



At Work: Are You a Marathoner or Sprinter?

Mar 9, 2015

Novelist George Eliot observed, “**A difference of taste in jokes is a great strain on the affections.**” And I’ve found that in the workplace, a difference of taste in *pace of work* is a great strain on the efficiency and happiness of teams.

When building our habits, and when working with other people’s habits, it’s important to recognize how we’re like other people, and how we’re different from other people. The **Strategy of Distinctions** is key, if we’re to shape our habits in the way that will allow *us* to succeed.

From what I’ve observed, many people fall into one of two categories: Marathoners and Sprinters. (They say the world is split between two kinds of people: people who split the world into two kinds of people, and those who don’t. I’m firmly in the former category.)

It turns out that when trying to get things accomplished, people work most effectively and creatively at very different paces, and it’s crucial to understand what works for you—and for the people around you.

First, **Marathoners**. Of the “tortoise and the hare,” Marathoners are the “tortoises.” I know this type well, because I’m a Marathoner myself. I like to work at a slow and steady clip, and I dislike deadlines—in fact, I often finish work early. In law school, I had two massive writing requirements to complete by graduation, and I wrote them both by the end of my first year. (Side note: perhaps my eagerness to write big papers was a sign that I wanted to be a writer instead of a lawyer, but that’s another issue.) **Working on projects steadily, over long periods of time, ignites my**

creativity. Ideas simmer, and insights emerge, as I ponder ideas over a long stretch of time.

By contrast, **Sprinters** are the “hares.” **They prefer to work in quick bursts of intense effort, and they deliberately wait for the pressure of a deadline to sharpen their thinking.** They love the adrenaline of racing toward a finish line. A Sprinter told me, “I never prepare a speech until the people are in their seats, and I’m heading to the podium. It drives my staff crazy, but that’s when I get my ideas.” Another Sprinter observed: “I prefer to be completely immersed in a project for a short period of time. The work flows better, I can hold my concentration. Spread things out, and the total hours go way up.”

If Marathoners don’t have enough lead-time, they feel frustrated and anxious, and ideas don’t flow well. If Sprinters are given too much lead-time, they lose focus and enthusiasm, and ideas grow stale.

Each approach works well for the people in that category. But problems arise when Marathoners and Sprinters must work together. Both types tend to be judgmental and to tell the other type that they’re doing it “wrong.” Marathoners are driven nuts by the Sprinters’ refusal to start work, and their nonchalance at the impending deadline. Sprinters get irritated when Marathoners want to tackle tasks before the hour is ripe.

I talked to a guy, a head of a design team, who told me, “It’s important for teams to race toward a deadline. In those last days and hours, that’s when the creative juices really start to flow, and when teams really come together, because they have to work so intensively to turn in the product on time.”

“That works for *you*,” I said. “But I can’t work that way.”

“Oh,” he assured me, “I’ve seen this happen over and over. That’s the best way for teams to work, that’s the way people like to work best.” Well, I thought, not if *I’m* on that team! I would hate that approach.

Marathoners call Sprinters “irresponsible,” and Sprinters call Marathoners “plodding,” but there’s no right way. (Although Sprinters had better get their flu shots, because if they run into trouble at the wrong time, it can be a big problem.)

But here’s an important caveat. **Being a *Sprinter*** isn’t the same thing as being a *Procrastinator*. This can be confusing, because Procrastinators resemble Sprinters—they too tend to finish in a rush, when they’re up against a deadline. But the two types are actually quite different.

Sprinters choose to work at the last minute because the pressure of a deadline clarifies their thoughts and makes them productive; Procrastinators hate last-minute pressure and wish they could force themselves to work before the deadline looms.

Unlike Sprinters, Procrastinators often agonize about whatever work they’re not yet doing, which makes it hard for them to do anything fun or meaningful with the time

when they aren't working. They may rush around doing busywork as a way to avoid doing what they know they have to do.

Sprinters and Marathoners usually feel good about their work style, but Procrastinators don't. So they're happier when they change their work habits in ways that allow them to work more steadily.

How do they do that? One habit-formation strategy that works well to fight procrastination is the **Strategy of Scheduling**—that is, **setting a specific, regular time for an activity to recur**. Write in your calendar, "Work on weekly reports from 9:30-11:30 a.m. every Monday and Tuesday." Dedicate that slice of your workweek to that particular task.

Scheduling helps Procrastinators for a few reasons. First, many people procrastinate because working on a task makes them anxious, so they postpone dealing with it; keeping to a schedule reduces pressure, because you know that work is getting done. When you know that you're going to work regularly, no one day's work is particularly important. You don't have to be super-productive when you do tackle it.

Also, when you're working, you're working, and when you're not working, you're at leisure. Without scheduling, it's easy to spend the whole day worrying about working. So you're not being productive, but you're not having fun either; you're anxious, you're exhausted. Scheduling creates useful boundaries.

And here's an important tip: **during that scheduled work period, do nothing else**. Work on that particular scheduled work, or stare into space. No emails, no filing, no research, no calls, no removing lint from a sweater. *Work, or nothing*. It's a Secret of Adulthood: **Working is one of the most dangerous forms of procrastination**.

So if you find yourself clashing with people at work or at home, about when and how work should be done, consider the issue of Marathoners, Sprinters, and Procrastinators. There's no one right way; it's a question of what works for *each individual*.

If you're intrigued by this distinction, or you want to learn more about how to shape your habits, check out my book **Better Than Before: Mastering the Habits of Our Everyday Lives**. If you like learning about yourself, by using categories like this one, **take the Quiz** to find out if you're an Upholder, Questioner, Obliger, or Rebel. More than 70,000 people have taken it.

How about you? Are you a Marathoner, a Sprinter—or a Procrastinator? How about the people with whom you work?

*Gretchen Rubin is the author of the blockbuster New York Times bestsellers, **The Happiness Project** and **Happier at Home**. Her upcoming book, **Better Than Before**, reveals the secret of how to change habits--really. Read more at gretchenrubin.com. Follow her here by clicking the yellow FOLLOW button, on Twitter, [@gretchenrubin](https://twitter.com/gretchenrubin), on Facebook, facebook.com/GretchenRubin*