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Buying into Your Own Status Quo

by **Rick Smith**

Because we cling so tenaciously to the status quo, we also tend to overcommit to our present circumstances, over-defend the decisions that got us there, and overestimate the risk and costs of altering them.

Consider, for example, that annual sporting and betting extravaganza known as “March Madness,” the NCAA Division I basketball championships. The more time you spend puzzling out all the brackets and possible combinations of Sweet Sixteen, Elite Eight, Final Four, etc., the more committed you become to your own predictions. If you then place a bet on the final outcome—and the FBI estimates \$2.5 billion gets wagered each year—the odds are extraordinarily high that neither love nor money could get you to change your mind, at least until the first round has been played.

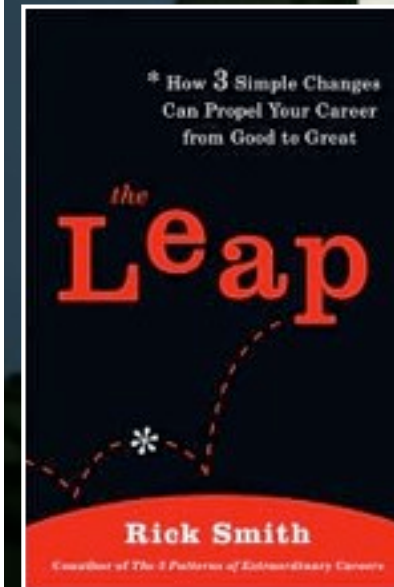
In effect, you have created a status quo and bought into it; studies have consistently shown that the bigger the bet and the more you fretted over it, the more certain you are that your reasoning is sound and the outcome you have predicted is highly likely. That’s the way the brain works. It makes us sweat and strain over our decisions like a crew of ditch diggers; then, once the decision is made, the brain invokes a psychological defense clause that says, Well, that sounds like a great bet to me. I’ll

stick with it through thick and thin. So it is with jobs and careers and even life patterns. We often invest so heavily in them, and buy into the logic of our investment and decision making so thoroughly, that we see abandoning them at the one extreme as a kind of psychological suicide and at the other as an unnecessary dare, given that the future (as our flawed brains paint it) is so likely to re- create the present. Rather than face up to the potential of positive, dramatic change, we silence the argument within ourselves, and in doing so, we spare ourselves the pain both of a difficult contemplation and of potentially realizing that our assumptions about the future have been fundamentally flawed.

In various branches of science, this is known as a closed system. In more everyday terms, it’s like walking into a dead- end alley. Maybe instead of calling it presentism, we should think of it as the “Now Trap.” What is closes in around us. What *could* be seems impossibly distant. And the space between them appears far too risky to navigate. No wonder our personal ruts seem so hard to escape— they are, in fact, Now Traps every one.

Simply put, we are motivated more by the fear of losing what we have than we are by the possibility of gaining something of equal or greater value. Economists and psycho-

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logists have both shown that we expect losing a dollar to have much more impact than gaining a dollar. Even when the gain side of the equation is dramatically increased, the fear doesn't go away. Most of us would refuse a bet with an 85 percent chance of doubling our life savings because the big gain doesn't compensate us for the much smaller chance of losing it.

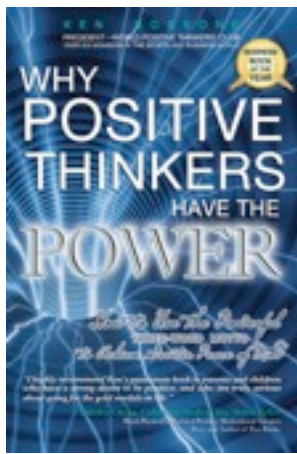
Psychologists have long assumed that terrible events such as violent crime have lasting negative effects on their victims, and sometimes they do. But more recent studies have found that most people who go through such traumatic experiences suffer relatively low levels of sadness for relatively brief times, then get on with life. The same is true with our work lives. We consistently overestimate how bad a job change or even a career shift will make us feel and how long we will feel that way, and thus we opt for what is, rather than for what could be. And yet for most of us, the emotional system is on the whole far more elastic than the brain will let us believe.

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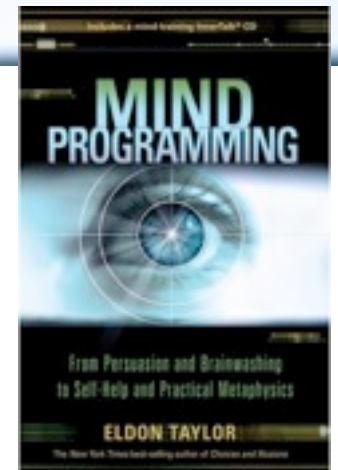
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