

The Only Thing You Can Control Is You

by Markku Kauppinen

“S**t happens”, my friend, Tim, used to say all the time. Sometimes he said it with a little smile, but most often he made the statement when he was giving into whatever was happening. Once Tim confessed he was at the time a “victim of unfortunate circumstances and a streak of bad luck”. I wanted to find the right words to say to encourage him but realized this was not the time. He just wanted to be heard. “I feel overwhelmed by all that is happening in my life. I have too much work and I am under paid. And I can’t keep up with all the personal life stuff. I feel like my life is out of control. Sometimes I just want to leave all this behind. Leave and escape. Start over and regain some control.”

Maybe you know someone who has felt like Tim. The person feels he has no control over what is happening and feels overwhelmed, helpless and powerless. It is a tough situation and can be very difficult to overcome.

The reality is we have very little control over what happens next in our life. At times we may get a little delusional about how much control we do have. This is especially true when things are going well. We may give ourselves a just a tad too much credit: “Look at me! See what I accomplished.” Occasionally, the opposite also tends to occur. We may attribute missteps, misfortunes and mistakes to other factors: “How could this take place in spite of all of my valiant efforts and smart decisions? Must be just bad luck, I guess.” All of this is not bad. Self-confidence is good. But the fact remains: we have very little – if any – control over what happens in this world.

There is a part of this world you can control. It is you. In fact, you are the only one who can truly control you. Tim did not recognize the amount of power he has over his life. He did not know he does have control over how he responds, nor was he aware of how much power he actually has over his life. No, Tim cannot prevent what happens next. But, yes, he has the power to decide how he responds. It will not always make things easier but it will prevent Tim from being paralyzed by the feeling of helplessness.

This power allows Tim not to start falling into “woe me, why is this happening to me?” mode that is really a trap keeping him from moving on and taking action. In other words, regaining control over his life.

Easy for me to say, isn't it? How can Tim gain this power?

First, he needs to have a very keen self-awareness. Tim must know how he tends to respond to what happens. If he does not, his natural reaction will blindly direct him. In effect, Tim responds and behaves routinely and without much, conscious thought. Sometimes his natural style works really well. Other times outcomes are not what he wants.

We cannot sugarcoat self-awareness: Tim needs to get comfortable with both his strengths and development areas. In other words, Tim must accept who he is. (Have you ever met a successful person who was not self-aware?) Once he does, Tim will know how he will naturally react.

Have you ever noticed how two individuals react completely differently to a very same situation? One person sees an incredible opportunity and quickly springs into action while the other one perceives insurmountable obstacle and turns away. Who is right? It does not matter, of course, because each individual believes he is right and hence his natural response must be the best course of action.

This is exactly why self-awareness is so important. When Tim knows how he naturally tends to respond, he will be able to ask this important question: What is my natural tendency in a situation like this?

Second, Tim needs to decide how he will actually respond. He has the power to decide if his natural style is indeed the best response, or if he should modify his behavior. For instance, he may consciously think: “My tendency is to think about what impact my decisions have on other people. In this situation, I need to make a

quick decision because the cost delaying by making sure everyone agrees with it is too high. I must decide now and not worry about others as much this time.”

Instead of allowing himself to routinely follow his preferred and most comfortable way of responding, Tim takes control of the situation by deciding what he will do. This does not guarantee he will always make the right decision. However, it will ensure he makes conscious decisions how to respond. As Tim begins to make these decisions more frequently, he will realize how much more control he actually has. Not over what happens, but over how he responds. This in turn will not only guide his behavior, but his attitude as well. Tim will feel he has more control and power over his life: he can decide how he will experience it.

There is a famous saying by Charles Swindoll: “Life is 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how we respond to it.” While we may disagree about the accuracy of the percentages, he does make a very valid point. We do have control how we respond to what happens in our life. To me that's incredible power.

Today Tim's life is clearly busier than ever. He has a lot more responsibility at work, two more children, more and bigger bills to pay, and many more items on his daily to-do list. Tim tells me he, just like all of us, has to deal with challenges. But he does not feel helpless and like his life is out of control.

“I still can't control what happens. But now I can better control how I deal with things”, he told me.

Tim is now in control. Are you?

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Think of that one person who drives you crazy -- who upsets you, makes you feel guilty or sad. Does someone come to mind? You may have spent many hours reliving events when this person was unfair, unappreciative, or inconsiderate.

You may have thought, "What a jerk!" Even remembering this person may make your blood pressure rise, your pulse race and your mind fill with grief.

Try not to let this person -- or other people -- make you feel so miserable.

Their problems are their problems. Try not to make them your problems. Letting other people "get to us" is seldom a good idea for two reasons: 1) it does not help the situation and 2) life is too short to spend your time feeling bad.

An old Buddhist parable may help.

A young farmer was covered with sweat as he paddled his boat up the river. He was going upstream to deliver his produce to the village. It was a hot day, and he wanted to make his delivery and get home before dark. As he looked ahead, he spied another vessel, heading rapidly downstream toward his boat. He rowed furiously to get out of the way, but it didn't seem to help.

He yelled, "Change direction, you idiot! You are going to hit me!" His screaming was to no avail. The other vessel hit his boat with a sickening thud. He was enraged as he cried out, "You moron! How could you manage to hit my boat in the middle of this wide river? What is wrong with you?" He then realized that he was screaming at an empty boat that had broken free of its moorings and was floating downstream with the current.

The point of this story is simple.

There is never anyone in the other boat. We are always screaming at an empty vessel.

Don't Let Them Make You Crazy

by Marshall Goldsmith

The person who is making you so angry can't help but be who he is, and getting mad at him makes no sense.

You don't have to like the other person, respect him, or agree with him. Just accept that he is who he is and decide not to let his craziness become yours.

Often, the cause of our anger is not the other person. We are usually mad at ourselves. For example, on a recent flight, I talked to an investor who had bought a small business. He was livid about how the original owner had let him down. In spite of the owner's positive initial impression, he consistently missed commitments. The investor told me how the owner had induced him to make a poor investment. The investor was a multi-millionaire who lived in a beautiful home in Switzerland and had a lovely wife and child.

I asked how long this had upset him.

He angrily grunted, "Many months!" I suggested that the real cause of his anger might be that he was incensed with himself for being a poor judge of character and not conducting adequate due diligence in the purchase.

He reflected, "You're right. In hindsight, I was dumb for making this purchase. I'm usually a good judge of character and have a great sense for these deals. I just screwed this one up! I'm really mad at me for missing this one!" I suggested that getting upset with himself for making one mistake was even crazier than getting upset at the other person. He was successful in spite of this mistake. Besides, in the future, he could learn from what he did wrong. By the end of the flight, he decided to sell the business, cut his losses, and enjoy life with his family! The next time you feel like another person is making you crazy, just smile and say, "There is no one in the other boat." Accept him for who he is and make the best of it.

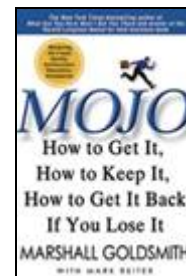
Also, look in the mirror. The person you are angry with may be staring back at you. Forgive yourself for making a mistake in judgment. Cut

your losses, get on with life, and enjoy your family!

Life is good.

***Dr. Marshall Goldsmith** recently been named by the American Management Association as one of 50 great thinkers and business leaders who have impacted the field of management. His 18 books include the Business Week best-seller, *The Leader of the Future* and *Global Leadership: The Next Generation*. Marshall is a world authority in helping successful leaders achieve positive change in behavior: for themselves, their people and their teams.*

Marshall's latest best-seller, **MOJO**, is now available.



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