



Self-Sabotage Ways We Get in Our Own Way

By Clay Parsons

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Andrew seemed to be doing everything right. An experienced computer engineer with an MBA from UCLA, he had all the right credentials for the job he was seeking. He was applying to all the right places, bypassing the crowded Internet job boards and going straight to the companies where he wanted to work. He contacted the right people who got him interviews. He presented himself as a capable and solid professional. And yet, he was unsuccessful — unemployed now for almost a year. Something was getting in his way. What was it?

It turned out to be an old habit. Whenever he was talking with someone and there was a pause in the conversation, Andrew would fill in the gap by saying something. It didn't matter what the subject was, and it didn't matter if Andrew knew anything about what was being discussed, he would say something anyway. During a formal interview, this inevitably led Andrew to sabotage himself. At some point during one of his monologues, he would refer to his health, which was not good; he had MS with several chronic complications. At that point the interview became a moot exercise.

Kerry also seemed to be the perfect job candidate. She was a graduate of an exclusive liberal arts college. She had extensive graduate school training in communications technology and an impressive resume which included positions of responsibility in several well-known companies. Like Andrew, Kerry was also doing all the right things but getting nowhere. What was wrong?

We discovered that Kerry's problem arose from her perfectionism. She would prepare at length for an interview, doing extensive research into her target company including reading their annual report, revising her resume to focus on the job requirements, listing her accomplishments and practicing the answers to questions she would most likely be asked. She would push herself very hard for several days before the interview. By the time of the interview she would be physically and emotionally exhausted. During the interview she would inevitably freeze up, lose her concentration, and say something

which harmed her chances. Usually her lapses were minor but, expecting a perfect performance of herself, she would overreact. She told me that she had almost fainted on one occasion because of tension.

Merida, a talented writer and journalism graduate, worked as a reporter for a major San Francisco Bay Area newspaper, and then for several years served as the editor and publisher of a high quality nature magazine in South East Asia. Now back in the US, and looking for a position in her field, she kept encountering problems. After six months of searching, and several lackluster interviews, she turned to career counseling to find out what was holding her back.

It turned out that Merida had a hidden disability. Beneath her calm, professional exterior she suffered from chronic anxiety, which caused procrastination and indecision. Her fear of being found to be incompetent, which of course did not reflect reality, kept her from taking a thorough, proactive approach to finding a job. She knew what she had to do but preferred to react to scattered opportunities rather than generate leads of her own. This resulted in her interviewing for positions which didn't fit her qualifications. She was also never fully prepared for an interview. Her lack of success made her more anxious, which caused her to avoid the subject and procrastinate even more.

Andrew, Kerry and Merida were all the victims of self-sabotage caused by irrational fear. In Andrew's case, he was fearful of the consequences of silence during an interview, so he kept talking. Kerry was fearful of the consequences of not working hard enough preparing for an interview. And Merida was fearful of being judged as incompetent by potential employers. In all three cases their self-sabotage inevitably lead to failure.

What to do about it

Self-sabotaging behavior can be corrected. All it takes is understanding, commitment and time. There are three steps required. The first step is diagnosis. You need to find out what is happening and why. Enlist the help of an experienced career or mental health professional who can be objective and is trained to recognize self-sabotaging patterns of behavior. Remember that observing your own behavior is very difficult.

Next, devise a strategy to counter your destructive patterns by literally learning a new habit to replace the old one. The new habit must be comfortable or it will not 'take.'

And third, implement your game plan one small step at a time. Don't try to bite off too much at once. Despite cultural beliefs to the contrary, there are no quick fixes. Remember that bad habits take only a moment to learn and many months of concerted effort to end. The hardest part is beginning a new regime. Once you make a commitment and begin in earnest, it's much easier.

Taking this approach – replacing old habits with new ones – can have dramatic results. Take the case of Andrew. Once he realized what he was doing and why, he learned to answer an interview question and then stop talking and wait for the next question. It was

simply a matter of practice and a supportive and patient career counselor. By the way, the next interview Andrew participated in landed him the job.