

From Theoretical Understanding to Practical Application

As I absorbed the tapes that had quickly become a staple of my commute, eagerly listening and re-listening to the messages of change and empowerment, I started to put these incredible ideas into action. After all, Tony also taught me that a great idea isn't worth anything if it isn't turned into great action.

When I initially began the process of taking over the store chain in 1989 and 1990, I struggled tremendously with stress, especially when things unexpectedly went wrong. At this point I had met Yadira (more about that story in the next chapter!), but she still lived in Venezuela, so aside from the occasional weekend party I had no distractions from work whatsoever. Not surprisingly, my career quickly became too important and too all-encompassing in my life.

In fact, around this time my dad actually had to sit me down and talk to me about how concerned he was for my health. He told me that even though he saw a lot of potential in me, he doubted that he'd be able to let me continue running the store chain unless I was able to get my anxiety under control. Truth be told, at this time my dad was right: I was completely overwhelmed and a nervous wreck due to my job. (Any businessperson will tell you that stressing obsessively when things go wrong or differently than you expected them to is not a good trait to have, since change is really the only constant in business.)

There were three recurring work situations that I found especially brutal in terms of my anxiety levels during those early years. The first involved my store managers. Occasionally, a manager would show up unexpectedly at my office—usually on a Monday morning—give me the keys to his or her store, and quit with no notice. This opened up a stressful can of worms for me because at the time I didn't yet have enough quality supervisors whom I could rely on to quickly go and cover stores for what could potentially be several months. Thus I had to frantically switch people around just to keep that store up and running.

The second situation that really drove me crazy involved store break-ins. Along with each store manager (who was responsible only for his or her own store), I was on *all* of our twenty store alarm lists at this time. So, whenever a store within one hour of my home was broken into, it was my responsibility to immediately go to that store after receiving the call from the alarm company. I would then meet the store manager and the police, assess the damage, and call a company to come out and board up the broken window or storefront. Often, our stores were in dangerous neighborhoods and the police never waited

around with the manager and me for the security company to arrive. These situations, which usually occurred in the middle of the night, would have been nerve-wracking even for someone who didn't already suffer from high anxiety.

The third situation that sent my blood pressure through the roof involved employees (usually the store managers themselves) who were caught stealing from our stores. When this happened, I always felt betrayed. I knew this was not an uncommon problem in the retail world, yet I simply could not help taking it personally. I also, of course, had to fire the employee in question, and again scramble to find a replacement to cover that store.

With my father's necessary ultimatum about replacing me if I couldn't learn to relax a bit echoing in my head and all of the new information and guidance from Tony's tapes at my fingertips, I finally resolved to do something about these three specific work situations that were a risk to my health—and hence to my job.

I vividly remember sitting at my kitchen table one night and—incredibly—solving the entire problem right then and there in just one sitting. The secret to my transformation was recognizing that each of these three scenarios was unpleasant and that I couldn't do much about them. *However, what I could do was control my reaction to them!*

Specifically, by taking into account past company statistics and balancing them against my salary, I figured that it was reasonable during one calendar year for me to be expected to deal with three managers who quit without notice, three break-ins that I would have to handle and manage in person, and three employee thefts. Handling up to three of each of these situations each year was now simply part of my self-imposed job description. I concluded in my mind that these unenviable situations were why I earned what I did.

Forewarned, forearmed; to be prepared is half the victory.

—Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra

However, I told myself that if more than three instances of any one of these problems occurred in any twelve-month period, then I would be justified in feeling aggravated and upset, and I could totally freak out. Reframing how I thought about these problems (and others in the future) certainly allowed me to manage situations more calmly—and realizing that for the first time I had taken control of my life by managing my brain was a huge self-esteem boost.

And in case you're wondering, there were never more than three instances of any one of these three crises in any one-year time frame after I made up my mind to manage them this way! Thus, from that one amazing night at my kitchen table on, I honestly was able to handle these situations almost flawlessly and with so, so much less stress!



An Expert View on Contingency Planning

If you're an anxious person and/or prone to rumination, now's the time to start employing contingency planning as a weapon against worry and stress. When you don't take an analytical view of planning, your thoughts grow into full-fledged anxieties that rattle around the unedited privacy of the mind, growing disproportionately and tumbling out of control. To combat this exponential increase of stress, try the following when you're making any type of major plan:

- Write down outcomes—positive and negative—that could occur.
- Identify which of these is your “worst-case” scenario.
- Decide how you might best respond to each of these possibilities.
- Identify potential roadblocks and obstacles to your preferred outcome.
- Discuss your thoughts and plans with others to get third-party feedback.

Knowing beforehand that you're prepared for likely eventualities will help your mind to get off the constant-worry track so that it can move on to more productive tasks.