

EFFECTIVE SELF-MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

C. W. Von Bergen

Southeastern Oklahoma State University

Barlow Soper

Louisiana Tech University

Buddy Gaster

Southeastern Oklahoma State University

ABSTRACT

Many authors have recommended that leaders learn how to manage themselves to successfully supervise others, but few have suggested specific steps to do so. This article reviews how self-governance has been effectively applied in a variety of settings and presents a case study illustrating key application principles.

EFFECTIVE SELF-MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

Many of us write ourselves notes as reminders, set an alarm clock to awaken, tie strings around our fingers to remember. Such self-management behaviors and today's focus on teamwork, empowerment, self-managed work groups, egalitarianism, and flatter organizations put a premium on such activities (Dessler, 1999). The emerging view is that employees can take care of themselves. Indeed, "The center of gravity in employment is moving fast from manual and clerical workers to knowledge workers, who resist the command and control model that business took from the military 100 years ago" (Drucker, 1988, p. 45).

Technology is changing the nature of work so that it is more common to operate in what may be called an "electronic cottage" (DeNisi & Griffin, 2001, p. 522). This environment enables more and more employees to take office work with them and complete it on a home computer. They can then return to the office to collect more work and be connected to that office via a modem, fax machine, e-mail, and video conferencing. Telecommuting is simply the logical extension of the

electronic cottage and may result in a virtual office. Under these arrangements, employees may do almost all of their work at home and even receive assignments electronically. Some individuals may simply lack the self-control to get the work done in such a relatively unconstrained environment and hence the need for employees who can discipline and manage themselves.

Tied to these organizational and technological developments stressing the importance of self-direction is a rise in the importance of personal independence. For example, independence has become more and more desirable to parents as a character attribute for their children, as evidenced by historical surveys. In 1890 only 16 percent of parents believed that independence was an important quality; but by the end of the 1970s, approximately 75 percent felt that independence was the most important character trait (Russell, 1998). A book, *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care*, published in 1946, likewise put a strong emphasis on teaching children the value of independence. Over the next several decades, the book became hugely influential, becoming a Bible for child rearing now in its seventh edition (Spock, Parker, Parker, & Scotland, 1998). Additionally, the 1960s saw the commercial introduction of the contraceptive pill, which gave women greater control over an important bodily function and helped enervate the women's movement. Likewise, women began entering the workforce in ever-greater numbers. For many women, these events spelled greater independence (Conger, 1998). As a result of these organizational, technological, and cultural trends, managing oneself has become increasingly important because employees are given more autonomy over their working lives and are less dependent on others.

Concurring, Allred, Snow, and Miles (1996) examined managers in a large number of leading-edge companies and identified five competencies required for successful careers in business for the 21st century. A key skill noted was self-management: "...in addition to the technical, commercial, and collaborative skills needed to interact with more traditional organizations, individuals will need to have a full complement of self-governance skills" (p. 24). Hill (1992) and Kets de Vries (1994), likewise, suggest that supervision requires a commitment to self-management. London (1985) and Bennis (1984) indicate that managers have to learn how to manage themselves. Bennis (1984) calls this "the creative deployment of their characters" (p. 200). Management guru Peter Drucker (1999) agrees with Bennis that success in today's knowledge economy comes to those who know themselves. Drucker (1999) notes that history's great achievers (e.g., Napoleon, da Vinci, Mozart) have always managed themselves. That, in large measure, is what makes them great achievers. But they are rare exceptions, so unusual both in their talents and their accomplishments as to be considered outside the boundaries of ordinary humans. Yet Drucker (1999) believes that most of us, even those of us with modest endowments, will have to learn to manage ourselves.

If self-management is important to large organizations, it is even more so to small ones. Without the personnel resources to allow significant role and function specialization, small business workers may find they are called upon to do more and

varied tasks than their larger business counterparts. In order to do so effectively self-management would seem to be even more critical because it is easy in such work settings to feel as though one is at the whim of every stakeholder, asked to be all things to all others.

The issue, then, is how to manage ourselves effectively. Though a desirable objective supported by the cited experts, most provide scant specifics as to what to actually do. This article complements the above studies and describes the self-management process in detail, illustrates key components of a self-management system, provides an example of a successful professional productivity self-management program, and concludes by discussing managerial self-improvement through self-management.

SELF-MANAGEMENT

The premise behind self-management is that employees can and do take an active role in regulating their performance. They do so by setting their own goals, monitoring their behavior related to those goals, and rewarding themselves for goal achievement. Over 20 years ago management scholars Fred Luthans and Tim Davis suggested: "Research and writing in the management field have given a great deal of attention to managing societies, organizations, groups, and individuals. Strangely, almost no one has paid any attention to managing oneself more effectively.... Self-management seems to be a basic prerequisite for effective management of other people, groups, organizations and societies" (1979, p. 43).

Self-management represents an individual exerting control over some aspect of his or her decision-making and selected behaviors. To do this, the person must define specific behaviors related to identified goals and take appropriate action. Self-regulation has been evaluated in laboratory and clinical settings. Positive results have been found with many behaviors, including: stopping smoking (Kanfer & Phillips, 1970), overcoming drug addiction and substance abuse (Kanfer, 1980, 1986), reducing weight (Mahoney, Moura, & Wade, 1973), improving study habits (Richards, McReynolds, Holt, & Sexton, 1976), enhancing academic achievement (Glynn, 1970), and increasing job attendance (Frayne & Latham, 1987; Latham & Frayne, 1989).

Kanfer's (1975, 1980) training in self-management teaches people to assess problems, to set specific goals in response to those problems, to monitor ways in which the environment facilitates or hinders goal attainment, and to identify or administer reinforcers for working toward, and punishers for failing to work toward, goal attainment. In essence, this training teaches people skills in self-observation, to compare their current behaviors with goals that they set, and to administer payoffs and punishers to bring about and sustain goal commitment (Karloly & Kanfer, 1982). Reinforcers or punishers are made dependent on the degree to which behaviors approximate or lead to the specified goal.

A CASE STUDY IN SELF-MANAGEMENT OF WRITING BEHAVIOR

After having been in business and industry for nearly two decades, the first author made a career move into the academic environment as a college professor. This case illustrates how the fledgling professor managed a key job responsibility using self-management. Steps in the process (after Frayne & Geringer, 1992; Manz & Sims, 1989) entailed: (1) self-assessment and reality check, (2) goal setting and action planning, (3) a written contract, (4) constructive thought patterns, (5) designing rewards, (6) self-monitoring, and (7) self-reinforcement. Each step is demonstrated below in an example of the first author modifying his writing behavior.

Table 1: Seven Key Elements of Managing Oneself

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|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Self-assessment and reality check |
| 2. Goal setting and action planning |
| 3. Written contract |
| 4. Constructive thought patterns |
| 5. Designing rewards |
| 6. Self-monitoring |
| 7. Self-reinforcement |

Step 1—Self-assessment and reality check

Self-assessment, as the term suggests, requires individuals to carefully analyze what they perceive to be their own abilities, competencies, weaknesses, skills, interests, values, and goals. Some organizations provide employees with forms or questionnaires that are used to develop this information. These may take the form of a personality inventory, or they may simply be open-ended questions. After such an evaluation an individual should identify what needs are realistic. This may be accomplished through an organization's performance appraisal process or talking with friends, colleagues, or relatives who have a reputation for providing honest, candid feedback. It is interesting that Drucker (1999) suggests working on one's strengths: "One should waste as little effort as possible on improving areas of low competence. It takes for more energy and work to improve from incompetence to mediocrity than it takes to improve from first-rate performance to excellence. And yet most people—especially most teachers and organizations—concentrate on making incompetent performers into mediocre ones. Energy, resources, and time should go instead to making a competent person into a star performer" (p. 66).

An important organizational goal in many educational institutions is research and development as measured by ones' publications. Many academics, including the first author, found writing for the professional literature to be daunting and difficult. Yet, it remained a significant job expectation. Promotion and tenure decisions may be based to a considerable degree on the candidate's scholarly activities, with publication record being a pivotal component. Depending upon one's university and/or department one or more of the following may be important: the number of publications, the number of publications in referred journals, a weighted figure based on the quality of the publications, numbers of pages published per year, etc. Regardless of the actual criterion or criteria used in specific academic settings, the writing process is fundamental to the profession. The first author, even though he believed himself to be a fairly good writer, recognized that he had to become better but kept procrastinating. Many of us went into education because we like to teach and feel we have something to contribute to students. We were aware that research is important but we believed it to be more so for professors at noted research universities. Yet, when many of us came to smaller institutions, we were surprised to find that our universities likewise strongly encourage scholarly activity in the form of professional publications. In other cases, with the selection of a new president, vice president, or dean, priorities change and suddenly "publish or perish" may take on personal meaning where previously it did not.

Consultation with others, especially those who readily attain the goals one sets for oneself can provide a reality check to determine if one has the required expertise and motivation to meet the identified goal—in this instance, professional publication. Likewise, colleagues can provide tutelage and support throughout the developmental process of goal attainment. This was certainly the case with the first author who worked with others, particularly the well-published second author, to help hone his writing skills and reframe his trepidations into motivations.

Step 2—Goal setting and action planning

To address this step the first author set up a goal of four publications per year, a specific but challenging goal considering that he had a two-decade hiatus from technical writing. The situation was that the author had no publications since graduate school. This goal is typically called a distal goal in that it is relatively far off from the desired behavior (i.e., writing). A near or proximal goal the author set for himself was to spend 15 hours per week at the office actually writing. It must be noted that the proximal goal is very specific and did not include library research, discussions with colleagues and co-authors about research, copying reference materials, composing letters to editors, mailing manuscripts, or other necessary non-writing tasks. Nothing counted toward the goal but the hard work of creating sentences with the word processor.

The author developed an action plan to achieve this outcome by asking a senior faculty member who was widely published to work with him on a number of projects, setting aside specific hours for writing at the office, not answering the

phone, and closing the office door during these writing times. Additionally, the author declined to participate on several committees by asking administrators to work with him by not over-committing him to service projects. Finally, the author removed one of the two visitor's chairs from his office and placed a stack of books on the remaining chair. The idea was to conduct stand-up meetings and thereby limit the amount of time spent not writing. This approach is consistent with research of Bluedorn, Turban, and Love (1999) who found that sit down meetings were 34% longer than stand-up meetings, but they produced no better decisions. If, in the opinion of the professor, more interaction time was needed he would simply move the materials and offer an individual a seat. Rarely, did anyone move the books from the chair and seat themselves. In effect, the author's goal setting process incorporated an action taking component, energized with the intention to reduce the gap between the initial situation of zero publications and targeted outcome of four publications.

Step 3—Written contract

The idea in step 3 is to set up real contingencies involving other people. An extreme example of making a commitment (Epstein, 1997) is to write a nasty letter to your manager, sign it, seal it, and give it to a friend with a statement such as, "If I smoke another cigarette, then drop this in the mail." You have then set up a negative, immediate, and certain consequence for yourself. A less risky means of doing this might be to write a check to your least favorite charity and give it to your friend under similar contingencies. With respect to a written contract, the author committed to the department head that he would write four papers for publication for the academic year. Additionally, the author placed the number of publications he expected to write in his computer boot up file so that every time he turned on his computer he, and others who might be in his office, would be reminded of his goal. He posted his publication goal on his bathroom mirror so that every morning he would be prompted to work on publications on that particular day. Essentially, these approaches involved a public commitment to a self-set goal. Such a technique has been found to increase performance significantly. This is consistent with Hollenbeck, Williams, and Klein (1989) who found higher levels of performance for those individuals who set goals, even difficult ones, and then communicated those goals to a significant other than those who set goals but did not share them.

Step 4—Constructive thought patterns

Step 4 in the self-management process is adapted from the sports psychology literature (e.g., Van Raalte & Cornelius, 2000) and suggests that before beginning a task and while performing it, individuals should engage in positive (constructive) thoughts about that activity and its accomplishment. In particular, individuals are more motivated and better prepared to accomplish a task after they have engaged in self-talk and positive mental imagery. Self-talk refers to any situation in which we talk to ourselves about our own thoughts or actions (Morin, 1993). It creates positive

expectations and thereby raises motivation and subsequent performance (Neck & Manz, 1996). For example, research found that young skaters who received self-talk training improved their performance one year later (Ming & Martin, 1996). Mental imagery refers to mentally picturing a task and imagining successfully performing it beforehand (Anthony, Bennett, Maddox, & Wheatley, 1993). While an aspect of mental imagery is that it may help us anticipate possible errors, it also involves visualizing successful completion of the task. Research has shown that visualization can enhance actual sports performance, and encouraging this strategy has now become a widespread coaching technique (Manz & Sims, 2001). Visualization can be applied to work situations to enhance one's own achievements at work. For example, visualization may be particularly helpful for those individuals giving a speech or briefing. Here individuals are encouraged to engage in mental rehearsal by visualizing themselves delivering the speech in a very effective manner. Peak performers are visualizers (Covey, 1989; Driscoll, Cooper, & Moran, 1994).

Both self-talk and mental imagery can be said to lead to hope. "Having hope means believing you have both the will and the way to accomplish your goals, whatever they may be...Hope has proven a powerful predictor of outcome in every study we've done so far" (Snyder, 1991, p. B-2). In a study of 3,920 students at the University of Kansas, Snyder (1999) found that the amount of hope among entering freshmen was more predictive of academic success than either high school grades or SAT scores, the two conventional predictors. Data suggest people with high hope tend to be reality centered, set higher goals for themselves, and actively work to attain their expectations. In short, they were motivated.

The author had to identify his negative self-talk such as, "I can't do this," "I'll never finish this paper," or "This won't be accepted for publication," with positive statements such as "I can do this and I shall right now," "I'll finish it and do so by working on one section at a time," "Even the best authors have to revise," and "I can do it; I've set aside plenty of time to complete the paper." Imagery included visualizing: completing the abstract as a final writing step, collating the completed paper and attendant materials and packaging them for mailing, and opening a letter from the editor and finding an acceptance.

Step 5—Developing rewards

Step 5 involves developing rewards for one's anticipated performance achievement. Here one needs to give some consideration to how you might reward oneself for successful performance. Self-reinforcement occurs whenever individuals have control over a reinforcer but do not take the reinforcer until completing a self-set goal (Logue, 1995). Reinforcers might include material rewards such as a movie, dinner at a nice restaurant, watching TV, playing sports, or pleasure reading. Other rewards might include taking a break, talking with a good friend, while still others might involve self-praise, self-congratulations, self-administered physical rewards such as a break or a cup of coffee. Another is self-administered cognitive rewards

such as imagining yourself at your favorite vacation spot or imagining yourself receiving recognition at an award ceremony.

The key to designing rewards on a day-to-day basis is to use the Premack Principle (Premack, 1959), which states that reinforcement is relative, and that you can reinforce yourself with something that on the surface does not appear to be a reinforcer. With it we are able to identify many opportunities for self-reinforcement throughout the day. For example, after reading this article, you might allow yourself a trip to the water fountain. Certainly, getting a drink of water is hardly anyone's idea of a good time, but it may be more interesting than reading and so can become a reinforcer to increase reading. This technique was used to increase writing. If the author wanted to drink a cup of coffee or get up and stretch, he would have to finish a sentence or a paragraph. If he had to go to the bathroom, he would do the same thing. To go to lunch he had to finish the page he was working on. To go home he would have to complete a section. Numerous other consequences may be applied ranging from reviewing your e-mail, scanning interesting web sites, or playing racquetball or tennis after plodding through a difficult a report.

The Premack Principle also provides us with a very effective time-management system (Daniels, 2001). He suggests making a list of the things you have to do. Rank them from the thing you most like to do to the thing that you least like to do and then start at the bottom. If you start at the bottom a curious thing happens. When you complete the last item on the list the next one is more desirable. The farther up the list, the more rewarding the tasks become. Most of us, however, start at the top. But, consider what happens. When you complete the first task, the next one is less desirable. The farther down the list you go, the more punishing each successive job becomes. Is it any wonder that people who start at the bottom get two to three times more done than do those who start at the top (Daniels, 2001)?

Step 6—Self-monitoring

Self-monitoring is the process of keeping track of one's progress toward a goal and is a key component of the self-management process. Salespeople might arrange to receive monthly reports of sales levels in their territory. Production staff might have gauges or computer feedback systems installed so they can see how many errors are made on the production line. The weigh-ins of weight loss programs, the batting statistics of a baseball player, and the handicap of a golfer are all means of making people more aware of their performance. The trick is to make the monitoring process as effortless as possible, and to monitor and record performance in some manner. You can make hash marks on a page, tear off and save pieces of paper, or drop pennies in a jar. The key in self-monitoring is that one establish a process that is natural and easy to do. "Many studies show that if you get someone to be more aware of what they are doing, they'll be better at it, virtually without exception" (Epstein, 1997, p. 2).

To assist in monitoring office writing performance the author purchased a small table lamp costing about \$10.00. He also bought an analog electric alarm clock

with no battery back up costing \$4.00. Finally, he purchased an electrical plug with an attached switch for about \$2.00. The plug had two outlets and both the lamp and the clock were plugged into the switch so that the clock and lamp operated only when the switch was turned on. At \$16.00, it can be seen, the cost typically associated with self-management programs can be minimal.

The idea was to write, and do nothing but write, when the switch was on and both the lamp and clock operating. The lamp served as a difficult-to-ignore visual cue that the author should be writing. The clock showed how much time the author spent performing the target behavior, i.e., writing. Any time the author stopped writing he flipped the switch, turning off the lamp and stopping the clock. At the end of the week the author had an exact accounting of how much time he spent actually writing at the office. The weekly total was charted on a wall graph that allowed everyone, the author, colleagues, and supervisor to see at a glance how many hours were spent writing. The chart was maintained over three-month periods, plotting writing performance for each week. Initially, the graph was shocking because the clock showed less time writing than the author had imagined. Student consultations and advising, course/lecture preparation, committee tasks, departmental and college assignments, meetings and discussions with colleagues, data analysis and interpretation, reading to stay current with recent research, and assorted interruptions can consume significant amounts of time and leave little for writing unless an effort is made specifically to do differently. Rather than the 15 or more hours per week he felt he was writing, the clock showed but 4-5 hours.

Continued monitoring by charting the number of hours actually spent writing and exerting self-control over writing time yielded 10 publications. The number of publications increased substantially when the author wrote on a consistent basis for at least 15 hours per week. By self-monitoring performance on a daily basis and weekly recording, it became possible to regulate writing behavior.

Step 7—Self-reinforcement

The author evaluated his writing hours weekly and for those periods where the specified goal was achieved the author would go out for dinner that weekend and see a movie or rent a video. This served as reinforcement. At other times as a reward the author would treat himself to a new shirt, tie, or other article of clothing. When publication goals were achieved the author gave himself considerably more expensive gifts like taking a weekend shopping trip to a large city a few hours distant. The author punished himself for not meeting proximal writing goals by doing tasks around the house (e.g., cleaning the oven or laundry, cleaning the children's room) that were not typically part of his household responsibilities. Self-granted rewards can lead to self-improvement. But as failed dieters and smokers can attest, there are short-run as well as long-term influences on self-reinforcement. For the overeater, the immediate gratification of eating has more influence than the promise of a new wardrobe. The same dilemma plagues procrastinators (Ferrari, Johnson, & McCown, 1995). Consequently, one needs to weave a powerful web of cues, cognitive supports

and internal and external consequences to win the tug-of-war with status-quo payoff. Clearly, the procedure worked for the author and once the requisite behaviors were learned and habituated they continued—for years.

SELF-MANAGEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONS

The power of self-management in organizations is only beginning to be recognized. In a study by Frayne and Latham (1987), twenty unionized government employees with habitual attendance problems identified and learned to overcome personal obstacles to job attendance. During eight thirty-minute, one-on-one sessions they identified the reasons for using sick leave (e.g., legitimate illness, alcohol and drug issues, transportation difficulties). After identifying problem behaviors, the employees noted the conditions that elicited and maintained the problem behavior and, more importantly, identified specific coping strategies. This completed the self-assessment phase of the program. Next, distal goals to increase attendance by a specified amount over an established period were set. These were coupled with the development of individual day-by-day strategies to attain the long-term goal. The employees were then taught to record their own attendance, the reason for missing work, and the steps that were to be followed to get to work. Finally, they identified rewards (e.g., self-praise, purchase of a gift) and punishers (clean the oven, do the laundry) that could be self-administered. The employees practicing self-management attended work thirteen percent more (fifty-five hours in twelve weeks) than did other employees with similar past attendance problems. A follow-up study showed that the improvement in attendance continued a year later (Latham & Frayne, 1989).

The concept of self-management is also important in programs of empowerment. In order for employees to work effectively in a firm that delegates power and responsibility, they need to have the basic skills of self-management (Wellins & George, 1991). Also, as organizations move from individual-based systems to group- or team-based systems of human resource management, the concept of self-management extends to self-managed work groups (Manz & Sims, 1989). Armed with technological innovations such as modems and fax machines, computers are permitting more and more individuals to work away from an office and in many cases, less structured environments such as their home or their vacation retreats. It is extremely important that individuals be able to manage themselves in such circumstances. Many are untrained and unskilled at doing so. Through the use of the concepts and methods identified here anyone can become more self-directed and productive.

WHERE TO BEGIN

In concluding this article we would like to provide the reader an agenda for change and action. Often times it is difficult to begin the process. As indicated above, the first step is to evaluate ourselves. Kreitner and Kinicki (1995) have

suggested that Stephen R. Covey's best selling book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, can assist us in our self-assessment. Covey refers to the seven habits, practiced by truly successful people, as "principle-centered, character-based" (1989, p.42).

Table 2. Stephen Covey's Seven Habits as an Agenda for Self-management Projects

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| 1. Be proactive | Choose the right means and ends in life, and take personal responsibility for your actions. |
| 2. Begin with the end in mind | Be goal oriented. |
| 3. Put first things first | Establish firm priorities that will help you accomplish your mission in life. Balance your daily work and your potential for future accomplishments. |
| 4. Think win/win | Cooperatively seek creative and mutually beneficial solutions to problems and conflicts. |
| 5. Seek first to understand, then to be understood | Strive hard to become a better listener. |
| 6. Synergize | Because the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, you need to generate teamwork among individuals with unique abilities and potential. Value differences |
| 7. Sharpen the saw | This refers to self-renewal which has four elements: (a) mental—which includes reading, visualizing, planning, and writing; (b) spiritual—which means value clarification and commitment, study, and meditation; (c) social/emotional—which involves service, empathy, synergy, and intrinsic security and; (d) physical—which includes exercise, nutrition, and stress management. |

Source: Adapted from "Q & A with Stephen Covey," *Training*, December 1992, p. 38.

A first step for those practicing self-management might be to pick one or more of the seven habits that are personal opportunities for improvement and translate them into specific goals and behaviors. For example, "think win/win" might remind a conflict-prone manager to practice cooperative teamwork behaviors with co-workers. Principle number five might prompt another manager to stop interrupting others during conversations. Principle seven could energize a supervisor to initiate a health enhancement regimen involving weight loss and exercise.

The point is to apply the self-management steps enumerated earlier in an important life domain. It is recommended that managers beginning a self-management program concentrate on tangible, small projects where the chances of success are high. Success engenders success, not only because of increased confidence, but also because additional resources flow toward winners. This small wins approach capitalizes on the fact that change generally does not proceed by leaps and bounds but through a number of small steps (Daniels, 2001; Soper, Von Bergen, & Sanders, 1996). Alcoholics Anonymous, one of the most successful individual change programs, only asks for abstinence one day at a time or even one hour or minute at a time instead of requiring a wholesale change of lifestyle. Similarly, Benjamin Franklin said, "Human felicity is produced not so much by great pieces of good fortune that seldom happen, as by little advantages that occur every day" (Franklin, 1996, p. 82).

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