

Thriving Workplace

Hoping to Make Some Changes?

(Six keys to being excellent at anything)

Work that Tony Schwartz carried out with executives at dozens of organisations, and his studies of scientific research have led him to believe it is “*an incredibly durable myth*” that only those born with special talents and gifts are able to excel in any given pursuit. Though we may sometimes believe otherwise and behave as though it were not true, he maintains we have remarkable capacity to influence our own outcomes.

Schwartz is CEO of The Energy Project, and author of [The Way We're Working Isn't Working](#), a worthwhile book (thoroughly recommended) about the contemporary workplace, what it's doing to us, and a practical guide to what we might do about it.

He says “ . . . *it's possible to build any given skill or capacity in the same systematic way we do a muscle: push past your comfort zone, and then rest . . .*” He reflects the studies of Anders Ericsson, the leading researcher into high performance who established that “ . . . *it's not inherited talent which determines how good we become at something, but rather [how hard we're willing to work](#)— something [Ericsson] calls “[deliberate practice](#).”*”

Obviously, this is both good and bad news but hardly *fresh* information: the philosopher Aristotle pointed out 2000 years ago, “*We are what we repeatedly do.*”

More hard work . . ? Give me a break!

As much as we may like the pleasure of progress without the pain of change, “ . . . *practice is not only the most important ingredient in achieving excellence, but also the most difficult and the least intrinsically enjoyable . . .*” (Schwartz again.) “*If you want to be really good at something, it's going to involve relentlessly pushing past your comfort zone, along with frustration, struggle, setbacks and failures. That's true as long as you want to continue to improve, or even maintain a high level of excellence. The reward is that being really good at something you've earned through your own hard work can be immensely satisfying.*”

What Schwartz has to offer to help bring this seemingly self-evident but difficult-to-achieve truth within our grasp, are his Six Keys to Being Excellent at Anything: reasonable and reasonably do-able things we can practice at any time. And yes, practice is the master-key. Here's his list, followed in each case by my own comments and comments.

1. Pursue what you love. Passion is an incredible motivator. It fuels focus, resilience, and perseverance.

Very many workers behave as though they are unable to follow their passion because they're trapped, helpless victims of circumstance and limited choices; they put a lot of effort into proving this is the case. Some have yet to clarify what their passion comprises. Whatever you're currently practising is what you'll acquire expertise in. If you're currently practising directionless-ness, resignation, frustration, blame, bitterness, anger, suffering or self-exploitation, expect to become even more accomplished at these qualities over time.

What do you need to develop through deliberate practice: Definition of your personal vision, purpose and Big Picture? Clarity about where your work fits within that? Persistence? Resilience? Self-control? Self-reliance? Response-ability? Gratitude? Metacognition? Attitudinal change? Emotional intelligence? Equanimity in the face of uncertainty?

2. *Do the hardest work first.* *We all move instinctively toward pleasure and away from pain. Most great performers, Ericsson and others have found, delay gratification and take on the difficult work of practice in the mornings, before they do anything else. That's when most of us have the most energy and the fewest distractions.*

Do you begin the day by opening your e-mail, then becoming trapped in it? (Bad call.) Are you still trying to manage time? (Forget it.) How does your priority-management methodology stack up? Is it an A, B, C method based on what has become most pressing or already overdue? An improvisational approach based on hunches, or a well-designed, tried-and-tested system? What does it routinely avoid, that should be attended to constantly so that it never becomes urgent?

Do you routinely practise procrastination, honing your competence at this, every day? What generic duties and tasks have you established are always important and should never become urgent, to prevent them from becoming both important and urgent? How clear are you about the causes within your control, of your wheel-spinning, energy-wasting, or allowing yourself to be out of control?

[Access our guides to Priority Management and Self-Reflection at the Self-Management section of our Subscriber Library.]

3. *Practice intensely, without interruption for short periods of no longer than 90 minutes and then take a break.* *Ninety minutes appears to be the maximum amount of time that we can bring the highest level of focus to any given activity. The evidence is equally strong that great performers practice no more than 4½ hours a day.*

You have no time for practice, because you've got wall-to-wall busyness every day? (Check your priority-management practices.) Not even five minutes every hour? Three minutes . . . ? Ninety seconds in between tasks . . . ? What are you foregoing by making yourself available for this kind of self-exploitation?

If you're honest, what benefits do you receive from a reputation as someone who is always very busy but only just (at enormous expenditure of effort, endurance and skill), coping? What would happen if you actually honoured the emotional and physical signs of your need to set and hold boundaries over the amount of energy you give to your work, to others' demands or to aspects of them?

Does it really make sense to routinely begin the next meeting immediately after the preceding one has concluded? Is "running meetings" the best way of doing business? Are you confusing "running meetings" with "organising", "managing", "leading" or "developing the team"?

If you're currently developing a particular competency, (such as leadership) have you defined what you mean and devised a methodical plan for reaching your goal? Are you methodically monitoring your progress against pre-determined competence criteria?

[Access our guides to Planning, and Planning Improvement Initiatives, at the Planning section of our Subscriber Library.]

4. **Seek expert feedback, in intermittent doses.** *The simpler and more precise the feedback, the more equipped you are to make adjustments. Too much feedback, too continuously, however, can create cognitive overload, increase anxiety, and interfere with learning.*

Feedback helps the action-reflection process, to ensure we learn from our everyday behaviour. When did you last get feedback from your customers (especially those who report directly to you) on the quality of services you provide? How can you make it safe for them to do so? Are you getting regular coaching or mentoring? If not, why not?

[You can access 1:1 coaching and mentoring services at EncourageMentors.com. Access a guide to Receiving Performance Feedback at the Relationships Management section of our Subscriber Library.]

5. **Take regular renewal breaks.** *Relaxing after intense effort not only provides an opportunity to rejuvenate, but also to metabolise and embed learning. It's also during rest that the right hemisphere [of your brain] becomes more dominant, which can lead to creative breakthroughs.*

No time for a break? See my comments under item 3, above. In terms of well-being, mindfulness and self-awareness, endlessly uninterrupted wall-to-wall busyness creates toxicity.

6. **Ritualize practice.** *Will and discipline are wildly overrated. As the researcher Roy Baumeister has found, none of us have very much of it. The best way to insure you'll take on difficult tasks is to ritualize them — build specific, inviolable times at which you do them, so that over time you do them without having to squander energy thinking about them.*

This is one of the reasons why regular coaching and mentoring work so well. We are forced into a ritual of regular support sessions, within which we encouraged to self-reflect, learn from our experience, and to plan – rather than merely hope – to make changes.

[Access our guides to Self-Reflection and Self-Review at the Self-Management and Performance Development sections of our Subscriber Library.]

Are you planning change or hoping for it?

Over many years in this field, I've worked with far too many aspirants to improved performance who hope to change but lack real commitment to do so. The difference, it seems to me, between resilient people who remain positive and those who see themselves as trapped, is often a matter of planning for change or hoping for it.

"Today a widespread hopelessness exists with regard to the possibility of changing the course we have taken. This hopelessness is mainly unconscious, while consciously people are 'optimistic' and hope for further progress". They hope, but it is not given to them to act upon their heart's impulse . . . they wait and wait. Hope is neither passive waiting nor is it unrealistic forcing of circumstances that cannot occur. To hope is a state of being, that of intense but not-yet-spent activeness."

[Erich Fromm: The Revolution of Hope]

Wake up! Pay attention! Become more mindful.

Skill and accomplishments involve series of relentless iterations. Try again! Methodically.

Tom Watkins