

Career Path: Can You Think Your Way to Success?

Career Development



I can think of many times in my own life where I firmly believed I would benefit from magical thinking, or the ***power of thoughts alone***. The sports world is filled with elite athletes who practice visualization or mental imagery. This is the practice of imagining yourself performing the sporting activity as you would like to do it in the real world.

For example, if you have an important race coming up, you can visualize yourself performing the race in your head. There you are at the starting line, feeling calm, full of energy, and ready to go. You envision yourself clearly as you start running, with smooth and quick strides, conserving your energy. You imagine what you will feel and how you will respond when you notice some tiredness, or perhaps a stich in your side. And look, here is how your neck, shoulders, arms, and legs will all be flowing and relaxed as you head into the final stretch. It becomes palpable.

Using mental imagery



From Olympians on down to us average plodders, in sports as diverse as golf, weightlifting, running, or chess, studies have demonstrated the startling power of first playing out realistic scenarios in your head. *Psychology Today* wrote about this mental imagery exercise.

It seems that our thoughts can produce similar mental patterns as the actions themselves. As a result, visualizing your specific performance in a specific setting can impact your later physical (and mental) performance. Remarkable, but also easy to understand, I suppose, when we consider how important one's mental attitude is to performance.

You may have heard the phrase attributed to Henry Ford, "Whether you think you can or think you can't, you're right." Visualization — and confidence — is key in producing the desired performance. By mentally going over your race or event, you are seeing yourself perform as you would like. You are training yourself to "think you can" by seeing yourself do it in your head.

Mindfulness

I am going to provide two more reasons why we might keep an open mind about the power of the mind to impact outcomes in the real world. And I will wrap up by speculating on the thread tying all this together and offer my formula for how to turn thoughts and ideas into personal success.

First, some of you know I am sharing elements of Stoic philosophy in the Moral Letters for Modern Times. One key lesson is that one's state of mind is crucial in determining our path through life. By focusing on what we can control, and particularly on our thoughts, we can live a purposeful life.

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You've probably heard the term, "mindfulness." Steering our thoughts and actions is part of what it means to be mindful. How could I embrace Stoic wisdom without at least being open to the idea that our thoughts have the power to shape our lives?

Articulate

Second, one of the spookiest things I ever did was write down on a single piece of paper a number of life goals: personal, professional, financial, social, and fitness related. It was Christmas break 2006. I made the list as part of a career development exercise in which I considered my situation 10 years before, the present day, and where I wanted to be in 10 years. I made my aspirational list, put it aside, and didn't think of it for years. Looking back, I see that sheet of paper changed my life.

Without realizing I was doing it, I started to knock off one item on the list after the other. By now I've accomplished more than 90 percent of the things on that now 16-year-old list. I don't know about you, but I rarely complete task lists of any kind as well as that one. Mind you, these were not little goals. Many were so ambitious as to be almost comical to my 2006 eyes.

Some 10 years ago, I started to take out the list about once a year and update it. I'd check off goals I accomplished and add new goals. I might spend an hour on it, that's it. I kept the original sheet of paper because it was already clear to me something magical (and kind of scary if I'm honest) was going on. I know it wasn't the piece of paper itself, but it was hard not to be superstitious.

I think writing down goals all those years ago helped me in two ways: I personally acknowledged what I wanted to achieve and I expanded the scope of what was possible for me to achieve. Just writing down goals made them not only tangible but doable, and they became goals I thought I could achieve.

Did writing down goals cause me to pay more attention to them in the coming years and take actions as a result? No doubt. That's part of how we move beyond *knowing* an idea and *implementing* that idea. We have to take some concrete step to move from thought to action.

The power of magical thinking

My experience suggests that even a small step may help get you started. Once you are on your way, if you just keep putting one foot in front of the other, then nothing will stop you from reaching your goals.

So go ahead and believe in your own magical thinking, so long as you take at least one step right away toward achieving your goals.



Be well.

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