

How To Live Up To Your Greatest Potential

If you want to make more of your talents - live up to your full potential - you have to learn to use them. You have the power to change your habits - to acquire new skills and fully use the skills you now have. You can improve your performance, your productivity, and the quality of your whole life.

What makes a high achiever? Is it luck, intelligence, talent, dedication? All of these things figure in - they all make a difference. But we all know intelligent, talented, hard-working people who do not consider themselves very successful or even happy. And we know people who are not exceptionally bright but seem happy and successful.

So there must be something else, some secret to success. Actually there are several secrets to achieving your peak performance - living up to your full potential.

Your success at business, friendship, love, sports - just about anything you try - is largely determined by your own self-image. Your unhappiness is something you choose. So, you're thinking no one chooses to be unhappy. Well, maybe not - but you have to consciously choose to be happy, self-confident, and successful.

Happiness is elusive when we go after it directly. So is self-confidence. Both seem to be more "side-products" than something you can achieve in and for itself. So how, then, can consciously choosing to be these things be of any value? Well, the secret is to focus on other things.

First, focus on your potential. Begin by making a complete and accurate assessment of your potential. To do this you must take an inventory of yourself - you will make a few lists. Sit down and make a list of all the things you can do well. Be honest with yourself. When that list is done, make a list of all the things you like to do, even if you think you can't do them well. Then, make a list of all the things you would like to do, if you could. Now list your hobbies.

Then, go back to the list of things you can do well. You are probably being much too hard on yourself. Most of us are. We have this little voice in our heads telling us things like: "You're so dumb," or "You can't learn to do that," or "You never do anything right," or similar nasty things. And even worse, we listen to that voice as if it's telling us the gospel truth.

So now, shut off that voice - you can do it - and add a few more things to the list of things you can do well. Pretend you are your best friend - it's amazing how much more forgiving and charitable we are with our friends than we are with ourselves. Now that you are your best friend, you should be able to add a few more items to your "do well" list. But do be honest - don't list things you feel you really can't do well.

Next, go to your list of things you like to do but you feel you don't do well. Speaking as your own best friend, do you think there are some things on this list that could be moved to your "do well" list? There probably are. If you like to do it, chances are you do pretty well at it. Treat your hobby list in the same manner.

Next, go to your list of things you would like to do if you could. Ask yourself, "Why can't I do this, if I'd like to?" Put your reasons on another list. OK. So you have a lot of lists going - what good is that going to do? Well, you have just made an assessment of yourself. If you have been truly honest in making these lists, it may even be a fairly accurate assessment. Probably it isn't, but that's OK. This assessment isn't carved in stone. It's subject to change. But for now we will work with what's on the lists. At least you have a place to start.

Look over your lists again. You are focusing on all the things you feel you can't do and the reasons why you can't do them, right? Well, don't. **FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN DO - FOCUS ON YOUR POTENTIAL.** Make it a habit to focus on your strengths. Don't forget to include your undeveloped potential, as well. Train yourself to focus on your potential instead of your limitations.

Now that's not to say that you should ignore your list of reasons for not doing some of the things you would like to do. Not at all! But look at them from the viewpoint of your strengths. For instance, you'd like to play basketball but you think you are too short, so you don't even try. In this case, you are looking at it from the viewpoint of your limitations. Now, when you look at it from the viewpoint of your strengths, you would say, "Well, I may be pretty short to play, BUT I am fast. I can handle the ball well. I have a lot of stamina. I can't change being short, but I can refuse to let my limitations overcome my strengths."

You see the difference? Focusing on your limitations lets those limitations make your decisions for you. Focusing on your strengths lets YOU make the decision. To go back to our example: when you've decided to overcome your height limitations to play basketball - something you really want to do - you will be more determined to develop your strengths to compensate.

You will do well, because you will be doing what you really want to do and you will be determined to develop the full potential of your strengths. Very few people concentrate on fully developing any of their strengths. That's where you will have the edge. You know your true disadvantages but your determination, your singleness of purpose, will inspire you to fully develop the talents and skills you do have.

OK. You probably have no interest in playing basketball. Then go to your assessment of yourself. What do you have a major interest in? What do you have a natural aptitude for? Go for it. Devote yourself to something you really like to do. Don't choose something just because you think you could make more money at it than you could by doing something else that you would really rather work at. You won't work to develop your full potential.

You may start out with enthusiasm, but you will soon flag. It will be a chore to go to work. You'll probably find yourself hating to go. It'll be difficult to work on improving your skills because you don't like what you are doing. You probably won't be working up to your potential. Your success will probably be limited by your growing lack of interest and your happiness will surely be affected.

If, however, you devote yourself to something you really like to do, you'll enjoy your work, you'll be enthusiastic, and you'll probably find yourself working on improving your skills just for the sheer joy of it. You will be working to reach your full potential. You'll probably soon find you are making more money at this truly

interesting occupation than you ever dreamed possible. And because you like what you are doing, you will be happier.

When you know you are working to your full potential and you enjoy your work and begin to feel successful, you will find that self-confidence and happiness soon follow.

But, you must be realistic and honest with yourself. If you set goals that you can't possibly reach, you are setting yourself up for failure. You will make yourself frustrated and unhappy. The key here is a realistic and honest assessment of your potential.

Although most people will be unnecessarily harsh in their assessments, it is easy to become too hopeful when you start breaking down barriers. If, for instance, you're extremely interested in and fond of music and would love to be a singer, it would be unreasonable to set a singing career as your goal if you can't sing a note (some talents are inborn). But if you are knowledgeable about the music business and would be happy being involved in some other capacity, then it would be reasonable to pursue a career in the business.

Be wary of making otherwise perfectly reasonable goals unattainable because of stringent time frames. When you set a goal, you will most likely set times for achieving certain steps along your way to achieving your final goal. Even if you don't set the time frames formally, you will probably have a pretty good idea of how long you are giving yourself. It's wise to sit down and formally set these goals. Think about it and give yourself reasonable time to achieve them. Make a deal with yourself to view these time limits as flexible.

Don't get discouraged if things don't work out as planned. Sometimes finding our place takes both time and error. All of us experience failures of one magnitude or another. The key is to view the failures as a learning experience - if nothing else, failures teach us what not to do. Remain flexible. As long as you keep focusing on your strengths and potential, the right thing will come along - and probably sooner rather than later. But don't quit at the first sign of boredom. Even if you have truly found your niche, you will not feel enthusiastic 100 percent of the time.

Don't worry about others - don't compare your progress with that of others. No matter how successful you are, there will be someone else who, to you, looks like she's got it made - who looks like she's getting where you want to go faster and easier than you are. Maybe she is. Maybe she isn't. Who cares? Focus on your own achievements. Work to develop your skills and talents to their full potential. Compete with yourself - your short term goals should be based on today's accomplishments. If you have reached Point A today, make Point B your next objective - improve yourself and don't worry about the other guy.

OK. You have decided what your ultimate goal is. Make sure it is a definitely defined goal. "Someday I want to be famous" just won't cut it. Define exactly what you want to do. Define a reasonable time frame. Know what you have to do to get there. You don't need to know every little detail, but you do have to have the big picture and many of the details. If you have a goal in mind but don't know what it takes to reach it, then you need to find out. Do some reading, talk to people who know, ask questions and LISTEN to the answers. Think that sounds like a lot of work? Well, remember what you are preparing for - your success and happiness.

Surely you want to put a little effort into that! Anyway, a little research into what it will take for you to reach your goals isn't too difficult.

Train yourself into making this "research" the next focus of your life. You will be focusing on your strengths, on your purpose, and on learning and doing. If you have chosen a goal that is right for you, focusing on these things and devoting the necessary time should not be too difficult. It may take a bit of self-discipline at first, but your determination and interest will carry you through until the focusing process becomes a habit. When you have a real desire to accomplish something, initiative should only require an occasional shove - but you may need to give it a nudge now and again.

Get into the habit of visualizing your success. Now sitting around and daydreaming in generalizations about it is not what we mean. You need to visualize specifics. To return to the basketball example, daydreaming about being carried off the court on your teammates' shoulders is just daydreaming. Picturing in your mind how you will work a play if your opponent makes a particular move, picturing your exact response to it, is visualizing specifics. If you run through specific moves in your mind, you will be prepared when the need for those moves arises.

Don't be afraid to use your imagination to visualize new and better ways to accomplish things, as well. Here in your mind, you can try doing things in ways that are different from the usual. This is a creative process - you may have heard of creative thinking. Training yourself to think creatively is largely learning to let your imagination work on methods that are different from the "way things have always been done." It's breaking away from the idea that a thing can be done effectively in only one way. It's looking at a problem from all angles.

Just play a game of "what if." Ask yourself, "What if I did this thing this way?" It's OK to get a little crazy sometimes. But, you must also spend some of your thinking time at specific visualizations of the moves you need to make to accomplish your goals.

Visualizations are important but actual physical practice of your skills is important, too. Practice the boring little skills that are necessary as well as the skills that you enjoy. Don't let yourself rely on just the things that come naturally and easy to you. Develop your limited potentials as well as those that you feel are your assets.

Work on developing the more general attributes that are important to almost any goal:

Success comes more easily to those who have a pleasing personality. This is not to say that you should bend to everyone's wishes or scrape and bow. Rather, develop an attitude that is respectful of other's opinions but true to your own beliefs. Be flexible - don't be so rigid that you can't accept another's opinion when it is superior to your own. Be willing, even eager, to learn from others. Changing your opinion in light of more facts is a sign of strength of character, not weakness. Be willing to extend a helpful hand, be a team player. Develop a sense of humor. Be polite and caring - but be your own person.

Learn to guard against emotional responses. You are susceptible to errors of judgement when you let your emotions get in the way. Of course, everything we do is done based somewhat on our emotions, but strong emotions have little place in

decision making. Hold your emotions in check. Try to delay decisions if you are in an emotional state. Learn to ignore your emotions and use reasoning to arrive at your decisions.

Develop the habit of enthusiasm. Enthusiasm works like a magnet - it draws people and success. It's a pleasing personality trait that people like to be a part of. It seems to be contagious - the people around you become enthusiastic, too, and become more cooperative. Enthusiasm sparks initiative and singleness of purpose.

We've talked of working to develop habits - the habit of focusing on your goals, the habit of focusing on your strengths, the habit of learning and "researching," the habit of visualizing, the habit of enthusiasm. Now we will talk of habits in a little different light - breaking them. First, assess your habits looking for the ones that may be displeasing to others. Offensive habits can hold you back from success - they are often a part of an unpleasing personality. Look for things like grumbling or grunting at people instead of answering, gazing at anything but the speaker when conversing, smirking or sneering when you don't agree - anything that is an automatic, displeasing mannerism.

It will be very difficult to assess your habits accurately. After all, a habit is something that we do without thinking much about it. You will have to spend some time at this and be very conscious of yourself. Ask someone you trust to help you with this assessment. It may take a lot of work to break yourself of displeasing habits. Try substituting a different, more pleasing behavior for the habit you wish to break.

OK. You have set definite goals, you have a definiteness of purpose, you have researched and know the specific steps to take to achieve the goals, you have resolved to be flexible and to develop a more pleasing personality. Now what?

Well, just because you have a clear purpose, know what you want, are willing to work on developing your potential, and willing to be a nice person, success will not drop into your lap overnight.

You will probably find that one of your first steps in achieving your goals will be to take a job somewhat below where you hope eventually to be. But you've already analyzed the steps to your goal, so you presumably have planned for this. However, you do want to advance and, of course, as quickly as possible.

As you advance toward your goals, you will undoubtedly run up against some difficult people (maybe even difficult bosses), and there will be times you'll need to deal effectively with them. Since you are working on becoming a nice, enthusiastic person and a team player, you already have half the battle won. Your attitude is as important as the other guy's attitude when you are dealing with difficult people.

Always keep in mind that your job is a training field for you. You are getting paid as you learn the things you need to know to achieve your goals. Pretty good deal, right? If you view your job as a paid opportunity to advance toward your goals, you will be an asset to your boss. You will also be a happier, more productive person. Viewing your job in this manner will allow you to view the difficult people you will inevitably need to deal with as an opportunity to grow. From them and the situations they create, you will learn to negotiate with, side-step around, and draw out the best in others without letting yourself become upset.

Each time you successfully deal with one of these people you will gain confidence and probably friends to add to your support network. The skill of negotiating with difficult people and the confidence you have gained from these encounters comes in handy when you are ready to ask for a promotion or raise - even if your boss happens to be a nice person.

Successful negotiation is not a contest of wills - it is working together to solve a problem or come to an agreement. It is an opportunity to learn how others feel about the issue.

Always be prepared. Know who you are talking with. Always know as much as possible about the person. Know about the person's marital status, family, hobbies, education, difficulties, attitudes, and whatever else you can learn. The information may give you an understanding of the person. If you know the circumstances, you will more easily find the most effective way to get your point across. At the very least, the information will make the person seem more familiar which will give you more self-confidence.

Know the issue - not just your opinions about it. Be able to back up your opinions with reasons and research. If you are asking for a promotion, know the demands of the job in question. Know and be honest about how much of the job you are already qualified to do and how much additional training you will need. If you may not be as qualified as someone else applying, be prepared to negotiate for a smaller-than-offered salary until you are fully trained - remember the training is worth a lot to you. Be enthusiastic and focus on your strengths - don't boast but give an a simple and accurate listing of the strengths you feel make you a good candidate for this job. The strengths you cite can and should include specific job related skills, your present accomplishments on the job, your interest in the field (not just this job), your enthusiasm, your ability to work as a team member, and other personal traits that will be an asset on the job.

Always enter into negotiations with a calm and reasonable manner. Don't let emotion and emotional outbursts have a place at the negotiating table. You must be in control of yourself if you want to get your point across. People are more likely to listen to your views if you present them in a calm and reasonable manner. Present your ideas with conviction but don't try to intimidate others or be demanding. State your views simply, completely, and orderly. When you are expressing an opinion rather than a fact, use a qualifying "I think" or "In my opinion." When others are expressing their views, listen carefully and ask questions if something isn't clear. Don't disagree until you are sure you understand their position. When you do disagree, do so in a pleasant non-threatening way. "I see what you mean, but . . ." or "I can understand why you think that, but . . ." are a couple of good ways to begin a statement of disagreement. Be courteous and leave them a chance to save face.

Be prepared to face people who are not calm and reasonable. Don't let them get to you. Remain calm and reasonable and even be a little sympathetic. Let's say you have entered into negotiations with your boss for a raise and he blows up with, "I can't afford to give you a raise. This business isn't exactly a gold mine. Don't you realize how tough times are?" Remain calm. Put yourself in his shoes. Try to find something you can agree and sympathize with. For instance, look sympathetic and agree, "I know you have a lot of expenses and you work hard to keep this business going. It must be really difficult for you sometimes." This will probably not be the response he expects. It will probably take the wind out of his sails.

Most likely he will calm down, and since you are sympathetic to his problems, he'll be more willing to listen to you. If you remain calm, reasonable, and sympathetic, he will calm down. When he is calmer, discuss with him the reasons you are a valuable asset to him. Don't threaten but calmly and reasonably discuss the bargain a small raise is. With that small raise, he'll be keeping a happy and fully trained employee who knows the company. When you consider the expense of finding and training another individual, giving you a raise is a bargain for your boss.

Play "Let's Make A Deal." Be prepared to deal. Don't expect to get everything you want. If you are willing to gracefully make some concessions, you will be more likely to arrive at a satisfactory deal. After all, a negotiation has at least two opposing sides. This means someone else has something they want, too - even if that something is simply to leave things as they are. Arrive at a compromise that everyone can live with. Remember, you are working at long-range goals, and you may be negotiating with them again.

Developing your potential more fully is a key to happiness and fulfillment. Although we have primarily discussed this in terms of a job, these same concepts can be used in many other areas of your life.

In developing your potential to it's fullest, you will want to become a more efficient person - get more done in less time - so you can take full advantage of the opportunities that you make for yourself. You will note that most effective, successful people seem to accomplish a great deal. It's true that this is partly due to enthusiasm, but there's more to it.

The first barrier to efficiency is procrastination - putting off getting started. Sometimes you know you are procrastinating. You may not want to do the task at hand so you keep putting it off until tomorrow. The thing to do is to look at it from a different angle. If it'll have to be done sometime, tell yourself, "why not do it now, and get it off your back." And that's just where it is! On your back dragging you down. Putting things off makes everything harder to do. If you keep putting things off, you'll soon have several things piling up, and then the sheer number of tasks you have backed up will make it seem impossible to ever get caught up. This affects everything you do try to do.

Sometimes you don't even realize you are putting things off. You may keep yourself extremely busy doing things of little importance to unconsciously give yourself excuses for doing the things you really should be doing. You say to yourself, "Look how busy I am. I just can't get everything done." But the result is the same as when you know you are procrastinating. It soon bogs you down. All you are doing is "running in place."

So how do you beat procrastination?

The first step in beating procrastination is to admit to yourself how often you do it and assessing your methods of doing it. Not very difficult, really, when you become aware of the tactics some of us use to hide from ourselves what we are doing.

The key in overcoming procrastination and becoming more efficient is organization. Plan ahead. Know what you want to accomplish today, this week, and in the long haul.

Make lists. The lists for today will probably be more detailed than the longer-term lists. That's OK. Now look over the lists and rank the tasks in order of importance. Make three or four groupings based on importance. Within each group, star the things you least like to do.

Each day you will have a "today" list to work on. Tackle the tasks that are most important first. If you have several "most important" tasks on your list, take on the least liked things in that grouping before you do the better liked ones. When you have accomplished a task, check it off. You'll be surprised what a good feeling you have when you check things off. What a sense of accomplishment! It's an incentive to do the next task on the list. When you have completed the tasks in the first grouping, begin on the list of next importance. Again do the starred items in that group first. Keep on checking things off as you get them done.

Do you see what is happening? You get the most pressing, least liked tasks out of the way early in the day when you are fresh and rested. As the day goes on you will feel less and less pressure. You have reserved the less important tasks for the end of the day when you will be more tired.

With this system you will have not only increased your efficiency but also reduced some of the stress in your day. Stress can get in the way of efficiency. Your new efficiency will help you develop your potential. It is, in fact, a part of living up to your potential.

Another important part of efficiency is in delegating work. If you are in a position where you have assistants or designated people under your supervision, you need to learn to delegate. If you are not in such a position yet, you still need to know - since you're working on developing your potential you very likely will be some day.

Delegating work is difficult for many people. Some find it hard to ask others to do things for them - others find it hard not to demand that others do tasks. Delegating is an art.

First, you need to realize that the people under your supervision are PEOPLE. Seldom, if ever, should you demand - that takes away self respect. In order to achieve a happy and co-operative crew, you need to help them build self-respect and self-confidence. A happy and co-operative crew is an asset to you. Demands do not promote self-respect and co-operation. Oh, it's probably effective to demand in the short run - but in the long run you will be better off to gain co-operation without demanding.

People who are asked to do a task, are given explanations and clear instructions, and are praised for a job well done will grow in self-respect. They will also respect you as a good supervisor. If you hesitate to ask for their assistance, your crew will feel that you do not trust them or have faith in their abilities. This affects their self-respect and, as a reaction, will affect their respect for you, as well.

When you delegate work, don't delegate just the "junk" tasks. Your crew needs to be given some important tasks to do as well as unimportant ones. The important task gives them a sense of the respect you have for them and the faith you have in their abilities. It's a good idea to save some "junk" tasks for yourself. Perhaps the most respected and effective boss is the one about whom the crew says, "She never gives us anything to do that she wouldn't do herself." Why? Because, by her

actions the boss is saying that, though her position is above theirs, she is still just "plain people."

Delegation of tasks is important because you can gain in effectiveness and get more done if you properly supervise a crew. Don't feel embarrassed or hesitant about delegating work. If it helps you to shine, it helps your crew shine, too. A well-run, effective department is a credit to the whole team. With proper delegating, you can help your crew achieve their potential as well as achieving your own.

All of us have untapped potential - perhaps even areas of genius - that we have neglected to develop. Whether your concept of success has to do with business, love, friendship, sports, a combination of these or something else, more fully developing your potential will help you achieve your goals. If you can learn to assess your potential, set realistic goals, and go after those goals with determination, organization, and purpose, you will use your potential more fully, gain confidence, and be a happier and more successful person.

