

The trial is an invitation to failure

As I described in my article «Self-hypnosis - an art practised extensively!», I mentally rewind and rephrase whenever I catch myself formulating a statement that is weakening me. One of the most frequent occasions when I advise my clients to press the 'rewind' button is when they formulate this or a similar sentence: «That's a good idea, I'll give it a try».

Peter Näf

My coachees always spontaneously agree with me that this is not a promising resolution. Because when I ask them whether they have just listened to themselves, I usually get the bashful smile of a child who has been caught out. Why does everyone seem to realise that this debilitating statement will not lead to success and yet they use it so often?

Action is always in the now

Whether we will be successful with our actions also depends on how we formulate our goals. Tom & David Kelley describe a vivid experiment on this in their book «Creative Confidence»: Bernie Roth, a school headmaster challenged his students to try to snatch a water bottle from him, which he held up in the air to demonstrate. The group of 20-year-old students subsequently failed to overpower the 50-year-old professor and take the bottle away from him.

He then asks his students to stop trying and do it instead. And lo and behold, the professor has no chance of defending his water bottle.

The invitation to try postpones the action to a vague moment in the future and is therefore as promising as making New Year's resolutions. Action is always in the here and now or, if this is not possible for whatever reason, at a very specific, bindingly defined moment in the future.

Trial and error as part of action

But don't we often say that goals are achieved through trial and error and therefore shouldn't trial be given greater honour? In fact, the realisation of goals often involves us making various attempts and failing with them. This leads us to try something else. The attempt is therefore justified, but only after we have clearly defined the goal and made a binding decision in favour of it. Failure then turns the action into a failed attempt.

If we set the attempt as the goal instead, it is like putting the cart before the horse. And if the attempt fails according to the original objective, no further attempt will follow. You don't have to make 10,000 attempts like Thomas Edison to achieve the goal of lighting up a light bulb. Even simpler endeavours often require more than one attempt before success is achieved.

Even Luke Skywalker in the film «Star Wars» knew that the attempt was an invitation to failure when he said: «Do or do not. There is no try!»

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