

## If work stresses you out, give yourself permission to take control

We control most of our lives on a daily basis. We must admit it and use that knowledge assertively, writes Alan Weiss



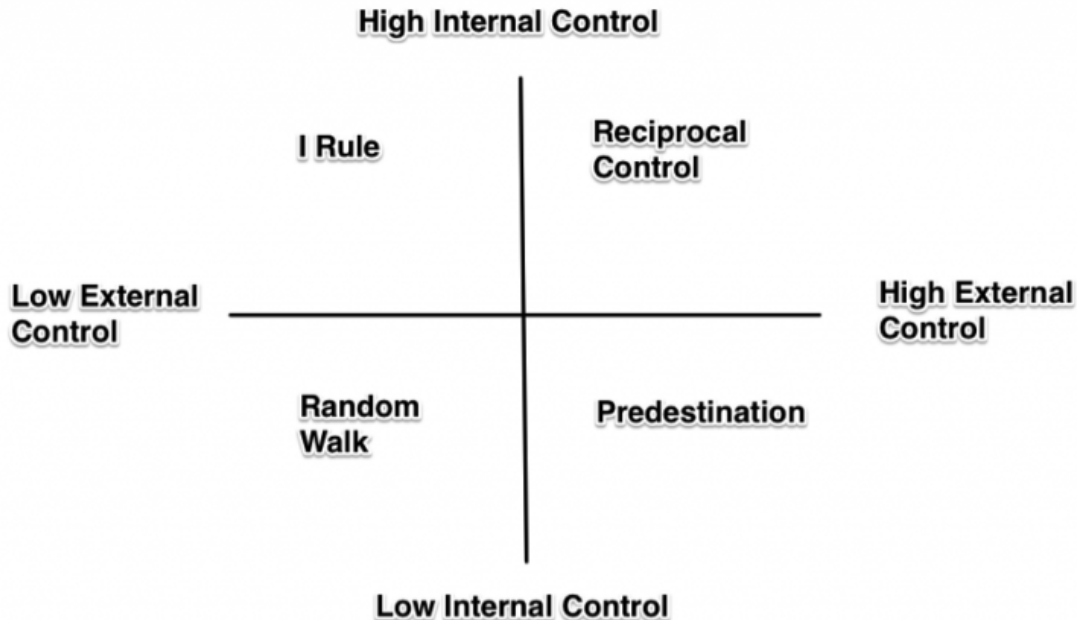
One of the greatest expenses for organisations is, of course, people. And one of the greatest people expenses is absenteeism. And, in my 30 years of consulting, I've found that one of the greatest causes of absenteeism is stress. And one of the greatest causes of stress is the incorrect belief that we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow and that we have little influence over it.

We have far greater control over our lives and destinies, personally and professionally, than we care to admit. The problem, in fact, isn't lack of control *but surrendering control*. We tend to look at a world in polarisation about belonging or not belonging, immigration or closed borders, militancy or rapport, climate influence or lack of influence, and believe we are lost in the maw of huge issues that are not reconcilable.

### The reciprocity of control

But on a daily basis, we control most of our lives. Admitting that, and using that knowledge assertively, constitutes what my co-author Marshall Goldsmith and I have termed "Lifestorming" and is the title of our latest book.

The dynamic looks like this:



People who feel totally without control, either internal or external, are simply taking a random walk each day. They are plankton, without independent motive force, and don't even realise the effect of the winds and currents on them. You'll find people in your organisations like this, simply drifting without apparent reason or direction. They may react, but they have no initiative.

In the lower right, we have a Calvinistic sort of pre-destination, which asserts that the individual has zero control, and that one's fate is directed totally by external and inflexible sources. These are the people who follow even unreasonable (and/or unethical) orders and simply shrug their shoulders as if to say, "What am I to do in the face of the overwhelming?" That's why Volkswagen and Well Fargo continued so long in their subterfuge and inappropriate tactics.

In the upper left we have the belief that the individual is in total control. That's the home of the motivational speaker, a book such as *The Secret*, and the entire "human potential movement." And it's simply silly. *Think and Grow Rich* doesn't work. We can't just control our lives and the surroundings by thinking we can.

In the upper right we have healthy people and healthy organisational performers. There *are* external forces that we can't control—the weather, the tax laws, our company's strategy, the rules of the road. Yet there are many more things we do control, such as our judgment, decisions, behaviour, resilience, and so forth. It is the *reciprocity* between external and internal control, and the understanding of that dynamic that creates and sustains personal power.

Churchill famously said, "We build our houses and then they build us," referring to Parliament. The same principle applies here. We can influence elected representatives, have a "Plan B" if the weather is poor, provide feedback to our management, and so forth.

Life is not "either/or," but rather about synergy.

### Permission is required, but whose?

That means that we have to have "permission" to exert and receive that reciprocal influence. Yet we often deny ourselves that ability, waiting for others to grant it.

Have you even been on an airplane shortly after takeoff where, despite smooth flying, the "seat belt" sign remains on, and you need to use the lavatory? You become more uncomfortable, and

hope for the sign to change, but you keep your seat, concerned about the reprimand by the flight attendants.

But then, someone gets up and simply uses the lavatory without any consequences. After that, you (and others) eagerly follow suit. You refused to grant yourself permission, but happily accepted the implicit permission granted by someone else (unknowingly).

### The Permission Gauge



In the illustration, those on the extreme left (eight o'clock) never have permission. They will stand at the “don't walk” sign not moving even if they can see there is no traffic in either direction for over a mile and it's beginning to pour. Those at the eleven o'clock position wait for others to indicate or tell them it's okay to act, as on the airplane. At one o'clock, we justify our actions to ourselves —“It's unhealthy sitting here with my need to visit the rest room in perfectly smooth air”— before we act. And at four o'clock, we simply act.

There are people who raise their hand to speak in meetings and often go unacknowledged for a long time (and/or the subject changes) and those who merely speak out when they have something to say.

### Lifestorming

The proper balance is probably somewhere between those last two positions, say three o'clock, depending on the situation and the urgency. Blanket permission wouldn't include cutting the line at a theatre or train station, for example. But speaking out in a meeting is often important.

If you want to take life “by storm” you need to recognise what you can influence and control and provide yourself with the permission to do so. That realisation alone hugely decreases stress and

the illnesses that accompany it.

You now have my permission to proceed along that route.



- *This blog post is based on the author's book [Lifestorming: Creating Meaning and Achievement in Your Career and Life](#), co-authored with Marshall Goldsmit, Wiley.*
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