

Focus On Outcomes, Not Tasks

By, Jef Menguin

The ability to focus on outcomes, not tasks, may very well be the primary thing that separates people who can improvise and flow with the unexpected from those who can't. A task is a means to an end; an outcome is the end itself. Understand that, and you will be able to flow with anything.

A traditional improv comedy show consists of multiple "games" featuring various rules that challenge the performers' creativity. Most performers make the mistake of thinking that playing the rules 100% correct is the goal of the game. It's not. The goal of any performance game is to entertain the crowd and have fun. The rules are the means to that end. I have seen many performers, both new and veteran, bomb on stage because they are so wrapped up in what they think the goal is (playing the game "right") that they miss the real point ("entertaining the audience").

Outside of the improv comedy arena, I am constantly surprised by how unfamiliar this topic is to others. The idea of thinking about overall goals seems to be foreign to many people.

Focusing on outcomes may sound like something you do only with the dreams you are pursuing or huge business goals. However, by focusing on outcomes even in little day to day things, you will be more able to improvise and achieve the things you really want.

Here are some examples of task focus vs. outcome focus:

Task Focus:

Speaking – What are the words I need to say and how will I say them?

Training – What are the activities I have planned and what is my schedule?

Business – What do I need to do today? What meetings do I have to attend?

Relationships – Where are we going for dinner? What time do we have to be there?

Improv Comedy Game – What are the rules of this specific game?

Outcome Focus:

Speaking – what is the outcome you want for the audience? What do I want them to walk away with?

Training – what is the outcome for the group? What do I want this group to do differently when I am done?

Business – what is the outcome for this meeting? For this marketing campaign? For this activity?

Relationships – what is the outcome I want for this evening? Why are we going to dinner?

Improv Comedy Game – why am I playing this game? How do I want the audience and my fellow performers to respond?

This is not to say that tasks aren't important. Tasks are the steps you take to achieve your outcome, but you must remember that the tasks are just that: steps to achieve the outcome. Once tasks become the outcome, you get into trouble. However, if you can maintain an "outcome focus," you will reap many benefits:

Maximize Your Results

On occasion I have two extremes of work days: 1) I end the day feeling like I worked a lot but didn't accomplish much or 2) I end the day feeling like I didn't do all that much but I accomplished a whole lot. Which day would you prefer? Which do you more often have?

The days where you work a lot and don't accomplish much are most likely days where you are focused on tasks rather than outcomes. Tasks are always only a way to achieve outcomes; completing a task is never the end goal in and of itself. By focusing on outcomes first, you can ensure that your tasks align properly. When you get caught up in tasks, there is a chance that you will end up doing busy work that takes you nowhere.

Minimize Your Effort and Eliminate Waste

One way to reduce the number of "work a lot but accomplish little" days is to consistently ask yourself, "Why am I doing this?" You may be amazed at how many tasks you can start to eliminate from your day.

If you work in a corporate setting, the most common place you will find this is with meetings. Many meetings seem to occur with no real outcome in mind, and they end up wasting everyone's time.

I have heard many tales of people who go into business for themselves and work longer hours and more days than when employed. Personally, since I have been self-employed, I have worked fewer hours and fewer days a week than when in the corporate world. I honestly believe that is because as the sole decision maker, I can truly focus on outcomes and critical tasks and eliminate the rest – especially endless meetings!

Outside of work, you can apply this technique to the various activities and associations you are part of. There are things we all do for such a long time that we forget why we started doing them in the first place. Often, the original reason is no longer valid but we still keep going. I had this happen recently with two associations I was involved with. I joined them years ago for specific reasons, but without realizing it those reasons were no longer valid. When I refocused on, “why am I doing this?” I realized that for one group, I really had no real reason to stay involved, and for the other, my reason for attending meetings had changed. I dropped the former group, and completely changed my approach to the latter. Overall, I am now using my time better and getting more out of the second group.

Reduce Your Stress and Stay Motivated

If looking at a mountain of “tasks” gets you overwhelmed, then looking at the outcomes you are after is the way to let go of your stress and stay motivated.

Richard S. Lazarus from the University of California, Berkley, defines stress as the following: “stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that “demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.””

What is interesting about this definition is that it is about what the person perceives. By this definition, there are two ways to reduce stress: reduce perception of demand or increase perception of resources. If you spend your time focusing on all the little tasks, then the perception of demand will be very high (“Oh my God, look at all the things I have to do!”). While it certainly won’t eliminate your stress altogether, focusing on the outcome will reduce your perception of demand.

Not only will this focus reduce your stress but it will also increase your motivation. The ultimate outcome is why you are doing all these tasks in the first place. By focusing on the “whys” you will constantly re-motivate yourself to move forward.

Be Able to Deal with the Unexpected

From an improviser’s perspective, focusing on outcomes is the key to rolling with the unexpected. When something unexpected pops up, if you focus immediately on the outcome

you will be able to quickly make adjustments and continue on towards your goal. In fact, you must focus on the outcomes because all the tasks you had lined up may be irrelevant now. And yet, even when they are irrelevant, people still find it hard to let go of tasks.

If you have a large “to-do” list and something suddenly comes up that takes a few hours out of your day, you may start to scramble to try to get through your entire list. However, if you take a few minutes to think through the outcomes you may be able to figure out what’s important, what needs to get done, and what you can change to achieve your outcomes faster.

Remember, tasks are simply the means to an end.

Gain Perspective

Focusing on outcomes helps you keep things in perspective and keep your mood up. When things happened that throw your plans awry, shifting to an outcome focus will allow you to not be thrown by them and still allow you to get what you want.

For example, imagine that you are going out to dinner with your family and when you arrive at the restaurant they have lost your reservation. Many people in this situation would get angry, argue, and get in a sour mood. Worse, they would spend the rest of the night complaining about the restaurant, whether they stayed there or not.

A quick shift to outcome focus would serve much better here. As soon as you realize that the reservation is lost, remember your outcome: to connect and spend quality time with the people you love. Ruining your mood because a restaurant messed up completely prevents you from achieving that outcome. Am I saying you should not push back and try to get the restaurant to honor your reservation? No. However, once your push-backs get in the way of achieving your outcome, it’s time to let it go and remember the big picture.

If you haven’t done this before, take a moment now and think about your outcomes for the day. Are your tasks aligned to allow you to achieve those outcomes in a minimum amount of time with a minimum amount of effort? Or are you setting yourself up to spend a long day accomplishing very little? Invest a few minutes up front, focus on your outcomes, and you will find yourself flowing with the unexpected and making the most of your time every day!

Jef Menguin facilitates **people skills seminars and teambuilding and leadership workshops in Metro Manila, Philippines**. Visit his website at <http://jefmenguin.com> to learn more about his seminars.