

CHAPTER 1

What's It All About, Alfie?

SUPERCOMPETENT

Hero Thinking:

I know exactly why I work hard and what I'm trying to achieve.

SIMPLY COMPETENT

Zero Thinking:

I'm working hard trying to accomplish "it," but I don't know what "it" is.

Michael Cane starred in the classic 1966 film *Alfie*, where he played a handsome, British womanizer who lives a very hedonistic lifestyle. The line, "What's it all about, Alfie?" is a highly poignant moment in the film, when Alfie pauses on a bridge overlooking the River Thames in London and reflects on his life. He realizes that despite all of his activities in life, he has achieved very little. He asks himself, "What have I got, really? Some money in my pocket? Some decent clothes? A fancy car at my disposal. And I'm single. Unattached. Free as a bird. My life is my own." Then, he pauses and says, "But I don't have peace of mind. And if you don't have that, you've got nothing. So, what's the answer, that's what I keep asking myself. What's it all about?"

Like Alfie, you occasionally need to stop and reflect upon your life and whether you are making the most out of it. Perhaps, like Alfie, your days are just spent passing time or drifting along. Do you know what you're aiming for in life? You may work so hard and are so busy that you have lost track of your dreams.

You can't be productive if you don't know what you're working toward, which is why the word *empowerment* is a popular buzzword in business circles. People who know what they're working for are more likely to buy into the productivity goals of their teammates, superiors, and everyone else in the organization. If you're self-employed, you might say, "I *am* the organization. Of course I know what I'm working hard for."

But is that true? Do you have a set goal in mind, or are you just ambling along, marking time? It is admittedly more likely that a sole proprietor is going to be more aware, in general, of his or her ultimate goals than a worker bee in a big corporation. You need to get clear quickly. You might want to be a successful full-time freelance writer or the best plumber in town, but you can work so hard on the day-to-day operations of your business that you lose track of your dreams.

In this chapter, I'm going to offer a few simple suggestions to help you get back onto your goal-oriented track.

Know What Makes You Tick

I started my speaking and training business in 1992 by teaching professionals and organizations how to achieve their goals through increased productivity. Random House published my first book, *Leave the Office Earlier*, in 2004. Many things have changed in my life and in business during the 18 years I've been a professional speaker. One thing that has not changed is my passion for personal productivity and peak performance. It was then, and continues to be, my professional mission in life: to build high-performance productivity cultures in organizations by creating Maximum Results in Minimum Time[®] with greater profits.

We all have a special purpose in life and a particular calling. People sometimes ask me why I'm so fanatical about helping people energize their lives and hone their time-management skills. There's no doubt that helping people boost their productivity and maximize their profits brings me professional satisfaction. However, the truth is, as a wife and a mother of three young children, I do what I do because I know how special and fleeting time truly is. At the end of your life, you won't regret having attended one less meeting or taken one less call from a client, but you *will* miss the

memories you never took time to make with your family. The best thing you can spend on the people you love is *time*, which is why productivity is so important to me.

Why is productivity important to you? There's no one-size-fits-all answer. My "why" is likely different than yours, and one of the keys to productivity is *finding* your "why." For most people, an external reason like "My boss expects more of me" isn't always the most motivating factor. You must get to the heart of *why* you do what you do to be truly motivated. Is the need to be more productive exciting to you, or does it exhaust you just to think about it? If the latter is true for you, perhaps you haven't gotten clear on why being productive is important.

It all comes down to your personal goals and what you want the picture of your life to look like. Sure, you may need to be more productive at work to make your boss happy or boost company revenues. But how can you turn it around and make it important to you personally? If you're motivated by extra time with your family, then make your priority getting things done at work so you can enjoy your weekend free from work stress. If making more money is what drives you, give yourself achievable daily or even hourly goals of what you need to accomplish to make those extra sales. Figure out what truly motivates you, then try to relate each task to a goal you have set for yourself—not one that someone else has set for you. For example, if you're in sales, your organization sets a sales goal for you. While you should absolutely do your best to achieve it, make it about *you* at the same time. How many sales are required to earn the commissions you need for a family vacation, buy the fabulous pair of shoes you want, or get the country-club golf membership?

It's only human to be motivated by what feels good, so use that. What makes you feel good? Each task you accomplish—however difficult or dull—gets you closer to that great feeling. If you can figure out how productivity relates to your personal goals, then the quest for it becomes exciting, rather than overwhelming.

Luke, It's Your Destiny

Just like Luke Skywalker, you have to acknowledge and accept that you're the only person responsible for your life. Stop blaming others for the outcomes of situations that you actually control. It's vital to

own your own destiny and set your own priorities. What ideas are worthy of your time? What *must* get done? When you outline your priorities, your goals become clearer. Then you can limit your workload by mastering what's important and tossing what isn't.

Stay Focused on Your Mission

I was at a wedding reception recently and had a profound conversation with an old family friend. I asked about his flight, knowing he'd run into a few snafus along the way. He smiled and said, "The flight was fine. I'm delighted to be here." I replied, "I heard about the rain and the flight delay. That must have been frustrating." I proceeded to regale him with stories of other friends who got stuck in Denver over Christmas during a recent blizzard.

His wise response: "Oh, it didn't bother me. *I had a mission, not an agenda.*" He shared that he had adopted this motto as a rule for living. Having a mission keeps him from getting lost in the minutia. By not trying to live by other people's agendas, he's not focused on ego, but rather on his mission. As he was talking, I could just picture him waiting in Zenlike tranquility for the long-overdue airplane to arrive, while his flying companions were standing in line, flailing and fuming at the ground crew.

It was exactly what I needed to hear: "I have a mission, not an agenda." So often when launching a new endeavor, we get caught up in the agenda of the day—or worse—someone *else's* agenda for us. We lose sight of our purpose. My friend's words served as an important reminder to all leaders to not get distracted by the details, but rather stay the course and focus on the mission—*your* mission! Circumstances must never trump contentment.

How Do You *Know* When You're Being Productive?

Do you stay productive while you're working toward your mission, or are you just busy? Watch out for this one, because it's an easy trap to fall into. Everybody likes to look busy. Some workers make a career out of it, while actually accomplishing very little in an average day. People zoom around the office, guzzling coffee and

stomping back and forth to the copier; they scatter paper across every inch of their desks and furiously clack away at their keyboards while they talk on the phone. Busy, busy, busy!

But motion isn't momentum; velocity doesn't equate to value; activity doesn't equal accomplishment; and rushing doesn't mean results. We all know what it's like to have a busy day but still feel like we accomplished little.

So be realistic. Set and achieve attainable goals. Everyday interruptions and the inevitable fires will still sidetrack you, but you'll be able to douse them. Having a plan will help you get back on track.

Do You Plan Your Day?

This means more than simply keeping track of your meetings and jotting down deadlines. Planning your time is about organizing your projects and long-term goals and managing your priorities. If you never look beyond your daily to-do list, it's easy to spend your day reacting to low-priority tasks without even realizing it. Sure, you'll probably go to each of your meetings and cross off a few items on your list; however, this is no guarantee that you're maximizing your productivity and making sure your daily activities are contributing toward your long-term objectives.

Take a few minutes each day to invest in longer-term planning. Double-check to make sure every meeting you attend advances your goals. Knock out your top priorities first and then chunk away at future projects.

It's easy to decide to spend time on a low-priority task in the heat of the moment. Let's face it: Fun, easy, low-stress tasks are tempting because they allow you to cross an item off of your list right away; we *all* know how good that feels. But resist this temptation. If you do the most unattractive but highest value task on your list first, you'll build momentum for the rest of your day.

Do You Have Written Goals?

And are you moving toward them? Your biggest professional and personal goals become your obsession and the object of your focus. They represent your career ambitions, your dreams for your family, or those for yourself. If somebody asked you about them, you'd

probably agree your big goals in life are your highest priorities. So why is it so easy to neglect them?

Our next promotion, our relationships with our kids, our physical fitness—whatever matters most—often gets pushed to the back burner. It's too easy for unimportant work to steal family time, for office frustrations to make you lose sight of career ambitions, or for exercise to be the entry on the list that always becomes secondary.

Grab a piece of paper and write down your goals for the next month, six months, and year. Then post this list where you can see it on a regular basis—near your computer monitor at work or on your bathroom mirror at home—so that it can act as a constant reminder of your true priorities. Make sure your goals are clearly written and post them with pride.

Productivity is about reaching high-value goals in every area of your life, often in the shortest amount of time (but not always—such as spending time with loved ones). It isn't about striking lines across a to-do list. Time-management techniques, electronic/paper planners, and other productivity aides are just *tools*, and they're only as useful as what they help you accomplish. Make sure your biggest, most important goals create the context for the other things you do throughout the days, weeks, and months.

Grab Your Dreams by the Horns and Get Going!

I wanted to use the first chapter to shake you up and remind you of why you're trying so hard in the first place. You have to know what makes you tick. What propels you toward your dreams and goals in the first place? Are you striving as hard as you should? Or have you gotten bogged down in day-to-day minutiae? This is a common problem with people who'd like to be more productive.

Your next step is to take responsibility for your life. If you're stuck in a particular situation, don't blame others for it. Step back and take a look at what you can change. Control your destiny and determine whether some of the things you're doing are keeping you from achieving your goals and dreams—and get rid of them if you can. Once you've done that, focus on your goals in laserlike fashion.