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The Seven Essential Strategies

The single most important characteristic of good managers is that they protect their employees—protect their time, protect their dignity, protect their career potential.

**—Robert Townsend, Former Director
of American Express and Author of *Up the Organization***

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The Seven Essential Strategies

I know you're busy, so let me start by giving away the essential secrets for performing optimally at work. Here are seven basic principles for working efficiently while minimizing distracting and destructive habits. While many of these concepts have been around for several millennia, not many know how to access and apply them to work and career situations. With some practice, you'll be able to make these strategies work for you within a few weeks. Start today; challenge your old beliefs, habits, and defaults; and begin to replace them with what has proven to work for peak performers in every field of endeavor.

Principle One

Shift from your current habit to corrective action. The fastest way to change is to link your current behavior to corrective action. In many cases, this can mean doing the opposite of what you're doing now.

Avoid wasting time criticizing what you've done wrong. This only adds emotional trauma to an already confused mental and physical state. Instead, point yourself toward the correct behavior. To be an effective manager of yourself and others replace "Why did you spill the milk?" with "How do we clean it up?"

You're probably a more effective manager than the coach who gave me my first sailing lesson. While our small boat was heeling over and taking on water, he chose that moment to ask,

“Why are you doing that?” I thought that was a really dumb question to ask during an emergency. I realized that if I took the time to do the psychoanalysis necessary to answer that question, we might all drown.

With my mind racing, I decided to take corrective action: I pushed the rudder in the opposite direction and released the main sheet. This immediately righted the boat and taught me that analyzing why I’m doing something wrong or criticizing myself during an emergency is not as effective as doing the opposite of what’s not working. Given the ineffectiveness of my sailing coach, I had to become an effective self-manager and instruct my brain to shift to corrective action rather than the distracting and confusing questions “Why are you doing that?” and “What’s wrong with you?”

Give yourself corrective actions directing your attention to what you can do now. You’ll be problem-solving and feeling effective within 5 seconds. Now that’s effective time management!

Principle Two

Shift from struggle to ease: the law of reverse effort. Like many wise principles, this one seems like a no-brainer. But when we think we’re fighting to just survive, we tend to repeat what we’ve done in the past. Think of me, holding onto that rudder for dear life, even while our boat was taking on water.

Struggling is a sign that you’re going in the wrong direction. During a seminar at a bank, I made the mistake of handing out finger puzzles—a braided straw tube about five inches long and about an inch in diameter—to everyone, including the

bank's president. I instructed my audience to put one finger from each hand into either end of the tube and see what happens when they try to pull their fingers apart. They quickly discovered that the more they struggled to remove their fingers, the more the tube tightens its grip.

I then said, "If you're struggling in life, you're going in the wrong direction. To free yourself, you have to go in the opposite direction—do what is counterintuitive, like facing down the ski slope to gain control over your skis. Stop struggling, push your fingers into the tube, it will loosen, and you'll be free. This is the law of reverse effort."

Following my instructions, everyone got free except the president. He was still struggling harder and harder, causing the tube to tighten its grip. He must have been trained, or brain-washed, to believe: "If you're not succeeding, try harder and put in more time." My heretical advice is "If you're pushing on a door and it doesn't open easily, it's probably a pull-door. Stop pushing and struggling and it will pull open easily. Life has hinged the doors—and most seeming problems—so that they open easily."

In what ways do you struggle unnecessarily and find that you are repeatedly frustrated? Yet you continue to struggle and stay stuck. How will you let go of your struggle, change direction, and free yourself?

Principle Three

Shift from ego-focus to task-focus. One of the fastest ways to increase productivity is to shift in one breath, like a karate shout, to a task-oriented focus.

Categorize your thoughts as belonging in one of two boxes: Box #1 is for thoughts about the past, the future, and what's wrong with you. Box #2 is for thoughts about working on the task.

Students trained to shift rapidly from ego-oriented thoughts, Box #1, to “What do I know now about this question?”—Box #2—significantly improved their scores on SAT, LSAT, and GRE exams. Take any part of ego-oriented thoughts—self-criticism, psychoanalysis, or thoughts about what you should've done in the past or what may happen in the future—and link it to what you can do and what you do know now.

You'll discover that you significantly increase your productivity. As a side benefit, you'll also lessen feelings of depression and anxiety because you're releasing pent-up energies and worries into effective action, giving your brain its own natural serotonin, that feel-good hormone in antidepressants.

Identify your favorite or default Box #1, ego-oriented thought. Practice shifting to Box #2 to focus on the task.

Principle Four

Shift from “I have to finish” to “I choose to start.”

Ineffective managers tell their workers that they have to do something they don't want to do, thereby evoking resistance and rebellion. “You have to” means “you don't want to, but I'm forcing you to do it anyway” and “if you don't do it, something awful and painful will happen.”

It doesn't take a genius to see that “you have to” is counterproductive and self-sabotaging. It communicates that

the workers—in this case, your mind and body—should resist and rebel against something they don't want to do. Yet we continue to speak to ourselves, our children, and our employees in this absurd, self-sabotaging language.

If you repeat, "I have to finish all this stuff" to yourself a dozen times an hour, you'll hypnotize yourself into fatigue, distractions, depression, and procrastination as ways of passively resisting a victim role. For every child saying, "But I don't want to," there's a parent, teacher, or boss saying, "You have to."

You don't have to *want to* do something that's difficult and challenging and could lead to criticism from your boss or clients. But you can *choose to* start for 15 minutes to see what comes to you. Even a simple "I *am* getting a root canal, doing my income tax, taking the state bar exam for the sixth time" is more effective and less ambivalent and depressing than "I have to" do all these difficult and painful things that I don't want to do. You might argue that there are things in life that you have to do that you don't want to, such as surgery and paying income tax. But if you're going to do it, you will find the task much easier when you communicate that you are choosing the difficult or frightening task rather than the consequences of not doing it.

The point is, telling yourself "you have to" will provoke and inner conflict that divide your energies, blocks motivation, and will make this task more difficult and unpleasant.

Catch yourself saying, "I have to," and notice the resistance and distractions that arise. Notice the thoughts that accompany feelings of ambivalence, inner conflict, and avoidance, and see if they include the counterproductive "you have to" message. Then choose to start the task or choose the consequences of

not doing it and notice how your energies are free to move forward.

Principle Five

Shift from “finish an overwhelming 1,500-hour project” to “start for 15 minutes.” As an effective self-manager of your body and mind, you never tell the workers to finish a task that takes more than a few hours to complete. Your workers must know when, where, and on what to start and when they will be paid and rewarded.

Note that you don't have to keep reminding yourself: “You have to finish.” The last time you start is when you'll finish. You don't want to confuse yourself or anyone else by telling them they have to jump into the imaginary future to get to a future deadline. You'll only create anxiety—energy that is stuck trying to solve a problem in the imaginary past or future that doesn't exist except in the virtual reality your mind creates.

Focus your workers on a near deadline of 15 to 30 uninterrupted minutes that is enough to break through inertia and give you a procrastination inoculation shot. Short time frames compete better with all the distractions in your life and allow you to use breaks as rewards to stretch, clear out some papers, or check e-mail and phone messages.

Notice how your brain becomes used to concentrating without interruption for 15 quality minutes and learns to rapidly bring you creative solutions. Notice how focusing on starting in the present moment releases the stuck energy of anxiety and transforms it into excitement and productivity.

Principle Six

Shift from the arrogant, lonely struggle of your separated conscious mind to connect with your larger brain and subconscious genius. One of the most effective ways of doubling your productivity while reducing stress is to access your subconscious genius or night shift mind.

Common expressions such as “I can’t remember her name, but it’ll come to me,” “Let me sleep on it,” and “It’ll be interesting to see how I solve this problem” indicate that you are relaxing the struggle of your conscious mind and its consciously controlled striated muscles. You’re allowing another part of you—your subconscious right brain, autonomic nervous system, and smooth muscles—to do the heavy lifting and bring you a creative solution. In business, we all know of those folks who have brilliant hunches and intuition. They tend to daydream while taking a shower, working out at the gym, or having lunch and come up with inventions, innovative solutions, and creative, out-of-the-box concepts. Like many fictional detectives, they don’t struggle like bloodhounds or Scotland Yard to chase after small clues. Instead they typically—like Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot—“let the little gray cells do the work.”

Writers, inventors, scientists, and entrepreneurs have learned to put their struggling conscious minds to sleep so their subconscious night shift can do a little daydreaming and night dreaming to make major breakthroughs and discoveries.

One of my coaching clients took my suggestion to give her chemistry projects to Albert Einstein and Marie Curie, who could continue to work in a room at the back of her brain

while she slept. I knew this might work because I completed my doctoral dissertation in one year by delegating to my dreaming, subconscious mind any problems or blocks that arose. Each morning, I awoke with a solution and was eager to start working for 15 to 30 minutes before breakfast to seed my mind with ideas that would germinate while I was at work. I completed my dissertation in 15 hours a week for one year while working a 40-hour-a-week job. And I have completed six books in 15 to 20 hours a week within 18 months, each while working a full-time job. I never told my conscious, ego mind, “You have to finish writing a book.” I simply said, “I’m choosing to start at 8 AM for 15 minutes to see what will come to me and to make it easier to start again at 12 noon or at 6 PM.”

An Exercise

Part 1

Grasp a bottle, a cup, or a book, and hold it out at shoulder height. Let your extended hand represent a part of your brain separated from the rest. Imagine that this is the way you work all week long: struggling with just your conscious mind, separate from the rest of your brain and body, to deal with your projects. From this position, your separated conscious mind is easily overwhelmed, stressed, and vulnerable to addictions in order to experience some temporary relief from its lonely struggle. Soon you’ll be thinking of a thousand-calorie treat because you’ve suffered and you are convinced that, as the commercial says, “You deserve a break today.”

Part 2

Bring your elbow to your side, close to what martial artists call the *hara*, or the place just below the navel where *chi* flows. Now your project and arm are supported by the rest of your body, the chair, and the earth. Notice how much easier it is to work when you are connected to your larger brain and body and the support of chair, the building, and the earth.

Principle Seven

Shift from your default or favorite reaction to choosing to act in a way that is congruent with your higher values and current goals. Your enlightened, human brain is the only brain on the planet that can choose how to act rather than simply react. Think about it: You can choose to get a root canal, pay your income tax, and tackle a new, challenging project. You are more than your “have to” versus “don’t want to” voices that keep you stuck in ambivalence and inner conflict. As a human, you have a third option, choice.

To be efficient, your brain performs like a computer to give you your favorites and defaults, but you can choose to override them to fit your current skills, knowledge, challenges, and opportunities. You are not stuck with what first occurs to you out of habit or efficiency.

Remarkably, you can start to break a habit or addiction in 10 to 15 seconds or two to three breaths. Take a few days to just notice the defaults and favorites that come to you when you are stressed or feeling insecure. Are your thoughts about criticism from the boss, escaping to the fast-food cart, looking for a new

job, surfing the Internet, or calling a friend? On any given day, 90 percent of such thoughts could be outdated defaults that are not congruent with your current mission, job description, values, and adult capabilities. Many of them are primitive ways of coping with early concerns about survival and acceptance: Will they abandon me if I don't perform well? What if they judge my worth as a person by how perfectly I do this work? What will they think of me if I make a mistake?

Whenever you replace your primitive and outdated defaults with a choice to face fears and self-doubts, you are building your self-leadership credentials with your brain and body. You are acting more consistently in alignment with your truly human abilities and values and, therefore, are more in charge of the direction of your life.

Hot Tip

Keep handy these seven strategies for optimal performance. Notice that each starts with your current behavior and connects it to a corrective, more effective action. Practice focusing on one per day for seven days and discover which ones work best for you in your situation. Then practice one strategy until you can rapidly shift from an old, negative habit to a new, more effective structure that makes life and work easier and more productive for you.

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- 2.** Shift from struggle to ease: the law of reverse effort.

3. Shift from ego-focus to task-focus.
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