



The Link Between Mountains & Molehills

It all depends on your line of sight.

How often does 'seeing your mountains' stop you from 'stepping on or over your molehills'?

Dr. Shari L. Frisinger | Sājet Solutions

© 2018, 2021

Director of Maintenance (DOM) Sam asked Alex to work late to help Jim prepare the aircraft. DOM Sam stressed how important it was for the job to be done expediently and thoroughly. Alex was not pleased, and his displeasure became obvious in his tone of voice, curt words and amplified behaviors. What began as a simple request to help another team member became, in Alex's mind, a punishment and proof of his low worth to the department and lack of respect from the DOM. In fact, the more Alex allowed the situation to fester in his mind, the faster it grew from the proverbial molehill to the overpowering, overwhelming and all-encompassing mountain.

This type of situation, with the details changed, can happen to even the calmest, most objective director. Yet there are times that you, for whatever reason, blew a minor or even moderate situation out of proportion? Looking back, you realized you pulled that knee-jerk reaction, and could not get it out of your head. One reason may be that you took your eyes off your big picture, your result, your future. Of course, there may be other reasons and those reasons may be justified or rationalized. This article will look at those times we struggle and get too caught up in the moment, when we cannot focus on our long-term goals; those times we become consumed by the situation occurring today and right in front of us.

What's inside your head

Your thoughts provoke your emotions and your emotions fuel your thoughts. As your brain becomes mired in the throes of chaos and uncertainty, your rational brain is thrown to the side. When your emotional brain (specifically your amygdala, or Amy/Andy as many of you know it by) is triggered, it sucks strength from your other brain areas, starving them with not enough energy or oxygen. Your thoughts, emotions and actions can pull distant thoughts into the present, and what was once forgotten, forgiven or explained resurfaces as an issue. This can easily and quickly lead to catastrophic thinking, which in turn enhances and enlarges your ever-growing molehill. At this point, there is probably no way out as your thoughts are in a hectic downward spiral. Don't get caught up in the 'drama du jour'.

Our brains are wired to be serial processors – that is they perform one 'task' at a time. You cannot think about one thing and focus on something else; you cannot think about the expanding molehill and focus on your necessary tasks at hand. Our prefrontal cortex has a finite amount of working memory – the ability to remember information in the short-term while working to complete a task. Your working memory capacity also affects what you do with the information you have readily available in your mind.

When accuracy is important, it is not advisable to divide your attention. When time is of the essence, focus on completing one activity or task at a time. When your molehill is becoming that mountain, the worst thoughts you can have are those that are not solution oriented; "why did this happen to me?", "what is the boss/client/co-workers going to think about me?", "it is totally unfair!" and "all I want is ...". Those thoughts take up your working memory and, much like standing in quicksand, impede your progress to move forward.

You cannot see your future if your brain is wrapped around the axle of today's molehill.

Actions you can take:

Often it helps when you link your thinking to a physical activity – transforming the abstract into the concrete.

1. Imagine the offending situation, person or activity is an object or an item you can touch.
 - a. Picture this object in your mind; notice your thinking and your body (heart rate, breathing, are your hands or is your jaw clenched?). Are you showing other signs of stress?
 - b. Now take that picture and make it farther away so it appears smaller in your mind; change the colors to black and white, and blur the edges. How does that change the effect it has on you?

2. Listen to what you are saying, both to yourself and to others. Really listen. What words are you using? Are you portraying yourself as a victim, or as someone in control?
3. Re-assess or re-interpret the situation. Put it in a different perspective. Take the actions you see as unfair or unjust and re-frame the situation. This accomplishes several things:
 - a. It uses your prefrontal cortex - your brain's executive and the cognitive part of your brain. When your prefrontal cortex is focused on one situation or issue, your attention is not scattered, and you are more likely to respond appropriately and not negatively.
 - b. It takes pressure off your emotional brain as it works to figure a way out of the situation. This allows rational thinking to prevail.
 - c. It opens doors (and your mind) for alternate reasons for the behaviors.
 - d. It stops you from impulsive or regrettable actions.
4. Recognize the uncertainties of the situation and mentally work to define them. It is difficult to move forward when there is not a clear path, and every step you take has the possibility of worsening the situation. As the director, resist the urge to answer 'how' to solve; instead work through the why is this important and the repercussions, what is important to the department, who you are as a department.
5. Are you aware of the content of what going through your mind? One way to raise that awareness is to imagine a rubber band around your wrist; every time you recognize that your thoughts have traveled back to 'the situation', snap the rubber band and 'feel' the sting. Eventually you will identify the times when your thoughts stray; that's when you can proactively change your thoughts and your emotions.

Thoughts to remember

1. Remember the big picture – trying to build or rebuild your department. Don't blow an off-handed or callous remark out of proportion – feelings hurt – still part of the team, refuse to carry and feed that grudge and seek revenge.
2. If you don't get the job or promotion you want. It's one episode in your life. Take a step back and figure out why you were not chosen, regroup and proceed anew.
3. When all is said and done, what is important – your pride/ego, relationships (work and working), your reputation, your values? Your response will dictate your immediate actions.
4. Tweaking what Stephen Covey in The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People said "keep the end in mind".
5. Excessive negative self-talk hurts your performance now and in the future.
6. You have the ability to consciously change your thoughts, much like changing the direction in which your car is traveling. It may not be easy, it may not be 'pretty' and you may not be successful the first time (or two) you try. You will be successful if you decide that is what you want or need to do.

Summary

Perspective is reality. Reality drives thoughts, emotions and actions (TEA Tornado™). The unconstrained mind can make mountains out of molehills; the skillful mind can make molehills out of mountains and regain a more situationally-appropriate perspective.

References:

Beilock, S. (2011). Choke. Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press.

Covey, S <https://www.stephencovey.com/7habits/7habits-habit2.php>

Fairhurst, G. T. (2011). The power of framing: Creating the language of leadership. San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass.

© Dr. Shari L. Frisinger, 2018, 2021



About the Researcher



DR. SHARI L. FRISINGER

Human Behavior Consultant | SME
dr.shari@sajetsolutions.com

