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Improvement and You Identifying Your Role in Making Your Best Better

IN 1988, NIKE launched its Just Do It advertising campaign. Ever since, those three words have been used to motivate, inspire, encourage, and even demand people to take on all kinds of goals and work harder to make things happen—personally *and* professionally. What have you ever tried to “just do”? Of course, that slogan may resonate for *some* people, *some* of the time, for *some* of the things they work to achieve. But if you’re anything like me (and I’m assuming you’re at least a little like me since you’re reading this book), you’ve occasionally found that “just doing it” can be hard.

When you take on something big, it can be daunting to think, “Okay, I’ll just do it.” How do you make it easier to achieve a goal, or even *begin* to move in a specific direction?

To identify your role in making your best better, you must know how you *work*, how you *think*, and how you *make things happen*. The better you understand yourself, the better able you will be to work effectively and efficiently to get the important things done.

When you think of changing the way you do things, how you can work smarter, think bigger, and make more, stop and ask yourself:

- Where do I begin?
- What if it's too much to take on?
- What if something doesn't work out?
- What if I'm not yet ready to start?

These kinds of “contingency” questions are extremely useful when you’re project planning; you have the opportunity to bring up all kinds of possible scenarios. Unfortunately, for more creative people (you among them, perhaps?), these kinds of questions may actually slow you down; you may even stop and question that which you’re planning to change (and hopefully) improve. These questions can force hesitation; even worse, prompts like this may make you feel so intimidated by the prospect of taking action that you end up just *not* doing it. (Sorry, Nike.)

What are you interested in making better? That is, “Why did you pick *this* book?” Of all the books on improving your performance, increasing your productivity, and getting more of what you want, you picked this one.

I know you can work *smarter*, think *bigger*, and make *more*. I, myself, have used all the techniques that I write about, and I coach clients around the world to test the very same principles, methods, and activities I outline for you here. As you can guess, the campaign that I promote is: “Just get started!”

Once you clarify your role in improvement, you’ll use every chapter in this book as a rung on the ladder to success. Each chapter in each part adds another level of depth to the overall mission of professional and personal development.

Now, you must be wondering, “Okay, how do I do that? How do I ‘just get started?’” Fortunately, the I.D.E.A. elements I teach will guide you in taking personal responsibility and achieving your goals. They are:

I: *Identify* a very specific area you want to improve. Focus your attention on making the best better in one area of your life, and clarify what that will look like when you get there.

D: *Develop* strategies to engage in specific actions and techniques to direct your professional improvement and personal development. Acknowledge the process—remember, you’re just getting started! An important aspect is that the most sustainable changes people tend to make usually start small, are repeated with consistency, and often result in a payoff greater than anyone could have hoped.

E: *Experiment* by planning for and taking actions that generate bursts of momentum. Experimenting gives you the freedom to stop at any time to try something new. It also provides a more objective framework so that you can determine whether you should stop or continue moving forward. When you take specific actions to make your best better, it continues to get better.

A: Assess the value the effort has created. Here is the question I consistently ask myself, my friends, my family, even my clients: “Is what you’re doing worth the effort?”

It All Starts with You

Begin at the beginning; tell your own story—the tale of you getting from where you *were* to where you *are* to where you *are going*. There’s no time like the present; take the time right now to clarify your role in making your best better.

One of my favorite sayings comes from a high school math teacher who said, “If you wait long enough, the bell will ring!” There are several distinct factors and experiences that set me on this path of learning, experimentation, and achievement. Throughout the book, I will share them with you. My hope in doing so is that you will generate new ideas of what you can do. Read this book, talk about the ideas with your friends and colleagues, and practice with the ideas and exercises. Little by little, your best will get better.

Since before I started college, I’ve been interested in how people get from here to there. I distinctly remember having dinner one night while I was still in high school and living with my father, stepmother, and younger brother. One evening I asked my dad, “When did you know you were an executive?”

He was the president and COO of a store called The Sharper Image, and I wanted to know what he had done to get there. He talked

about the work he had done to figure out how he worked most effectively, and the goals he set for each three-year period of his life. He also told me about the importance of patience and pacing, something that I believe I've gotten better at over the past few decades.

Beginning in August 2000, and for the next six years, I worked as a senior facilitator with David Allen, originator of Getting Things Done (GTD), a work-life management system. I coached senior leaders in effective workflow and organization strategies, and presented more than 350 GTD seminars in Europe, South America, and throughout the United States. During that same time, my wife Jodi (who was the first full-time employee of David Allen Company) worked as an office administrator, customer service liaison, and public seminar coordinator.

In 2006, I decided to set a new goal, and it was then that I launched The Jason Womack Company. I had gained the experience of working for someone else in presenting information; now it was my turn to create content, publish reports and articles, and work with clients focused on their next level of success. I am dedicated to advising individual leaders at small to large-sized companies, providing “Workplace Performance” seminars and coaching.

The company is now more than five years old, and I continue to take my leadership role as a founder very seriously. I use all of the methods and systems you’ll read about in this book to manage the complexities, surprises, and successes of our coaching and publishing company. How do I do it? It’s quite simple (though not always easy!); I continue to return to the theme of this chapter: I just get started.

Let me share with you how some of my goal-setting and strategic planning sessions with mentors have changed things for the better for me.

Over lunch one day with my long-time mentor, executive coach Marshall Goldsmith, I shared my dedication to a three-step process, which I outline in detail a little later in the chapter: (1) Set a goal. (2) Be consistent. (3) Take action. During that discussion and throughout subsequent e-mail conversations, he encouraged me to stay on message. “What is it you want to do?” he asked. Though it sounds like a simple question, it took us a couple of hours to discover the real core goal I had set for my small company:

I teach principles of human psychology and sociology that make it easier to get done what you *have to do*, so you have the time, energy, and focus for what you really *want to do*.

That is the ultimate goal for my company—and, this book! The statement also acts as a filter while I'm interviewing a client, talking with a journalist, writing an article, or serving as an advisor to a board. It's the entire purpose of my work. If we ever get to share a conversation, and if what I am sharing with you can help you work smarter, think bigger, and make more, let's keep talking and figure out a way to work together!

I reflect often on that lunchtime conversation with Marshall. I know it was one of two best things I did when my wife and I were preparing to launch this company. A second memorable coaching session also took place over a meal some time later.

The next meeting Jodi and I scheduled was with another of our mentors, Jim Polk, here in our hometown of Ojai, California. We met for breakfast one morning to share the overarching goal of our company. He encouraged us to think about the overall strategy of our company—that is, what would *indicate* that we were living and working “on purpose”? His questions were intense, and the conversation was deep.

Subsequently, Jodi and I had several conversations about the prompts that Jim gave us; they were great business development questions we could come back to again and again. And, notably, they triggered our thinking beyond our new company. Later that week we spent another two hours together in his office identifying what became our four Most Important Things (MITs) for The Jason Womack Company. On a large whiteboard in my office, we transcribed the following critical success factors (along with objective goals, strategies, and measures) for the first 12 months of our business. Our four MITs were:

1. *Lifestyle*: We longed for a lifestyle that was more focused on contribution (what can we give) than on acquisition (what will we get). It's important to us, to this day, to work with people who do good work. We spend time sharing our guidance and knowledge with organizations and companies that promote a focus on sustainability—and I'm not talking only about our environment, but also about the larger picture of sustaining and building contribution, improvement, health, wellness, prosperity, happiness, and joy as a lifestyle.
2. *Revenue*: We had two reference points over the previous decade: From 1995 to 2000, I worked as a high school teacher (lower

annual salary) and from 2000 to 2006, as a seminar facilitator and executive coach (higher annual salary). We created a budget and planned for our savings, vacations, and monthly expenses. We defined “our nut,” that sum of money we’d have to make each month to keep moving forward. We multiplied that by 12 months to come up with a goal for the first year of our business. It was as easy a goal-setting strategy as that! (In that first year, we did enough work to earn almost 15 percent more than our stated goal! Of course, we then used that as a metric for the next year’s plan.)

3. *Client list:* This MIT was fun. I started by looking at my office supplies and visiting my favorite companies’ websites. I reviewed my bookcase, and even walked through the garage. I made a master list of the companies and the products I thought were awesome, the things I used and would be willing to recommend. From the triathlon bike that I race on to the books in my bookcase, and from the technology on my desk to the clothes in my closet, I made a list of the companies I supported with my wallet.

I then decided to reach out to these companies to see if I could support their leadership development programs. In January 2007, I developed a Presentations course for managers of my favorite outdoor lifestyle company, Patagonia, based in Ventura, California. Later that same month I worked with a senior leadership team from one of my favorite not-for-profit organizations, the World Wildlife Fund (at an off-site meeting in Antigua, Guatemala). Later that year, I presented a speech to more than 1,500 small to medium-sized business owners at a business planning conference for Loan ToolBox (the founders were friends of mine from California), at the company’s annual conference in Las Vegas, Nevada. Ever since that first year, I have continued to introduce myself to the people and companies I’d like to work with, and this effort continues to pay off!

4. *Products:* Our fourth MIT was to create products—books, ebooks, and audio and video recordings—that people could use to review and learn about ideas to make their best even better. We decided that first year we’d record an audio CD and build an ebook (in PDF format that we could e-mail) containing ideas on digital organization. Later on, we created more products, and even started drafting the outline of the book you’re now holding in your hands.

If you agree that goal setting is a very powerful process (whether you *think* about your goals, *write* your goals, or *see yourself* in your goals), then your role in making your best better is clear to you. Every six months, Jodi and I return to our MITs and talk to, meet with, and e-mail our mentors with updates. We like to review and renew our short-, medium-, and long-term goals with each other, and then ask for ideas and feedback from our network. By doing so, we continually identify and clarify the focus of our consulting and advising work, and learn about the challenges our clients face so that we can develop newer strategies, better techniques, and more efficient processes they can use immediately.

Focus on Making Your Best Better

In this section, I outline in detail the three steps—concepts, really—I mentioned earlier, which I firmly believe are crucial to a focus on making your best better:

1. *Set a goal.* A goal goes a long way toward making more things possible. A clear outcome helps form a structure, clarifying the *destination* while making obvious the *direction* to go in. Once you have set a clear path to achieving a goal, it will be easier to say no to things that take you off-course.
2. *Be consistent.* Consistency is key to personal and career success. If you can repeat positive, valuable behaviors, develop routines that build upon each other and that generate and enhance momentum, you will demonstrate your trustworthiness to everyone you work with and around.
3. *Take action.* Action is necessary to achieve your goals. To get from where you are to where you want to be, you must plan *and* take specific action steps directly related to the goal.

Now it's time to stop and ask yourself, "How do I apply these three concepts to my own work and life experiences?" As you continue reading, make notes of how you think you identify your goals, how you plan for consistency, and how you take deliberate action toward achieving your desired outcomes.

Identifying Your Own MITs

It might seem intimidating at the beginning of the process, but there are small, very easy steps you can take to get started. Begin right now, while you’re reading this book. Take a page from a notebook or pull out a blank piece of printer paper. On top of that page, write “MY MITs.” Underneath, write down the kinds of things you already know are among your top three to five MITs. Blend them, mix them, and clarify them among the categories of work and life, professional and personal, big and little.

Here are two things you can do *this week* to take ownership of your role in making your best, better.

1. *Strike a deal:* Ask a mentor, coach, or friend to serve as an accountability buddy. Identify one very specific goal you have, either in your personal life or at work, and tell your accountability buddy about it in person, over a Skype call, or on the phone. Then, every 5 to 10 days, schedule time to talk. Ideally, you’ll meet several times over the course of two months. Decide at the beginning of the process just how many meetings you’d like to have. This clarifies the beginning, middle, and end. Over the course of those few conversations, you’ll share your goal and progress, and keep your ears open for the “feed-forward” (as Marshall Goldsmith calls it) that this person can share with you.

This kind of a check-in process gives you a special opportunity: You get to see your progress through someone else’s eyes and, as a result, notice some things that you might not see on your own. As fast as life happens, sometimes it’s simply easier to think about and reflect on what needs to be done than to put the time, energy, and focus into reviewing what you’ve done and how it’s leading to something better.

As your accountability buddy reflects back to you what you are sharing, and asks you the kinds of questions you need to answer to continue improving on the situation, you will make more progress—faster than you thought possible.

2. *See yourself in your goals.* There are three kinds of goals: (1) goals you think about, (2) goals you write on paper, and (3) goals in which you actually *see yourself*.

I find the third group to be the most effective. Instead of thinking about what you'd like, or making yet another list of things you "need to do," try the following: Stand in front of a mirror holding a dry-erase pen (the kind you use on whiteboards). Look yourself directly in your eyes and ask, "What do I want to get *better* at? What do I want to make *more* of?" Write down the first couple of things that come to mind. Yes, write them on the mirror so that you actually *see* yourself and the goal at the same time, in the same space.

Start practicing this on small things. For example, early in the morning before you leave for work, stop and write what you'd like to make progress on during the day. Then you have an opportunity to check in with that goal two more times during the day: first, when you return home (or to your hotel room if you travel as much as I do!), and then right before you go to sleep. Again in front of the mirror, look yourself in the eyes and ask, "Based on what I wanted to have happen today, how did I do?" Listen to the answer(s) and use that information to help guide you toward the following day.

Acknowledge the Process of Iterative Improvement

Another author, speaker, and leader I have learned a lot from over the past decade is Frances Hesselbein. She is president and CEO of the Leader to Leader Institute and author of, *My Life in Leadership*. Over a conversation one morning in her New York City office, she offered me this slice of wisdom: "You get what you expect." I truly believe this to be true, and have found that what I think should happen, often does. Whether I'm coaching a corporate executive on the psychology of teamwork and accountability, or working with a friend who's preparing for a triathlon, we *always* focus on what we want to occur over the long term, and we acknowledge that it is always an incremental process to identify projects and milestones to make things happen.

Knowing where to expend your next effort is critical to working smarter, thinking bigger, and making more. Everything you read here will support this process:

Clarify where you *are*, get started toward where you're *going*, and regularly evaluate the *payoff(s)* of the effort.

When I taught high school (U.S. history, world history, and Spanish) from 1995 to 2000, I always shared the rules of the game with the students in my classroom. I didn't hide my teaching methods, personal objectives, or required standards. At the beginning of each term, I shared with students my scoring and grading strategies, and even provided a copy of the California State Standards (the guidelines of content I was to teach over the 10 months of the school year) to keep in their notebooks. When it was time to start a new unit, I asked them to review the state standards. "Here's where we're going," I'd always say.

By understanding my grading strategies and knowing the California content standards for each subject I taught, they could determine *exactly* where we were along the path to their ultimate goal: to complete the course. Throughout the year, I even held special monthly classes (always on Saturday mornings) to share what I thought were important student skills, such as note taking and backpack organization. One month I even presented a two-hour workshop titled "How to Talk So Adults Will Listen." It was one of the most popular weekend classes I ever taught!

Why Improve Iteratively?

Iterative improvement presupposes that small actions—identified, completed, and reviewed with consistency—can build positive momentum. When you review your day-to-day activities in the office, what do you remember about the day? Do you reflect on the actions you took toward the goals you said you wanted to reach? One of the most important, and time-saving, things you can do to speed the process of improvement is to *continually* define, clarify, and create the support structure you need to succeed.

Have you done this? If so, how? Does your team or your boss know where you are going? What about your friends and family members: Are they aware of the path you wish to be on? Do they see you taking steps each day, each week, each month, toward achieving your ultimate outcomes? How do you continue to make things possible?

Once you have identified even some of your MITs, it's time to do the work necessary to make progress toward achieving them. To do so, you're going to need and use more support. (I will talk much more extensively about building your social network in Chapter 5.)

Most professional and executive leadership or talent development programs promote the idea of accountability and teamwork. By identifying what you expect to happen, creating realistic and specific milestones, and asking for help when you need it, you put yourself on the way to a whole new level of success. Following is an iterative approach you can take to improve, one that will enable you to step more fully into your role in making your best even better!

Scripts for Success

WHO DO YOU KNOW WHO . . .?

This is a question I have used for years to ask people to introduce me to others who may share my interests. I find that when I reach out and ask for help, those around me—my friends, colleagues, and even clients—make an effort to do whatever they can (and sometimes more!) to assist me in my endeavors. As you continue on the path to making your best better, make the people around you aware of the kinds of things you’re working on, and who you’re looking to meet. One chance meeting and one extra conversation may wind up moving an entire project forward by leaps and bounds. And it may have started with one simple question, “Who do you know who?”

WHERE ARE YOU LOOKING TO EXPAND?

At a conference, meeting, or networking event, you’re bound to meet someone and hear the question, “So, what do you do?” I have found that this question, more often than not, actually opens a chasm between two people. Despite the fact that it’s intended to begin a conversation, it instead creates dissonance, as each person starts unconsciously to compare him- or herself to the other.

By instead asking a question like, “Where are you looking to expand?” you invite the other person to a different sort of conversation. As he or she is talking, you can even use a conversation script based loosely on the one above by saying something like, “Hey, I know someone who . . .” Being interested *and* interesting in conversation is another way to gently, simply, and positively take responsibility for your own improvement.

To Get Started, Just Get Started

Years ago, my business coach Tim Braheem said to me, “Jason, when you’re at work, *work*.” Very quickly, I came to understand that he did not distinguish between his personal and professional expression of work; his definition of the term was all-inclusive. It simply meant: “Anything you’re doing right now.” What he taught me in that one conversation—really, in just those six words—was, wherever I am, no matter what I am doing, I need focus on the task at hand. Whether I’m coaching an executive, pushing myself to the limit in a triathlon, reading a book, or taking a get-away-from-it-all weekend vacation, I have one intention: to engage completely and give as much of my focus as possible to the endeavor.

It is important to recognize, however, that it’s not realistic to give 100 percent, all the time, to everything you do. For that reason, you must make important choices; in other words, you have to prioritize.

What’s your current approach here? Do you try and do a little bit of everything? Or do you focus on a few important areas of your work life on a somewhat rotating basis?

When we fail to make our MITs a priority, we become overwhelmed trying to think about and remember all there is to do. The phrase “the stress of it all is killing me” comes to mind. What does it mean? It means that the anticipation of trying to get all of your MITs done can kill the motivation to even begin on a single task.

To begin, bring to mind just one of your MITs and *just get started*.

Understand the Impact of Your Style of Working

Your individual role in making your best better requires that you: (1) know the way you *work* and *get things done*, and (2) constantly *ensure that you are aligned with* the way you work and get things done.

There’s a simple question you can ask to distinguish your own working style: Are you a verb person or a noun person?

To help you answer that, put down this book and find a to-do list you composed sometime in the past month or so. If you can’t find one, make one. It’s best to have a list with more than 30 things that need your attention. Now look at the first (or sometimes, only) word of each item on the list. Is it a noun or is it a verb?

There's no right or wrong way to write a list. If you get things done, you get things done. Here is what I know about these two kinds of work: I have had the valuable opportunity over the past decade to sit down with hundreds of people and their to-do lists. I have also sat in (as an observer) on scores of meetings (in person and via conference calls) with teams around the world. I find that although everyone will switch between nouns and verbs here and there, the very real data is there for you to see in your own hand; some people tend to choose nouns over verbs; others prefer verbs to nouns.

As you clarify the ways you can work smarter, consider the distinction between the two.

Working with Nouns

People who have a lot of nouns show up in their notes and to-do lists (and my own hand goes up here—I write down events, people's names, situations, article titles, and so on) tend to be known as visionary, big-picture thinkers. It's easy for them to talk in generalities, or want to discuss overarching aspects of the project before defining the details and actions necessary to get the work done.

At the *end* of a day, noun workers want to know which projects or events received attention, and that the people around them understand where they're going. During meetings, I frequently observe noun workers talk about what's going to happen, who will be involved, and/or how great it will be when they're done. Sometimes, I'll even hear them repeat something that was said previously (as if saying it for the first time), as they're still processing the idea mentally. Looking around my office, I have a list on my office whiteboard right now:

- Marketing Plan/Excel file
- Singularity University
- Book Launch
- Website Landing Page
- Mastering Workplace Performance Online
- June (D-Day) trip to Normandy, France

Note that these signify projects that no doubt have several actions (verbs) tied to them. The nouns act as bookmarks, or placeholders,

for those things that I need to be thinking about, planning, and acting on in order to achieve some objective goal. I naturally surround myself with noun workers. I like them close by, as they are the ones to whom I can bring a new, crazy, big idea and who will make it *newer, crazier, and bigger!*

How do you work on the big things?

When it's time to think creatively, innovatively, or differently, invite your friends or mentors who are known to do just that. Don't worry just yet about figuring out *how to do* what it is you're thinking about. That comes later. As you bring your colleagues, friends, and mentors to mind, please keep in mind that being a noun worker is by no means a good or a bad thing. There is no right or wrong here. In fact, knowing which members of your team *are* the noun workers could add to the effectiveness and efficiency of meetings by designating a specific period of time for noun-only-focused discussions.

If you happen to work with (or for) someone who is a noun worker, try this five-day experiment: At the end of each day, bring to this individual a short list of the major accounts, issues, projects, or events you worked on. Resist telling them *what* you did on those accounts or projects, unless of course they ask for the details. If the noun worker is an especially efficient and astute manager, he or she will know exactly where and when to ask follow-up questions regarding the "verbs" of the day.

Working with Verbs

Now, look at the list of someone who is a verb worker and you will see he or she has clearly defined the things that need to be *done*, sooner rather than later! Every item on each line of that person's to-do list will start with an action verb (big or little). Verb workers manage their productivity in terms of action, delegation, and progress.

Generally, when I work with someone and we start talking "verbs," I advise him or her to write down tasks for the next one to four days. This time frame imposes urgency and lends effectiveness to the process of getting the important things done. When you do this, you will find it easier to get started, as you have already identified the "bookmark" for each project you're managing.

If I take the “things I’m thinking about” (those nouns from above) and filter them through what I call the “verbing process,” here’s what I come up with for the tasks I need to do in the next 24 to 96 hours:

- Draft six-week book promotion tour outline and objectives.
- Call Rao to discuss attending Singularity University Executive program.
- Find 10-plus bookstores in San Francisco, New York, and London for book promotion.
- Edit second draft of website landing page with pop-up for downloadable Chapter 1.
- Review (plus 60 minutes) current layout of MWPO website.
- E-mail Craig, Roel, and Pip re: next leadership trip to Normandy.

I will raise a caution flag here: If your to-do list has “big” verbs—by which I mean verbs that are mentally demanding or longer term in nature (such as *plan*, *discuss*, *create*, or *implement*)—you can help yourself (and may save time and reduce the sense of overwhelm) by deciding on the action step to *just get started*. That is, pick a “smaller” verb—by which I mean verbs describing tasks that are easier to start and faster to finish.

My own rule of thumb: I keep my defined “work” actions to 15 to 30 minutes each. These are the “chunks” of time I can use to stay focused, minimize interruptions, and work effectively.

Let’s say you have items on your list like:

1. *Plan* HI-PO leadership development program scheduled for March 7 to 12.
2. *Discuss* org chart re: budgeting for next year.
3. *Handle* staffing issues.

Consider experimenting for the next week by breaking down those bigger lead-in verbs to smaller verbs, in this way:

1. *Review* last year’s feedback comments from participants at leadership program.
2. *Collect* and *review* current org chart and this year’s budget.
3. *Call* Sam in HR to schedule a 90-minute meeting on staffing.

I also like to surround myself with verb workers. Why? Because whether during a meeting, on a phone call, or in casual conversation, they are the ones who will pause and say, “You know Jason, that’s a good idea. Now, what are going to *do* about it?” The book you are holding in your hand is a direct product of my mentor, Jim, asking me that very question quite some time ago.

For months, I discussed this book (a noun), which was only an idea in my head at the time. Finally, it got to the point where, one morning over a breakfast at the Ojai Café Emporium, Jim said, “Enough talk already; what are you going to *do* about this book idea?” This one question changed everything. *Your Best Just Got Better* is now available because I took my natural tendency to think in terms of nouns and matched them to verbs that, when acted upon, moved my mission forward.

If you happen to work with or for someone who is a verb worker, try this five-day experiment: At the end of each day, bring him or her a short list of what you *did*. Resist focusing on just the noun (the project or event) you worked on, and instead clearly identify and emphasize the *actions you took* to move those toward completion. For example, instead of saying, “I worked on the XYZ account,” say something like, “I met with Pat from the XYZ account and closed a sale with her that we’d been working on for about a month.”

Someone who is verb-oriented will appreciate the significance of the bigger picture, as well as the action taken and completion experienced each day.

Working with Nouns and Verbs: Your Turn

Ready for an experiment? Take out a piece of paper and begin to think about both kinds of work. Even though you may prefer one style over the other, it’s absolutely critical—the more responsible you become, and as you develop your strengths and goals professionally *and* personally—that you be able to easily, effectively, and efficiently engage in both kinds of working.

Set a timer for 15 minutes and in those minutes fill that page with your handwriting. On one side of the page, write down a list of the many “things” you’re thinking about—that is, just the nouns. Examples might be a meeting you’re attending, the trip you’re planning,

a book you're reading, someone you need to talk to, and so on. Once you've filled the page, pause and reflect.

When the 15 minutes are up, turn the page over, and for each item you wrote, identify a single action you can take within the next 24 to 96 hours to just get started (as you can see, I'm going for something actionable here). Even if the "thing" on the other side is *big* (e.g., your next promotion, a life goal to vacation in the islands, your child's upcoming college choice), identify just one task you can absolutely, positively do in the next one to four days. If you identify your work at this level of action, by midweek next week you just may have moved some very important tasks forward well ahead of schedule! That's what it looks like when you take responsibility for working *smarter*, thinking *bigger*, and making *more*!

Maximizing Your Limited Resources

In Chapter 2, I describe the importance of pacing as it relates to goal setting. I caution people not to attempt to go too far, too fast, and I focus intently on identifying when progress is going too slowly. But right now it's time to clarify your "resources," the limitations you face while working to make your best better.

You may have read this brief conversation from Lewis Carroll's book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, between Alice and the Cheshire Cat: "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat. "I don't much care where—" said Alice. "Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat. "—so long as I get *somewhere*," Alice added as an explanation. "Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."

Chances are, you aren't like Alice. You know the direction and already have an idea of the destination you'd like to reach. For specifically those reasons, the more clearly you've identified where "there" is, the easier it will be to efficiently identify the decisions—the actions you can take now and in the near future—you need to make to get started. Once you make those decisions, it's time to maximize your limited resources. These are the four critical elements of productivity: *time, energy, focus, and tools*.

They are limited because you only have so much of each before you need to replenish them. How you use—and maximize—these four

resources will directly and significantly affect what you get done over the course of a day at work.

No doubt you have tried managing *time* before. Whether you've made prioritized daily to-do lists or time-blocked your calendar, "time management" techniques are probably not new to you!

Chances are you already know when during the day your *energy* is highest (and lowest). Most people know when is the best time (i.e., the most productive) of the day for them—the morning, the afternoon, or the evening.

Next, let's assume you can *focus* on your MITs and not get distracted, so that you accomplish your priorities during the day.

Finally, you likely have productivity *tools* (or a system) that you utilize in order to make it easier to get the important things done in the time you've allotted for them.

Take the opportunity now, while reading this, to think about and to study all four of these elements, in the order I describe below, as you move toward a clearer definition of your role in making your best better, and specifically how you can work smarter. In my coaching programs, we always start with tools, as they constitute the basis of each person's professional productivity and workplace performance.

Tools: There are countless systems, apps, and tools available to help you. Are you a fan of the buy-it-now-and-see-if-it-helps-me-later methodology? Do you have binders on your shelves? Have you downloaded "most" of the productivity apps now available online? Have you attended seminars and workshops, hoping you'll find the "magic bullet" to time management and productivity?

Of course, knowing *how* you can use those tools to their full potential will make you even more effective and efficient. If you have a journal or a notepad nearby, open it to a fresh new page. If not, simply find a piece of paper and a pen. On the top of the sheet, write today's date. Under that, write: "As of right now, the tools, systems, and gear that I use/rely on to get my work done include: _____, _____, and _____." (Keep this list handy, as I will refer to it again.)

Later in this book I will show you how to save time and get the most out of the tools you have, whether they are paper-based,

digital, or a combination of the two. Suffice it to say that, for now, if you can learn one or two new features of each of the tools you use, you can save time, by working smarter each day.

Focus: You have the ability to be interested in and concentrate on something specific as long as you can—until you get distracted. I’m talking about attention span here, and we all have different limits. What one person can sit down and focus on for hours at a time another person may get up and walk away from after just minutes.

Over the past 24 hours, think about how many times you were interrupted by others, distracted from what you were working on, or even forgot what you were just about to do. (Have you ever had this happen at home? You leave one room to get something in another room, and by the time you get there have completely forgotten why you went there in the first place? That’s how fast our focus goes!)

In other words, your attention span will always affect what you get done. Consider the various areas of your life: personal interests, work, family, health, finances, career, leisure activities, and more. Let it all come in to your mind. When you think about the next 6 to 18 months (which, by the way, is a great place to start with goal setting; this span of time is short enough to begin experiencing momentum and long enough to realize significant change), where do you imagine you’ll be? What do you picture yourself doing? With whom do you imagine you’ll be spending more (or less) time? I devote Chapter 9 to the topic of focus, and how you can maximize yours to make your best better.

Energy: You may be a morning person; you may be an evening person. (Do you have a spouse or a boss who’s your opposite?) No matter your preference, you are already aware that there are certain times during the day when you are more productive, as well as when you’re not. One of the most effective things you can do is study the times of the day and the physical locations you work in to identify when and where you have the most energy to give to your important projects. Matching your tools, focus, and energy is always one of the most effective ways to save time while you’re working.

Time: You may want to highlight this sentence: *There are only 96 15-minute blocks of time in a single day, and there are just 168 hours in a week.*

Was this fact as profound to you as it was to me when I first realized it? When I learned that our time is that limited, I started using mine very, very differently.

Here's a challenge: Set a timer for 15 minutes. Right now. Go ahead; do it. Then continue reading this chapter. When the time is up and you hear the beep-beep-beep or the buzz of the timer, think about this: That was about 1 percent of your day. How well did you focus during that time? Were you able to read page after page after page? (If you do, you will most likely be able to continue reading the next 15 to 20 pages of this book.)

For the next few days, keep that timer nearby. I maintain that time is the *most limited* resource of the four (time, energy, focus, and tools), and it's often the one we have the least control over. Therefore, you need to *objectify* your time, by which I mean you need to be able to watch as the minutes you have count down to 0:00. In Chapter 3, I will show you very specific tactics you can take to manage, control, and get more from your time each day.

Did you happen to notice that I originally listed the four limited resources in one order, and then outlined their impact on productivity in another? I have a very specific reason for doing this.

I have spent many years studying productivity and time management. I frequently meet people who say, "I wish I had more time," or, "I just need another hour in the day." When I first meet with my clients by phone, I ask the next four questions, in this order, to better understand the work they do and the areas we'll focus on during our coaching program.

1. What *tools and systems* do you use to get things done?
2. How do you *focus all of your attention* on the goal you have for each work session?
3. When do you have the *energy to be productive* and remain in a positive, proactive frame of mind?
4. When do you have the *time to consistently work* at a higher level of focus and motivation?

You see, when you study the four resources in this order, you can then more effectively utilize your blocks of time; perhaps even getting more done faster, and expending less energy and effort.

Oh, and the reason I asked you to set a timer for 15 minutes? That was about 1 percent of your day today. (Remember, there are 1,440 minutes in a day, so 15 minutes is about 1 percent.) I will go into much more detail on this in Chapter 3. The idea here is to demonstrate how little time it can take for you to make some significant progress on your important work. As a colleague of mine, Michael Bungay Stanier teaches, “Do More Great Work.” Here’s what I know: You will get important things done when you maximize your tools, focus, and energy effectively.

Just Keep Moving

When you clearly identify an objective goal (perhaps your Ideal Day!), you automatically begin to make things better, and you can continue moving in a positive direction. When you think about where you are going, talk about your dreams, write goals, and reflect on your efforts, you make significant progress. Focusing on a specific direction is important for two reasons: (1) You’ll notice more opportunities, while (2) you narrow your focus. The more you can see the direction in which you are heading, the easier it will be to collect ideas and information to get you closer to achieving the results you’re after. Remember the words of Abraham Lincoln: “A goal properly set is halfway reached.”

But how do you pick, manage, and celebrate the “right” goals, whether they are personal or professional, short term or long term? Surely you have heard that one way to be effective is to set goals that are SMART: Specific, Meaningful, Actionable, Realistic, and Timely. However, that doesn’t work for everyone. It’s too easy to make excuses for, to “explain away,” not reaching goals and objectives. Here are the “goal-stoppers” I hear all too often:

- *But, what if goal-setting doesn’t work?* Do you know someone who has said this? Generally, it happens when people set the bar too high, taking on goals that are too big to begin with. They take something on, work on it, stress about it, think about it, work on it some more, only to realize that for some reason (and they usually have several to share with you!), they won’t be able to “just do it.” They won’t be able to finish what they started.

- Won't setting a goal limit my opportunities? Other times, people claim they prefer the serendipity of achievement; that is, by not picking anything too specific to work toward, they keep themselves open to living life in the moment and taking advantage of what shows up, as it shows up. "Sure I'd like to know about that next promotion, if it's ever offered. If not, it's okay; something else will show up." That was a comment I heard from a participant in an open seminar I presented at a not-for-profit organization.

There is a middle ground, fortunately. For those of you who have set goals in the past and not achieved them, it's time to start anew. And for those of you who enjoy the surprises life has to offer, I encourage you to keep on working and living that way. Just realize that to make your best better there will be some things you'll want to do starting now.

Start Where You Are

One of the activities I ask people to undertake is to draft, by hand, a long, unprioritized, private list of the things to which they—and other people—have said yes to, and to acknowledge how many of those things are still outstanding. This inventory of open loops usually contains items such as promises, projects, reminders, tasks, ideas, and more. And, it's usually a fairly long list. (The longest one I've seen from a client had over 400 single-line items.) As in the previous exercise, start by giving yourself 15 minutes of uninterrupted focus time to answer this question: "What have I promised to do that I have not yet completed?"

As you gain more and more clarity about the work you have to do (I define "work" in a very general way, as I explained earlier in this chapter), I am confident you will realize the importance of improving your productivity and performance methodologies.

How Do You Start Your Day? So now what do you do? Here's my recommendation: Start right where you are. Chapter 1 is all about working smarter and making a commitment to taking personal responsibility for your own improvement. Now is the time to identify when you're at your best.

No doubt you know the kinds of things that can happen at the beginning of any day to set you off on the wrong foot. To turn 180

degrees, here's another day-day experiment: Ask the following questions at the beginning of each day.

- Did I wake up rested?
- Is my mind already on overdrive, thinking about all I have to get done today, this week, this year?
- Are there certain people who, just by thinking about them, cause me stress or overwhelm me?
- As I start the day, am I able to anticipate to any degree of clarity (or certainty) what I may be able to accomplish?

As you ask and answer these questions over the next five days, make a note of those mornings that start in an unproductive and potentially discouraging way. You don't have to track everything that happens to you; just notice those things that you can use to your advantage. Often, when we know what gets in the way of our having a good day, we can take steps to preempt them, so that they don't knock us as far off track as they have in the past.

The "I am at my best when . . ." activity I describe next is one that I introduce to everyone I work with, from high school students planning for college to retirees taking on a second career by volunteering in their communities. Most of my work is with senior executives, whom I coach as they move up in their organizations; I also work with startup founders as they grow their ideas into full-fledged businesses.

Take a cue from a lesson I offer to these individuals: Give yourself the gift of your own attention! Stop now to make an inventory of the kinds of things that could happen during a day that would get you working in a positive direction.

When Are You at Your Best? How Do You Find Out? It is human nature to return to some natural set point (often referred to as *homeostasis*) by doing what you normally do. Recognizing your habits and routines are very significant aspects of reaching your overall level of productivity and goal achievement. By focusing on that which is within your control, you give yourself one simple (though not always easy to implement, as you'll see in just a moment) key to success.

Knowing, focusing on, and practicing the actions you must take to be at your best requires initiative and discipline. True, working when

you are at your best might require significant behavioral changes, but, I assure you, the process will produce significant and sustainable quality-of-life improvements.

Figuring Out When You Are at Your Best in Three Easy Steps

1. Take out a piece of paper.
2. At the top, write “I am at my best when . . .”
3. Underneath that phrase, write down 5 to 10 things you can do to support yourself in having a good day. Make sure they are items that you can control. For example, “When I eat a good breakfast,” is something you can control, whereas “When my manager is in a good mood,” is not. (See the list below for some examples to get you thinking.)

The practical application of starting your day with a focus on “me at my best” will result in a proactive, productive change. Some of my clients call it their recipe for a great day. Post this inventory where you can see it first thing in the morning and throughout the day.

Review your list at the beginning of each day, over the next five days. If you haven’t done something on it that could significantly improve each of those days, take a moment now and make the effort to do so. Set yourself up for success.

For the first few days you experiment with this productivity tool, make a conscious attempt to *review the list each morning* and to do at least one thing on it as close to that moment as possible. Turning these practices into daily habits will often result in quicker reaction times, a better mood, and a reduction in both work- and life-related stress. Think about where in your daily routine you can easily incorporate simple, new, and better behaviors.

Here are a few samples from the “I am at my best when . . .” lists of other people. Feel free to use them and add your own.

I Am At My Best When . . .

- I get enough sleep and eat breakfast each morning.
- I arrive on time for my appointments.
- I reach out to clients in advance of meeting with them.
- I create a list of daily objectives and deliverables.

- I'm prepared for my meetings and presentations.
- I have all the updated travel logistics I'll need on my computer/in my smartphone.
- I acknowledge others on the team and let them know they made valuable contributions.
- My electronic gear (ereader, BlackBerry, laptop, etc.) is fully charged and ready to use.

Now, take some time to identify the habits you can repeat to be at your best. Once you begin to focus on the things that you can do to be at your best, you can magnify them, thus increasing the likelihood you'll experience a more productive day, every day. Now *that* is a way to work smarter.

