

Living In The Positive Zone

How To Enjoy and Multiply Your Achievements

by Dan Sullivan

A successful entrepreneur was in London for a series of speaking engagements in the U.K. He and his wife left their room at one of the city's most venerable old hotels for only a few hours, but when they returned the unthinkable had happened. His laptop was gone, stolen from his room with virtually no chance of recovery. This might have been a minor inconvenience, except that on it — and nowhere else but on some disks which were stolen too — was the near complete manuscript of his next book, due to go into production the next week. He hadn't thought it necessary to leave a back-up copy somewhere else. "How could this happen now? Why me?" he agonized to himself. Months of painstaking work gone, just like that. A whole chain of very busy people were lined up on a very tight schedule to turn what he gave them into a finished book. As his heart sank, his confidence plummeted even further. He had only one week left before the deadline. How could he possibly recover everything he'd done in just one week, away from home, with all his other commitments.

Then, with nothing to lose, he decided to try an experiment. He said to himself, with the conviction of a man with few options, "Everything I've done up to now has just been a dress rehearsal. Tomorrow is the real show. Tomorrow, I'll get up and write my book."

With that, he went to bed early to get a good night's sleep for the next day. He woke up the next morning with creative juices flowing. The book seemed to write itself. What came out was not the lost manuscript recreated, but a whole new approach, superior in every respect to the original. The book went to press on time, and early sales and feedback indicate that it may be his best yet.

This entrepreneur is not a hero. He simply managed to change his mental perspective at a critical moment. He decided not to beat himself up but instead to find a way to work constructively with his human error. Years before this incident, he probably would have taken the other path, wasting his energy on chastising himself for the costly oversight of not having had a backup and trying to share the blame with others (the hotel? the thieves?). The difference this time was that he had made a commitment to himself to live in The Positive Zone.

Happiness does not always accompany success.

In 25 years of working with financially successful entrepreneurs, I have observed two contrasting models of human behavior.

The Positive Zone. At one end of the spectrum, many of these high-achievers are happy individuals who seem to appreciate and enjoy every aspect of their daily lives. They have the internal ability to create joy and meaning for themselves, and they teach this ability to others. It's stimulating, motivating, and rewarding just to be in their company. Their lives are a **never-ending progression** of greater challenges, goals, accomplishments, growth, awareness, contribution and satisfaction.

The Negative Zone. At the other end of the spectrum, I have met high-achievers for whom the opposite is true. In spite of their success, they feel like failures. When they look at what they have accomplished, it seems like nothing. When they're praised by others for these accomplishments, they brush it off as

meaningless. These individuals lead lives filled with anxiety, guilt, and dissatisfaction. They are extraordinarily harsh in assessing themselves and others. Seldom does anyone measure up to their exceedingly high standards.

Given that you're going to be, or are already, successful, which end of the spectrum would you rather inhabit? It's surprising how many high-achievers don't believe they have a choice. I hear arguments all the time like, "The reason I'm successful is because I never allow myself to be satisfied with what I've done. There's always more and better, and this is what motivates me. Unhappiness, guilt and frustration are just part of the price of success." Fair enough, but these people also spend a significant amount of their valuable energy beating up on themselves. It takes effort to crack the whip. Not to mention what it does to those around them.

Wouldn't it be nice if there was another way to achieve success which would free up this energy for other productive uses? In fact, there is. And because most of us have at least some moments when we live in The Negative Zone, we all stand to gain by understanding it.

The difference between these two options rests on the flick of a tiny "mental switch" that any of us can access at any time — a concept so simple, in fact, that a child can grasp and utilize it within the space of a few minutes. Now you're wondering, "If it's so simple, why isn't everyone living in The Positive Zone?" The answer is that **most of us lack a clear understanding of some fundamentals about how our brains work**. Let me share with you a concept from The Strategic Coach Program which has had a profound impact on many of our clients, their spouses, children, friends, and staff.

The key to living in The Positive Zone rests in **how we measure our progress**. To begin to illustrate why this is so, let me first make an important distinction between goals and ideals, two often-referenced but frequently-ill-understood concepts. As humans, we are given the ability to conceive of perfection or the ideal. **Ideals** serve three very important purposes: They **help us to set goals, motivate ourselves, and withstand hardships**. What we often fail to realize about ideals, however, is that they are **mental constructs**. I often liken ideals to the horizon — The closer you get to them, the further ahead they shift. **Ideals don't exist outside of our minds, nor are they achievable.**

Goals, however, should be **achievable by definition**. If you are setting functional goals, at useful increments, they should be both **real and realizable**. The distance between where you actually are now (let's call it Actual 1) and your goal (Actual 2) can be measured objectively, and when you achieve Actual 2, you know it. Think of the distinction this way: No matter how fast you run toward the horizon, you'll never get there, but if you run more quickly towards a goal post, you will get there faster. This may sound simple, but you'd be amazed at how many people confuse their goals with their ideals.

This brings us back to measuring progress. When you reach a level of achievement you have the choice of measuring it in one of two ways: You can measure it against your Actual 1 — that is, where you were when you started your progress — or you can measure the achievement against the ideal. The different results produced by these contrasting approaches determine whether we live in The Positive Zone or in The Negative Zone.

Measuring based on where you've come from.

This method of measuring gives you the opportunity to stop and **celebrate your progress** and to understand where you are in relation to your next goal. Your current Actual 2 becomes your next Actual 1 — the starting point for your next progression. Measuring in this way **builds confidence** and a **sense of achievement** and **satisfaction**. It puts you in The Positive Zone.

Measuring by the ideal.

People who do this always fall short, no matter what their effort and accomplishment. Ironically, they feel their greatest sense of failure and frustration when they are achieving and being the most successful, because no matter how hard they work, they can't seem to bridge the gap between their actual progress and the ideal.

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What they fail to realize is that there is a permanent difference between one's actual level of achievement at any time and the corresponding ideal. This is what makes the ideal great as a motivator and beacon (it's always out there ahead of you), but useless as a target (it's always moving as long as you are). How frustrating to reach a hard and long-sought-after goal, only to feel that it isn't enough. Paradoxically, these individuals, who should be highly confident based on their real achievements, often suffer from low self-esteem. The game (which is made up in their own minds) seems fixed so that they can never win, yet they hang on to the notion that things will be better if and when they finally reach the ideal. Over time, the results of this way of thinking lead them more and more deeply into The Negative Zone. Sadly, they rarely travel alone.

Progress not perfection.

The critical attitudinal difference between these two groups of people is that the latter group is always seeking perfection in themselves and others, because anything less is failure in their eyes. The former group, on the other hand, **only seek progress**, and they are **always amply rewarded**. There is **continual daily movement forward** on many different fronts, and all efforts give them a sense of achievement.

Three strategies for living in The Positive Zone

We all need to learn the proper care and feeding of the ideal. Even the most positive among us occasionally venture into The Negative Zone. Here are three of the most vital strategies for increasing our ability to live in The Positive Zone, distilled from 12 that I elaborate on in my books and talks.

1. Recognize **"the Gap" between the actual and the ideal as a mental construct**. Understand the nature and purposes of the ideal. You shouldn't feel failure or frustration at not being able to reach it any more than you do at not being able to reach the horizon. It's just the way things work. The hardest part about shifting to living in The Positive Zone is remembering about the Gap when it most matters — that is, when you are being hardest on yourself or others. Old habits are hard to change. **Seek progress, not perfection.**

2. **Set ideals that are much bigger than you and strive to increase your commitment to them.** This helps to distinguish your ideals from your goals. Also, living in The Positive Zone with big ideals gives you room to set big goals and helps to generate the positive energy to attract the resources and creativity necessary to achieve them. Remember that people want to be led by individuals with big ideals.

3. Set aside a regular time for yourself — maybe at the start of each week — to **write down and reflect on your ten biggest accomplishments for the past week and what makes them significant**. You'll be amazed at how much you've done. Then think about what you need to do next to continue on this positive path and write down specific action steps. And don't forget to celebrate your successes along the

way. Take time to enjoy your accomplishments. You'll soon realize that this kind of regular, habitual Positive Focus gives you renewed confidence and energy to tackle new challenges.

A bonus strategy that I would like to add in at the end, is to share this concept with others if you think it applies either to them or to your relationships with them. Sometimes it's easier to see when someone else is living in The Negative Zone. You may also realize that you've been imposing your own ideals on others and punishing them because they fail to measure up. The more you explain this distinction to others, the clearer it will become to you and the more likely it will be that you can access the knowledge when you really need to. It's also a **powerful relationship-building and fixing tool** which can add very significant value in both personal and professional situations.

Since introducing this concept at The Strategic Coach, we have seen clients use their recognition of "the Gap" to feel better about their progress within their businesses, giving them new peace of mind and energy to tackle opportunities with renewed enthusiasm. We have also seen it help put parents and their teenage children back on speaking terms and give cancer patients new courage and determination to face difficult courses of therapy.

Always remember that trying to live in The Positive Zone is an ongoing challenge, but that every bit you do increases your confidence, sense of achievement, and ultimately your happiness. The more you reflect on your own goals and ideals and the method you use to measure your progress — Actual 2 against Actual 1 or Actual 2 against the ideal — the more opportunities you will find to move in big and small, but important, ways into The Positive Zone.

Thankfully, living in The Positive Zone also gets easier with practice. **The more you protect your confidence, the easier it gets.** For instance, the next time someone has the gall to steal my laptop, no matter how foreign the locale, I won't waste even a moment's energy on self-pity. ■

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