History’s Great Achievers – A Napoleon, a daVinci, a Mozart – have always managed themselves. That, in large measure, is what makes them great achievers. But they are rare exceptions, so unusual both in their talents and their accomplishments as to be considered outside the boundaries of ordinary human existence. Now, most of us, even those of us with the modest endowments, will have to learn to manage ourselves. We will have to learn to develop ourselves. We will have to place ourselves where we can make the greatest contribution.

What Are My Strengths?

Most people think they know what they are good at. They are usually wrong. More often, people know what they are not good at – and even then more people are wrong than right. And yet, a person can perform only from strength. One cannot build performance on weaknesses, let alone on something one cannot do at all.

Throughout history, people had little need to know their strengths. A person was born in to a position and a line of work: the peasant’s son would also be a peasant; the artisan’s daughter, an artisan’s wife, and so on. But now people have choices. We need to know our strengths in order to know where we belong.

The only way to discover your strengths is through feedback analysis. Whenever you make a key decision or take a key action, write down what you expect will happen. Nine or 12 months later, compare the actual results with your expectations. I have been practicing this method for 15 to 20 years now, and every time I do it, I am surprised. The feedback analysis showed me, for instance – and to my great surprise – that I have an intuitive understanding of technical people, whether they are engineers or accountants or market researchers. It also showed me that I don’t really resonate with generalists.

Practiced consistently, this simple method will show you what you are doing or failing to do that deprives you of the full benefits of your strengths. It will show you where you are not particularly competent. And finally, it will show you where you have no strengths and cannot perform.

Several implications for action follow from feedback analysis. First and foremost, concentrate on your strengths. Put yourself where your strengths can produce results.

Second, work on improving your strengths. Analysis will rapidly show where you need to improve skills or acquire new ones. It will also show the gaps in your knowledge – and those can usually be filled. Mathematicians are born, but everyone can learn trigonometry.

Third, discover where your intellectual arrogance is causing disabling ignorance and overcome it. Far too many people – especially people with great expertise in one area – are contemptuous of knowledge in other areas or believe that being bright is a substitute for knowledge. First-rate engineers, for instance, tend to take pride in not knowing anything about knowledge. Human beings, they believe, are much too disorderly for the good engineering mind. Human resource professionals, by contrast, often pride themselves on their ignorance of elementary accounting or of quantitative methods altogether. But taking pride in such ignorance is self-defeating. Go to work on acquiring the skills and knowledge you need to fully realize your strengths.

Comparing your expectations with your results also indicates what not to do. We all have a vast number of areas in which we have no talent or skill and little chance of becoming even mediocre. In those areas a person – and especially a knowledge worker – should not take on work, jobs, and assignments. One should waste as little effort as possible on improving areas of low competence. It takes far more energy and work to improve from incompetence to mediocrity than it takes to improve from first-rate performance to excellence. And yet most people – especially most teachers and most organizations – concentrate on making incompetent performers into mediocre ones. Energy, resources, and time should go instead to making a competent person into a star performer.

How Do I Perform?

Amazingly few people know how they get things done. Indeed, most of us do not even know that
different people work and perform differently. Too many people work in ways that are not their ways, and that almost guarantees nonperformance. For knowledge workers, How do I perform? May be an even more important question than What are my strengths?

Like one’s strengths, how one performs is unique. It is a matter of personality. Whether personality is a matter of nature or nurture, it surely is formed long before a person goes to work. And how a person performs is a given, just as what a person is good at or not good at is a given. A person’s way of performing can be slightly modified, but it is unlikely to be completely changed – and certainly not easily. Just as people achieve results by doing what they are good at, they also achieve results by working in ways that they best perform. A few common personality traits usually determine how a person performs.

Am I a reader or a listener? The first thing to know is whether you are a reader or a listener. Far too few people even know that there are readers and listeners and that people are rarely both. Even fewer know which of the two they themselves are. But some examples will show how damaging such ignorance can be.

When Dwight Eisenhower was commander in chief of the Allied forces in Europe, he was the darling of the press. His press conferences were famous for their style – General Eisenhower showed total command of whatever question he was asked, and he was able to describe a situation and explain a policy in two or three beautifully polished and elegant sentences. Ten years later, the same journalists who had been his admirers held President Eisenhower in open contempt. He never addressed their questions, they complained, but rambled on endlessly about something else. And they constantly ridiculed him for butchering the King’s English in incoherent and ungrammatical answers.

Eisenhower apparently did not know that he was a reader, not a listener. When he was commander in chief in Europe, his aides made sure that every question from the press was presented in writing at least half an hour before a conference was to begin. And then Eisenhower was in total command. When he became president, he succeeded two listeners, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman. Both men knew themselves to be listeners and both enjoyed free-for-all press conferences. Eisenhower may have felt that he had to do what his two predecessors had done. As a result, he never even heard the questions journalists asked. And Eisenhower is not even an extreme case of a non-listener.

How do I learn? The second thing to know about how one performs is to know how one learns. Many first-class writers – Winston Churchill is but one example – do poorly in school. They tend to remember their schooling as pure torture. Yet few of their classmates remember it the same way. They may not have enjoyed the school very much, but the worst they suffered was boredom. The explanation is that writers do not, as a rule, learn by listening and reading. They learn by writing. Because schools do not allow them to learn this way, they get poor grades.

Schools everywhere are organized on the assumption that there is only one right way to learn and that it is the same way for everybody. But to be forced to learn the way a school teaches is sheer hell for students who learn differently. Indeed, there are probably half a dozen different ways to learn.

There are people, like Churchill, who learn by writing. Some people learn by taking copious notes, Beethoven, for example, left behind an enormous number of sketchbooks, yet he said he never actually looked at them when he composed. Asked why he kept them, he is reported to have replied, “If I don’t write it down immediately, I forget it right away. If I put it into a sketchbook, I never forget it and I never have to look it up again.” Some people learn by doing. Others learn by hearing themselves talk.

Of all the important pieces of self-knowledge, understanding how you learn is the easiest to acquire. When I ask people, “How do you learn?” most of them know the answer. But when I ask, “Do you act on this knowledge?” few answer yes. And yet, acting on this knowledge is the key to performance; or rather, not acting on this knowledge condemns one to nonperformance.

To manage yourself effectively, you also have to ask, Do I work well with people or am I a loner? And if you do work well with people, you then must ask, In what relationship? Some people work best as subordinates. General George Patton, the great American military hero of World War II, is a prime example. Patton was America’s top troop commander. Yet when he was proposed for an independent command, General George Marshall, the U.S. chief of staff – and probably the most successful picker of men in U.S. history – said, “Patton is the best subordinate the American army has ever produced, but he would be the worst commander.”
Some people work best as team members. Others work best alone. Some are exceptionally talented as coaches and mentors, others are simply incompetent as mentors.

**Another crucial question is:** Do I produce results as a decision maker or as an adviser? A great many people perform best as advisers but cannot take the burden and pressure of making the decision. A good many other people, by contrast, need an adviser to force themselves to think, then they can make decisions and act on them with speed, self-confidence, and courage. This is a reason, by the way, that the number two person in an organization often fails when promoted to the number one position. The top spot requires a decision maker.

Other important questions to ask include, Do I perform well under stress or do I need a highly structured and predictable environment? Do I work best in a big organization or a small one? Few people work well in all kinds of environments. Again and again, I have seen people who were very successful in large organizations flounder miserably when they moved into smaller ones. And the reverse is equally true.

The conclusion bears repeating: do not try to change yourself—you are unlikely to succeed. But work hard to improve the way you perform. And try not to take on work you cannot perform or will only perform poorly.

**What Are My Values?**

To be able to manage yourself, you finally have to ask, What are my values? This is not a question of ethics. With respect to ethics, the rules are the same for everybody, and the test is a simple one. I call it the “mirror test.” Ethics requires that you ask yourself, What kind of person do I want to see in the mirror in the morning? What is ethical behavior in one kind of organization or situation is ethical behavior in another. But ethics are only part of a value system—especially of an organization’s value system.

To work in an organization whose value system is unacceptable or incompatible with one’s own condemns a person both to frustration and to non-performance.

Whether a pharmaceutical company tires to obtain results by making constant, small improvements or by achieving occasional, highly expensive, and risky “breakthroughs” is not primarily an economic question. The results of either strategy may be pretty much the same. At bottom, there is a conflict between a value system that sees the company’s contribution in terms of helping physicians do better what they already do and a value system that is oriented towards making scientific discoveries.

**Organizations, like people, have values.** To be effective in an organization, a person’s values must be compatible with the organization’s values. They do not need to be the same, but they must be close enough to permit coexistence. Otherwise, the person will not only be frustrated but also will not produce results.

A person’s strengths and the way that person performs rarely conflict; the two are complementary. But there is sometimes a conflict between a person’s values and his or her strengths. What one does well—even very well and successfully—may not fit with one’s value system. In that case, the work may not appear to be worth devoting one’s life to (or even a substantial portion thereof).

**Where do I Belong?**

A small number of people know very early where they belong. Mathematicians, musicians, and cooks, for instance, are usually mathematicians, musicians, and cooks by the time they are four or five years old. Physicians usually decide on their careers in their teens, if not earlier. But most people, especially highly gifted people, do not really know where they belong until they are well past their mid-twenties. By that time, however, they should know the answers to the three questions: What are my strengths? How do I perform? and, What are my values? And then they can and should decide where they belong.

Or rather, they should be able to decide where they do not belong. The person who has learned that he or she does not perform well in a big organization should have learned to say not to a position in one. The person who has learned that he or she is not a decision maker should have learned to say no to a decision-making assignment. A General Patton (who probably never learned this himself) should have learned to say no to an independent command.

Equally important, knowing the answer to these questions enables a person to say to an opportunity, an offer, or an assignment, “Yes, I will do that. But this is the way I should be doing it. This is the way it should be structured. This is the way the relationships should be. These are the kind of results you should expect from me, and in this time frame, because this is who I am.”

Successful careers are not planned. They
Whenever I, or any other consultant, start to work with an organization, the first thing I hear about are all the personality conflicts. Most of these arise from the fact that people do not know what other people are doing and how they do their work, or what contribution the other people are concentrating on and what results they expect. And the reason they do not know is that they have not asked and therefore have not been told.

Today the great majority of people work with others who have different tasks and responsibilities. The marketing vice president may have come out of sales and know everything about sales, but she knows nothing about the things she has never done—pricing, advertising, packaging, and the like. So the people who do these things must make sure that the marketing vice president understands what they are trying to do, why they are trying to do it, how they are going to do it, and what results to expect.

If the marketing vice president does not understand what these high-grade knowledge specialists are doing, it is primarily their fault, not hers. The have not educated her. Conversely, it is the marketing vice president’s responsibility to make sure that all of her co-workers understand how she looks at marketing: what her goals are, how she works, and what she expects of herself and of each one of them.

Even people who understand the importance of taking responsibility for relationships often do not communicate sufficiently with their associates. They are afraid of being thought presumptuous or inquisitive or stupid. They are wrong. Whenever someone goes to his or her associates and says, “This is what I am good at. This is how I work, these are my values. This is the contribution I plan to make”, the response is always, “This is most helpful. But why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

Organizations are no longer built on force but on trust. The existence of trust between people does not necessarily mean that they like one another. It means that they understand one another. Taking responsibility for relationships is therefore an absolute necessity. It is a duty. Whether one is a member of the organization, a consultant to it, a supplier, or a distributor, one owes that responsibility to all one’s co-workers: those whose work one depends on as well as those who depend on one’s own work.

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