



# A Monster of A Slump

*Anyone can have a downturn in productivity*

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Contributing Editor

A “SLUMP” IS A VICIOUS, NASTY THING. If I were a cartoonist, I would illustrate this column and give life to the word with some monstrous creature: horns, three eyes, and a tail. That’s because I believe that a slump is “alive” in that it can take over your consciousness and actually run mind and body for some period of time.

Have you had a slump lately?

It can start out as a single bad day, and develop like a snowball rolling downhill. And the scary part is that you never realize your personal or professional life is being taken over by these new behaviors and actions. The slump feeds on these changes, and as time passes it gets harder and harder to break free—to get back to the winning behavior that made you successful in the first place.

In this month’s column, I will describe how a slump affected three people, beginning with my own situation, and then offer some suggestions on how to recognize and get out of a period of poor productivity.

## **Illustration #1: Recognizing My Own Problems**

I was in the office developing my weekly plan on a Sunday evening not that long ago. My consulting projects were looking good, all except one, so I needed to focus most of my activity on that weak spot. I set up my planner in such a way that I would spend about 80% of my days on that problem project. That was an abnormally high percentage of time to put into one assignment, and it was a risk. But I felt that, for a limited period of time, it wouldn’t hurt.

When that week didn’t produce as expected, the following Sunday night I set up my weekly planner in a similar manner, dedicating most of my time to that project once again. I didn’t realize it at the time, but this tight focus hurt me . . . I had several other commitments begging for my attention.

In week three, the same thing happened: Little success, and most of my days going to that one project. I was getting calls for new, prospective business that I wasn’t dealing with promptly because I was buried in the project that had turned sour. As I found out later, and should have known at the time, new business doesn’t wait—it goes to your competitors.

By the time I realized I had fallen into a slump, it was more than a month later. How time flies when you’re having fun, or when you’re up to your neck in alligators! At that point, what had happened was discouraging simply because I allowed

myself to slip into a period of unproductive activity. I was left with an incomplete and very frustrating project, and I had passed up on some significant new business that could have made my whole quarter.

I made a vow at that point to never allow slump behavior to overtake my better judgement again.

## **Illustration #2: A Problem Relationship Leads to a Slump**

Before John had taken off his jacket and put on his lab coat, he had already turned on the PC and was checking E-mail. He wasn’t usually this eager to get the day’s news on the company stock price and the typical assorted project notes from his colleagues. But there was something he was looking for . . . It was a response from one of his team members on a proposal he had made in yesterday’s staff meeting. And here it was, with their boss CC’d on it, of course.

As he sat reading the screen, his pulse began to rise and the hair on the back of his neck began to prickle the inside of his collar. His ideas were being turned inside out once again, tossed up like a chef’s salad, with the credit for the work going directly to *this* jerk. When he came to the company four years ago, John thought the world of the startup Biopharma company would be free of the “politics” that drove him from academia. And yet, here he was, just inches from the computer screen with evidence that not only were politics alive and well in biotechnology, he was dealing with a master of the art.

It was at that moment that John began to focus on the unproductive behavior that starts a slump. Lots of E-mails circulated, less and less project time accumulated for him, and within two or three weeks he was noticeably behind on many of his timelines. Productive time in the lab and pilot plant was replaced by time spent strategizing about how to defend his ideas against attacks from this “team” member. It went on for another three weeks before the boss called them both aside and ended it.

While this might have forcibly closed the turf war, it took John several months to recover from the slump it created. He had to literally rebuild the way he managed his day in order to get back to what was really important. The slump had

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taken a major bite out of his year.

### **Illustration #3: The Numbers Take a Nosedive**

Susan is a Regional Manager for a firm that supplies products for pharmaceutical packaging. Her company counts on her sales skills as well as her ability to manage and motivate a group of three territory sales reps who cover major customer accounts.

Because a "Regional Manager" job at her company still has customer responsibility as well as sales management, Susan is always faced with the decision of how to spend her time. She can choose to spend more time selling in her backyard or more time mentoring her reps in the field. Trouble begins as soon as the balance gets out of whack.

After a sales meeting, it was apparent to her that the reps were not succeeding in a new product launch. They had achieved their overall sales numbers, but these three had somehow fallen short of their goals for the new product line. Susan decided to forego, only for a week or two, her usual calls in her territory and instead concentrate on getting her subordinates up to speed. Three weeks later, she found she

had only marginal success, and committed to spending another week or two rotating through her sales reps' territories to assist them.

Sure enough, the slump took her by surprise, and it was her boss who had noticed it first. The numbers from her territory, while still looking okay on the surface, seemed to indicate a disturbing downward trend. Even more disturbing to Susan was that she knew it would take weeks to get back on track. She had taken her eye off the ball.

### **Recognizing a Slump Is Your Key To Solving It**

The single biggest obstacle to getting out of a slump is realizing you are in it in the first place. As my examples show, it is entirely possible to miss the signs of the slump sneaking up on you. This particular monster walks on tiny cat feet.

I've always found that the best way to recognize slump behavior is to start monitoring the numbers. In my business, I simply start to watch the number and success of my networking contacts. But this may not work for you; each one of us has a different way of monitoring our daily and weekly progress. In order to be certain you are not headed towards a slump in productivity, you have to watch your own indicators closely.

Once you find yourself in a slump, here are some questions to ask yourself:

- What is the core area of your job, that one most productive activity which you could engage in right now to get back on track?
- Who are those people who have been most affected by your slump, and what can you do to show them immediately that you are back on the case?
- Are there other areas of your life that could be currently "slumping" without your knowledge? Use this as a wake-up call!

In closing, let me tell you that the biggest lesson that I have learned about breaking out of a slump is that action—any kind of action—re-starts the fire and gets you back on track. While it is always desirable to determine exactly what the prime activity should be (as in my first question above), don't wait too long before taking action. If you come to a fork in the road, take one of them and don't linger too long.

Just remember that an ugly beast is lingering somewhere ahead of you on that same path, awaiting his moment to strike again and slow you down on your road to success. ■

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To receive a copy of Dave's report "7 Suggestions for a Slump-Free Life," request it via E-mail to [dave@careertrax.com](mailto:dave@careertrax.com).