to just run.

## CONCLUSION

There is a powerful book called "Chasing Daylight" by Gene O'Kelly, which I highly recommend (and I don't recommend many books...). At age 53, he was CEO of KPMG. He was then diagnosed with terminal brain cancer, and given 3 months to live. Unlike many who die of a terminal illness, however, he was told he would remain in fairly good health right up until his death. In his story, written in the couple of months before he succumbed, O'Kelly recounts his quest to live "perfect days" during his last weeks. For him, a "perfect day" was one in which he was thoroughly in the moment-completely mindful of what he was experiencing at that point in time. Talking about this, he says,

"The present felt to me like a gift. (Perhaps I should say the present was a present.) Living in it now, maybe for the first time, I experienced more Perfect moments and Perfect Days in two weeks than I had in the last five years..."

We spend a lot of time thinking about and planning for the future, and our professions encourage this skill-it's one of the ways we are helpful to our clients. But I'm convinced that any pastime or avocation which forces us into the present (sports, meditation, playing music, and many others) has to be good for us. These things can certainly make us more mindful and open to experiencing the kinds of "perfect moments" that O'Kelly describes in his book.

=====  
If you are not a subscriber and wish to subscribe, send an e-mail to [Join-clients@andrewsobel.com](mailto:Join-clients@andrewsobel.com) or visit [www.andrewsobel.com](http://www.andrewsobel.com). You can unsubscribe at any time by sending an e-mail to [leave-clients@andrewsobel.com](mailto:leave-clients@andrewsobel.com).  
=====

Andrew Sobel is a leading authority on client relationships and the skills and strategies required to earn enduring client loyalty. He is a consultant and educator to major services firms worldwide. Andrew is the author of the business bestsellers Making Rain: The Secrets of Building Lifelong Client Loyalty (John Wiley & Sons), and Clients for Life: How Great Professionals Develop Breakthrough Relationships (Simon & Schuster/Fireside). He can be reached at [andrew@andrewsobel.com](mailto:andrew@andrewsobel.com) (Tel: 505.982.0211).

