

Stock Doc: Don't Aim, Just Throw the Ball!

Free yourself from overthinking a setback with this old Little League motivational catalyst.

BY ALDEN CASS

Mar 2, 2007 12:00 PM EST

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Editor's note: Alden Cass, a psychologist, writes two columns for TheStreet.com : one that delves into how behavior and emotions affect investing, the other a health column specifically for men.

Every month, a new roster of patients trickles into my private practice in New York City, looking for ways to improve their productivity at work and their overall quality of life. One thing that I have learned in working with financial service executives, doctors, lawyers and athletes is that they all are fiercely competitive. Above all, they are overly critical of themselves for mistakes.

Instead of shrugging off and moving on from negative experiences like the major selloff that we experienced Tuesday, some folks ponder these events for way too long. When I lecture on this topic, I notice that audience participants complain of recent failures or misfortunes that are far more salient to them than positive achievements. Thus, they sit with failure far longer than they savor success. If you can identify with this, you are certainly not alone.

On the Couch

"John" is a very successful 36-year-old financial adviser working at a top firm in New York City. He was initially referred to me by his branch manager, whose intent

was to take a good employee and make him a great one. All of the ingredients were there for John to be successful, as he was hungry, competitive, client-centered, well-spoken and analytical. However, despite all of these impeccable attributes, he felt that he should be further along in his business, with far more assets under management.

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Cass is a performance enhancement coach and clinical psychologist for Catalyst Strategies Group (www.catsg.com) who specializes in working directly with individual and teams of senior investment executives, including high-profile CEOs, top hedge fund and prop traders, investors, and financial advisors to help them achieve their financial and personal goals. He works to modify behaviors that are hampering their performance and to give them the mental edge within competitive work environments. He is a licensed clinical psychologist and an expert on the use of psychology in the financial services industry. He has conducted behavioral healthcare studies on retail stockbrokers that indicated that 23 percent of the group measured met criteria for major depression. His research has been presented at both national and international conferences (APA, ICPP). He is a major contributor to columns in On Wall Street Magazine and Traderdaily.com. Cass has also conducted workshops with the Securities Industry Association, Money Management Institute, Trader Monthly Magazine's Peak Performance Workshop, The Wall Street Branch Managers Meeting at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, and the London Bullion Market Association, the Silver & Zinc Association, the Investment Management Consultants Association (IMCA), and the Investment Products Association (IPA).

He has appeared in the following media: The Today Show, Fox News Live, New York Magazine, Businessweek, Lou Dobbs Moneyline CNN, CNN money.com, CNBC London, Financial Times, London Financial Weekly, Washington Post Radio, NY Newsday, On Wall Street Magazine, E-Trade "On Air," BBC Radio, Reuter's Business Newswire, New York Times, Boston Globe, Absolute Return Magazine.

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John had been struggling within the last three months to break out of what he referred to as

"a plateau phase" in his business. He was stuck, analyzing everything that he was doing wrong and obsessing over it even when he came home to his wife at the end of the day.

John was caught in a very common mental trap that was made worse by his propensity to be too analytical. He was essentially in a brain freeze that rendered him unable to perform at an optimal level. His diagnosis was behavioral paralysis.

Little League Lessons

When I was 12 years old, I pitched for a team in my local Little League, the D'Agostino Blue Jays. I was admittedly a wild southpaw, but I did throw with decent velocity for my age. Currently an outfielder in a semiprofessional baseball league, I will never forget my days of pitching out of some pretty bad jams.

I was really hard on myself when I wasn't throwing strikes. To this day, I can still hear the voice of my coach reverberating through the air. He would yell at me after every wild pitch to "Stop aiming the ball! Just throw it to the glove!"

I emerged from childhood emotionally unscathed from my coach's constant yelling at me. In fact, I learned to adopt this mind-set for tackling almost every obstacle that I faced, whether at work or in the competitive sports arena.

Solution: Avoid Pressing Too Hard

I have changed my coach's words to "Don't aim! Just throw the ball!" I now use this motivational catalyst statement with clients like John as a way to get them to clear the noise in their heads before they start work each day.

John was obsessed with the fact that he was stalled and not progressing in his business. He was hyperfocused on what may have been wrong with his sales pitch or his investment strategy. Like a pitcher who tries desperately to change his windup and mechanics after going through a bad pitching outing, he couldn't let it go at the end of the day and change his outlook the following day.

John wanted to change everything that made him successful in the first place. I taught him to get back out there every day and just do what he knew best. Shake hands with a lot of people, follow his long-term investment strategy, attend more network venues and stop pressing so hard.

Whether we are pitchers, financial advisers, traders or surgeons, we can only reach optimal performance when we let our minds go and allow our bodies to do the work that they are trained to do.

It's important to look at the selloff this week as just an aberration in a long season. Use it as a beacon to re-examine your investment strategy, and you will succeed.

John learned to remain patient during this very normal plateau in his business cycle. He

remained positive and decided on an inspiring visual image to keep him focused on his new motivational catalyst and success formula. He chose the awe-inspiring image of his idol, Roger Clemens, going through a windup and doing what he does best -- just throwing the ball really hard!

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