

## Managing Oneself

*Success in the knowledge economy comes to those who know themselves -their strengths, their values, and how they best perform.*

We live in an age of unprecedented opportunity: **If** you have ambition and smarts, you can rise to the top of your chosen profession, regardless of where you started out. **But** with opportunity comes responsibility. Companies today aren't managing their employees' careers; knowledge workers must, effectively, be their own chief executive officers. **It** is up to you to ***carve out*** your place (***to make it by working hard***), to know when to change course, and to keep yourself engaged and productive during a work life that may span some 50 years. **To** do those things well, you'll need to cultivate a deep understanding of yourself -- not only what your strengths and weaknesses are but also how you learn, how you work with others, what your values are, and where you can make the greatest contribution. Because only when you operate from strengths can you achieve true excellence.

### What Are My Strengths?

Most people think they know what they are good at, **but** they are usually wrong. More often, people know what they are not good at -- and even then more people are wrong than right. And **yet**, a person can perform only from strength. One cannot build performance on weaknesses, let alone on something one cannot do at all.

Throughout history, people had little need to know their strengths. A person was born into a position and a line of work: The peasant's son would also be a peasant; the artisan's daughter, an artisan's wife; and so on. **But** now, most of us, even those of us with modest endowments, will have to learn to manage ourselves. We will have to learn to develop ourselves. We will have to place ourselves where we can make the greatest contribution. **And** we will have to stay mentally alert and engaged during a 50-year working life, which means knowing how and when to change the work we do. **In short**, we will need to know our strengths **in order to** know where we belong.

The only way to discover your strengths is through feedback analysis. **Whenever** you make a key decision or take a key action, ***write down (to write something so that the information is not lost)*** what you expect will happen. Nine or 12 months later, compare the actual results with your expectations. I have been practicing this method for 15 to 20 years now, and every time I do **it**, I am surprised. The feedback analysis showed me, **for instance** -- and to my great surprise -- that I have an intuitive understanding of technical people, whether they are engineers or accountants or market researchers. **It** also showed me that I don't really resonate with generalists.

Feedback analysis is by no means new. **It** was invented sometime in the fourteenth century by an otherwise totally obscure German theologian and ***picked up*** quite independently, some 150 years later, by John Calvin and Ignatius of Loyola, each of whom incorporated **it** into the practice of his followers. **In fact**, the steadfast focus on performance and results that this habit produces explains why the institutions **these two men** founded, the Calvinist church and the Jesuit order, came to dominate Europe within 30 years.

Practiced consistently, **this simple method** will show you within a fairly short period of time, maybe two or three years, where your strengths lie -and **this** is the most important thing to know. The method will show you what you are doing or failing to do that deprives you of the full benefits of your strengths. **It** will show you where you are not particularly competent. And **finally**, it will show you where you have no strengths and cannot perform.

Several implications for action follow from feedback analysis. **First** and foremost, concentrate on your strengths. Put yourself where your strengths can produce results.

**Second**, work on improving your strengths. Analysis will rapidly show where you need to improve skills or acquire new ones. **It** will also show the gaps in your knowledge -- and **those** can usually be filled. Mathematicians are born, but everyone can learn trigonometry.

**Third**, discover where your intellectual arrogance is causing disabling ignorance and overcome **it**.

Far too many people -- especially people with great expertise in one area -- are disrespectful of knowledge in other areas or believe that being bright is a substitute for knowledge. First-rate engineers, for instance, tend to take pride in not knowing anything about people. Human beings, they believe, are much too disorderly for the good engineering mind. Human resources professionals, **by contrast**, often pride themselves on their ignorance of elementary accounting or of quantitative methods altogether. **But** taking pride in such ignorance is self-defeating. Go to work on acquiring the skills and knowledge (that) you need to fully realize your strengths.

**It** is equally essential to remedy your bad habits -- the things you do or fail to do that inhibit your effectiveness and performance. **Such habits** will quickly *show up (arrive)* in the feedback. **For example**, a planner may find that his beautiful plans fail **because** he does not follow through on them. **Like** so many brilliant people, he believes that ideas move mountains. **But** bulldozers move mountains; ideas show where the bulldozers should go to work. **This planner** will have to learn that the work does not stop when the plan is completed. **He** must find people to *carry out* (perform) the plan and explain it to **them**. He must adapt and change **it** as he puts it into action. And **finally**, he must decide when to stop pushing the plan.

**At the same time**, feedback will also reveal when the problem is a lack of manners. Manners are the lubricating oil of an organization. **It** is a law of nature that two moving bodies in contact with each other create friction. **This** is as true for human beings as **it** is for inanimate objects. Manners -- simple things like saying "please" and "thank you" and knowing a person's name or *asking after (inquiring)* her family -- enable two people to work together whether they like each other or not. Bright people, especially bright young people, often do not understand **this**. **If** analysis shows that someone's brilliant work falls again and again as soon as cooperation from others is required, **it** probably indicates a lack of courtesy -- **that is**, a lack of manners.

Comparing your expectations with your results also indicates what not to do. We all have a vast number of areas in which we have no talent or skill and little chance of becoming even mediocre. In **those areas** a person -- and especially a knowledge worker -- should not take on work, jobs, and assignments. One should waste as little effort as possible on improving areas of low competence. **It** takes far 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 most 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.

### **The Second Half of Your Life**

We hear a great deal of talk about the midlife crisis of the executive. **It** is mostly boredom. At 45, most executives have reached the peak of their business careers, and they know **it**. After 20 years of doing very much the same kind of work, they are very good at their jobs. **But** they are not learning or contributing or deriving challenge and satisfaction from the job. And **yet** they are still likely to face another 20 if not 25 years of work. That is why managing oneself increasingly leads one to begin a second career.

There are **three ways** to develop a second career. The **first** is actually to start one. Often **this** takes nothing more than moving from one kind of organization to another: the divisional controller in a large corporation, for instance, becomes the controller of a medium-sized hospital. **But** there are also growing numbers of people who move into different lines of work altogether: the business executive or government official who enters the ministry at 45, for instance; or the midlevel manager who leaves corporate life after 20 years to attend law school and become a small-town attorney.

We will see many more second careers undertaken by people who have achieved modest success in their first jobs. **Such people** have substantial skills, and they know how to work. They need a community -- the house is empty with the children gone -- and they need income **as well**. **But** above all, **they** need challenge.

The **second** way to prepare for the second half of your life is to develop a parallel career. Many people who are very successful in their first careers stay in the work they have been doing, either on a full-time or part-time or consulting basis. **But in addition**, they create a parallel job, usually in a nonprofit organization, that takes another ten hours of work a week. **They** might **take over** (gain control) the administration of their church, **for instance**, or the presidency of the local Girl Scouts council. They might run the battered women's shelter, work as a children's librarian for the local public library, sit on the school board, and so on.

**Finally**, there are the social entrepreneurs. These are usually people who have been very successful in their first careers. They love their work, **but it** no longer challenges them. In many cases they keep on doing what they have been doing all along but spend less and less of their time on **it**. They also start another activity, usually a nonprofit. My friend Bob Buford, for example, built a very successful television company that he still runs. But he has **also** founded and built a successful nonprofit organization that works with Protestant churches, and he is building another to teach social entrepreneurs how to manage their own nonprofit ventures while still running their original businesses.

People who manage the second half of their lives may always be a minority. The majority may "retire on the job" and count the years until their actual retirement. **But it** is this minority, the men and women who see a long working-life expectancy as an opportunity both for themselves and for society, who will become leaders and models.

There is another reason to develop a second major interest, and to develop **it** early. No one can expect to live very long without experiencing a serious setback in his or her life or work. There is the competent engineer who is passed over for promotion at age 45. There is the competent college professor who realizes at age 42 that she will never get a professorship at a big university, **even though** she may be fully qualified for **it**. There are tragedies in one's family life: the breakup of one's marriage or the loss of a child. At **such times**, a second major interest -- not just a hobby -- may make all the difference. The engineer, for example, now knows that he has not been very successful in his job. **But** in his outside activity -- as church treasurer, for example -- he is a success. One's family may break up, but in that outside activity there is still a community.

In a society in which success has become so terribly important, having options will become increasingly vital. Historically, there was no such thing as "success." The overwhelming majority of people did not expect anything but to stay in their "proper station," as an old English prayer has **it**. The only mobility was downward mobility.

In a knowledge society, **however**, we expect everyone to be a success. **This** is clearly impossible. For a great many people, there is at best an absence of failure. Wherever there is success, there has to be failure. And then **it** is vitally important for the individual, **and equally** for the individual's family, to have an area in which he or she can contribute, make a difference, and be somebody. **That** means finding a second area -- whether in a second career, a parallel career, or a social venture -- **that** offers an opportunity for being a leader, for being respected, for being a success.

The challenges of managing oneself may seem obvious, if not elementary. **And** the answers may seem self-evident to the point of appearing naive. **But** managing oneself requires new and unprecedented things from the individual, and especially from the knowledge worker. **In effect**, managing oneself demands that each knowledge worker think and behave like a chief executive officer. **Further**, the shift from manual workers who do as they are told to knowledge workers who have to manage themselves profoundly challenges social structure. Every existing society, even the most individualistic **one**, takes two things for granted, if only subconsciously: that organizations outlive workers, and that most people stay put.

**But** today the opposite is true. Knowledge workers outlive organizations, and they are mobile. The need to manage oneself is **therefore** creating a revolution in human affairs.

By Peter F. Drucker (This article is an excerpt from his book *Management Challenges for the 21st Century* – Harper Collins, 1999)

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