

Podcast Episode #009

An Unusually Valuable Method for Reaching Your Goals with Ease

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Announcer: Welcome to the Lift Off Project with Coach Pamela.

Pamela: Hi, and welcome to the Lift Off Project. I'm Pamela Mitchell, your host and your coach, and this is the podcast devoted to helping you meld your professional self and your personal self into an enhanced version of your best self. My goal is to help you take control of your work and your life, feel more relaxed and confident, and experience the satisfaction and fulfillment of a sustainable, successful life. Today we are talking about an unusually valuable method for reaching your goals with ease, and ease is good when it comes to pursuing accomplishments. That is for sure. To help me talk about this, I spoke with Thomas Sterner, who is the founder and CEO of The Practicing Mind Institute, and author of a really fabulous bestselling book called The Practicing Mind. He is a popular speaker who works with high performance individuals including athletes, musicians, and corporate executives, helping them to operate efficiently within high stress situations so that they can break through to new levels of mastery.

Through his work at The Practicing Mind Institute, he has brought clarity to thousands globally, showing them how to accomplish more of their goals with less effort and the least amount of time, and with greatly reduced stress. When I found his book on Amazon, I read it and it made such an impression on me that I had to reach out. I recommend this book to all my clients. We are really lucky to have him today. Let's get this show started. Welcome, Tom.

Tom: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Pamela: I am so thrilled that you have agreed to speak to us today, because when I found your book on Amazon I was so excited. It's just an amazing, amazing book. What I love about it is that it's very counter-intuitive to the way that we talk about goals and accomplishing things in our lives, because we live in a very goal driven society and we're



always told to look at that end point, and put all our time, attention, and energy focusing on that, but you recommend changing our relationship to our goals and shifting our focus to the process which, as I said before, is kind of radical. Tell us about that and how you came to that realization.

Tom: Well, the realization came from a number of things. One was many years of studying both Eastern thought systems and also looking at what all of the studies, including the empirical Western studies, are showing in terms of what they call peak performance, performance enhancement psychologies. Most of these things originated in the sports arena, particularly in sports like golf, which are very mental and things happen much slower than they do in, say, football or basketball. Because of the way the computers have worked now, we can really look at athletic moves in very refined detail. I think we've gotten to a point where we've peaked in that. We know what a perfect golf swing looks like, we know we can watch somebody shoot a foul shot or something, and we can look at their form in slow motion. So after that, the next frontier was to figure out, "Well, if somebody has a perfect golf swing or if somebody has perfect form, why don't they make the shot every time?"

They started to do all this research and of course they found out that it's what's going on in between the years. When we create a goal, the goal should serve as a rudder. It shouldn't serve as something that reminds us of what we have left to do. The reason for that is when we start to focus on the end point of the goal, our mind is not focused on what we're doing right now, and there's a lot of emotions that go with that, and our energy is very scattered and dispersed. So we're not actually putting our energy into what we're doing. That's the paradox, because we feel if we become more present in the moment or if we become more process oriented, where all of our energy is going into doing what we're doing right now, that in some way we're not driven. I think that that's taught to us by the media, so we feel like we have to be in this state of mind where we're constantly reaching for the goal, otherwise we don't have the drive that we need to accomplish our goal.

Actually what that does is slow down the amount of time that it takes us to achieve a goal, and it also makes the process, the experience of achieving the goal very unpleasant. We have found that the most economical expenditure of energy, and the least stress, and the most efficient way to reach a goal, which could be a financial goal, a job goal, or developing a skill, is to be process oriented, to be much more involved in the process. I would also say most people don't actually experience all of the enjoyment that they have in actually acquiring their goal because they're so focused on this end point. We miss out on a lot which could serve as motivation as we're going, so that's the reason why it's not only that I'm saying this. It's that the empirical data that's out there has said, "Look, we've looked at all of this. We've looked at all the different ways that the



mind works, and how we maintain our focus the best, and if we can stay in the present moment, and we can stay processed, then that's what we're saying." When we say "stay in the present moment," then what we're doing is we're focusing on the process of what we're doing to achieve our goals. That's the reason why it's much more effective in goal accomplishment.

Pamela: There's so much in what you said there and I want to pull out a couple of different points. One is the idea that the goal is the rudder, and that somehow it's meant to give us direction. But in our sort of model focus on it, we end up separating ourselves from the present moment and the process. Of course, we're also separated from the goal, right? Because we're not there yet. We're left with this whole stew of emotions, usually frustration and impatience. I know I see that a lot in my coaching clients. I see it a lot in myself, frankly, as well. So how, when we step away from that and we start to say, "All right, let me use my goal as a rudder" and we're deposited back into present moment, how do we manage those emotions, and what's going through our minds as we settle into the process?

Tom: The end of that equation is that once we experience the release from anxiety and from a feeling of incompleteness that comes from being in the process, it pretty much takes care of itself, because at that point we realize that, "You know what? I'm enjoying my day and my life so much more when I'm operating under this paradigm than I am under this other paradigm" which is a leftover paradigm from when we didn't know that this was more effective. To your point, you still have to get to the point where you have experienced that several times. I tell people that in order to change something, and in this context your experience of being process oriented, you have to separate yourself from the emotions that you're having during that time, otherwise you're just absorbed in the emotion. I think an emotion that would be very common in this discussion would be a sense of impatience. "I want to get to the goal."

If you are not aware that you're feeling impatient, you're just in your impatience, then you really don't have a choice in terms of, "How do I change the way that I feel?" That's the conundrum. You have to get to a point where you're actually more aligned with this part of your personality that is an observer to this than the person that's actually sucked into the emotions. There's two components to that. One is that in order to get this awareness, and this is again what studies have shown, you must have some sort of practice of quietude. You can call it thought management, thought awareness, meditation. I don't really care what you call it, but you have to spend a certain amount of time in your day, not a whole lot of time ... What happens when you "meditate" or you sit quietly in a chair for 10 minutes in the morning, and you just try to stop thinking?



When you do this, and it's quite subtle at first, you become much more aware of the thoughts that your mind is producing, and so instead of actually just being in your thoughts, being anxious ... Anxious is, it starts with a thought. You have an anxious thought. Then there's emotions that are created from this thought, and you can either just be totally absorbed in that anxiety or that sense of impatience, or you can be separate from it, and say, "You know what? This is interesting. I'm having an anxious thought." For the general public this is like, "No, that can't be." Well, yes, it can be, and you just have to experience that, which is what I said earlier. Once you begin to experience being process oriented, in the moment, a mind that's not moving with a whole bunch of thought, because thoughts are always generated by anxiety and impatience and frustration, that's a very active mind; when you begin to feel that, then you begin to realize there's a whole another side of you that you haven't tapped into.

The beginning of that comes from being still and practicing this. It doesn't have to be a lot, 10 minutes, 15 minutes a day. What will generally happen is that once you start to do that, you will want to do it more because you will see how this empowers you. The second component is that you have to take the time to sit down when you're in a calm state of mind, and come up with some sort of a procedure that you're going to drop into when you begin to have these feelings that you don't want to have, because who wants to feel impatient? I certainly don't. Instead of just reacting to a situation and being sucked into this impatient feeling, let's come up with, first, we want to be able to separate ourselves so we can recognize, "Oh, here I go. I'm starting to feel impatient." Now all of a sudden, you have this power. You have the power of choice, but what are you going to do with that power of choice?

If you don't have anywhere to go with that power, then what will happen is, you'll lose that moment, and you'll get sucked back into feeling impatient. I tell people, "You really need to have a procedure to drop into so that you can practice that in your mind, so that you have something to go to." Quite frankly this is why they teach EMTs, people in emergency situations, pilots ... I have a pilot's license. They go over. They create these procedures that are written out and that are well thought out so that when you're in a situation that becomes stressful, you have the opportunity to first recognize the situation, and then you don't have to figure out. "What am I going to do in this situation?" It's already been done. It's something you've gone over in your mind, and now you have something to grab a hold of to keep you from dropping into whatever the emotion is that you don't want to experience. This is really a part of performing at your best without experiencing all the drama that can happen in those situations.



Pamela: I want to circle back and ask you a question about the procedure. I completely understand this idea. There's a moment when we have an opportunity to observe that we're having a particular feeling, say, anxiety, and then if we don't know where to go in that moment, then we're going to get sucked back in. But if we get some kind of procedure, then we can continue to be separate and maybe go down a different path. What kind of procedures have they found to be effective?

Tom: I think procedures are highly personal and they correlate. The procedure correlates to the specific circumstance. For example, someone at work that annoys you consistently would be a different procedure than worrying about money. I think your procedure has to be set up so that it works for you personally. One of the things that I do when I'm trying to create a procedure is to ask myself, "How would I handle this?" This obviously is away from the situation. "What would be the way that I would want to handle this if I had a choice of handling this any way possible?" You're thinking about this person that you know is consistently abrasive and you say, "Okay, when this person comes in the room, it's basically a trigger to start this process. If you could handle this person and their personality in any way, and handle what they say in any way that you wanted, what would that be?"

You've got to start there because you have to know where you want to end up. To me, once you have this idea of where you want to end up, then you can say, "Okay. What am I going to do to get from here, which is where I normally am when this starts, to over here?" That's when you would have to figure out something personal. For me, I just find that when I look at the procedures, I find that they're very different in different areas. For example, when you're flying an airplane, there's a separate procedure for an electrical problem than there is for when the engine quits, but somebody has taken the time to say, "Okay, what would be the best path once this emergency situation happens and you go through that?" Then you write this down and that's what has become the standard for what you do in that situation.

If you look at the world of golf, for example, all of these performers have a pre-shot routine for every swing. For whether they're hitting their driver off the tee, or whether they're putting. Whatever their particular shot, they have a separate procedure. Why is that? It's so that when they feel the stress of the competition, and they feel like they have to make this shot, and their nerves are starting to build, and they're beginning to get tight and worrisome, they have some place where they can drop into where they feel safe. Now, is a pre-shot routine the same for every person? No. I've worked with athletes and I can tell you that one pre-shot routine won't work for everybody. Everybody has to sit there and say, "What are my strengths? What are my weaknesses? What makes me feel comfortable in this situation? What can I latch on to?"



I don't know that I could answer that question with, "Then you do this and you do that" because I think those types of things, they just won't work across the board. I also feel that when you start to look at yourself in that situation you become more aware of yourself, and in so, how you react in these situations when you're trying to solve this thing. "How do I want to react in this situation? What can I do to react in this situation?" Then you really begin to get more in touch with yourself, what your strengths are, what your weaknesses are, you become more self-aware. You become more aware of what type of things bother you and how you have a tendency to react in certain situations. I think that alone is very strengthening in terms of personal fortitude.

Pamela: Really, then, what you're talking about is becoming aware of having a relationship, what I would call a conscious relationship with ourselves, and then once we're aware at that level, then we can begin to work with ourselves, and partner with ourselves. That's really what you're talking about in creating these procedures.

Tom: That's very well put, Pamela. That's a very succinct way of looking at it. As a coach, when people come to you, many times there are behaviors or reactions they have, or internal dialog that's happening, and they want to change. That's one of the things I'm sure you do. You work with a person to get them more aware of what is happening internally when they're in certain situations so that they can better understand themselves, and then they can formulate a procedure. You've got a plan, but it's a procedure. "Okay, when I begin to have this feeling, I want to recognize that this is something that I have repeated throughout my life or in certain situations. What is my best take to get out of this? How do I want to react in these situations?" You're doing that with a person, someone is assisting you. That's where someone is helping someone to do this, but it's the same procedure.

Pamela: Exactly. That's it. To your point, certainly when I'm talking to anyone, it's always about creating something that is particular to the individual. There is no real cookie cutter way of dealing with that because we're all a constellation of our experiences, our belief systems, our thought processes. What works for one person may or may not work for another person. It's just really a matter of learning what works for ourselves as individuals, and then creating something customized for that.

Tom: Yes, exactly. I also think that we need to touch for a minute or so on the whole concept of habits, because basically all of our behavior is habitual. I think for most people, they're not even aware that their behavior is habitual, but it is. There's so much study going on now into habits to understand how the brain forms them, why the brain forms them. I can tell you briefly that if you look at your brain like a computer processor, one of the things that they have realized now through the research is that your brain loves efficiency. Because the more efficient it is, the more spare processing time it has



for creativity and problem solving. It looks for things that are repeated. When it sees a behavior and that behavior doesn't have to be physical, it can be a thought process that is repeated, it basically says, "Oh, here's something that I can make into a habit."

"If I do that, I can go on autopilot." Then what will happen is, "I don't need to be so involved in that and that frees up more processor for this kind of stuff over here." The brain is always trying to do that. If you understand that, then you begin to realize that when you react to a situation the same over and over again, your brain and your mind, are basically saying, "Okay, this is something we need to habitualize to conserve processor energy" so it creates it. So many repetitions and it becomes a habit. Now, that's the bad news, but the good news is that you can change the habit too. If you understand that and you're aware, you can start to look at it again in the context of this conversation. "How am I reacting to these situations?" Because you can bet they're a habitual response.

Once you know that, if you understand that if you come up with a new plan of how you want to react in this same situation, and you begin to repeat that reaction, it will become a habitual response. Just like anything, when you first start to change an aspect of your golf swing, when you first start to do it, it feels totally abnormal. It feels uncomfortable. As you do repetitions the brain starts to groove that part in the swing. They talk about this in physical motions, it's like skiing down a mountain in fresh packed snow. The skis cut a groove in the snow, and when the skier goes back up to the top of the hill and goes back down the same path, what ends up happening is the snow develops a hard-packed groove. It becomes harder and harder for the skier to get out of that groove.

Once the skier decides to do that, then they start to move out of there, and it takes a little while for another groove to be cut. In that interim process, it can feel crunchy. It can feel kind of uncomfortable, and it feels like you're not getting anywhere, but you are. You begin to understand that so many repetitions of a new behavior, a new way of thinking, will create a habitual response in that area. I tell people, "Just repeat and relax." If you're repeating it, it will become a habit. You cannot stop it from becoming a habit. Then it starts, and the habit forming begins to become an ally for you if you're conscious about what you're actually creating as a habit.

Pamela: Well, I love that because basically what you're talking about is harnessing the power of habits. To your points, habits are neutral. It's what we choose to do with that power that can either benefit us or not. One other thing that I wanted to ask you about this, because all of this creating habits and moving into the process is really dependent upon our wanting to do that, and our relationship around that sometimes can be fraught because we're resistant and we don't want it. In our world, the idea of enjoying this is not



really supported, so how can we change our relationship with the practice or the process that it takes to build a new habit? How can we make it more fun instead of a chore?

Tom: I can explain how it happened for me. Years ago I was trying to learn a particular run on the piano, a jazz improvisational run, and couldn't do it. And because I couldn't do it, it wasn't any fun. I had this idea, "Wouldn't it be great to be able to play this really fast run in my right hand when I was playing these chords in my left? Boy, it would sound so great, and the experience of doing it would really be satisfying." But every time I tried to do it, my hands just wouldn't do it. That created this caveat: I needed to practice but I didn't feel like practicing it because it just plain wasn't enjoyable. What ended up happening was I worked at it for, I don't know, maybe a week and a half, and I didn't feel like I was getting anywhere with it, so I basically said, "I've had enough. I can't do this. I'm just going to quit."

What ended up happening was, I ended up on a gig. I was playing with other musicians. For some reason, in the middle of a particular piece of music, when we were playing, I had the idea to play this riff. I just held my breath and I went after it and it was there. I couldn't believe it. I didn't understand it. I thought, "I can't believe it. I played it flawlessly." What I realized later was that, because I didn't understand how the brain works with this stuff, I had picked a goal, and I had an unreasonable amount of time that I had arbitrarily chosen to accomplish this goal. I figured, "I should be able to do this in a week." Well, that may be totally unreasonable for what has to happen chemically in the brain to create the technical skills to do this. What I learned from that, which really impacted me, was if I stopped reaching for this goal, where was the uncomfortable feeling coming from?

The uncomfortable feeling was coming from the fact that, "This is taking too long. I don't feel like doing this. When am I going to get to this point that's out there?" That changed it for me, because I realized as long as I just kept working towards it, in the moment, it would happen. If I did that, what I found later was when I let go of this constant attachment to, "I have to be some place other than where I am," in this particular case it was developing this particular skill, "it will happen a lot faster, and the experience of it happening won't be so uncomfortable. In fact, I'll just relax."

Pamela: I love that. Thank you. Anyway, I am mindful of the time, and I could just talk forever, I swear. I think I might have to just bring you back on to the podcast because there are so many other things in your book, although it's not a long book. That's what I loved about it when I found it. It's very succinct and there's not one wasted word in your book, and that's unusual, because a lot of times it's a lot of filler. But your book is great because it's so profound in a very efficient manner. It's 137 pages of incredible wisdom.



Tom: Thank you so much. That was on purpose because I figured I don't read really long books, so that was something that I was really trying to do, so thank you. Thank you for acknowledging that.

Pamela: Thank you, Tom, for taking the time today to speak to us. Like I said, we will definitely have you back on the show.

Tom: I would love it, Pamela. Thank you so much.

Pamela: Wasn't that amazing? I swear, there are times when I just put on Tom's audiobook and I listen to it, and it is an instant shot of calm. If you want to know more about Tom's work, you can visit him at thepracticingmindinstitute.com. That's it for this week's segment of The Lift Off Project.

Be sure to visit our website, theliftoffproject.com/podcast, where you can download a transcript of today's episode, and see more of that great advice that Tom had for us today. If you have a question for an upcoming segment of Ask Coach Pamela, go to theliftoffproject.com/question and leave me a voice mail. If I answer your question during an upcoming episode, I will send you a free deck of reinvention cards as a gift, so go over there and leave me a voice mail. You can also connect with me on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @TheCoachPamela.

If you enjoyed this episode, please leave a review for us on iTunes. Your feedback does make a difference. Today's Lift Off inspiration quote comes from Lao Tzu who says, "Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished" so step into the process, don't hurry, and allow it to open up to you. Thank you for listening today and remember, why settle for good when great is waiting? Take one small step this week to lift your life. Bye for now.

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