



*Helping leaders and organizations live up to their promise*

## Is it "Hard Work" or "Effort?"

Heading back from the Channel Islands after a good but challenging week of sailing, Captain Mike and I had an interesting conversation about "hard work" vs. "effort." Each of us recalled experiences with clients that we'll just say were "up-hill" all the way; they turned out fine, but had been marked by many challenges and frustrations. When Mike shared that he hoped to take on fewer assignments requiring hard work, I said: "But Mike, this week was hard work wasn't it? Don't we want to do this again?" "No, Al," this isn't *hard work*; it's *effort*!" After a little more conversation, I got his point and like the distinction. "Hard work" does feel up-hill all the way - many challenges and frustrations, things don't flow naturally or smoothly, and results hardly seem to be worth the energy expended. "Effort," on the other hand, also involves overcoming challenges and expending lots of energy, but things just seem to click; we may be exerting ourselves as much or more as in those "hard work" situations, but it doesn't feel that way. The distinction reminded me of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of *flow*, which he described as "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that not much else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.<sup>1[1]</sup>" It got me to wondering what I'm involved with that seems more like hard work than effort, and distinctions between hard work and effort that might be useful for organizations and their leaders:

- For me, something is more enjoyable and rewarding "effort" vs. just "hard work" when it's for a worthwhile cause and something I believe in. Part of what made Mike's and my Channel Islands sail rewarding is that we were partnered with Wilderness Inquiry to provide kids with disabilities a sailing adventure; witnessing their introduction to sailing and sensing its impact on their lives was priceless. *Are we engaged in pursuits that we believe in and make a positive impact in others' lives? Is our organization?*
- Hard work becomes effort and more of a "flow" experience when tasks are a match for my natural strengths and inherently enjoyable. *How much of what we do daily leverages our unique and enduring talents?* (Gallup surveys report that only twenty per-cent of workers feel that their strengths are in play every day. When respondents answered "strongly agree" to the question: "At work do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?" they were 50 per-cent more likely to work in lower turnover organizations.<sup>i[2]</sup>) *Is our organization*

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<sup>1</sup>[1] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. FLOW - The Psychology of Optimal Experience; Harper Perennial; New York, NY, 1990.\*\*

*engaged in products, services and markets that leverage its core competencies?"*

- For me, additional characteristics of more rewarding effort vs. just hard work are quick feedback and the ability to connect actions with outcomes. That's likely one reason I enjoy sailing; there's usually pretty quick feedback indicating if sails are trimmed properly and positive or negative consequences depending on my seamanship! *What opportunities do we have to receive feedback, learn and adjust our efforts accordingly? Do our organizations measure the right things and possess "self-correcting" mechanisms?*
- *Am I stretching, learning anything or accomplishing something new? If so, chances are that I'm engaged with something requiring effort; if not it is likely just hard work. Is our organization rich with opportunities to try new things, experiment, learn and grow?*
- *Am I engaged in pursuits with others who share the same purpose and values? If not, it's "hard work;" if so, it's likely "effort" and totally worth it. Is our organization or work unit populated with people who share common goals and fundamental values?*

I need to remember that sometimes the distinction between hard work that's less rewarding and effort that's more rewarding is a function more of my attitude or frame of mind than about the tasks or circumstances. A while back I had the very unpleasant task of cleaning up an overflowing holding tank (where the "bad stuff" goes in my sailboat) while underway - but hey, I reminded myself, I was on a multi-day cruise with friends in the middle of Lake Superior on a beautiful day; it's all good! A former associate had a great way of re-framing less-than-totally-rewarding, "hard work" tasks by deciding they would constitute the portion of her work days that funded her Red Cross donations; that way, while the work itself wasn't inherently enjoyable it contributed to outcomes that were rewarding. *What adjustments might we make in our own attitudes and frames of mind, or help others make, that could result in more enjoyable experiences?*

*What elements of your work or life feel more like "hard work" vs. "effort?"*

*Which of those "hard work," less rewarding elements do you need to move away from or modify in some way? How?*

*How might your organization convert "hard work" to more rewarding opportunities for investing effort?*

*What changes in attitude or mind-frames - yours or others' - would yield more enjoyable experiences?*

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i[2] Buckingham, Marcus and Donald O. Clifton. Now, Discover Your Strengths; The Free Press; New York, NY, 2001.\*\*

\*\* You can purchase these books along with a selection of other recommendations at inTEgro's [Bookstore](#).

Happiness is that state of consciousness which proceeds from achievement of one's values.

Ayn Rand

Set me a task in which I can put something of my very self, and it is a task no longer; it is joy; it is art.

Bliss Carman

You don't choose the day you enter the world and you don't choose the day you leave. It's what you do in between that makes all the difference.

Anita Septimus

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