

HOW TO MANAGE YOUR WORK LIFE (AND BECOME A STAR)

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Star performers don't necessarily come into the office at the crack of dawn, lug around big day planners, or have uncluttered desks. Here's how you can be a *self*-manager and boost your personal productivity.

In the past few years, I have not met any professional who doesn't feel a need to be more productive. Most of us want to do better, but we're forced to do more with less. Who isn't working longer and harder than five years ago? Who doesn't have fuller in-baskets or a lot of unanswered email and phone messages? Who isn't afraid that, if we aren't more productive, we might get the ax next?

Most people have a few notions about what it takes to be star performer. Why not take the quiz on page 58 to see how accurate your perceptions are.

So, what do you have to do to become a star performer? You need to change the ways in which you do your work and work with others. After 10 years of research and productivity improvement work, my colleague, Janet Caplan, and I believe we have debunked the myth about innate superiority: Star performers are made, not born. Star performers work very differently from solid, average performing people. Over a seven-year period, we led 600 knowledge workers at AT&T's Bell Labs through Breakthrough, a program we developed to enhance productivity by helping people build skills in nine work strategies common to star performers. It's estimated that Bell Labs recouped the cost of the program after the first year through a 25 percent increase in productivity.

The nine strategies are as follows:

1. Initiative. Blazing trails in the organizational chaos by going above and beyond the accepted job description to offer new, often bold, and value-adding ideas.
2. Networking. Overcoming knowledge blocks in your daily work by plugging into the knowledge net of technical gurus.
3. **Self-management**. Managing your whole life at work by contributing to the critical path and ensuring high job performance.
4. Perspective. Getting the big picture by learning to see things as your customers, competitors, colleagues, and bosses see them.
5. Followership. Checking your ego at the door to lead in assists while exercising independent, critical thinking on goals, tasks, and methods.
6. Leadership. Doing small "I" leadership in a big "L" world by partnering with colleagues to accomplish important tasks.
7. Teamwork. Becoming a positive contributor to group goals, commitments, work activities, group dynamics, and accomplishments.
8. Organizational savvy. Using street smarts to navigate the organization's competing interests, to win others' help and cooperation, to address conflicts, and to complete tasks.
9. Show-and-tell. Persuading the right audience with the right message and the right user-

friendly format.

This article discusses strategy 3, *self-management*.

Self-management

The star producers we've studied have a more open version of *self-management* than those practiced by their average performing co-workers. Top performers don't consider *self-management* to be only a matter of organizing one's time well, as many companies have interpreted it. I call it the Day-Timer Syndrome—a take-off on the time *management* craze of a decade ago by which managers turned employees into time-logging robots who wouldn't have a hallway conversation without noting it in their Velcro-tabbed planners.

Stars, however, look at catch-phrase schemes like time *management* merely as common-sense scheduling of one's workday, not the secret of high productivity. In day-to-day behavior, star *self-managers* aren't just watching how much time they spend on each activity, but they're also evaluating what the activities are and trying to make good choices. Before high-priced consultants and authors started pushing the idea of "first things first," star performers were operating at a higher level by managing their time to work only on activities tied to their organization's critical path.

To do that successfully, one has to understand what the critical path is and where one should be positioned on it in order to contribute in the most productive way. The critical path is defined as the most direct, essential, and value-added route that can be plotted from an employee's work directly to the delighted consumer of the product or service resulting from that work. Critical path work ensures an organization's profitability and sustains success in the marketplace.

Stars know they can't depend on traditional *management* structures to put them on the critical path. Dan, a star performer at Bell Labs who created the initial designs for new telephone switches, learned that the hard way. Now in his 40s, he recounts his personal struggle trying to get on the critical path: "I first thought I was productive because I got through all of the items on my to-do list each day. Then, I realized that I wasn't sure how things got onto my list. I found that many of my activities were reactive responses to things my manager or co-workers wanted. I was OK with that for a while, until I realized that just because they wanted me to do something, that didn't mean it was on the critical path. I had to be responsible for getting myself on the critical path. So, I finally took control of my to-do list."

Star performers want the many benefits that come with having their work recognized for adding value to the bottom line. Those benefits include a sense of personal accomplishment, an enhanced reputation, and a powerful layer of protection from downsizing. One worker lamented: "Hey, wait a minute! I'm a curriculum designer in the training department. We're the first to get staff cuts because the CEO doesn't see us on that critical path. What do the stars do that I can do to make my job valued?"

Taking the critical path. First, take stock without the rose-colored glasses on. It's incumbent on every worker to evaluate how his or her work contributes to the organization's bottom line. If you don't see any critical path connections in the work you're doing, you should transfer your skills to a more value-directed job before you become excess baggage. If you identify areas in which your present job can be reconfigured onto the path, then the star vision of *self-management* will help you get there. Witness, for example, the critical path role that public relations people have come to play

in companies that face public scrutiny. They are the spokespeople for airline companies after a disaster, for environmentally sensitive industries such as logging and mining, and for tobacco companies facing lawsuits and restrictive legislation.

In the pharmaceuticals industry, public relations workers lobby Congress and federal regulatory agencies to shorten the FDA approval cycle for new drugs and gain competitive advantage by getting their products on the market faster. Several star *self*-managers at Pfizer, for example, realized back in the 1980s the need to get drugs to the market quickly so they moved from reactive problem solving to proactive strategies. They were successful in blocking the FDA from letting companies produce less expensive, generic versions of Pfizer's brand name drugs—a move Pfizer's competitors didn't make and came to regret. Those *self*-managed, critical path initiatives contributed almost as much to the bottom line as new drug development. Now, government and regulatory relations is one of the hottest critical paths in most pharmaceutical firms.

So, to the curriculum designer who asked how to get on the critical path, the answer is to tie your efforts to your firm's bottom line. Otherwise, you have two choices: (1) Stay in your current job and live each day in fear of downsizing or (2) join a firm where your work has critical path status.

Self-knowledge. Stars who develop good *self-management* techniques incorporate them into the mix of traits that define them as individuals in the workplace. Personality, workstyle, and motivation factors are all in play. Many managers and training programs attempt to form all workers into the same *self-management* mold. "Clean desk" people think being organized their way leads to higher productivity; the same is true for early risers.

However, we've discovered there is no single personality trait that will make you a star performer, no particular brand of organizing skills, and no evidence that clean desk workers are better *self*-managers than the co-workers buried under paper. Stars know themselves well and are known by others for being comfortable with who they are and how they're perceived by others in the workplace. They seek to learn *self-management* techniques from others and integrate those tips into their own styles. High performers reject the one-size-fits-all approach of many *self-management* programs. Little is gained by foisting a generic time-*management* system with to-do tabs on people who have a reliable system for keeping such information in their heads. It's more effective for those people to develop even more efficient techniques for storing information mentally.

Consider Josiah, a mid-career housing mortgage specialist at a Fortune 500 bank. In his late 30s, Josiah knew his natural rhythms and that he didn't hit the floor running in the early morning hours. Yet, he'd been forced for years to abide by his department's 7 a.m. start time, even though the bottom-line work didn't begin until 10 and ended at 5 p.m. to fit the schedules of home buyers, sellers, and their attorneys. That critical work period is known as "core time" in many time-*management* programs. Josiah wasn't just concerned about schedules. He was a slightly above average performer who knew that his productivity would soar if his workday was more in keeping with his personal productivity cycle starting at 10 a.m. and going until early evening. He believed others in the department would experience the same boost.

When a new CEO embarked on a justify-or-die evaluation of each department, Josiah saw his chance to introduce a flextime program to managers desperate for productivity improvement ideas. Half of the department switched to a 10 a.m. start time and, within months, their productivity soared. In effect, Josiah *self*-managed his way into a schedule that fit him and benefited the company.

Managing flow. Try to remember the last time you were so engrossed in a problem or an idea that you were oblivious to time. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a University of Chicago psychology professor, calls that a state of flow—the condition brain-powered workers strive for in the quest for greatest productivity. In a state of flow, all energy is directed at work and other aspects are blocked. Your best work gets turned out. There's an innate sense of progress and moving forward. Star performers who recount their experience in a state of flow say their workdays are satisfying, enormously productive, and centered on important contributions. But the flow has to be on critical path work, not on tangents and diversions even though they may be fascinating.

To kick yourself into the flow state, you first have to find meaning and enjoyment in the work. Next, you need to create a work environment that gives you the mental space to "get into" your work. That can be hard in an open-door, no walls, be-available-on-demand work environment. Our research and other studies have found that a major cause of poor performance is frequent interruptions. Most managers and line workers wouldn't dream of stopping the production line every 30 minutes to discuss something. Yet, they think nothing of interrupting people who don't work on the production line. When a brain-powered worker's concentration is broken, productivity suffers. He or she loses the train of thought and wastes time starting over again.

Star performers take different approaches to getting into flow and avoiding interruptions. One engineer wears headphones when he hunkers down at his computer, so that co-workers will think he's listening to music. In fact, there's nothing playing; he just wants to ward off chatty colleagues.

Pulitzer Prize winning writer Annie Dillard insists on a lackluster office environment to induce her writing flow. She works in a cinder-block edifice overlooking a tar-and-gravel roof. She advises aspiring writers to avoid appealing workplaces. Says Dillard, "One wants a room with no view so imagination can meet memory in the dark."

Joann, a star *self*-manager and busy grant reviewer for a large philanthropic foundation, is easygoing and approachable. No wonder she was besieged in her cubicle by calls, faxes, email, and unscheduled visits by co-workers asking for help. So, she would escape to a vacant office in the legal department. She didn't just disappear. In keeping with good *self-management*, she told her boss where she was going and made arrangements to catch up with co-workers after her flow session. In effect, Joann balanced her need to cut down on interruptions with her colleagues' need to have access to her.

Organized *self-management*. There may be as many techniques for achieving and sustaining flow as there are star performers, but the common theme is that they all value flow and strive to maintain it. But flow isn't the only venue to star *self-management*. You still must produce—that is, get your work done on time, within budget, and with high quality to add value to the bottom line. To achieve that, you have to organize your work life to get the maximum benefit from the good work produced in flow. Whatever approach you use should help you

- plan an entire project
- schedule your time
- keep track of progress
- communicate progress and results to customers, bosses, co-workers, and other stakeholders
- store and retrieve important information
- tip off potential crises
- create a back-up plan.

Average performers tend to obsess about peripheral details, spending hours to develop a color-coded filing system or computer program to store names and phone numbers. But the minute a crisis hits, their organizing system collapses.

Stars know that the best organizing plans aren't about state-of-the-art filing or whether you have an uncluttered view of the faux wood pattern on your desk. Star organizing has to do with treading the critical path, avoiding crises, and ensuring a plan is in place for dealing with the crises that slip through. But everyone has to find what works for them.

So, organized *self-management* requires some reliable methods to get work done and an honest, dependable measuring system that shows the work creates value on the critical path. Star performers also have early-warning systems and back-up plans. April, a star engineer working in videotape production at 3M says, "Letting your boss know of problems well in advance when something can be done is good planning; letting the boss know after the fact is giving excuses."

Once you integrate some star concepts into your own workstyle, you'll fall off your boss's radar screen as someone who has to be managed closely. By taking responsibility for your own productivity, you will attain the power to control your work life.

[CAN YOU DEFINE A STAR PERFORMER? TAKE THIS QUIZ](#)

Answer true or false to the following statements:

- 1. Star performers are born, not made.
- 2. Star performers are smarter than average performers-for example, they have higher IQs, are better problem solvers, or are more creative.
- 3. Star performers are more driven and ambitious than others.
- 4. Star performers have more leadership skills.
- 5. People with clean desks are more likely to be star performers than people with messy desks.
- 6. Detailed time *management* and organizing systems are keys to high productivity.
- 7. Star performers work longer and harder than average performers.
- 8. Star performers are more satisfied with their jobs than average performers.
- 9. Star performers are successful primarily because they play organizational politics and give slick presentations to upper *management*.
- 10. Minorities and women can seldom be as productive as people in the "old boy" network.
- 11. People can't sustain a doubled rate of productivity improvement for long periods.
- 12. A team with one star performer supported by four average performers is better than a team with five members who are from the top 5 percent of performers.

Answers: 1-11 false.

Question 12 does not have a right or wrong answer. It does indicate whether you believe in one star to lead to success or in having a group of top performers from which one or more stars may emerge. In today's highly competitive world, the latter strategy is more likely to give you an edge.

Scoring

- 10 -- 11 correct you know what leads to star performance
- 8 -- 9 you have an above average understanding of star performance
- 5 -- 7 you have an average understanding of star performance
- 0 -- 4 your understanding of star performance may be based on unfounded assumptions

Star performer productivity is not the result of innate traits such as IQ, personality, or character. Productivity depends on how they do their jobs. The everyday work strategies of star performers, not the gimmicky products of working long hours, make the difference. When certain star performer strategies are systematically integrated into everyday work routines, then productivity improvement rates can double. For those groups excluded from the "old boy" network, such as minorities and women, productivity improvement rates can increase 400 percent.

10 CORE SELF-MANAGEMENT SKILLS

1. Find out what your organization's critical path is and get on it by learning how to add value.
2. Choose work that lets you leverage who you are, use your talents, get into flow, and experience job satisfaction.
3. Know your own productivity patterns-what time of day you do your best work and how many hours at a time you can work effectively.
4. Regularly review your personal productivity and devise ways to increase your effectiveness.
5. Borrow shamelessly-not ideas and content, but techniques for better *self-management* by observing others and experimenting with new approaches. Adopt innovative techniques into your own workstyle.
6. Make a compelling case to *management* for changing job descriptions and regulations that limit your productivity or restrict you from the kind of work you do best.
7. Minimize interruptions without separating from your work group by having meeting-free hours or days for concentration time.
8. Avoid time-killer crises by planning for problems; build recovery time into projects and have a damage control plan.
9. Develop procrastination-busting work habits with to-do lists and priority plans, and add enjoyable work assignments to drudge tasks.
10. Learn to accept occasional, unproductive days or even weeks. No one can keep flow going constantly. Knowing your cycles and how to break a slump are crucial for boosting productivity.

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