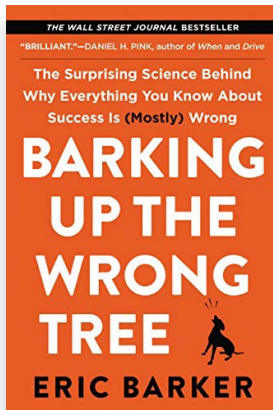


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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Eric Barker is the creator of the blog Barking Up the Wrong Tree. He was also a former screenwriter.

Barking Up the Wrong Tree

THE SUMMARY

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Introduction

What defines success for you is, well, up to you. It's about what you personally need to be happy at work and at home. That doesn't mean success is arbitrary. You already know strategies to get you there that are very likely to work (consistent effort) and very unlikely to (waking up at the crack of noon every day). The problem lies in the huge gulf in the middle. You've been told about all the qualities and tactics that will help you get where you want to go, but there's no real proof and perhaps you've seen plenty of exceptions.

Much of what we've been told about the qualities that lead to achievement is logical, earnest—and downright wrong. We'll explode the myths, look at the science behind what separates the extremely successful from the rest of us, learn what we can do to be more like them, and find out in some cases why it's good that we aren't.

Success doesn't have to be something you see only on TV. It's less about being perfect than knowing what you're best at and being properly

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aligned with your context. The thing that sets you apart, the habits you may have tried to banish, and even the things you were taunted for in school may ultimately grant you an unbeatable advantage.

Chapter 1: Should We Play it Safe and Do What We're Told If We Want To Succeed?

What makes a great leader? For years academic research didn't seem able to make up its mind whether leaders even mattered. Some studies showed that great teams succeeded with or without a figurehead taking the credit. Others showed that sometimes a charismatic individual was the most important factor in whether a group succeeded or failed. It wasn't clear at all until one academic had a hunch.

Gautam Mukunda speculated that the reason for the inconsistency in the research was there are actually two fundamentally different types of leaders. The first kind rises up through formal channels, getting promoted, playing by the rules, and meeting expectations. These leaders are "filtered." The second kind doesn't rise up through the ranks; they come in through the window. They include entrepreneurs who don't wait for someone to promote them; U.S. vice presidents who are unexpectedly handed the presidency; leaders who benefit from a perfect storm of unlikely events. This group is "unfiltered."

By the time filtered candidates are in the running for the top spots they have been so thoroughly vetted that they can be relied upon to make the standard, traditionally approved decisions. They are effectively indistinguishable from one another and this is why much of the research showed little effect for leaders.

The unfiltered candidates have not been vetted by the system and cannot be relied upon to make the "approved" decisions. Many would not even know what the approved decisions are. They do unexpected things, have different backgrounds, and are often unpredictable. Yet they bring change and make a difference. Often that difference is a negative. Since they don't play by the rules, they often break the institutions they are guiding. A minority of unfiltered leaders are transformative, though, shedding organizations of their misguided beliefs and foolish consistencies, and turning them toward better horizons. These are the leaders that the research said have enormous positive impact.

When I spoke to Mukunda, he said, "The difference between good leaders and great leaders is not an issue of 'more'. They're fundamentally different people." When asked what made the unfiltered leaders so much more impactful, he said often they had unique qualities that differentiated them. Not the flattering descriptors you might expect, like "incredibly smart" or "politically astute." These qualities were often negative at the mean—qualities you and I would consider "bad"—but due to the specific context, they became positives. Mukunda calls these "intensifiers." They hold the secret to how your biggest weakness might just be your greatest strength.

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Too often we label things “good” or “bad” when the right designation might merely be “different.” Dr David Weeks, a clinical neuropsychologist, wrote, “Eccentrics are the mutations of social evolution, providing the intellectual materials for natural selection.” We spend too much time trying to be “good” when good is often merely average. To be great we must be different. That doesn’t come from trying to follow society’s vision of what is best, because society doesn’t always know what it needs. More often, being the best means just being the best version of you. As John Stuart Mill remarked, “That so few now dare to be eccentric, marks the chief danger of our time.” In the right environment, bad can be good and odd can be beautiful. After talking with Gautam Mukunda, I asked the obvious question we’d all want to know the answer to: “How do I use it to be more successful in life?” He said there are two steps.

First, know thyself. If you’re good at playing by the rules, if you’re a filtered leader, then double down on that. Make sure you have a path that works for you. People high in conscientiousness do great in school and in many areas of life where there are clear answers and a clear path, but when there aren’t, life is really hard for them. Research shows that when they’re unemployed, their happiness drops 120 percent more than those who aren’t as conscientious. Without a path to follow they’re lost.

If you’re more of an outsider, an artist, or an unfiltered leader, you’ll be climbing uphill if you try to succeed by complying with a rigid, formal structure. By dampening your intensifiers, you’ll be not only a odds with who you are but also denying your key advantages. Consider the people we’re all envious of who can confidently pick something, say they’re going to be awesome at it, and then calmly go and actually be awesome at it. This is their secret: they’re not good at everything, but they know their strengths and choose things that are a good fit. Once you know what type of person you are and your signature strengths, how do you thrive? This leads to Mukunda’s second piece of advice: pick the right pond.

You’ve got to pick the environments that work for you—context is so important. The unfiltered leader who is an amazing success in one situation will be a catastrophic failure in another. It’s way too easy to think, “I’ve always succeeded, I am a success, I am successful because I am a success, because it’s about me, and therefore I will succeed in this new environment.” Wrong. You were successful because you happened to be in an environment where your biases and predispositions and talents and abilities all happened to align neatly with those things that would produce success in that environment.

Ask yourself, “Which companies, institutions, and situations value what I do?” Whether you’re a filtered doctor or a wild, unfiltered artist, research shows the pond you pick matters enormously. When you choose your pond wisely, you can best leverage your type, your signature strengths, and your context to create tremendous value. This is what makes for a great career, but such self-knowledge can create value wherever you choose to apply it.

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Know thyself and pick the right pond. Identify strengths and pick the right place to apply them. If you follow rules well, find an organization aligned with your signature strengths and go full steam ahead. Society clearly rewards those who can comply, and these people keep the world an orderly place.

If you're more of an unfiltered type, be ready to blaze your own path. It's risky, but that's what you were built for. Leverage the intensifiers that make you unique. You're more likely to reach the heights of success—and happiness—if you embrace your "flaws."

Chapter 2: Do Nice Guys Finish Last?

When Wharton School professor Adam Grant looked at who ended up at the bottom of success metrics, he found an awful lot of nice guys—“Givers.” In studies of engineers, medical students, and salespeople, those who were the most giving to others consistently came up short. They missed more deadlines, got lower grades, and closed fewer sales. If he had stopped there, it would have been a sad day indeed, but he didn't. When I spoke with Adam, he said: “Then I looked at the other end of the spectrum and said if Givers are at the bottom, who's at the top? Actually, I was really surprised to discover, it's the Givers again. The people who consistently are looking for ways to help others are over-represented not only at the bottom but also at the top of most success metrics.”

“Matchers” (people who try to keep an even balance of give and take) and “Takers” (people who selfishly always try to get more and give less) end up in the middle. Givers are found at the very top and very bottom. Those same studies showed that the majority of productive engineers, students with the highest grades, and salespeople who brought in the most revenue were all Givers.

When you think about it, it makes intuitive sense. We all know a martyr who goes out of their way to help others and yet fails to meet their own needs or ends up exploited by Takers. We also all know someone everyone loves because they are so helpful, and they succeed because everyone appreciates and feels indebted to them. Surely these Givers can't hack it when they get to be leaders, right? Leaders are supposed to be tough. Some negative traits help people who are in charge. However, when we look at the top ranked leaders in the military, where we would expect toughness to be prized, the exact opposite is true. Those scoring the best are supportive, not stern.

In a lot of short-term scenarios, a little cheating and bullying can pay off. Over time it pollutes the social environment and soon everyone is second-guessing everybody, and no one wants to work toward the common good. Being a Taker has short-term benefits, but it's inherently limited. In the end, nobody wants to help you because they know what you're really like. Who are a Taker's worst enemies? Other Takers. While Givers get tons of help from other Givers and receive protection from Matchers—who believe that to maintain fairness kind acts should be rewarded—they have only Takers to worry about. Meanwhile, Takers end up being disliked by everyone, including other Takers.

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Unless Takers learn to trust and cooperate, they can never really scale their efforts the way a group of Givers can. Even Matchers, who do benefit from trust and reciprocity, are inherently limited because they often wait for someone else to initiate a good act, which prevents exchanges that could be beneficial for both parties.

You might think I'm glossing over the fact that a lot of the Givers end up dead last. The difference between the Givers who succeed and the Givers who don't isn't random. Adam Grant notes that totally selfless Givers exhaust themselves helping others and get exploited by Takers, leading them to perform poorly on success metrics. There are a number of things Givers can do to build limits for themselves and make sure they don't go overboard. That two-hours-a-week volunteering? Don't do more. Research by Sonja Lyubomirsky shows that people are happier and less stressed when they "chunk" their efforts to help others versus a relentless "sprinkling." So by doing all their good deeds one day a week, Givers make sure assisting others doesn't hamper their own achievements. One hundred hours a year seems to be the magic number.

Grant also points out the other ace in the hole Givers have which is Matchers. They want to see good rewarded and evil punished, so Matchers go out of their way to punish Takers and protect Givers from harm. When Givers are surrounded by a coterie of Matchers, they don't have to fear exploitation as much.

When scientists look at the issue of trust, they turn to a game called the Prisoner's Dilemma. Here's how it works: let's say you and your friend rob a bank, and you're not very good at robbing banks so you get caught. The police arrest you both and put you in separate rooms to interrogate you. You have no way to communicate with your friend. The cops offer you a deal. If you testify that your friend was the mastermind and he doesn't testify against you, you go free and he gets five years in prison. If you don't testify against your friend but he testifies against you, you get five years and he goes free. If you both testify against each other, you both get three years. If you both refuse to testify, you both get one year.

If you two knew you could trust each other, the answer would be you both keep your mouths shut and get one year. But can you trust your friend? Are the police scaring the heck out of him? Will he testify while you stay silent? That means he walks free and you get five years in prison. In a one-off game, testifying seems the smart move, but what about when you play the game twenty times? That's more like life, right? Our fate rarely hangs on any one decision.

This is where Robert Axelrod got started. With the Cold War raging between the United States and the USSR, he wanted to explore what it takes to get people to trust and cooperate, what strategy is most effective. So he decided to have a tournament where different computer programs with different strategies play Prisoner's Dilemma together to see which one racked up the most points.

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One of the programs was insanely nice. It always trusted its opponent even after being screwed over. Another of the programs—named ALL D—was the opposite. It always betrayed its opponent without fail. Other programs rested somewhere in between. One program called Tester monitored the other player's moves to see how much it could get away with and then would backpedal if caught betraying its opponent.

Which ethical system reigned supreme in the end? Shockingly, the simplest program submitted won the tournament. It was only two lines of code. It's something we're all familiar with called tit for tat. All TFT did was cooperate on the first Prisoner's Dilemma round, then in every subsequent round, it did whatever the opponent did previously. If on the previous round the opponent cooperated, it cooperated on the next round; if the opponent betrayed, it betrayed on the next round. This simple program decimated the competition.

What magic power did this humble little strategy have? Axelrod determined it came down to a few key things that made those two lines of code so special. He saw early on, the good guys got trounced. The bad guys quickly seized the high ground in the initial interaction. Even TFT, the eventual winner, always got the short end of the stick early on because it cooperated initially. As time passed, the bad guys couldn't match the big gains of the cooperators. When TFT met a program that cooperated on every move, the gains were enormous. Even programs like Tester (the back peddler) learned that playing along was more beneficial than the marginal gains earned from defecting.

Isn't TFT lot like Adam Grant's Matchers? There are two critical distinctions. TFT starts off with cooperation, Matchers don't necessarily cooperate. Matchers tend to wait until others do something nice before they respond in kind. This passive attitude drastically reduces the number of interactions they have. Meanwhile, Givers run around handing out favors, losing a little to Takers, getting a fair share back from Matchers, and winning the lottery whenever they meet another Giver. Givers can be great networkers by merely being themselves, while the hesitant Matchers wait for an engraved invitation to the party. Axelrod offers four lessons we can learn from TFT's success:

- *Don't be envious.* Again, most of life isn't zero-sum. Just because someone else wins, that doesn't mean you lose. Here's the crazy thing, TFT never got a higher score than its counterpart did in any single game. It never won, but the gains it made in the aggregate were better than those achieved by "winners" who edged out meager profits across many sessions. Don't worry how well the other side is doing; worry about how well you're doing.
- *Don't be first to defect.* Matchers wait and miss too many opportunities. Takers trade short-term gains for long-term losses. Remember, all the big winners were nice and all the big losers started off betraying.

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- *Reciprocate both cooperation and defection.* Never betray anyone initially. Why make someone question your motives? But if a person cheats you, don't be a martyr. In the tournament, picking fights resulted in low scores, but retaliating increased scores.
- *Don't be too clever.* Tester sounds like a rational strategy which is to see what you can get away with and go no further. But this strategy lacks the clarity of TFT's, and while Tester edged out a gain here and there, it came at the cost of a good reputation. None of the other complex systems fared very well. TFT was the simplest of them all, and adding some occasional forgiveness was the only way to improve it.

You need to be able to teach the people you're dealing with because you want the relationship to continue. You cooperate with me, I cooperate with you. You betray me, I betray you. It's that simple. Getting too clever muddies the waters, and the other person can quickly become very skeptical of you. Once that person sees clear cause and effect, he or she is more likely to jump on board and realize that everyone will benefit. Now, in zero-sum games like chess you want your intentions to be unclear, but in the iterated Prisoner's Dilemma, it's the exact opposite. You want the other player to see what you're doing so they can join you. Life is more often like the latter.

Chapter 3: Do Quitters Never Win and Winners Never Quit?

Our culture beats us over the head with the idea that grit—sticking to something, working hard, and not quitting—is the secret to success. Often they're right. Grit is one of the key reasons why we see such differing levels of achievement between people of the same intelligence and talent levels. A Navy study revealed a number of things that people with grit do—often unknowingly—that keep them going when things get hard. One of them comes up in the psychological research again and again: “positive self-talk.” Yes, Navy SEALs need to be badass, but one of the keys to that is thinking like *The Little Engine That Could*.

In your head, you say between three hundred and a thousand words every minute to yourself. Those words can be positive (I can do it) or negative (Oh god, I can't take this anymore). It turns out that when these words are positive, they have a huge effect on your mental toughness, your ability to keep going. Subsequent studies of military personnel back this up.

It all comes down to the stories you tell yourself. Some of us say, “I'm not cut out for this,” or “I've never been any good at these things.” Others say “I just need to keep working at it” or “I just need better tips on form.” In almost any scenario each of these four could be applied. It's individual which one you are likely to choose, which your default is, and how often and when you vary from your preferred explanation.

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What is at the center of this was optimism and pessimism, feeling you can change things and feeling you can't. Helplessness is the result of a pessimistic attitude. When you believe things will not get better, it's irrational to keep trying. You just shrug and go home. In situations where you truly cannot win, this is the right choice. In difficult but not impossible situations, when persistence is called for, pessimism kills grit. It says, "Give up and go home" instead of "Gimme one more try. I can do it."

Optimists and pessimists shape their stories of the world very differently. Martin Seligman called this "explanatory style," and it comes down to three Ps: permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization. Pessimists tell themselves that bad events:

- will last a long time, or forever (I'll never get this done);
- are universal (I can't trust any of these people); and
- are their own fault (I'm terrible at this.)

Optimists tell themselves that bad events:

- are temporary (that happens occasionally, but it's not a big deal);
- have a specific cause and aren't universal (when the weather is better that won't be a problem); and
- are not their fault (I'm good at this, but today wasn't my lucky day).

Seligman found that when you shift your explanatory style from pessimistic to optimistic it makes you feel better and you become grittier. Stories aren't perfect pictures of the world, but they allow us to succeed for this very reason. They can keep us going and become prophecy. You weren't "born" to do anything in particular, but when your story says you were "born" to do something you perform better and persist. After all, it's your destiny.

What if you have a story that isn't working? You think you know who you are and what's important, but you're not happy or getting where you want to be. It might be time to play screenwriter and take another pass at the script that is your life. Therapists help patients do this in a process aptly titled "story editing." University at Virginia professor Timothy Wilson did a study in which therapists helped underperforming students reinterpret their academic challenges from "I can't do this" to "I just need to learn the ropes." This helped them earn higher grades the next year and reduced dropout rates. Studies show this can work as well as anti-depressant drugs and, in some cases, even better.

What do you do with this edited story once you have it? Play the part. A lot of psychological research shows that instead of behavior following our beliefs, often our beliefs come from our behaviors. As the old saw goes, "Actions speak louder than words." Wilson calls it the "do good, be good" method. When people do volunteer work their self-perception changes. They begin to see themselves as the kind of people who do good things for others.

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We don't like to think about limits, but we all have them. While grit is often about stories, quitting is often an issue of limits—pushing them, optimizing them, and most of all, knowing them.

One study of Olympians quoted an athlete as saying, "Everything is opportunity/cost. If I go out to a movie instead of going hiking as my leisure activity, what is the cost of that? If I go to the movies instead of hike, does that help or hurt my paddling? I've got to judge that."

"Quit" doesn't have to be the opposite of "grit." This is where "strategic quitting" comes in. Once you've found something you're passionate about, quitting secondary things can be an advantage, because it frees up time to do that number-one thing. Whenever you wish you had more time, more money, etc., strategic quitting is the answer. If you're very busy, this may be the only answer. We all quit, but we often don't make an explicit, intentional decision to quit. We wait for graduation or Mom to tell us to stop or we get bored. We fear missing opportunities, but the irony is by not quitting unproductive things ASAP we are missing the opportunity to do more of what matters or try more things that might.

We have all said that we should have quit that job or ended that relationship sooner. If you quit the stuff you know isn't working for you, you free up time for things that might. We're bombarded by stories of persistence leading to success, but we don't hear as much about the benefits of quitting. No one wants to be the skydiver who pulled the rip cord too late.

In Peter Drucker's book *The Effective Executive*, he explains: "The executive who wants to be effective and who wants his organization to be effective polices all programs, all activities, and all tasks. He always asks, 'Is this still worth doing?' If it isn't, he gets rid of it so as to be able to concentrate on the few tasks that, if done with excellence, will really make a difference in the results of his own job and in the performance of his organization."

If you don't know what to be gritty at yet, you need to try lots of things—knowing you'll quit most of them—to find the answer. Once you discover your focus, devote 5 to 10 percent of your time to little experiments to make sure you keep learning and growing. This gives you the best of both worlds. Use trying and quitting as a deliberate strategy to find out what is worth not quitting. You're not being a total flake but someone who strategically tests the waters.

The things you should opportunity/cost quit are things you do every day or week that produce no value. What we're talking about here are limited duration experiments. Giving something a shot. Taking a yoga class—but not signing up for a yearlong membership just yet. This is what spurs new opportunities and creates good luck. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better." In other words: fail fast, fail cheap.

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Chapter 4: It's Not What You Know, It's Who You Know (Unless It Really Is What You Know)

The payoff to networking is huge, but it can feel sleazy. Research from Francesca Gino shows that when we try to meet someone just to get something from them it makes us feel immoral. The people who feel least sleazy about networking are powerful people, but those who need to network the most—the least powerful—are the most likely to feel bad about it. We like networking better when it's serendipitous, when it feels like an accident, not deliberate and Machiavellian. This presents a big problem for introverts, who aren't as inclined toward making random acquaintances. It even creates difficulties for extroverts, who may make connections easily but not ones that can necessarily advance their careers.

Since you need to have a network to be successful, can you build one and still feel good about yourself, even if you're an introvert? To answer these questions, let's take a look at Adam Rifkin. In 2011, Fortune magazine named him the best networker in Silicon Valley. Guess what? Adam's a shy introvert. He's also the nicest guy you'll ever meet. In fact, he goes by the nickname "Panda." What's Panda's secret to networking? Be a friend. Yeah, it's that simple. Networking isn't just a skill anybody can learn. It's a skill you already know. Make friends.

I asked Panda about networking and he said this: "It is better to give than to receive. Look for opportunities to do something for the other person, such as sharing knowledge or offering an introduction to someone that person might not know but would be interested in knowing. Do not be transactional about networking. Do not offer something because you want something in return. Instead, show a genuine interest in something you and the other person have in common."

There's no need to be afraid of networking. The truth is, we often underestimate by as much as 50 percent how much others are willing to help us when asked. Being mistrustful or assuming others are selfish can be self-fulfilling prophecies. Remember, the rule of thumb is simple when making friends. Be socially optimistic. Assume other people will like you and they probably will.

Okay, you're done with the idea of uncomfortable networking and you're focusing on making friends. You've got the attitude, but how do you actually get started? There are a number of great techniques that can make the process easier, less time consuming, and not so intimidating.

Start with the friends you already have. Research shows that one of the quickest and easiest ways to boost your network isn't to pass your business card out on street corners; it's to just reconnect with old friends. There's no sleazy element to it at all—they're already your friends. You just haven't caught up with them in a year. It's a great place to start and not the least bit intimidating. Go through your Facebook friends list, your LinkedIn connections, or your address book, and send a few emails every week, asking "What's up?" Research shows that those dormant friendships can actually be bigger boosters to your career than any new connections you make. Also, University of

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Chicago neuroscientist John Cacioppo found that when we leverage Facebook to set up face-to-face meetings, it boosts our happiness. When we use it as a substitute, however, it increases loneliness.

Find Your “Super-connectors”. All people in a network are not created equal, contact-wise. Brian Uzzi and Sharon Dunlap did research and found that there’s an 80/20 rule of sorts in networking. You probably met the vast majority of your friends through a handful of “super friends” which are the buddies of yours who are most like Panda. So when it comes to trying to expand your network and make new friends, do what works. If you look at your Facebook friends or address book contacts, you’ll find that you met many of them through a small group of people. Reaching out to these and saying, “Whom do you know that I should meet?” will produce disproportionate results.

Make the time—and the budget. People say they want to increase their network but few really make it enough of a priority, dedicate time for it, or commit something specific to it, such as “I’m gonna allocate an extra fifty dollars a week to coffees and lunches in which I connect with people.” Bestselling author Ben Casnocha saw that top networkers pre-committed a certain amount of time and money to their networking goal so that when opportunities came up they didn’t hesitate. College students know that Friday and Saturday nights (and maybe a few other nights) are for parties and they don’t have trouble making new friends. Take a similar approach.

Join Groups. No, not some corny “networking group.” Again, that’s awkward and borderline gross. Just throwing a party is nice but probably too infrequent to produce consistent results. Do you know a bunch of friends who have lunch every week? How about a group who watches football every Sunday? A book club at work? These are fun, passive ways to make sure you stay in the mix and connect with others organically. Research shows that the best teams are a mix of old friends and new blood, and that’s also an advantage in networking.

Always Follow Up. We all meet people, but we rarely take the time to follow up and actually begin a friendship. Analyzing eight million phone calls between two million people, researchers at Notre Dame found that what makes close friendships endure is simply staying in touch every two weeks. Now, you don’t need to connect with people that often if they’re not close friends, but the principle still stands: checking in every now and then matters.

All right, you wanna be a real ramblin’ earth shaker? Somebody who changes the world and gets recognized in the history books? K. Anders Ericsson, the guy who created that ten-thousand-hour theory of expertise, says there ain’t no two ways about it; you’re gonna need a mentor. “These findings are consistent with a study of internationally successful athletes, scientists, and artists, where [Benjamin] Bloom (1985) found that, virtually without exception, each individual had been trained by a master teacher, who had trained earlier students to reach an international level.”

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Why are mentors important? You don't have time to make all the mistakes yourself, and of course making those mistakes can mean failure. It's better to let others make those mistakes so you can learn from them. Great mentors and great teachers help you learn faster. Even in high school, the right teacher makes a huge difference. Stanford economist Eric Hanushek says that bad teachers cover six months of material in one year. Great teachers cover a year and a half. That math isn't hard to decode, folks. He says you're way better off with an awesome teacher in a lousy school than vice versa.

Researchers Penelope Lockwood and Ziva Kunda found that the difference between being inspired by a role model and being demoralized by one comes down to two things: relevance and attainability. When you relate to someone you look up to, you get motivated. When that person makes you feel you can do that too, bang—that produces real results. This is why your employer's mentorship program, while well-meaning, doesn't help. Christina Underhill looked at the past two decades of mentorship research and found striking division. Yeah, formal mentoring made a small improvement, but the real results came from informal mentors which are the kind you find on your own.

Before we round this out, there's one more common objection I need to address. Maybe you're fairly accomplished already. Maybe you feel you're far enough along that you don't need a mentor. You're wrong.

Chapter 5: Believe in Yourself...Sometimes

Overconfidence makes you feel good, gives you grit, and impresses others—but can also make you an arrogant jerk who alienates people, doesn't improve, and possibly loses everything because of denial. Being less confident gives you drive and tools to become an expert and makes other people like you... but it doesn't feel so good and can send a lousy signal to others about your competence. Kinda sucks, doesn't it? Seems like there's no easy answer. You can impress people and make them angry or have them like you but not respect you. It feels like a contradiction. So how about this: what if you throw the whole confidence paradigm in the trash?

Don't scream heresy just yet. Plenty of research shows that looking through the lens of self-esteem might be the real reason the debate over confidence is so fraught with grief, but what's the alternative to self-confidence? University of Texas professor Kristin Neff says it's "self-compassion." Compassion for yourself when you fail means you don't need to be a delusional jerk to succeed and you don't have to feel incompetent to improve. You get off the yo-yo experience of absurd expectations and beating yourself up when you don't meet them. You stop lying to yourself that you're so awesome. Instead, you focus on forgiving yourself when you're not.

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Research shows increasing self-compassion has all the benefits of self-esteem without the downsides. You can feel good while not turning into a jerk or being unable to improve. Unlike self-confidence, self-compassion doesn't lead to delusion. In fact, one study, "Self-Compassion and Reactions to Unpleasant Self-Relevant Events: The Implications of Treating Oneself Kindly," showed that people high in the trait had increased clarity. They saw themselves and the world more accurately but didn't judge themselves as harshly when they failed. Meanwhile, people focused on self-esteem often feel the need to delude themselves or to dismiss negative—but useful—feedback in order to still feel good about themselves. They cling to their self-validating theories instead of seeing the real world. This leads to hubris and narcissism. When you check the numbers, there is a solid correlation between self-esteem and narcissism, while the connection between self-compassion and narcissism is pretty much zero.

So why does compassion succeed where self-esteem fails? Self-esteem is always either delusional or contingent, neither of which lead to good things. To always feel like you're awesome you need to either divorce yourself from reality or be on a treadmill of constantly proving your value. At some point you won't measure up, which then craters your self-esteem. Not to mention relentlessly proving yourself is exhausting and unsettling. Self-compassion lets you see the facts and accept being not perfect. As famed psychologist Albert Ellis once said, "Self-esteem is the greatest sickness known to man or woman because it's conditional." People with self-compassion don't feel the need to constantly prove themselves, and research shows they are less likely to feel like a "loser."

I know what some of you are thinking. Is always forgiving myself going to make me passive? Am I going to lose my motivation and edge if I'm not worried about maintaining self-esteem? It's actually lack of self-compassion that makes you passive. When you're self-confident you ignore feedback that doesn't match your internal reality, right? So, no need to change. When you lack confidence you can see problems but may feel not up to the challenge of overcoming them. Being self-compassionate lets you see issues and do something about them. Research suggests that having this forgiving approach allows you to take more responsibility for problems while being less saddened by them. Studies show that because people with self-compassion don't beat themselves up, they have less fear of failure, which translates into less procrastination as well as more grit.

Forgiving yourself is also easier than maintaining self-confidence. You don't need to constantly revise the inflated stories you tell yourself and you don't need to slay a dragon every day to prove you're worth something. Research shows what's probably obvious in that we like to hear good things about ourselves, but we also like to hear things that are true. The reason it's so difficult to increase self-esteem is that, sadly, we can't always do both. Self-compassion says that's okay.

So how do you develop self-compassion? It starts with talking to yourself. Instead of building yourself up with motivational stuff you may not believe and compliments that may not be true, just talk to yourself nicely, gently, like Grandmom would. Don't beat yourself up or be critical when things don't

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go your way. As researcher Kristin Neff explains, “Who is the only person in your life who is available 24/7 to provide you with care and kindness? You.”

You also want to accept your humanity. You are fallible. You don’t have to be perfect all the time like Batman. You can’t be. Nobody can. Trying to be is irrational, and that’s what leads to all the frustrating emotions.

Finally, recognize your failures and frustrations without either denying them or seeing them as the end of the world. No rationalizing or melodrama. Then do something about them. Studies show that taking the time to jot down nice thoughts to yourself, how you’re a fallible human and how you can see problems without turning them into emotional disasters, made people feel better and increased self-compassion. Meditation and mindfulness paid off too. Throw them into the mix for better results.

Is this gonna improve your life overnight? Heck, no, but with time, improvement is possible as opposed to the confidence/non-confidence spectrum, which always seems to come with side effects.

Chapter 6: Work, Work, Work...or Work-Life Balance?

Why is the work-life balance question such a dilemma? It didn’t seem to be such an issue in the past... or was it? What’s the real problem here and how do we fix it? It turns out the world has changed. There has been a real shift, but there is something you can do about it.

You need a personal definition of success. Looking around you to see if you’re succeeding is no longer a realistic option. Trying to be a relative success compared to others is dangerous. This means your level of effort and investment is determined by theirs, which keeps you running full speed all the time to keep up. Vaguely saying you want to “be number one” isn’t remotely practical in a global competition where others are willing to go 24/7. We wanted options and flexibility. We got them. Now there are no boundaries. You can no longer look outside yourself to determine when to stop. The world will always tell you to just keep going.

Brace yourself. I’m going to say something unpleasant. You have to make a decision. The world will not draw a line. You must. You need to ask, “What do I want?” Otherwise you’re only going to get what they want. Sorry to have to break this to you but in today’s world “having it all” isn’t possible when others determine the limits in each category. We used to rely on the world to tell us when we were done, but now the balance must come from you. Otherwise you risk ending up with that number-one regret of the dying: not having had the courage to live the life you wanted and instead lived the life others prescribed.

Barry Schwartz says we have to become “choosers” instead of “pickers.” A picker selects from the options available, leading us into false dichotomies created by the options we see in front of us.

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A chooser “is thoughtful enough to conclude that perhaps none of the available alternatives are satisfactory, and that if he or she wants the right alternative, he or she may have to create it.”

We all know the good life means more than money...but none of us is exactly sure what those other things are or how to get them. Let’s face it. Money’s pretty easy to count and it consistently brings some happiness for at least a short period of time. We all know love and friends and other stuff are important too...but they’re a heck of a lot more complicated and we can’t just have them delivered to our house by Amazon Prime. Evaluating life by one metric turns out to be a key problem. We can’t use just one yardstick to measure a successful life.

In *Just Enough* the authors refer to it as a “collapsing strategy”—collapsing everything into one barometer of whether or not our life is on track. Most of us find it easy to focus just on money and say, “Make the number go up.” Convenient, simple...and dead wrong. The insanely successful people the authors spoke to often felt they were missing out in another area of life, like their relationships. When we try to collapse everything into one metric we inevitably get frustrated.

The researchers realized multiple yardsticks for life were necessary. For instance, to have a good relationship with your family you need to spend time with them, but if that time is spent screaming at each other, that’s not good either. So you need to measure quantity and quality. The study came up with four metrics that matter most:

1. **HAPPINESS:** having feelings of pleasure or contentment in and about your life.
2. **ACHIEVEMENT:** achieving accomplishments that compare favorably against similar goals others have strived for.
3. **SIGNIFICANCE:** having a positive impact on people you care about.
4. **LEGACY:** establishing your values or accomplishments in ways that help others find future success

They also came up with a simple way to interpret the feelings these four needs to provide in your life:

1. **HAPPINESS = ENJOYING**
2. **ACHIEVEMENT = WINNING**
3. **SIGNIFICANCE = COUNTING (TO OTHERS)**
4. **LEGACY = EXTENDING**

How much of each metric do you need to feel like a success? It can be intimidating to have to determine, right now, what balance of these four will provide what you need for the rest of your life. You don’t need to go that far. What made you feel fulfilled at age ten isn’t true at twenty and won’t be true at eighty. Things will change and that’s okay. Specifics will shift, but your values probably won’t move nearly as much.

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You want to be contributing to the four needs on a regular basis. If you ignore any of them, you're headed for a collapsing strategy. Measuring life by one yardstick won't work. Delay any for too long and you're sequencing. A favorite quote of mine by Warren Buffett sums that up: "I always worry about people who say, 'I'm going to do this for ten years; I really don't like it very well. And then do this...' That's a lot like saving sex up for your old age. Not a very good idea."

All this makes sense, but we have to get to the crux of the work-life balance issue. Where do you draw the line? How do you know when you're doing enough "winning" and need to put more into the "counting" or "extending" categories? A good starting point is asking yourself what's "good enough"? People handle having lots of choices by "maximizing" or "satisficing." Maximizing is exploring all the options, weighing them, and trying to get the best. Satisficing is thinking about what you need and picking the first thing that fulfills those needs. Satisficing is living by "good enough."

In the modern world, maximizing is impossible and unfulfilling. Imagine exploring Amazon.com for the "best book for you." Good luck evaluating every single one. You'd need years, but there's a deeper, less obvious problem. You might think that evaluating more possibilities would lead to objectively better results—and you'd be right, but it also leads to less subjective happiness with what you end up with.

That's exactly what was found in a study done by Barry Schwartz and Sheila Iyengar. Students who were maximizers in trying to get the best job after graduation ended up better off—they got salaries that were 20 percent higher. But they ended up more unhappy with their jobs than satisficers did. Maximizers are on that treadmill of expectations and experience more regret because they always feel they could do better. Certainly if we're comparing brain surgeons, maximizing might be a good idea, but in most areas of life it just makes us unhappy. Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon, who created the idea of maximizing and satisficing, said that in the end, when you calculate all factors of stress, results, and effort, satisficing is actually the method that maximizes.

You cannot maximize two things if they are trade-offs. You have only twenty-four hours in a day and only so much energy. With multiple categories you must draw a line. You cannot go all in on one and have a successful life all around.

Conclusion: What Makes a Successful Life?

Success comes in many forms. Some success is incredibly impressive, some simple and quaint, others almost absurd. The most important thing to remember when it comes to success is one word: alignment.

Success is not the result of any single quality; it's about alignment between who you are and where you choose to be. It's the right skill in the right role; a good person surrounded by other good people;

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a story that connects you with the world in a way that keeps you going; a network that helps you, and a job that leverages your natural introversion or extroversion; a level of confidence that keeps you going while learning and forgiving yourself for the inevitable failures and a balance between the big four that creates a well-rounded life with no regrets.

As Howard Stevenson and Laura Nash wrote, “When you align your values with the employment of your signature skills in a context that reinforces these same strengths, you create a powerful and emotionally engaging force for achievement, significance, happiness, and legacy. When your internal choice of success goals aligns with the group in which you operate, the rewards are even higher.”

How do you find alignment? As the Oracle at Delphi said so long ago, “Know thyself.” What are your intensifiers? Are you a Giver, a Taker or a Matcher? Are you more introverted or more extroverted? Under confident or overconfident? Which of the big four do you fulfill and which do you consistently neglect? Then align those qualities with the world around you. Pick the right pond. Find a job that leverages your intensifiers. Create a story that keeps you going.

What’s the most important type of alignment? Being connected to a group of friends and loved ones who help you become the person you want to be. Financial success is great, but to have a successful life we need happiness. Career success doesn’t always make us happy, but the research shows that happiness does bring success. If you align your knowledge of yourself with your career and the people around you, it can form an upward spiral that leads to not only career success but also happiness and fulfillment.