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Stuck In The Perfection Gap? Try Leading From “The Gain”

Shannon Waller: Do you find yourself constantly frustrated and thinking that things should be different? Stay tuned as I talk about how to not only work, but also lead from The Gain and not The Gap.

Hi, Shannon Waller here and welcome to Team Success. Today, I want to talk about the importance of working and leading from The Gain. What do I mean by that? Well, I'm referring to our concept at Strategy Coach called The Gap and the Gain. And really quickly, The Gap is when you are measuring yourself or your team against an ideal. This is when you think, this is how things should be. Could, should, and would, in this context, are all gap words. It means you have an ideal about, again, how you think things could, should, would be, if only, right, if you've had those thoughts to yourself.

So you have this ideal. Now, it's not that ideals are bad. Ideals are inspiring. They help us set goals. They help us withstand periods of difficulty and hardship when we have to really hold tight to those to help us power through tough times. So they're not bad, but they don't really work when we measure ourselves or other people against it. And we don't just do this at work, by the way. We do this with our spouse, our significant other, our kids, our siblings, our parents, you name it, our friends—we hold a lot of people up against an ideal standard and we measure against that and that's where the problem comes and that's The Gap.

Now, the alternative is actually to turn around and look where you've come from and measure your progress from where you started and I literally am gesturing right now to go behind myself and say, oh, look how far we've come. And that's a much more positive standpoint. And this whole conversation was triggered by a good friend and brilliant, brilliant thinking partner, Justin Cox. Shout out to you, Justin, because he shared with me his insight that he had been, when he went into his business coaching, been doing, you know, a version of here's your progress, but then immediately realized that, you know, he was not leading from The Gain, not coaching from The Gain. And that that was really important to do. So it's like, why haven't you done this yet was kind of more the tone, I guess. And I thought, oh, this would be such a rich topic for Team Success. And I think it's really easy. And it's easy because of our role, our role as leadership in the organization.

And whatever your area of expertise, I'm really hoping you're providing leadership in that area. It's our job to deal with the new things that haven't been figured out yet, which is otherwise known as problems. Problems arise. Targets aren't being hit. Someone's not showing up or delivering the way they're supposed to. There's a market change, which your company needs to adapt and adjust to. Someone complained about something. Someone said, hey, this is not up to standard. I don't like this. Well, that's what we get to deal with because we're in leadership or because it's our area of expertise. And it can look like life is kind of full of problems.

Now, we'll put it this way. All of us like certain types of problems, but it can look like that's all there is. And we can sometimes forget to look back and celebrate everything that is working. And those two things that are not, all of a sudden become all we can see. They take over our whole vision field. All we can see are issues and problems and we're like, oh, life sucks. This is just no fun. How



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come there's only ever problems? And that's actually not the case. And I have to tell you a really powerful experience I had. Because I would often talk to my clients, they would call me, like, Shannon, I'm having this issue. I'm like, great, let me see how I can help, because I love solving problems. And then one day, I was getting depressed after all of the issues that this entrepreneur laid out for me. And I finally, out of desperation for my own sanity, said, is there anything that's going well or working right now? And they said, oh, well, actually, yes, we've had our best financial quarter ever. This new hire that I got is working out phenomenally well. The person I was super frustrated with laughed and the list went on. If he could see my face, which he couldn't, my mouth was open. I was like, oh my gosh, I was just getting this one tiny little narrow perspective. But in fact, the whole picture was much prettier, much more positive than I ever could have imagined. I was like, note to self, always, always, always start a conversation with reflection on what is working, which at Coach we call The Positive Focus, not what isn't. And I coach this a lot. I'm like, anytime you're going into a client meeting, even if there are issues, even if the reason they're talking to you is because they're mad or they're frustrated, you're like, I know we have issues to talk about. That absolutely is the priority for the meeting. And before we start, I just really wanna know what is working for you in your life. What are you happy about? And they'll tell you about their kids or their grandkids or this great new thing that happened or this awesome client or this trip they just took. And you're like, oh. And what happens is people, A, calm down, because they're realizing that not everything is crap, just this one issue. Then we can come at it from a different mindset, a different point of view, emotionally and psychologically.

And this is really the point of focusing in on The Gain, is it allows us to think more broadly. It allows us to see things from a more holistic perspective, to put it that way, that it puts things into context. Like you know, say you get physically hurt, you stub your toe or you cut your hand, all of a sudden that's all you can think of. And you have to take care of that, don't get me wrong, to make sure you put ice on it or bandage it up or what have you. But the rest of your body is actually just fine. We tend to go to that urgent thing and thinking that's all we have to pay attention to. It is urgent and it is important, but it's not the whole picture. And I think that's how problems work in organizations and particularly with teams.

So there are two things I want you to leave this conversation with. One is it's very important for you as a human, for your own self, to really keep yourself into the game. We lead better when we're in the game. And then also to really help your teams do this. Because if we're frustrated, here's why you want to do this. If we're frustrated, other people think that we're frustrated with them. And we may in fact be frustrated with them. But there have been so many studies that have shown the most successful teams, the most productive, the most profitable teams are the ones where there is enormous amount of psychological safety is the term. In other words, trust that someone throws out an idea or makes a mistake that they will not be vilified. It's like they're safe to take risks. And I think that's critical. And if you want evidence for this, there's a brilliant Google study. They evaluated people's intelligence, their history, their experience, their expertise, their training. They measured all these factors. The one factor that was shown to be tens of points more important than any of those other ones was the amount of psychological safety on a team.



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So you, as a leader, as a human, our job is to create psychological safety for others. And just think about from your own experience, again, why is that important? Because if you don't create psychological safety, and if you don't get people out of The Gap, they're playing defense, not offense. Let me say that again. If you do not help people stay into the game and instead that they're in The Gap, they are going to play defense, not offense. They're gonna be defensive. They're gonna be protecting themselves. They're not gonna take risks. And how in Lord's name are you gonna grow as a company unless people are not trying and doing new things and improving things and testing out things they haven't done before? You're not. And what's a company that isn't innovating and changing and growing and expanding? You're shrinking. So there is a very strong business reason to do this. Yes, we're talking about a psychological impact, but it has real practical impacts on your top and bottom lines.

So I think it's key and leaders who are not aware of this, first of all, drive me crazy, because to me, it's just so clear. But second of all, they're just not a fun person to work for. Their team is scared. They don't volunteer new things because they're going to be shot down depending on your mood. That's not good. And because you're not emotionally regulated, your team doesn't tend to be either. Way more drama. Ain't nobody got time for that. No one's got time for drama. I don't like drama. It annoys me. I sometimes don't mind being dramatic, but I really, really don't like drama. Incredible waste of time. So if you want the most productive, profitable, innovative, expansive, and frankly fun team with whom to work, it is critical that you, in fact, not only coach yourself on how to stay into the game, but also help your team do that. And it's really powerful from a day-to-day just to have a team that's happy and contributing and doing all the things. But it's really important when things don't go well. It's really important when there's a challenge, there's a breakdown, there's an accident, there's something bad happens, however you define that. You miss a target. You don't deliver the result for the client. The client fires you. The client's really unhappy with your deliverables for the project. You miss something or you misread something. That can also happen. And it's very easy. We're wired for defense. We're wired for making sure that we physically stay safe. So we have something like five times as many sensors and neurons for danger that we do for safety, which is kind of interesting. We're wired for fear. So you have to be really powerful and intentional to counteract that. Again, you have to be really, really strong, you know, and have very clear practices and protocols and ways that you work with one another in order to counteract that natural, you know, keeping us alive part of our brains, because you don't wanna trigger flight or freeze. That's not a productive team. You're not gonna be out risking new things if people are worried about their safety. We don't tend to be worried about physical safety much anymore, thank goodness, but psychological safety is a thing and we as leadership, need to pay attention to that.

And I'm gonna pick on business owners, because I've seen this. Business owners seem to be not that aware, often because they've been entrepreneurs from the get-go, they're strivers, they're independent, they sometimes don't need as much of that support as other people do, mostly because it just hasn't been available. They're really good at being rugged individuals, and they're not used to other people taking care of their psychological safety. They're pretty good at being resilient, don't get me wrong, but they're not necessarily aware of how they can come across. And



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entrepreneurs have strong emotions. That's part of the deal. So being aware of how those emotions regulate you and then how they impact your team, I think is a level of awareness that I would be really excited to see people be more in tune with, because I think, again, it can make a big difference. So how do you do this? Well, number one is you really focus on yourself first. If you're in the game, way easier to operate, have conversations, handle difficulties, handle challenges, handle problems. When you are experiencing the sense that you're making progress, again, is everything gonna be a touchdown? Is everything gonna be an automatic win? Heck no. But if you can recognize that you're making progress, I'm not looking for perfection here, I'm looking for progress. If you know that you're making progress, it's going to have that beneficial impact on you. It's like, oh yeah, when you're making progress, that gives us confidence. If we feel like we're not making progress, then we get a little freaked out. So try not to freak yourself out. That would be number one.

We have a fabulous tool called WinStreak, which is just about to come out as a web version. Super excited about that. In fact, by the time you listen to this podcast, I think it's available, so it's called WinStreak. And this is how you can track your wins every day and set up the wins you want to have tomorrow. Now, regardless of whether or not those happen, at the end of the day, you still track your three wins. So that's just a powerful reminder of really tracking your progress, not perfection. That's a great way to do it. Simply write down your top three things that, the value that you got from your day, where you realized you made progress. Did you eat well? Did you exercise well?

And on that note, one of the other things that keeps people in The Gain and not in The Gap is enough sleep. I had a really good night's sleep last night. I've been traveling for a while, sleeping in other beds and having, everywhere I stayed was fine. Some of them were really, really nice, but air travel messes with sleep patterns. Oh my goodness. Catching an early flight where I had to get up before five o'clock in the morning, and I'm not a morning person, was not fun. Late nights, which I love, spending time with the people I really care about and value, also tiring, packing, moving, all the things. So managing your sleep is huge. If you are tired, you are so much more likely to be grumpy and upset with circumstances. You just don't have the capacity to deal with things that are not working well. So really making sure that you're rested is key. Again, do the WinStreak. Those are two really simple, basic things. Taking care of yourself, making sure you're hydrated, making sure you get fresh air and sunlight, making sure you're moving, something I did not do nearly enough of last year, huge impact on my, I could say my mental health, that sounds a little dramatic, but huge impact on how I saw the world, let me put it that way. So yeah, moving your body, really important for that. So some of those really core basic things actually are powerful for keeping you personally in the game.

Now, what do you do with your team when the you-know-what hits the fan? So my very, very, very favorite number one learning tool in Strategic Coach is called The Experience Transformer. And it's so powerful because it allows us to take any experience, either positive or negative, and we actually used to call it the Negativity Transformer, which is kind of funny. Then we realized it worked for things that were working, not just weren't. And it's really, really simple. First of all, we track what's working, which is really a little mini Positive Focus on the situation. So I want you to think about the



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last project that you worked on with your team that did not go the way that you wanted it to, that did not go as planned or it went as planned, but just didn't have the impact that you wanted it to. Something missed. Somewhere, it could be in the process, could be in the intention, could be that you weren't really tuned into what was needed. Maybe a team member dropped a ball somewhere. Maybe you didn't have all the expertise that you needed on the team. I don't know what it was, but I want you to think of something where you did not land the plane. There was a bit of a crash landing, put it that way. So I want you to think about one of those circumstances. And then instead of just going to fix, fine, okay, this and this and this and this didn't work, we'll get there. But instead of doing that first, briefly describe the circumstance or the experience you want to learn from. That's the very first part in The Experience Transformer. And you make it brief, you just keep it to the facts. This is not, you're not writing a long novel on this one. So if you kind of are putting this back into the front part of your brain, like prefrontal cortex, not the reactionary emotional back part of your brain and the amygdala and all those things. So you're getting cognitive about this. And then you think, okay, well, what really worked? Well, what worked was this team member was awesome. This software we used was great. We did do a great deep dive with the client. What else worked? We had some budget for this. You just kind of lay out the things that really worked. Then and only then, once you have hopefully a really long list, and we've got at least six to eight boxes for that, use a piece of paper if you need more space. And then you think, okay, what didn't work? And usually there's actually only a few things that didn't work. It's like, oh, we didn't know we needed this expertise, but we did. And because of that, we failed. Okay. The point here is to learn from failure, not to get dissuaded by it. By the way, once you have laid clearly, factually what the situation is that you want to learn from, and you've listed the Positive Focus, if there was someone who did drop the ball, they likely feel safe enough at this point. This is creating psychological safety. They're like, you know what? I was supposed to do this, and I didn't do it in the timeframe that was specified. I screwed up. Instead of you having to point it out or blame, the person will actually go, oops, my bad, I'm so sorry. And then you graciously acknowledge it and you go, thank you. I appreciate that because they're learning at this point. They're not being blamed, but they're learning. And Dan Sullivan has this phenomenal mindset about this, which is, person who created The Experience Transformer, he goes, if there's a problem with a person, it's almost always never the person, it's almost always the system. 99% of the time, it's the system. So that's really what you're looking at. How come they didn't know that step? Were they overloaded or overwhelmed with other things? Was the priority not clear? Common problem. Did they not have the resources that they need? Were they the wrong Who for that particular seat? We just put something on someone who actually has no either mental energy for it or didn't have the experience or didn't have the expertise. They're brilliant over here, but not where we had them. That's often the problem. All of these things come out. So the whole purpose is how can we do it better next time? So you list the key things that didn't work. Again, don't belabor them. If someone admits fault, then you graciously say thank you for admitting that. We can all learn how to do this next time instead of a better system. So we have backups and make sure there's redundancy or whatever else you need to do. And then you brainstorm a list of what will we do better next time. And this is a brainstorm list, by the way. This is the full Experience Transformer. Like, oh, well, we could have done this. We could have done that. And you get creative about it, which again, you have to be in a



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safe space to do this. So this is powerful. It has people go into problem-solving mode from a capability standpoint, not a defense standpoint, if you know what I mean.

And then finally, you determine a new course of action. So if we were going to do this over again, and you may or may not, but you can always learn from the experience and make something similar, just differently. So knowing what we know now, what will we do differently next time? And then you lay out the new and improved process, which is, you know, there are eight sections for this in ours and ours is always in a clockwise direction. So it, kind of picture that U shape, or you can just list the strategies that you're going to employ because you want to keep what worked. Here's the thing, you do not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. You really need to keep what works. So your new process includes what did work and includes your improvement ideas for next time.

Now, we at Strategic Coach use this for like everything, especially for events. So after every Couples Connection workshop, after pretty much every workshop, most of our coaches do it after every session. So they'll do an Impact Filter first, another one of our tools to set intentionality, and then Experience Transformer afterwards, especially if something involves a lot of moving parts, if it's something new that we're doing. And if we want to make it better next time, we do that. This is how we get so darn good. It's how we provide a first-class experience because we're focused on positive and collaborative teamwork. So that's our number one. We're alert, curious, responsive, and resourceful. We're always focused on growth and results. So this is a way of growing to provide an excellent first-class experience. P-A-G-E, positive and collaborative teamwork, alert, curious, responsive, resourceful, focused on growth and results to provide an excellent first class experience.

So you can see how The Experience Transformer just feeds every single part of that and how our core values feed every single part of The Experience Transformer. So having a thinking tool like this, one that depersonalizes the pain, takes it from that reactionary, again, keep us alive, back part of our brain, very important, but actually raises it to the level of conscious awareness, our prefrontal cortex, and it allows people to go, oh, I totally missed that this was such a critical point, part of this project. And I know now what I would completely do differently next time. You're like, awesome. I know I can count on you for that now. So it's this incredible learning process. And I like it because I have one perspective on a project. I know the parts I love to do. I know I'm not even usually aware of half of the other stuff that needs to happen to produce the result we're looking for. So I learn a ton. I love doing The Experience Transformer. And I don't mind having experiences to transform. I mean, if everything works so well, there was never anything to improve. Oh my gosh, how incredibly boring is that? And as an entrepreneurial company, you are always doing new things. If you're not, what are you doing? Because we're testing stuff. We're making up stuff brand new. We are testing new things on our marketplace. We're getting new clients, new type of clientele. We're adding a new product line, a new location, a new system, a new software, new, new, new, right? And some have worked better than others. So how are we going to learn? You just have it in your mindset that you're either winning, like, yay, this was successful, or you're learning. The only failure



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is not winning or not learning. So if you're learning from it, it's not a failure. It's not a big deal. Embrace it.

So test things out, try them. So this is what I mean by working and leading from The Gain. I think anyone can lead. I think you can have no leadership status in an organization and you can still bring this tool and this thinking process to the project. I just read a phenomenal book. It's actually your second last one by Liz Wiseman called Impact Players. Highly recommend it. Love to get her on my Team Success Podcast. But she has a description of impact players, and there's five key characteristics. And it's interesting, an impact player can be anybody. There's your conventional player, who's a good, solid team member, don't get me wrong. But an impact player is someone who provides this type of leadership. They step up when it's needed and pull back when it's not. And they are the ones who really always keep things moving ahead, and they're looking at it from this bigger perspective. So this, to my mind, would be a way of being an impact player, no matter what your official title or status is at an organization. So certainly, if you're the owner, you've got your marching orders. If you're a team leader, same deal.

And if you're a team member wondering, how do I do this? You have an opportunity to provide leadership. You are a contributing member to the team and every single one of us can do this. And this is actually how most people in our company became leaders, is because they showed up as someone who was measuring progress and looking for improvement ideas and implementing those things. And they were learning, they weren't defensive, they didn't crawl back into their hole or under their shell. No, they were like, darn it, I screwed up. I mean, gosh, the number of mistakes I've made in my career, No way I could count them all. Oh my gosh, there's things I did that I should never have done because they were not suited to me at all. There's other assumptions I made. I was way too cocky sometimes. Other times I didn't speak up enough. You name it, I've done it. But I don't really regret any of those and I can easily laugh and tell stories and thoroughly enjoy those experiences because I have learned from them. They have no angst in them anymore for me. There's no pain points because I have transformed or transcended past them and I realize I couldn't be where I am now unless I had those experiences. So I can't regret them. It means you kind of have to let go of this ideal of perfection, our fabulous quarterly book, which is called The Geometry of Staying Cool and Calm. You talk about everything's made up, no one's in charge, and life's not fair. So when you realize that everything's made up and no one's in charge, there is no perfection. Great. Things are changing all the time and our job is to be incredibly alert, curious, responsive, and resourceful to those things and help keep making things better. And that's what we're good at. That's why we're part of entrepreneurial companies and not more bureaucratic ones.

So this is a skill set. But I kind of wanted to remind you because in entrepreneurial companies, things are always happening, especially if you're already in a leadership role, it can look like everything is problems. And that's our job. That's our jam. That's what we like doing. But to address them and to do it well in a healthy way for both yourself and your team, absolutely vital to make sure that you're leading and working from The Gain and not from The Gap, not from that sense of ideal, not making people feel bad and wrong because it didn't happen according to that ideal. You will not, I want to say never, likely not or rarely get what you're looking for with that



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leadership style. So please get yourself out of The Gap, get your team out of The Gap, really make that practice of always doing a Positive Focus before you look to transform everything. And I think you'll find that the drama goes down and your results and productivity and profitability go up. So that's what I'm excited about for you. Thank you so much for listening. Any questions or comments, please let me know at questions@strategiccoach.com. And as always, here's to your team's success.