Crossing the Swamp: Avoiding Distractions that Limit Performance
Dan Wrona | RISE Partnerships

“I will have to remember ‘I am here today to cross the swamp, not to fight all the alligators.’”
Rosamund & Benjamin Zander

Ever since this quote showed up in an issue of Tim Ferriss’ 5 Bullet Fridays (2019), it has been running through my head, prompting memories of past mistakes where I spent too much time fighting all the alligators. There was a time when I became obsessed with building the perfect conference curriculum while overlooking the biggest priorities: securing a space, getting people in the room, and doing it within budget. I made this mistake again on an assessment project, when I chased a complete explanation of everything when the goal was simply to find opportunities to improve performance. The quote also helped me realize that building an extravagant website was a distraction that, although beautiful, didn’t get me any closer to the other side of the swamp.

Fighting alligators is a trap. It is easier work, it feels rewarding, and it can seem like the right thing to do in the moment. On the other hand, perfecting every detail of every project takes a lot of time and effort. Professionals begin feeling overwhelmed and overworked, not because there is too much work, but because they put too much effort into the wrong work.

Unfortunately, this type of mistake is easy to repeat because it can be difficult to recognize when it is happening. We can get lost in the work we love doing, become invested in making it better, and forget about the original objective. Colleagues tell us about the alligators they fought, we compare it to our fight, and we decide to copy what they did without asking about the swamp they were trying to cross. The cycle reinforces and repeats itself.

Aside from adopting this quote as a personal mantra, there are a few techniques that have proven helpful in staying focused on the shore on the other side of the swamp.

Keep the shore in sight.
Review the institutional/organizational objectives to ensure you know what value you should contribute. Write down whether and how each project contributes to those objectives, then reexamine your work. Do you even need to fight this alligator to get to the other shore? Would a different strategy work better? Which efforts don’t map to your objective that need to be discontinued?
Think like your supervisor.
Supervisors approach work differently because they are thinking about how to allocate the office’s resources to get the best results. Anyone can adopt the same mindset by calculating the value and impact of their work. Evaluate each of your projects and determine whether it deserves 4 hours, 40 hours, or 400 hours of staff time. For maximum effect, translate this to monetary terms: would you pay $100, $1000, or $10,000 to have this done (approximately 4 hours, 40 hours, or 10 40-hour weeks at a $50,000 salary)? Does the project’s impact match your investment? How could you use that time to have a bigger impact? Use these questions to determine whether and how much time and effort the project deserves.

Define good enough.
The law of diminishing marginal returns shows up in many ways in our work (Ashkenas, 2002). It suggests that, after a certain point, it takes exponentially more time and effort to make a proportional improvement. For most projects, the difference between “perfect” and “good enough” is small in terms of results but big in terms of effort. Define what good enough looks like for each of your projects. Differentiate between elements that are essential to meeting your objectives and what elements are a luxury.

Know the big variables
All of your work is not equal: some things make a bigger impact than others. Learn to identify and differentiate between the big variables and the small variables. For example, having clear expectations, communicating them, and holding organizations to them are big variables. Adjusting the tiers, points, and tracking process of a chapter accreditation process is a small variable. The time you spend tweaking the incentives system cannot possibly have as much impact on student behavior as setting, communicating, and demonstrating accountability to expectations. Discuss the project with your supervisor to determine what variables matter most, and work on those first. Before adding luxuries, address the essential elements of other projects.

Although it may seem like I am suggesting you take short cuts, this reflection should not be seen as an argument for doing sub-par work. Quality is important, but it cannot come at the expense of results or your own well-being. Choosing not to fight all the alligators, or to choosing to only fight those that serve your purpose creates space. It frees you up to do more good work on other projects, and it helps you reclaim the extra time and energy that makes you feel overworked and overwhelmed. Like me, you will probably make this mistake repeatedly, but taking these steps may help you recognize and avoid it more often.
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References


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