

# Thriving Workplace

## Self-Managed Work & the Self-Managing Worker

*"You can't manage my performance; only I can do that."*<sup>1</sup>

Self-managed people are self-disciplined. Workers with high levels of self-management skill are self-regulated people who methodically plan their approach to strategic goals, employ the right tool for the job, identify blocks to their own performance and modify their approach and practices on the basis of awareness of effect, to ensure goal attainment. They are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, and possess a broad repertoire of context-independent process tools (generic skills, practices or other *optimally effective and efficient work routines*) from which they select those most appropriate.<sup>2</sup>

Modern organisations could not exist without self-managing workers. Most organisations would benefit from a very different approach to developing and sustaining the self-management skills of their workforce.

### A Fundamental Shift

Work that involves carrying out prefigured routines closely overseen by managers to ensure compliance, no longer dominates organisational efforts. These days, "work" for most senior staff and for very many other workers, means "knowledge work".

*Knowledge work* requires mainly configured responses to the circumstances at hand (decisions and reactions shaped or crafted at the time in the light of principles, concepts, procedures and assumptions about work derived from the study of optimum work practices). The results or effects that really matter are indirect and delayed, rather than direct and immediate.

Although managers no longer prefigure optimally effective and efficient work routines and supervise adherence to them, this fundamental shift in the nature of work hasn't been matched by a corresponding shift in the systems used in an attempt to manage performance. Performance management systems were designed to control and influence the quality and of "old" work, not *knowledge work*.

Conventional performance management systems still in place actually interfere negatively with *knowledge work* practices. They are widely experienced as either or both (a) An imposed, irksome and irrelevant procedure for providing unhelpful retrospective comment on workplace performance prior to an annual performance appraisal; (b) Close managerial scrutiny of an employee's behaviour designed to correct serious malperformance or to indirectly facilitate the employee's exit from the organisation.

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<sup>1</sup> The first two pages of these notes draw heavily on the work of consultant and author Fred Nickols ([www.nickols.us](http://www.nickols.us)) and his 2012 article, "Performance Appraisal in the Age of Self-Managed Employees: A Précis", from which his quotations are taken.

<sup>2</sup> **Knowledge workers** in today's workforce are individuals who are valued for their ability to act and communicate with knowledge within a specific subject area. They will often advance the overall understanding of that subject through focused analysis, design and/or development. They use research skills to define problems and to identify alternatives. Fueled by their expertise and insight, they work to solve those problems, in an effort to influence company decisions, priorities and strategies. What differentiates knowledge work from other forms of work is its primary task of "non-routine" problem solving that requires a combination of convergent, divergent, and creative thinking (Reinhardt et al., 2011).

Knowledge workers spend 38% of their time searching for information. They are also often displaced from their bosses, working in various departments and time zones or from remote sites such as home offices. [They] are employees who have a deep background in education and experience and are considered people who "think for a living." They include doctors, lawyers, teachers, nurses, financial analysts and architects. (Reinhardt et al., 2011)

## Responding to this Shift

Although developing the desired performance of staff remains a key management responsibility, in the present world of work where interactions between and amongst people and information predominate, they must now execute that function differently. The “optimally effective and efficient work routines” and practices they must help workers acquire are in the domain of self-management because individual workers are and must be considerably more in charge of decision-making about how they approach and manage their work – more in control of their own *operating systems* - than ever before.

Effective development of self-management skill in others requires that leaders and senior managers themselves exemplify good self-management and are able to train and coach others in the practice of it.

This shift referred to also demands another: whereas previously, performance management and performance appraisal were services provided by managers to their staff (the customers of those services), self-management needs to become seen as a service provided by employees for the organisation through their managers. Managers become customers of that service.

“Instead of being the authors of performance appraisals, managers should be the audience [the customers of them]. In other words, employees should be charged with formally [and] officially appraising their own performance and management should be the judge of those appraisals.” (Fred Nickols)

## The Purpose of Self-Management

The broad intention (of developing self-management practices) is continuous enhancement of the organisation’s performance of its Primary Task by continuously enhancing individuals’ and the collective capacity for the Primary Task. Nickols puts it this way:

“The goal is clear enough: Sustainable, superior performance of individuals, and through them, organizations. The means is also clear: equipping and enabling employees to manage, appraise and improve their own performance. (Fred Nickols)

## Self-Management and Metacognition

Developing self-management practices is largely a matter of working on *the soft stuff* of workers’ roles, often perceived as a strange territory requiring a major shift in their focus. Typically, many workers find that this is *the too hard stuff* because it is “personal”, involving self-scrutiny, and provokes their own embarrassment, discomfort, anxiety and potential for low self-esteem. If they are used to being rewarded for more easily-measured, shorter-term Primary Task results rather than the means for achieving them or for developing capacity for Primary Task, they may lack interest in the area.

Although constant awareness and monitoring of self-management practices is a prerequisite of improving them, complete unawareness or only vague awareness of them is more common initially. Similar results are produced by asking people to monitor and modify their thought processes as they think. While this latter is a highly desirable skill (known as *metacognition*) because of its potential for making attitudinal shifts and the perceptive decision-making that flows from them, competence in it is not widespread.

Metacognition or thinking about thinking is a helpful analogy for what’s involved in developing individual self-management operating systems. Metacognition<sup>3</sup> involves active control over the process of thinking:

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<sup>3</sup> *Meta* is a Greek prefix whose meanings include beyond; transcending; more comprehensive; a higher order; a state of development. *Metacommunication* for instance, implies communication taking place in the light of principles or theories about communication derived from the study of communication.

the ways we approach a task, monitor our comprehension, maintain motivation and sustain effort to complete a task, become aware of and overcome distracting stimuli (both internal and external), and evaluate progress towards task completion.

People with high levels of metacognitive skill are self-regulated learners who employ the right tool for the job, identify blocks to learning and modify their strategies and skills on the basis of awareness of effect, to ensure goal attainment. They are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, and possess a broad repertoire of general, generic and context-independent process tools from which they can select those most appropriate. They perform better on challenges and complete work more efficiently than those with lower metacognitive ability.

*Meta-level leadership* implies self-regulated leadership taking place in the light of principles or theories about leadership derived from a study of leadership. It requires a high degree of self-awareness of the ways leaders approach leadership, monitor their comprehension of leadership situations, maintain motivation and sustain effort to apply appropriate and effective leadership practices.<sup>4</sup>

### **Characteristics of a Self-Managed Worker**

*Management is not just for managers, just as leadership is not just for leaders.*

*We all manage, and we all lead; these are not actions reserved for only those people who happen to hold these "positions" in a company. I personally think of management and leadership as *callings*, and we all get these callings to manage and lead at different times, and to different degrees. Considered another way, I believe we can all learn to be more self-governing through the *disciplines* of great management and great leadership; these are concepts that can give us wonderful tenets to live and work by. (Rosa Say, *12 Rules for Self-Management*, <http://www.lifhack.org/articles/lifestyle/12-rules-for-self-management.html>)*

Drawing on the discussion so far, we can say that people with high levels of self-management skill are self-regulated people who plan their approach to strategic goals, employ the right tool for the job, identify blocks to their own performance and modify their approach and practices on the basis of awareness of effect, to ensure goal attainment. They are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, and possess a broad repertoire of context-independent process tools (generic skills, practices or other "optimally effective and efficient work routines") from which they select those most appropriate.

In short, they are empowered (authorised) and enabled (equipped) to manage, appraise and improve their own performance.

Broadly, self-managing workers –

- Work within a clear understanding of strategy planned to achieve the organisation's Bigger Picture strategy and that of their own role(s) within it.
- Hold and balance the focus between strategic development and operational needs
- Consciously monitor their self-management practices as they utilise them
- Remain constantly aware of their strengths and weaknesses
- Identify and overcome distractions and blocks (both internal and external) to their work performance
- Possess a broad range of context-independent "tools" appropriate for a wide variety of self-management situations
- Choose the right "tool" (method or process) for the task at hand, to ensure goal achievement

<sup>4</sup> I discuss meta-level leadership and its practices in *Lead, Manage and Strengthen Your Leadership Practices*, at [http://www.thriving-workplace.com/articles/articles/29\\_109.pdf](http://www.thriving-workplace.com/articles/articles/29_109.pdf)

- Continuously adjust, refine and improve their practices on the basis of awareness of effect.

The generic, context-independent “tools” required for self-management cover a wide range. Here’s a suggested partial list, divided into (a) managing self and own work; (b) managing self in relationships; and (c) managing own leadership.

### **A: Managing self and own work**

- 1 Maintains the focus of required role(s) and responsibilities
- 2 Maintains alignment of own efforts with the organisation’s strategic plan
- 3 Manages priorities to make best use of time and energy
- 4 Separates “purpose” from “agenda” and “process”
- 5 Distinguishes between matters operational (transactional) and strategic (developmental)
- 6 Plans development plans, methodically monitors progress and evaluates results
- 7 Operates systematically (methodically) and trusts in pre-determined principles and processes to reduce tendencies to improvise or act impulsively
- 8 Poses problems accurately and asks constructive questions
- 9 Applies methodical problem-clarification and problem-solving processes to resolve problems
- 10 Persists when the solution to a problem is not readily apparent
- 11 Thinks flexibly
- 12 Thinks interdependently
- 13 Recognises unstated assumptions and values, and works to clarify and distinguish differences in them
- 14 Reconstructs own patterns of beliefs on the basis of wider experience
- 15 Thinks about own thinking and modifies it where necessary (practises metacognition)
- 16 Responds to crises, problems and difficulties with pre-determined processes and practices
- 17 Expresses anger or annoyance constructively
- 18 Modifies mental patterns that inhibit constructive responses to situations
- 19 Limits the stress of interpersonal and other conflict
- 20 Contains personal challenges, crises or dilemma sufficiently to explore and deal with the resulting anxiety, pain or confusion without spinning out, blaming or taking it out on others
- 21 Delegates aspects of own work to others to both encompass a wide range of responsibilities and to help others’ development in their roles
- 22 Constantly improves own knowledge, understanding and skills
- 23 Embraces uncertainty, rises to adversity, and remains centered and grounded in situations where others are not<sup>5</sup>
- 24 Manages own attitudes (thought patterns and resultant feelings) - those which contribute to effectiveness and those which disable it
- 25 Limits unhealthy personal stressors and their effects

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<sup>5</sup> “The [person] who is centered and grounded can work with erratic people and critical group situations without harm. Being centered means having the ability to recover one’s balance, even in the midst of action. A centered person is not subject to passing whims or sudden excitements ... the centered and grounded [person] has stability and a sense of self.” John Heider *The Tao of Leadership: Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching Adapted for a New Age*, 2005.

- 26 Manages personal needs and wellbeing to avoid burnout, frustration or despondency
- 27 Learns constantly from reflecting on everyday experience
- 28 Establishes “how I best make sense of things”, and maximises use of those processes
- 29 Aligns purpose or work and own ways of working with personal inner purpose.

### **B: Managing self in relationships**

- 1 Creates a healthy balance between own needs and desires and those of others
- 2 Functions interdependently
- 3 Fosters a collective identity and cohesion with co-workers, colleagues, managers and staff
- 4 Develops and nurtures teams to produce a combined effect exceeding the sum of individual contributions
- 5 Assesses the team’s performance as a team, not merely according to its business performance
- 6 Comprehends and uses language clearly and precisely, with equal discernment and respect for self and others
- 7 Challenges people to perform
- 8 Addresses under-performance in others and requests behaviour changes where necessary
- 9 Develops others’ skills and capacity
- 10 Listens skilfully to others to facilitate clarity and understanding
- 11 Applies appropriate response skills in interpersonal communication
- 12 Express anger and annoyance in ways easily heard and understood
- 13 Negotiates equitably around differences and conflict
- 14 Provides others with constructive feedback on performance
- 15 Receives and responds constructively to criticism and feedback on performance
- 16 Establishes and hold boundaries – of authority, responsibilities, and behaviour
- 17 Modifies own mental patterns that inhibit constructive responses to other people
- 18 Learns how others “best make sense of things” and uses those processes in dealings with them
- 19 Supports those to whom aspects of own responsibilities have been delegated (by training, coaching, etc)
- 20 Facilitates group problem-solving
- 21 Manages differences to reduce the levels and incidence of conflict
- 22 Facilitates group/project action-planning
- 23 Facilitates discussions and meetings
- 24 Generates, receives and processes useful feedback about own behaviour and practices
- 25 Applies coaching and on-the-job training practices to develop others

### **C: Managing own leadership**

- 1 Envisions the future and enlists others in support of a shared vision
- 2 Models desired practices, sets the examples, exemplifies desired values and practices

- 3 Clarifies own personal Big picture relevant to work and to the organisation's Big Picture
- 4 Searches for opportunities
- 5 Experiments and takes risks
- 6 Challenges others to perform
- 7 Strengthens others' ability to act
- 8 Fosters collaboration
- 9 Enhances awareness of needs of staff, colleagues and managers and how best to contribute helpfully to them
- 10 Recognises contributions and celebrates accomplishments.

### Useful References

"*The Shift to Knowledge Work*", Fred Nickolls, 2003: <http://www.nickolls.us/shift.pdf>

"*Meeting the Challenge of the Shift to Knowledge Work*", Fred Nickolls, 2010. This article is some 20 pages in length. It delves into the shift to knowledge work and the many challenges that shift presents. It is well-illustrated with examples and diagrams. (<http://www.nickolls.us/meetingthechallenge.pdf>)

**Knowledge workers** in today's workforce are individuals who are valued for their ability to act and communicate with knowledge within a specific subject area. They will often advance the overall understanding of that subject through focused analysis, design and/or development. They use research skills to define problems and to identify alternatives. Fueled by their expertise and insight, they work to solve those problems, in an effort to influence company decisions, priorities and strategies. What differentiates knowledge work from other forms of work is its primary task of "non-routine" problem solving that requires a combination of convergent, divergent, and creative thinking. (Reinhardt, W., Schmidt, B., Sloep, P., & Drachsler, H. (2011). Knowledge worker roles and actions – results of two empirical studies. *Knowledge and Process Management*. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/kpm.378/abstract>)

Knowledge workers spend 38% of their time searching for information. They are also often displaced from their bosses, working in various departments and time zones or from remote sites such as home offices.

Knowledge workers are employees who have a deep background in education and experience and are considered people who "think for a living."

They include doctors, lawyers, teachers, nurses, financial analysts and architects (2006).<sup>[6]</sup> As businesses increase their dependence on information technology, the number of fields in which knowledge workers must operate has expanded dramatically. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knowledge\\_worker](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knowledge_worker))

Drucker defines six factors for knowledge worker productivity (1999):

- 1 Knowledge worker productivity demands that we ask the question: "What is the task?"
- 2 It demands that we impose the responsibility for their productivity on the individual knowledge workers themselves. Knowledge workers have to manage themselves.
- 3 Continuing innovation has to be part of the work, the task and the responsibility of knowledge workers.
- 4 Knowledge work requires continuous learning on the part of the knowledge worker, but equally continuous teaching on the part of the knowledge worker.
- 5 Productivity of the knowledge worker is not — at least not primarily — a matter of the quantity of output. Quality is at least as important.
- 6 Finally, knowledge worker productivity requires that the knowledge worker is both seen and treated as an "asset" rather than a "cost." It requires that knowledge workers want to work for the organization in preference to all other opportunities.

(Drucker, Peter F., *Management Challenges of the 21st Century*. New York: Harper Business, 1999.)

**Self-management** means different things in different fields: In business, education, and psychology, self-management refers to methods, skills, and strategies by which individuals can effectively direct their own activities toward the achievement of [objectives](#), and includes goal setting, decision making, focusing, planning, scheduling, task tracking, self-evaluation, self-intervention, self-development, etc. Also known as *executive processes* (in the context of the *processes of execution*). <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-management>

**Self-management** may also refer to [w]orkers' self-management - a form of workplace decision-making in which the employees themselves agree on choices (for issues like customer care, general production methods, scheduling, division of labor etc.) instead of the traditional supervisor telling workers what to do, how to do it and where to do it. This was the official development strategy of Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. Workers self-management was promoted on all levels in society. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-management>

**Self-managed Companies.** Some business leaders have begun to structure their companies as either partially or fully self-managed. A fully self-managed company is one that imposes no formal hierarchical structure upon employees (in some cases, having no hierarchy whatsoever). Some companies (e.g. Google, famous for their 20 Percent Time), allow their employees to have free rein for a portion of their time, pursuing projects that they find interesting or promising without requiring consent or authorization from management. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-management>

In 2009, authors Isaac Getz of ESCP Europe Business School, and Brian Carney, of The Wall Street Journal, published the book *Freedom, Inc.*, which made the case for businesses based upon the principles of freedom. They advocate removing bureaucratic rules and regulations and allowing employees to do what they do well without traditional "managerial" intervention. Some of the more notable companies detailed in their book:

- IDEO
- W. L. Gore & Associates
- Semco, made famous by their president, Ricardo Semler, in his book *Maverick*

The Morning Star Company, a privately held food processing and agribusiness company, is a fully self-managed company, having no formal hierarchy, and allowing colleagues within the company to commit to their own activities, organize their own work, and coordinate their own working relationships with other colleagues. Morning Star was the initial sponsor of the Morning Star Self-Management Institute, a research and training organization aimed at furthering the principles of Self-Management in organizations. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-management>

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