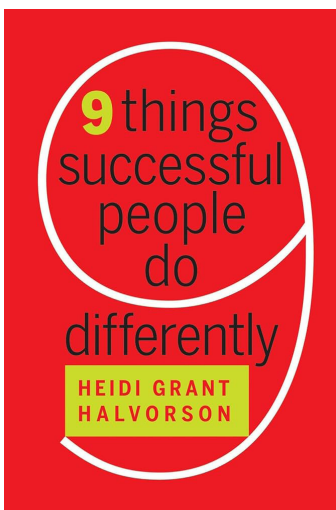


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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9 Things Successful People Do Differently

THE SUMMARY

Why do some people succeed while others don't? Why do some people succeed in some areas but not others? It isn't just because of some innate talents or abilities. Research shows that successful people reach their goals because of specific things they do. There are actually nine strategies they use to set and pursue goals that have the biggest impact on performance.

Fortunately, these strategies are easy to understand and to use. In going through these, you will both gain insight into some of the things you have been doing right all along, and be able to identify areas where you can make adjustments.

Habit #1: Get Specific

When setting a goal, it's important to be as specific as possible. "Lose five pounds" is a better goal than "lose some weight" because it gives you a clear idea of what success looks like. Being specific keeps you motivated. It's also important to be specific about the actions you need to take to reach your goal.

Taking the time to get specific and spell out exactly what you want to achieve and how you are going to do it helps you not settle for less, or telling yourself that you've done "good enough." Thousands of studies have shown that getting specific is one of the most critical steps you can take in reaching any goal.

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After getting specific about the goal, you also need to get specific about the obstacles you need to overcome. There is a strategy called “mental contrasting” that comes into play here. To use this technique, you will alternate between thinking about accomplishing your goal and the obstacles that stand in the way. First think about how you will feel when you accomplish your goal. Think about it in great detail, so it really comes alive for you. Now think about the specific obstacles.

What will probably happen is you will experience the *necessity to act*. You will find the motivation to move forward, and have a new level of clarity about what you need to do to make things happen. Mental contrasting leads to greater effort, more energy, planning, and a higher degree of achieving goals.

Habit #2—Seize the Moment to Act on Your Goals

Most of us miss opportunities to act on goals just because we are so busy we don’t notice them. To seize the moment, you need to make some decisions in advance. Decide when and where you will take each action that moves you towards your goals. For example, say “On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday I will work out for 30 minutes at 5:00.” Studies show that this kind of planning will help your brain grab the opportunity when it arises, which will increase your chances of success by roughly 300%.

Everyone wants to be more productive. Unfortunately, wanting it doesn’t make it happen. But there is a simple strategy that works well: *if-then* planning. It’s a way of deciding in advance when and where you will take specific actions. (*If* it is 4:00 PM, *then* I will return today’s phone calls). *If-then* plans can double or triple your chances for success.

This approach to planning works because it is written in the language of your brain—the language of contingencies. When you make if-then plans, your brain starts to look for the situations that are part of the plan. Since you’ve already decided what you need to do, you can do it without having to spend much time or energy trying to figure out what to do. If you are finding that you are not being as productive as you want, start here: make simple if-then plans to tackle your goals. While you won’t be actually creating more hours in the day, it will feel like you did.

Habit #3—Know Exactly How Far You Have Left To Go

In order to achieve a goal, you have to monitor your progress. You need to know how well you are doing, so you can adjust your actions or strategies as needed. To that end you need to get feedback by checking your progress regularly. You can’t stay motivated without feedback.

Feedback is what tells your brain there is a discrepancy between where you are and where you want to be. When that happens, the brain responds by throwing resources at it to try to eliminate it (resources could be attention, effort, willpower, etc.) When you don’t recognize a discrepancy—nothing happens. No effort or energy is put forth to make something happen.

So how often do you need to get feedback? It depends on a couple things. First is the goal duration—is it a one week goal, one year goal, five year goal? The longer the duration, the more time you can leave between assessments. For short-term goals you need to have them more frequently. Frequency of feedback also depends on where you are on the learning curve. When you are first trying to learn a new skill, it isn’t a good idea to try to do too much self-assessment. It will actually distract you from developing the very skills you are working on.

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When done right, assessing your progress will help you stay motivated and moving forward. Done the wrong way, it can actually hinder progress by giving you a premature sense of accomplishment. Most people either focus on how far they have come (*to-date thinking*) or on how far they have left to go (*to-go thinking*). Both have value, but too much *to-date* thinking, focusing on what you have accomplished, actually undermines your motivation to finish the task. You start feeling good about what you have done and your motivation to finish decreases. Keeping your mind on how far you have to go for complete success will keep you motivated and enable you to adjust your strategy if needed in order to accomplish your objective.

It's far better to stay focused on the goal when assessing your progress, and not congratulate yourself too much on a job half-done. Save the congratulations for a job that is completely, and well, done.

Habit #4—Be a Realistic Optimist

Positive thinking can be very helpful in accomplishing your goals. However, if it leads you to underestimate how difficult it will be to reach your goal, it won't be helpful. Most goals worth achieving take time, effort, planning, and persistence. Studies show that thinking it will be easy to accomplish your goals will leave you ill-prepared for the effort and greatly increase the odds of failing.

A lot of self-help books focus on the idea that if you believe that success will come easily to you, it will. The only problem with this idea is that it is *completely* false. It is a recipe for failure. While it is true that the best predictor of individual's success is whether or not they *believe* they will succeed, there is an important caveat. To be successful, you need to understand the important difference between believing you will succeed and believing you will succeed *easily*. It's the difference between being a realistic optimist and an unrealistic optimist.

Realistic optimists believe they will succeed through their effort, planning, persistence, and using good strategies. Unrealistic optimists are different—they believe that success will happen to them—that the universe will reward them for all their positive thinking and they will somehow gain success as the obstacles just cease to exist.

Believing that the road to success will be rocky leads to greater success, because it forces you to take action. People who are confident they will succeed *and* are confident that success won't come easily put in more effort, plan more carefully, and persist longer when they face difficulty. And they succeed more often. Unrealistic optimists are less likely to consider all their options and are more likely to take risks without thinking things through. (and they will tell you that you are just "being negative" when you raise questions or express reservations).

The best thing you can do is to cultivate your optimism by combining a positive attitude with an honest assessment of the challenges you will face as you pursue your goals. Don't visualize success; visualize the steps you will take in order to make things happen.

Habit #5—Focus on Getting Better, Rather Than Being Good

Believing you have the ability to reach your goals is important; so is believing you can get the ability if you don't have it. Many of us think our intelligence or aptitudes are fixed—that no matter what we do, we won't improve. When we have that attitude, our focus is on proving ourselves rather than developing or acquiring new skills. But research shows that our abilities are not fixed; they can grow and can be developed.

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In many companies today, workers are just trying to avoid any major mistakes, rather than taking on new challenges in the hope of advancement. Taking on something new increases the risk of making a mistake—it's almost always part of the learning process. If you are in that position, the best way to approach a new responsibility with confidence is counter-intuitive: give yourself permission to screw up.

Studies show that when people feel allowed to make mistakes, they are much less likely to actually make them. People approach any task with one of two types of goals: *be-good* goals, or *get-better* goals. With *be-good* goals, the focus is on proving yourself—proving that you have a lot of ability or that you know what you are doing. With *get-better* goals, the focus is on developing ability and learning to master a new skill.

Be-good goals create stress when we are faced with something new or unfamiliar. We feel like we don't know what we are doing, which creates anxiety, which actually leads to poorer performance. Anxiety is one of the most significant productivity killers known. *Get-better* goals have the opposite effect. When we think about what we are doing in terms of getting better, we stay motivated, even when setbacks happen. And research also shows that people with *get-better* goals actually enjoy their work more and find it more interesting. To top it all off, people who find their jobs interesting replenish their energy—they have more energy to bring to the table, and that energy often lasts into the next task they work on.

Giving yourself permission to not do everything perfectly and embracing the reality of a learning curve will lessen your anxiety and enable you to connect with what is interesting about your work. That will both increase your motivation and decrease the chances that you will make any mistake at all!

Habit #6—Have Grit

Grit is a willingness to commit to long-term goals and to persist in the face of difficulty. People with grit do better in life—they get higher grades, pursue more education, and rise higher. The good news is that even if you aren't "gritty" you can grow in grit.

People who lack grit often just don't believe they have what it takes to become successful. As we discussed earlier, success usually comes from effort, persistence, and good strategies. Embracing this reality will do wonders for your grit.

People generally subscribe to one of two theories about the nature of ability. *Entity theorists* believe that their abilities are fixed from birth, and therefore expect their performance to be relatively stable. *Incremental theorists* believe that ability is changeable—it can and does grow with effort and experience. Evidence shows that incremental theorists are right—you can get more ability if you want more. All you need is grit.

Grit is persistence and commitment to long-term goals. Grit is all about not giving up when it gets hard, even when tired, discouraged, or bored. And the best predictor of whether or not we will give up is how we *explain* the difficulty. When it's hard—why is it hard? Who do you blame?

Entity theorists tend to blame setbacks on a lack of ability. If it is hard, it must be because I am not good at it. That results in a lack of grit. They give up too soon, which reinforces the idea that they can't improve.

Incremental theorists take a different approach. They tend to blame setbacks on things that are controllable—not enough effort, using the wrong strategy, poor planning, etc. The end result is that when they face difficulty, they then *try harder*, since they believe they can improve. And they do.

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Interestingly, when entity theorists do improve, it often creates anxiety for them. They start thinking, “How could that happen? I’m not good at this kind of thing...” or “It must have just been luck.” Often they get so nervous that the next time they are in a similar situation they can’t perform...which again reinforces the idea that they can’t improve.

Ultimately, no matter what kind of learning opportunities you receive, you probably won’t see lasting improvement if you don’t believe improvement is possible. You won’t have the grit for it. If improvement isn’t possible, it makes no sense to try...which quickly becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. To be successful and make the most of your potential, you need to examine, and even challenge, your beliefs. The next time you find yourself thinking “I’m no good at this” you need to change your thinking to “I’m no good at this *yet*.” That will help you grow in grit...and improve.

Habit #7—Build Your Willpower Muscle

Your willpower, or self-control, is a muscle, and just like the other muscles in your body, it needs exercise. If it doesn’t get it, it becomes weaker. But when you give it regular workouts by putting it to good use, it will grow stronger, and be better able to help you accomplish your goals.

To grow your willpower, take on a challenge that forces you to do something you really don’t want to do. Give up snacks or TV, do 100 sit-ups a day, eat some fruit, etc. Start with one thing. It will be hard in the beginning, but it will get easier—which is the whole point. Your willpower is growing, and as it grows, you can take on more challenges and grow it even more.

Thinking about willpower as a muscle helps us understand both how it operates and how to increase it. Like a muscle, willpower can vary in strength from person to person, and also from moment to moment in the same person. Even strong muscles get tired after a workout; so does willpower. Even normal, everyday actions can drain your willpower—anything that requires effort will do it. And if you do too much at once, or for too long, the self-control can run out. That’s when the junk food wins.

Fortunately, the depletion is only temporary. It will recover with time. You can even speed up the recovery by doing things that lift your spirits (that could be almost anything—listening to your favorite music, calling a good friend, taking a walk, etc.) The other way willpower is like a muscle is that it can become stronger over time if you give it regular workouts. Daily activities like exercising, tracking your spending or eating, or just sitting up straight can strengthen your self-control.

So if you want more willpower, start by picking something to do (or stop doing) that fits with your life and your goals. Anything that requires you to make a conscious effort will do. Add that activity to your daily routine. Over time your self-control will grow, and you will be able to access it for other things you need. Note: before taking on something that requires *a lot* of willpower, start by strengthening your muscle with less strenuous workouts, and then build up from there.

Habit #8—Don’t Tempt Fate

No matter how strong your willpower muscle becomes, there is a limit, and if you overuse it, you will temporarily run out of steam. Many people over-estimate their ability to resist temptation, which results in putting themselves in situations where temptation abounds. Successful people know not to make reaching a goal harder than it already is.

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Resisting temptation is a key part of reaching almost any goal. What we *want* to do is often the very opposite of what we *need* to do in order to achieve our goals. One thing that you have to do if you are going to move forward successfully is to make peace with the fact that your willpower is limited. It will *always* be limited!

The problem is that most of us think we have more willpower than we actually do. This results in putting ourselves in harm's way, exposing ourselves to temptations that we assume we can handle. Often we can't handle them, or doing so takes so much willpower that we have little left for other things. Even if you have a lot of willpower, you won't have much left for your goals if you have spent the whole day at work dealing with crises. You need to be realistic enough to recognize that it will be hard to stay on track during high-stress time periods. That's why it is so important to make some *if-then* plans to keep yourself out of harm's way.

And do yourself a favor—don't try to pursue two goals at once that each requires a lot of self-control. Studies show that people who try to quit smoking while dieting are more likely to fail at both efforts than people who tackle them one at a time.

Finally, remember that it is far easier to abstain from doing something altogether than to give in just a little and then stop. You need more and more self-control to stop a behavior the longer it goes on. Lay's wasn't kidding when they said, "Betcha can't eat just one."

Habit #9—Focus on What You *Will* Do, Not on What You *Won't* Do

If you really want to make a significant change in your life, plan how you will replace unhelpful behaviors with more productive ones. Too often, people focus their efforts on what they want to stop doing and fail to consider how they will fill the void. Research on thought suppression (Don't think about pink elephants) has shown that trying to avoid a thought makes it even more active in your mind. The same is true when it comes to behavior: trying *not* to do something increases the impulse rather than lessens it.

If you want to change your ways, ask yourself, what will I do instead? For example, if you want to get control of your temper, you could make a plan like "if I start to get angry, I am going to take three deep breaths." Replacing losing your temper with deep breathing will cause your negative impulse to eventually get worn away and disappear over time.

Once you've decided to make an *if-then* goal, the next thing you need to do is figure out what, *exactly*, goes into it. Depending on how you set up your plan, it can help or hinder you. There are three types of if-then plans:

Replacement plans do what the name suggests—replace a negative behavior with a more positive one.

Ignore plans are focused on blocking out unwanted feelings, like cravings, performance anxiety, or self-doubt.

Negation plans involve spelling out actions you won't be taking in the future. (If I'm at the mall, I won't buy anything). These are probably the ones we use most often.

When the three types were tested, the results were very consistent. *Negation plans* were far less effective than the other two, and sometimes had a rebound effect, leading people to do even more of the forbidden behavior.

Replacement plans were easily the most effective. When it comes to reaching your goals, you need to plan how you will replace the behaviors that sabotage you, rather than focusing on the behaviors themselves. The most important part of your *if-then* plans is what you will do, not what you won't do!

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Conclusion

Most of us look at people at the top of their game, be it in politics, business, the arts, or something else, and explain their success with words like “genius” or “ability” or “talent.” Being successful is not about winning the DNA lottery; it’s about reaching goals. It’s about making smart choices, using the right strategies, and taking action. Studies show that measuring talent, like IQ tests, is a terrible way to predict who will succeed and who won’t.

Successful people set specific goals and seize opportunities to act on them. They always know how far they have to go and stay focused on what still needs to be done. They believe they will succeed, but embrace the reality that success won’t come easily. They focus on making progress rather than being perfect. They believe they can develop their abilities through their effort, which makes them gritty in the face of setbacks and challenges. They build their willpower through exercise, and try not to put themselves in situations where temptations abound. Finally, they focus on what they will do, not what they won’t do.

There is nothing they do that you can’t do, too!