

Patience – A Virtue or Liability?

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Patience has to be one of the most confusing and challenging attributes known to humanity. Sometimes it's good. Sometimes it's bad. Sometimes it's neither or both.

Generally, patience is considered a virtue. People need to slow down and be still at times. People need to calm down and chill out. However, there are times when patience stalls progress. It prevents achievement. It conflicts with having a sense of urgency which many circumstances desperately need. There are times when people need to be still and times to take action.

There are few other attributes that are so dependent on context. Many attributes, like honesty, courage, passion, and having a can-do attitude, are not as dependent on context. With few exceptions, they are considered a virtue. Patience, however, can be a liability or an asset depending on the circumstances.

Another reason patience is confusing is that people define it differently. Some see it as doing nothing. Patience may require deferring a decision or not taking action, but it isn't doing nothing. It isn't simply waiting or passing time. Perhaps the best definition of patience is knowing what to do and when to do it.

Patience is knowing your timing. Rather than do nothing you may need to keep doing what you've been doing for a while longer. You may need to follow habits that make incremental progress until a certain event occurs. You may need to do what is honorable and remain disciplined until the time is right to pursue a different course. You may need to do more thinking, studying, research, or learning. Or rather than change your circumstances, you may need to change yourself in some way.

If you lack patience, you may do something too soon. If you have too much patience, you may do something too late. If, for example, you repeatedly leave someone a message without giving them sufficient time to respond, you are persistent when you should be patient. If you pursue a new job without the requisite knowledge or experience, you are overly ambitious when you should be patient. If you bring a product to market before it is ready, there may be no interest. Bring a product to market too late and your competition captures all the buyers. Buy a stock after everyone else does and it may go down in value. Buy it early though and you might realize a sizable gain.

How do you know when to be patient? When should you go slow versus fast? How do you know when to keep doing what you're doing versus changing course? Listed below are some examples to which patience applies. Consider the ones in which you may be involved and whether or not patience might be appropriate.

- Relationships: If you've invested heavily in a relationship, don't be too quick to end it. Don't quit or give up without doing everything reasonable to improve it.
- Problems: If something clearly isn't getting better with time, like a project increasingly going overbudget or a health issue getting worse, take action.
- Conflict: If you are in conflict and people need to calm down, disengage for a while.



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- Teamwork: If you have agreed on a course of action, completed your task, communicated what you completed, and are now waiting on someone else, don't bother them unless they are delinquent.
- Planning: If there is no significant benefit to starting a project sooner than later, give more time to planning and making your mistakes on paper or electronically rather than in physical form.
- Projects: If you don't have the time, energy, or necessary resources to do something right, wait.
- Projects: If you do have the time, energy, and required resources to do something right, do it.
- Decisions: If you are waiting for complete confidence in a decision, it will never happen. Realize that if your confidence is significantly above 50 percent that your odds are good. Mitigate your risks and make the decision.
- Decisions: If you lack information in a decision, or your confidence is no better than a coin toss, defer your decision until you have more insight.
- Decisions: If you are making a bet-your-life or bet-your-business decision, ensure you have considered every reasonable angle before proceeding.
- Conversing: If you are doing all the talking in a conversation, stop. Ask questions and listen instead.
- Conversing: If you are not speaking up when you have something important to share, speak up.
- Timing: If there are prerequisites not yet in place, something isn't ready, or you're the only one that thinks it's a good idea, you're probably too early. Wait for whatever is needed before taking action.
- Timing: If you believe in something strongly, see great future potential in it, and other's interest is building too, it might be time to jump in.
- Change: If you are going through adversity, there may be a valuable lesson to learn or change to be made. Don't do anything unreasonable or abnormal to end the adversity. Don't miss the experience and opportunity to grow.
- Greed: If you are avoiding taking action because you want to increase your gains or advantage beyond what is reasonable, secure what you've gained. Don't be greedy.

If you think being patient is the same as being passive, consider what the nineteenth century French sculptor, Auguste Rodin, said, "Patience is also a form of action." Making the decision to be appropriately patient is still making a decision and acting on it.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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