PERSONAL SKILLS

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LESSON 1: INCREASING YOUR PRODUCTIVITY AT WORK
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BEING BUSY AND BEING PRODUCTIVE

Being busy

In our modern ‘always-on’ world, there is a constant demand to be always busy, and to be seen to be busy, and responding to everything immediately, and getting tasks done straight away. It can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed.

The economist Cyril Northcote Parkinson, once wrote that “Work expands to fill the time available for its completion.” Or, to put it another way: workers will increase their efficiencies, if they feel there is less time to complete their task.

John Spencer, the editor of Pop Culture and Society, has four rules for understanding the difference between being busy and being productive:

- Being busy is frantic, while being productive is focused.
- Being busy is fueled by perfectionism while being productive is fueled by purpose.
- Being busy is about working harder while being productive is about working smarter.
- Being busy is about being good at everything while being productive is about being great at a few important things.

Solutions to be being busy

What does it actually mean to be ‘busy’ anyway? It means having a great deal to do. When you are constantly busy, you may feel like you have a lot going on. However, in reality, you are probably accomplishing very little! By overloading yourself – because you think you have to, or possibly because of your work culture – you are affecting your ability to complete tasks in the long term and within your role. An added danger is that your personal credibility will suffer as your task and project failure rate increases.

So what’s the solution? You need to rest your brain, take stock, step back, pause in the moment, and be brutally honest about what you can and cannot get done. First, you should develop a new understanding of the dangers of being busy and ‘always on’. And then you can move to a new understanding of the difference between what is urgent and what is important. And ultimately you achieve a better work balance.

The Decision Matrix

Dwight D. Eisenhower, the former general and former president of the United States, devised the ‘Eisenhower Decision Matrix’. He said, “What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important.”

Most people fall into the trap of believing that all urgent activities are also important. This probably comes from conditioning in pre-historic times. Back then, short-term concerns of food, safety, and shelter outshone any longer-term strategy. As a result, we fall into silos of stress, fatigue, and breakdown. And then we are unable to accurately see and assess our priorities.

In his book The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Steven Covey refined Eisenhower’s Decision Matrix into four quadrants.
Quadrant 1

Quadrant 1 contains tasks that are both urgent and important. These tasks require our immediate attention and go towards our long-term goals.

Examples of items in Quadrant 1 include feeling obliged to respond within 24 hours to an email received or tasks not completed due to issues outside your control. Paying your rent or mortgage if you have missed the payment date would be a Quadrant 1 task.

With careful planning, you can reduce the sense of urgency. For example, you could work on your Annual Report for a short maximum time period every day, instead of leaving it until the week before publication to begin. This helps you move some Quadrant 1 tasks into Quadrant 2.

Quadrant 2

Quadrant 2 contains urgent but important tasks. These are tasks without a deadline that help you achieve your goals. These tasks center around relationship building (in work and at home), planning for the future (medium to long-term), and personal recreation (hobbies or studying).

As recommended by Covey, Quadrant 2 is where we should aim to spend the majority of our lives. To operate effectively in Quadrant 2, you comprehend that ‘there is never a right time’ and that we must live and plan our lives to succeed.

Quadrant 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>URGENT</th>
<th>NOT URGENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quadrant I</strong>&lt;br&gt;urgent and important&lt;br&gt;DO</td>
<td><strong>Quadrant II</strong>&lt;br&gt;not urgent but important&lt;br&gt;PLAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quadrant III</strong>&lt;br&gt;urgent but not important&lt;br&gt;DELEGATE</td>
<td><strong>Quadrant IV</strong>&lt;br&gt;not urgent and not important&lt;br&gt;ELIMINATE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Quadrant 3 contains urgent and not important tasks. These are the tasks that require action now, but that are not actually critical to the achievement of our goals. Quadrant 3 items and tasks are usually the result of the actions of others as they prioritize their own work over yours.

Examples of Quadrant 3 tasks include making and taking phone calls, responding to social media, and dealing with colleagues approaching your desk. Emails can also fall into this quadrant, if you find it hard to distinguish between the urgent and the important.

According to Covey, people spend most of their time focused on Quadrant 3 tasks while holding the mindset that they are actually working in Quadrant 1.

In Quadrant 3, while you may be responding to the needs of others, you feel good about your involvement in these tasks. But this does not mean that you are getting stuff done. You may be feeling good marking items off your list, but you also realize that you are not making any progress in your own long-term goals. Quadrant 3 can be personally frustrating.

Quadrant 4 consists of tasks that are neither urgent nor important. These tasks do not assist you in achieving your short or long-term goals. Examples include surfing the web or browsing TV and social media. Obviously, your professional career and work-life-balance would suffer if you spent all of your time, energy, and focus in Quadrant 4. However, this quadrant is of some value, as it allows you work on tasks that help you relax and decompress.

You need to learn to objectively filter what is urgent versus what important for you, and which tasks are actioned in which quadrant. However, this requires constant discipline and honesty.

Being productive

You aim is to be productive, not just busy. You can follow a number of guidelines to achieve this. First, focus on getting important tasks done. And understand the who, what, why, and where that allows you to be productive and position yourself in that zone. Next, aim to be more efficient in less time. In other words, use your time more efficiently. This leads nicely into the next guideline. If you efficiently manage your time, you’ll have ‘spare’ time to be good to yourself and allow yourself a respite from the workplace. Resist being ‘always on.’ Next, practice assertiveness. Don’t automatically agree to every task. Being assertive means learning to discuss, argue, and negotiate. And finally, make sure you have an accurate and up to date big-picture viewpoint.

Productivity in action

Consider this example. Perpetual Guardian, a New Zealand-based company, recently completed an eight-week trial of giving their 200-plus employees a full extra day off per week, while retaining salaries and their conditions of employment. Interestingly, despite the reduction in working hours, their employees were found by Jarrod Haar, Professor of Human Resource Management at Auckland University of Technology, to be a measurable 20 percent more productive. And they claimed to be happier, and role and life satisfaction increased across the company!

TECHNIQUES TO INCREASE PRODUCTIVITY

You can use a number of techniques to increase your productivity at work.
Prioritize

The first one is to prioritize and plan based on urgency and importance. Let’s face it, tasks and projects rarely run according to plan. So, to ensure success, you need to set clear priorities. Even if you use the best project-management software, you still have to prioritize the daily work and avoid blockages. And remember, assigning everything ‘top priority’ is also unrealistic and unworkable. Most tasks and projects are multifaceted, with many moving parts made up of people, processes and materials. So you need to adhere to specific steps.

How can you do this? First, list of all your tasks specifically. Then understand the difference between ‘urgent’ and ‘important.’ An urgent to-do means do it ‘now.’ An important task does not have to be done now, but contributes to our long-term values, goals, and mission.

Third, assess the value of the task against your priorities. And next, order tasks by estimated effort and time taken to complete them. Fifth, be flexible and adaptable in your scheduling and think outside the box. And finally, know when to stop, change the plan, and re-prioritize.

Schedule resources

The second technique is to schedule resources. Resource scheduling is a key step of project management! It is used by organizations to efficiently assign available resources to jobs, tasks, processes, or projects. It enables them to accurately schedule start and end dates based on resource availability.

The resource scheduling methodology involves a number of steps:

1. Begin with a list of the tasks to be actioned and their estimated durations.
2. Consider the barriers and constraints for this list of tasks. These might include required skills, availability of a facility, time differences for staff in different countries, strict deadlines, and so on.
3. Specifically categorize the resources required, such as time required, people available, materials to be ordered, and on-demand funding.
4. Fourth, delegate the resources for each stated category. Take into account the availability of people with regard to their current and forecasted workload, training requirements, upcoming vacation days, and so on. In the case of materials, consider what is available on demand, in stock, subject to shipping delays, licensing, and so on.
5. Coordinate scheduled tasks with their corresponding available resources until all tasks are assigned.
6. Realistically forecast to take into consideration delays in materials, resource availability, and capacity versus demand.

Set deadlines

Cyril Northcote Parkinson, a famous economist, developed Parkinson's Law. This states that “Work expands to fill the time available for its completion.” In other words, the longer you give yourself to complete a task, the longer it will take you to complete the task.

By approaching a task and setting a strict deadline in advance, you can cut off this ‘expansion of time’ and stay focused on your task. For example, you could use your mobile handset to set specific small deadlines and alerts of 60 - 90 minutes to work on your specific task.
Learn to say ‘No’ to meetings

Of course, you must always have a valid reason for saying no. If you are invited to a meeting and you know in advance that you will not be asked to contribute or asked a question, don’t attend the meeting. Defend your time instead.

If you let other people waste it for you, they will willingly do so. So it’s important to say no. But remember, if you do say no, you must have a valid reason for doing so.

Avoid multi-tasking

This might sound counter-intuitive. Many people assume that multi-tasking is a very efficient use of time. However, according to Forbes, “focusing on one task at a time is more efficient.”

Tracking and limiting time spent on tasks is the sixth technique. Take a moment to consider this. Are you really being efficient and effective with an eight-hour day spent sitting at your desk? Realistically and honestly understand your ability to stay ‘on task’.

Gallup surveys have found that the average amount of time that people spent on any single activity before being interrupted or before switching was three minutes and five seconds, on average! After any interruption, most of us tend to not revert back to our task and instead focus our attention elsewhere. Without strict self-discipline to stay on course and avoid multi-tasking, these interruptions make for a disjointed and unproductive day that can become, if not checked, a daily, weekly and life-long negative habit.

Manage email

Despite the advantages of using email, most of us become a slave to our inbox. We receive a little boost of endorphins when we see an email alert. This, coupled with the modern expectation to be ‘always on’, means we feel the need to respond instantly to every incoming email. Better instead to turn off notifications and look at your email at the beginning of the day, just before lunch, just after lunch, and before you go home.

Activate your ‘out of office reply’ when you are at a meeting off-site, or on leave. You may even turn on your ‘out of office’ reply to say that due to large volumes of email being received that you are unavailable until a specific time. This will allow you to prioritize more effectively. Also bear in mind that if an email really is urgent, the sender will probably telephone you directly.

Take food breaks and stay hydrated

This concerns your physical well-being. Beginning your working day with breakfast and then having a constant supply of water will help you improve your productivity. The powerful air-conditioning in modern workplaces can cause you to become dehydrated and this will in turn affect your ability to think and reason. You slow right down.

Skipping food breaks because you are busy is very tempting. However, you need the nutrition to maintain your energy levels. Taking time away from the desk to eat is a welcome break in your working day.
HANDLING INTERRUPTIONS

Impact of interruptions

Interruptions are not just a trivial inconvenience. According to Basex Research, interruptions can eat up 28 billion wasted hours a year, at a loss of almost $1 trillion to the U.S. economy.

Many studies have been conducted on the likely impact of frequent interruptions in the workplace. Basex conducted a report called 'The Cost of Not Paying Attention: How Interruptions Impact Knowledge Worker Productivity'. It found that “A new challenge awaits companies in the knowledge economy: the tools which serve as a lubricant and keep knowledge flowing, such as email, the Web, and instant messaging, interrupt knowledge work as well and cause significant downtime.”

Interruptions need to be categorized as important, urgent, or sometimes both. However, many workers in the knowledge sector are unable to differentiate. So they feel themselves to be ‘always on’ and view everything as being both important and urgent. The importance of a task or project can also vary, based on the requirements of the company.

The Basex research found that 28 percent of each knowledge or information worker’s day may be wasted due to unnecessary interruptions. The research divided interruptive events into four categories: total interruptions, dominant interruptions, distractions, and background activities.

In addition, interruptions can be divided into passive and active. Active interruptions are initiated by the very person who chooses to be interrupted by them. It’s like you interrupt yourself. And passive interruptions arrive from others via email, landline, mobile phone, instant messaging, and so on.

Another study by the University of California found that people compensate for interruptions by working faster. However, this comes at a price, as they experience more stress, higher frustration, time pressure, and effort. Also affected are work rhythms, strategies, and mental states.

Handling interruptions

So how can you tactfully handle workplace interruptions which affect your productivity and ability to focus? Here are some suggestions.

Stand up

When you see a colleague approaching your desk, stand up to greet them. By physically standing up, you are ‘signaling’ your impatience to get back to work. You can also use your arms and head to gesture that you have to ‘get back’ to work. This is subtle and powerful body language. Before standing up, write down or record the last thought in your head. This will allow you to return to your task with less interruption of flow.

Activate 'out of office'

Activate your ‘out of office’ reply and place your mobile and land line on silent call forward when you need to find a quiet couple of hours during a working day. Switch off all notifications. Don’t allow bad habits to form with your colleagues by always responding to them straight away. If you respond to every interruption immediately, you are creating an expectation in the other person and training them that it is acceptable to interrupt you and expect an immediate response.
Ascertain your prime time

At what time of the working day are you at your best in terms of getting stuff done? Make this period your prime time and block it off to get work done. If you can gain 30 to 60 minutes of time that is completely free from interruptions, you can accomplish a lot.

Ask colleagues to defend your time

Ask your colleagues to ‘defend’ you from the approaches of colleagues who are seeking to interrupt you and upset your workflow. Colleagues can field calls for a set period and/or physically but politely block people from approaching you. You may also use a visual clue, such as a tent card with a red triangle, signaling that you are unavailable, or you can put on headphones.

Find a quiet space

Here are some other suggestions. If one is available, use a quiet room to work, free from distractions. Or work from home, if your organization facilitates this. You could go into work earlier to ensure some quiet time to work. Or be proactive and schedule set times within your day for interruptions from colleagues. This reduces the chance of them interrupting you outside of that time.

Distinguish between questions

Distinguish between different types of questions. If it is a quick question, make yourself available a quarter to the hour, every hour of the working day. But if it is a complex question, schedule a dedicated time each day for this type of conversation, so that you can prepare material and get into the right frame of mind.

Know what works best

You could also let colleagues know what type of interruption works best for you. For example, you could say, “If you need to talk to me urgently, come to my work station. If it is less important, telephone me. And if it is less important and not urgent, just instant message or email me.”

Don’t interrupt others

Don’t forget that, in the workplace, you don’t want to cause unnecessary interruptions yourself! So have a careful think before you interrupt a colleague. Try asking if someone is free before you interrupt them. When you look at a colleague, does their body language indicate that they are busy or stressed? And consider whether you can answer this question yourself. Can you come back later? Is your question really that urgent?
LESSON 2:
ADAPTABILITY IN THE WORKPLACE
Cultivating an Adaptable Mind-set

Being flexible

Adaptability in the workplace means being flexible, and having the ability to adapt easily to changing work conditions.

To illustrate the concept of adaptability, let’s begin by imagining a soccer team. Every single person on that team has a different role and a different purpose, but with a common aim - which is to put the ball in the back of the goal net as many times as possible. Team members collectively and individually have to make themselves adaptable to every scenario that arises on the playing field. This way of thinking applies not just to soccer players - it applies to you and your work colleagues too.

Today’s work environment is constantly changing. New and unexpected events happen frequently. When something unexpected happens in the workplace, you tend to be judged by peers and management on the actions you have taken to overcome the problem or adapt to the changing situation.

To adapt to new and ever-changing situations, you need to be able to look at problems in different ways and find new solutions you hadn’t considered before. Most of us unconsciously have strong-held beliefs and fixed mind-sets which cause us to react negatively to new challenges and to people around us.

Highly adaptable people have an open view of the world. They are, with practice, able to solve problems more easily, enjoy a deeper imagination, and tend to be less affected emotionally by setbacks than others. These people can overcome or adjust their held beliefs and fixed mind-sets, and implement new ideas. But this takes a lot of work and persistence.

Becoming adaptable

A recent study published in The European Journal of Social Psychology found that it took on average 66 days (not 21 days, as most people believed) to form a habit, such as eating fruit at lunch, or running for 15 minutes a day. So, it will be a formidable, but workable challenge for you to change your held beliefs and mind-set. Luckily, there are actions you can take to help cultivate an adaptable mind-set and to challenge your held beliefs.

Make time to complete new, important tasks when they arise

Honestly listen to yourself and what you say or think in response to any new issues that arise. Are you commonly responding “I don’t have the time” or “I can’t find the time”? We could say that you should simply ‘make the time’, but that is not realistic. It’s better to think with an open mind, and adapt your routine in order to prioritize the available time in your life. Reframe the task and ask yourself how important it is for you to complete it. If you truly need the time, you will find the time.

With an open mind-set, you can easily reframe arising issues, adapt to new situations, and run with them.

Listen to others

Honestly listen to others and learn how to accept constructive feedback. Your held beliefs and mind-set may condition you to react to feedback as if it is a personal criticism. However, an open,
adaptive mind-set welcomes feedback. As they say, ‘knowledge is power’ and knowledge fuels the ability to take and make decisions. Once you are aware of a situation, then you can decide whether or not you wish to change your behaviors.

**Avoid qualifiers**

Avoid using ‘qualifiers’ when discussing the possibility of adapting to a new direction or idea with other stakeholders. Qualifiers exist for nearly every situation. For example, “Don’t take this personally, but...”, “I know what you’re thinking, but...”, or “This might be a bad idea, but...”.

However, if you do have the tendency to overuse them, it may have a detrimental effect on your personal credibility and overall likelihood of adapting and implementing a new idea. Use qualifiers sparingly, as they can often sound condescending or unnecessary.

**FINDING ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEMS**

In order to be adaptable, you need to have the ability to find alternative solutions to problems as they arise. To do this successfully, it’s important to:

- Give yourself time to think objectively
- Allow yourself the ‘headspace’ to think, re-assess, and adapt, and
- Avoid allowing yourself to feel stressed or overwhelmed

**Tactics for finding alternative solutions**

There are tactics you can use to help you adapt to new environments and find alternative solutions to problems, such as practicing emotional intelligence, brainstorming, and mind-mapping.

**Practice emotional intelligence**

Adapting to a new situation or environment can be an emotional experience at first for many people. People often talk of fear, palpitations, and dismay at the thought of a big change; and although positive feelings may also be felt, such as joy and excitement, they can be equally powerful emotions. Having emotional intelligence means having the capacity to be aware of, control, and express one’s emotions, and to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically. It is widely acknowledged that emotional intelligence is the key to both personal and professional success. Numerous studies have shown that people with high emotional intelligence enjoy greater job performance and personal mental health, and possess strong leadership skills.

Emotional intelligence was recognized in 1964 by Michael Beldoch and gained popularity in 1995 with the science journalist Daniel Goleman’s book *Emotional Intelligence*. According to Goleman, there are five main elements of emotional intelligence:

- Self-awareness
- Self-regulation
- Motivation
- Empathy
- Social skills

If you can learn to recognize your own emotions and those of others, and recognize how emotions influence your actions, then you can discern between different feelings and label them appropriately.
You can then use this emotional information to guide your thinking and adjust your emotions to adapt to a new environment or achieve a particular goal.

**Use brainstorming**

Brainstorming is the method of creating ideas to solve an issue, and so it is a perfect tool to help you to adapt to an arising situation. Brainstorming allows people to draw links between topics in a free-thinking environment, thereby broadening the adaptive-solution space.

There are some simple steps involved in brainstorming:

1. Define the issue arising – be as specific as possible
2. Select a facilitator from within the team
3. Invite people to participate – adaptive thinkers are best
4. Set a time limit – if it can’t be done in an hour, it can’t be done
5. Make it clear that here are no silly ideas – everyone has a say
6. Nothing proposed is criticized
7. Use what other people say to trigger your own thought processes, and

The objective is ‘quantity over quality’ – so through drawing or writing, get everything down

Once you have finished brainstorming, be open-minded about other arising possibilities. Consider what you need to know more about, what can you eliminate, and if there are any barriers. Weigh up all of the possibilities and list potential alternatives. Try not to be influenced by your held beliefs. Select ideas that are adaptable, write them down, and implement them.

**Use mind-mapping**

Another effective method for gaining a clear overview and allowing you to adapt to a new situation is to use Tony Buzan’s ‘Mind-Mapping’ process. According to Buzan, “A mind map is a graphical way to represent ideas and concepts. It is a visual thinking tool that helps structuring information, helping you to better analyze, comprehend, synthesize, recall and generate new ideas. Just as in every great idea, its power lies in its simplicity.”

In the context of gaining an overview and adapting to a complex situation, mind-mapping is an invaluable review tool. A typical mind map looks something like this:
Tony Buzan suggests the following ten steps to make the best use of the mind-map process:

1. Start in the center with an image of the topic, using at least three colors.
2. Use images, symbols, codes, and dimensions throughout your mind map.
3. Select key words and write them using upper- or lower-case letters.
4. Each word or image works best alone, sitting on its own line.
5. The lines should be connected, starting from the central image. The lines become thinner as they radiate out from the center.
6. Make the lines the same length as the word or image they support.
7. Use multiple colors throughout the mind map, for visual stimulation and also for encoding or grouping.
8. Develop your own personal style of mind-mapping (for example, write your own codes).
9. Use emphasis and show associations in your mind map.
10. Keep the mind map clear by using radial hierarchy or outlines to embrace your branches.

While there are numerous apps you can use for brainstorming and mind-mapping, pen and paper or whiteboard are often the best, as using them allows you to slow down your thinking and tap more effectively into your memories, and the information flow onto paper or whiteboard is smoother.

MAXIMIZING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Close the knowledge gap

Being adaptable in the workplace involves being open to acquiring new skills, being willing to learn, and taking steps to diversify your knowledge and maximize learning opportunities.

Begin by considering where there are gaps in your knowledge. Think about who could guide and inform you about what you do not know. It’s not realistic to do all of this on your own – this is most effective when entire organizations are proactive in supporting continuous learning, building new skills, and diversifying held knowledge.
The most productive people in successful organizations are leaders who actively build and maintain a ‘Learning Organization’ that maximizes the learning skills and knowledge of its staff. These dynamic organizations have created a stimulating environment where they continuously rethink, reinvent, and transform themselves. They thrive on the opportunities presented by the challenges and threats facing them within the global business environment. Motivated employees actively seek out and embrace feedback for guidance and direction for self-improvement. Adaptable employees are motivated and always open and receptive to positive, constructive feedback on how they can boost every aspect of their performance.

The Steve Jobs method

Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple, was equally famous and infamous for his ‘reality distortion field’ which was a phrase coined by his colleague, Bud Tribble, to describe Jobs’ ability to convince himself and others to adapt and believe in almost anything with a mix of charm, charisma, bravado, hyperbole, and unflappable persistence. Whether used for good or bad, a ‘reality distortion field’ is said to distort a person or group’s sense of proportion and the scale of the difficulties, and makes them believe that they can adapt to the task at hand and that it is possible.

The first person that Jobs had to convince to be this adaptable was himself. It was his ability to display tenacity and doggedness and to be open to flexibility that allowed him and his teams to overcome seemingly unsurmountable challenges. Jobs trusted his own ability and said: “You can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something—your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down, and it has made all the difference in my life.”

How to maximize learning opportunities

To develop the kind of mind-set that maximizes new learning opportunities when they arise:

- Slow down, and take time to process what is going on around you and to think. For example, don’t skim emails – read them in full and take the time to understand what may be required of you.
- Learn to ‘pause’ in the moment. Pausing and taking breaks helps to increase focus, boosts awareness, reduces stress, and helps to maintain interest and energy levels.
- Practice tenacity to drive your resilience. Resilience helps you to cope with crises and unexpected events, and helps you to frame problems as learning opportunities.
- Finally, consider living with your own ‘reality distortion field’. You can use this way of thinking to convince yourself that you can learn whatever you set your mind to learn, and that you can achieve anything.

THINKING CREATIVELY

Being creative

People who think creatively have the ability to come up with new and unorthodox ways to solve problems and meet challenges whenever called upon. Because of their adaptable approach, they are extremely valuable employees to any company. By thinking creatively, you are approaching or looking at something in a different way. You are ‘thinking outside the box’, you are focused on lateral thinking and not on obvious patterns. Your abilities to think in this way can improve with practice.
A person approaching a problem tends to think about it in either a linear or lateral way. Each approach has its own strengths and neither one is the right or wrong approach, they are just different ways of thinking.

**Linear thinking**

Linear thinkers think according to their held beliefs. Linear thinking is based on logic, rules, and rationality to solve an issue. The thought process is singular, methodical, and focused. Only one path is followed toward completion, which ignores other possibilities and alternatives. The linear thinking process is generally efficient and organized, and enables the thinker to get things done on schedule.

**Lateral thinking**

Lateral thinking allows organizations, teams, and individuals to be creative. Lateral thinking seeks a solution to an issue through unorthodox methods and techniques that are ‘out of the box’ and that would normally be ignored by logical thinkers. Lateral thinking techniques encourage thinkers to disrupt logical thought and arrive at solutions from another angle via a paradigm shift. The lateral thinking process is creative, turns problems into alternative solutions and taps into an unconventional way of thinking. Everyone can be a creative thinker, but only if you are open to thinking ‘outside the box.’

To approach a problem laterally, you need to think a little differently and challenge your held beliefs and personal paradigms. For example:

- If you need to press a shirt and your iron is broken, why not heat up a clean frying pan on your stove and use that instead?
- Remember Henry Ford? His idea for the mass production of his Model T came from observing the production line in a meat-packing plant.
- And companies like Ryanair, Uber, and Airbnb have all challenged the paradigms of their marketplace and customer base.

**Six Thinking Hats**

'Six Thinking Hats' is a time-tested, proven, and practical thinking tool devised by the creative thinking guru Edward de Bono. His techniques focus on enhancing the structure of thinking, so that decision-making and idea evaluation can be dramatically improved.

The Six Thinking Hats method uses ‘parallel thinking’ as an alternative to traditional ways of thinking. It’s a simple mental metaphor that involves six different colored hats – blue, white, green, red, yellow, and black - that can be put on or taken off to indicate a mode of thinking. One hat is worn at a time by an individual, or group in parallel, allowing more thorough, expansive thinking, and increased creativity and decision-making.

**Six Hats framework**

The Six–Hats tool provides a framework to help people think clearly and thoroughly by directing their thinking attention in one direction at a time:

- **Blue Hat** thinking focuses on managing the thinking process and symbolizes the thinking about thinking – that is, the thinking that will be required in order to plan for action. Questions
that encourage Blue Hat thinking include: “What problem am I facing?”, “How can I best define this problem?” and “What is my goal and outcome?”

**White Hat** thinking focuses on data, facts, and information that is known or needed. It is neutral and objective. Questions that encourage White Hat thinking include: “What do I know about this problem?”, “What don’t I know about this problem?”, or “What can I learn from this problem?”

**Green Hat** thinking focuses on creativity and coming up with ideas, alternatives, possibilities, and solutions to problems. Questions that encourage Green Hat thinking include: “Could this be done in a different way?”, “How can I look at this problem from a unique perspective?” and “How can I think outside the box about this?”

**Red Hat** thinking focuses on feelings, hunches, gut instinct, and intuition with the understanding that feelings are sometimes inexplicable and can change. Questions that encourage Red Hat thinking include: “What is my gut telling me about this solution?”, “What are my feelings telling me about the choice I am about to make?”, and “Based on my feelings, is there a better way to go about this?”

**Yellow Hat** thinking focuses on values and benefits, and symbolizes positive points and perspectives. It considers logical reasons and the ways in which ideas can be useful. Questions that encourage Yellow Hat thinking include: “How can I best approach this problem?”, “What positive outcomes could result from this action?”, and “What are the long-term benefits of this action?”

**Black Hat** thinking focuses on difficulties, potential problems, and weaknesses. It looks at the logical reasons why something may not work, and the risks and dangers that may be involved. Questions that encourage Black Hat thinking include “What is the drawback to this way of thinking?”, “What are the potential risks and consequences associated with this?” and “Do I have the necessary resources, skills, and personal or operational supports?”

### Six Hats benefits

Using the Six Thinking Hats method has many benefits, including:

- Better, more productive thinking and ideas
- Improved communication, collaboration, and understanding
- Increased levels of creative thinking and fresh ideas, and
- Shorter, more productive, focused, and effective meetings
LESSON 3: MANAGING YOUR TIME EFFECTIVELY
INTRODUCTION TO TIME MANAGEMENT

Using your time

We all have the same amount of time each day. But how we use those twenty-four hours is up to us! Using your time to best effect takes a bit of planning - and you need to be realistic about your own personal abilities and capabilities.

Your time-management ability with your peers, and with internal and external customers, will have a direct impact on people’s opinion about your credibility. Why is this? Well, for example, if you say ‘yes’ to everything, then people will initially like you for your ‘can-do attitude’ and willingness to assist. But what if you actually can’t do everything that you promise? Over time, people will come to the conclusion that you can do nothing effectively at all, as you are always overwhelmed.

Defend your time

The first and most important thing to remember about effective time management is that you have to defend your time. Otherwise, others will waste it for you!

To ensure you can use your time effectively, you should be realistic about a number of things before you commit to completing any task. First of all, think about what you can and cannot achieve within a normal day. And also consider your own skills and knowledge. Are they sufficient for you to complete the tasks?

What is your personal commitment to the timeframe? Don’t forget to include the time required for planning, resourcing, completion, and review. And remember to take into account your own need to commute, eat, sleep, and have family time.

When thinking about the time needed to complete a task, you also need to consider the other people on your team. Are they equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge? Will they work faster or slower than you? Do you have to check their work? Do they have to check your work?

And consider the wider work environment. Think about the hidden agendas in the workplace. What’s high priority to you might be low priority to others!

Guidelines for responding to requests

One of the biggest time management challenges you face is effectively dealing with people who make requests on your time. You can use a few useful guidelines to help you respond to these requests:

- Don’t apologize for saying ‘no’.
- When replying face-to-face, always use a slow, calm voice when replying to people. If you’re replying via email, use as few words as possible.
- Before you reply, make sure you understand what you’re being asked. Listen, paraphrase, and empathize with any request. Get to the root of the perceived problem as soon as possible.
- However you decide to respond, always explain yourself clearly and simply. Repeat your answer several times if necessary, using the same language.
- Use depersonalized language like ‘The situation is...’ rather than ‘I think...’ Avoid turning the situation into a potential personal conflict.
Remember, even if you've already said ‘yes’, you can change your mind and then say ‘no’ if your situation changes.

When it comes to time management, people often say "I don't have the time" or "I can't find the time." Now, you could argue that people need to 'make the time' for important tasks. However, you have to do more than that. You should instead re-imagine the task in question, and ask yourself, "How important is it for me to complete this task?"

This is where priorities come into play. You may find that you cannot make the time to complete a work task, but you can find the time to go online and spend time checking out hotels and flights for your next vacation. What this shows is that you are not prioritizing the available time in your life. If you need the time, you will find the time. But, to do this, you need to prioritize the task that you need to complete.

**BENEFITS OF EFFECTIVE TIME MANAGEMENT**

You probably instinctively know that it makes sense to manage your time. But what are the actual benefits of effective time management?

**Being in control**

Well, think about it. How do you feel when you think you don’t have enough time? Stressed out, or even panicked! But knowing what has to be done, when, and by whom, allows you to experience calmness. You feel in control of your time and your tasks. In addition, you open yourself up to new ideas and challenges in work.

When you’re in control of your time, you're better able to defend your time against those who would knowingly waste it for you.

**Earning a reputation**

In fact, you begin to get a reputation as the person who gets stuff done. People admire how you manage your time and succeed with your tasks. This, in turn, means you are better positioned to seek promotion.

This positive reputation has other benefits too. For example, peers like to work with you, because you are successful in the workplace.

**Feeling calmer**

And think about the personal benefits. Because you are calmer, you sleep better and are easier to be around. You have high energy, and your personal and workplace relationships improve.

**Getting more done**

With good time management, you get more done in less time. This, in turn, gives you more free time, and helps you focus on what is important, and not just on what seems to be urgent. You can then put your freed-up time to good use, such as further training and learning, or other steps to develop your career. All these benefits also improve your overall well-being.
PRIORITIZING TASKS AND SETTING GOALS

Urgent versus important

Managing time effectively involves prioritizing tasks and setting goals. In order to do this, you first need to be able to distinguish between what is important and what is urgent.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, the former general and president of the United States, devised the ‘Eisenhower Decision Matrix’. It was later refined and popularized by Stephen Covey in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

Eisenhower said, “What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important.”

We react to ‘urgent’ tasks and ‘important’ tasks in different ways. We face urgent tasks in a reactive mode. This mode tends to make us negative, hurried, and most of all defensive. If something is urgent, we feel we need to do it now.

We face important tasks, on the other hand, in a responsive mode. This mode makes us rational, composed, and open to new opportunities. Our important tasks are what contribute to our long-term values, goals, and mission.

There is a difference between what is urgent and what is important. However, most people fall into the trap of believing that all urgent activities are also important.

In our modern ‘always-on’ world, we can get overwhelmed by the sense that everything is urgent and must be done immediately. As the media theorist Douglas Rushkoff claims, we are currently experiencing ‘present shock’. In other words, “we live in a continuous, always-on ‘now’” and lose our sense of long-term narrative and direction.

This causes us to fall into silos of stress, fatigue, and breakdown. Over time, we are unable to accurately see and assess our priorities.
The Decision Matrix

Covey refined Eisenhower’s Decision Matrix into four quadrants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>URGENT</th>
<th>NOT URGENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quadrant I</td>
<td>Quadrant II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>urgent and important</td>
<td>not urgent but important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DO</td>
<td>PLAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quadrant III</td>
<td>Quadrant IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>urgent but not important</td>
<td>not urgent and not important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DELEGATE</td>
<td>ELIMINATE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Quadrant 1 consists of tasks that are urgent and important. These include crises, deadlines, and urgent problems.
- Quadrant 2 consists of tasks that are important, but not urgent. These include relationships, planning, and recreation.
- In Quadrant 3, we find tasks that are urgent, but not important. These might include interruptions and meetings, and simple but urgent activities.
- Quadrant 4 consists of tasks that are neither urgent nor important. These include time wasters, pleasant activities, and trivia.

As you can imagine, you should be focusing on Quadrant 1, the realm of urgent and important tasks. These tasks require our immediate attention and go towards our long-term goals.

**Quadrant 1**

Let’s dive into each quadrant a bit more. Examples of items in Quadrant 1 include feeling obliged to respond within 24 hours to an email received or tasks not completed due to issues outside your control. Paying your rent or mortgage if you have missed the payment date would be a Quadrant 1 task.
With careful planning, you can reduce the sense of urgency. For example, you could work on your Annual Report for a short maximum time period every day, instead of leaving it until the week before publication to begin. This helps you move some Quadrant 1 tasks into Quadrant 2.

**Quadrant 2**

According to Covey, the ideal is to be able to spend most of your time on important tasks without that stressful sense of urgency. This is Quadrant 2. These are tasks without a deadline that help you achieve your goals. These tasks center around relationship building (in work and at home), planning for the future (medium to long term), and personal recreation (such as hobbies or studying). To operate effectively in Quadrant 2, you need to accept that there is never a ‘right time’ to do something. You can’t wait around for the ‘right time’, you must live and plan your life to succeed.

**Quadrant 3**

Here we find tasks that are urgent, but not important. These are the tasks that do require action now, but that are not actually critical to the achievement of our goals. Often, tasks end up in your Quadrant 3 because of the actions of others. They are prioritizing their work over yours.

Examples of Quadrant 3 tasks include making and taking phone calls, responding to social media, and dealing with colleagues approaching your desk. Emails can also fall into this quadrant, if you find it hard to distinguish between the urgent and the important.

According to Covey, people spend most of their time focused on Quadrant 3 tasks, while thinking they are actually working in Quadrant 1. In other words, they are working on tasks that are not really as important as they think they are.

In Quadrant 3, while you may be responding the needs of others, you feel good about your involvement in these tasks. But this does not mean that you are getting stuff done. You may be feeling good marking items off your list, but you also realize that you are not making any progress in your own long-term goals. Quadrant 3 can be personally frustrating.

**Quadrant 4**

Here we find tasks that are neither urgent nor important. These tasks do not help you achieve your short- or long-term goals. Example include surfing the web or browsing TV and social media. Obviously, your professional career and work-life-balance would suffer if you spent all of your time, energy, and focus in Quadrant 4. However, this quadrant is of some value, as it allows you work on tasks that help you relax and decompress.

**The quadrants in action**

So how does all this talk of quadrants help you more effectively manage your time? You need to understand the distinction between urgency and importance. Start to objectively filter and prioritize what is important over what is merely urgent. Deciding which tasks are actioned in which quadrant requires constant vigilance, discipline, and honesty.

Consider this example. Every month you have a system in place to pay a major bill, such as your rent or mortgage. Then this becomes a Quadrant 2 task, because it is important, but not urgent. You’ve put in place a plan whereby your salary is paid into your bank account, and from there the lender draws down an agreed amount at the same time each month.
What happens if this system fails because you did not have enough funds in your account to cover the payment? Then this important task suddenly becomes urgent too! If urgent and immediate action is not taken, there may be extreme consequences. It is much better to plan to have a systemized payment in place within Quadrant 2.

Once you have filtered and prioritized your tasks, you can set goals to help you achieve them. Regardless of where you work, goals give you direction and purpose to steer your daily activities to success.

Here’s another example. Suppose you decide you are going to drive to Martina’s house. But you don’t know where Martina lives. Your plan is to drive around until you recognize her house. This sounds like a workable strategy. However, it could take decades to find Martina’s house, and even then you would have to be very, very lucky to find it.

Believe it or not, this style of thinking is commonly found in many companies. Although they might not leave success at the mercy of pure chance, many companies have a similar lack of clarity about their destination and how long it will take to get there.

Consider this statement: “We’re going to be the biggest provider of widgets in Europe.” That’s a worthy goal, of course. But what do you actually have to do to become the biggest? Like driving to Martina’s house, such statements of intent are going to be impossible to achieve unless an appropriate roadmap is created.

**Best practices**

To help you achieve your goals, follow these best practices.

- **Write down your goals.** Talking them out won’t work. By using pen and paper, rather than an electronic device, it takes longer – and this is a good thing, as the slower pace allows you to clearly visualize your goals and lodge them in your subconscious mind as the first step.
- **Dig into each goal, and list and specify the details.** This includes the when, who, how many, cost, colors, and so on. The more specific you can be, the more information your mind has to work with to achieve your goals.
- **Tick off the individual specifics as you achieve them.** This will give you a more accurate picture of your journey to date, and of what comes next.
- **Make sure your goals are realistic.** Can you really do this? Do you need assistance? What will it cost? How long will it take? Imagine that your goal is to become a millionaire within a year. That’s great! But if you currently earn $50,000 per year, your goal isn’t realistic, is it?
- **Begin with the end in mind.** Start with your destination, and work backwards from there to define the steps of your roadmap.

**SAVING AND CREATING TIME**

What strategies can you use to save - and thereby create extra - time?

**Use the Pareto Principle**

One useful strategy is to set time limits and use the Pareto Principle. This was named after the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto in 1895. Pareto noticed that 80% of Italy’s wealth belonged to only 20% of the population. He discovered that nearly all economic activity was subject to his principle. In
business today, Pareto’s 80/20 rule can be applied to learn how to prioritize your tasks: by days, weeks, and months.

This principle suggests that only two out of ten items on a to-do list will be worth more than the other eight items grouped together. In other words, 20% of their tasks are as valuable as the other 80% combined. Ironically, people tend to procrastinate on the 10% to 20% of tasks which are valuable to their success, and instead focus on the remaining 80%, which have very little bearing on their success.

According to time management guru, Brian Tracey: “The rule for this is: resist the temptation to clear up small things first.” If you start your day working on low-value tasks, you will soon develop the habit of always starting and working on low-value tasks. It’s better to complete the hardest, most important, task of your day first. Schedule your recurring tasks within the day.

**Create a task list**

This will enable you to become motivated about the task, get organized, delegate, and set milestones. Begin by listing your tasks and sub-tasks. Aim to break up the larger tasks into sub-tasks, so that the individual or even the team is not suddenly overwhelmed with work.

When creating tasks, be detailed, involve the entire team, and keep the timeline very much to the fore. Remember which people and processes worked together in the past and those that did not. Sort your tasks into priority, and allocate responsibility accordingly.

Using colors will help you to quickly scan your task list: for example, red for ‘must do’ tasks; yellow for tasks that you should do if you have the time; and green for low-priority tasks that you can postpone or delegate. Finally, tick off tasks as you complete them. This will help to motivate you and give you a sense of progress.

**Plan ahead**

Aim to plan ahead, strategically and realistically. Enlist the strategic thinking of others.

**Delegate**

This is an important tool for using others’ actions to help you complete your tasks. Before delegating, ask yourself the question: Is this task suitable for delegation, or would it be better to carry it out yourself?

So how can you delegate successfully?

**Step 1: Select the individual or team**

You should delegate and ask a team to make its own decisions, bearing in mind that team’s abilities. You can use a rising scale of levels of delegated freedom when working with your team.

**Step 2: Assess ability**

When delegating a task, consider your instructions to the other person. Do they have the necessary skills and experience to get the job done? Do they need task-specific training?
**Step 3: Explain reason**

Make it clear *why* you are delegating the task. Imagine if I were to approach you and state that there was a very important task that I wanted you to complete. I might say that there was no-one else with your skill-set who could do it, and that most importantly I *trust* you to complete this task for me. Doesn’t that become an extremely powerful motivation for you?

**Step 4: Agree what resources are needed**

In advance, confer and agree on what the person requires to complete the delegated task. Discuss and agree what is required to get the job done. Consider resources, people available to assist, equipment, additional assistance, and so on.

**Step 5: State required results**

Clarify understanding by getting feedback from the other person. How will you jointly measure this task to completion?

**Step 6: Confirm deadlines**

Ensure the person being delegated understands what you want done, by when, and to what level. Also, if they have any issues or are unsure, ask the person to approach you. Make sure you are both in agreement at the beginning as to what is expected.

**Step 7: Frequently communicate**

It is up to you to inform this person’s peers of the task they have been delegated, especially if there are internal politics to be considered. In the early stages of the delegation, arrange frequent check-ins, which can diminish in frequency as the project progresses. Just prior to completion, arrange a further series of check-ins.

**Step 8: Feed back on results**

After the task has been completed, all stakeholders must be briefed on performance and if results were achieved. Also, all issues arising must be addressed. Accept the failures, thank the person, and ensure they receive positive credit for their effort.

**Batch your tasks**

Despite what you might think, there’s nothing more unproductive than multitasking! Trying to do many different things at the same time – and getting none of them fully completed – is not a good habit. According to time management guru Brian Tracey in his book *Eat That Frog!*: “It’s estimated that the tendency to start and stop a task – to pick it up, put it down, and come back to it – can increase the time necessary to complete that task by as much as 500 percent.”

To avoid this negative ‘pick it up, put it down’ behavior, try to batch your tasks. By batching all of your tasks together, you enable your brain to reach peak proficiency and focus on only one task at a time. For example, write all of your emails as a batch or make all of your phone calls as a batch. By batching, you improve your workflow.
**Avoid procrastinating**

Often, the main reason for procrastinating about important tasks is that they appear so large and difficult when you first approach them.

Have you heard of the Salami Method? This is where you can ‘slice’ the task down to size. And then, by completing one slice at a time, you are steadily eating away at the whole project. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time!

**ELIMINATING PERSONAL TIME STEALERS**

Let’s now identify some personal time stealers - and how you can eliminate them!

**Poor internal communication**

You can combat this by setting up out-of-office replies on email accounts and setting up call forwarding.

**Excessive viewing of email**

A good tip is to set specific times for viewing email. This could be first thing in the morning, just before lunch, just after lunch, and just before you go home in the evening.

**Interruptions**

Interruptions from personal and electronic sources can steal a lot of time. To eliminate electronic interruptions, turn off all non-essential notifications on your desktop and mobile handset. And to deal with personal interruptions, close your office door. If you stand up when people approach you, it sends out a clear signal that you’re keen to get back to work.

**Meetings**

Arguably one of the most common time stealers is meetings. How can you deal with them? Do not attend a meeting if you are not going to contribute or be asked a question. Ensure there is an agenda and a time limit.

**Procrastination**

This occurs when you get stuck at the start of a task. If starting a task is a problem, don’t start at the beginning, just start anywhere! Once you start working, you develop a sense of forward momentum and a feeling of accomplishment.

**Distractions**

These can steal a lot of your time. So keep your office environment and desk free from clutter.

**Perfectionism**

This can also lead to lost time. Learn to do tasks faster. Learn to speed-read.
Lack of planning

Make a realistic plan for your day. Ensure your objectives, priorities, and goals are clear. Automate your diary.

Do you regard traveling as wasted time? Try to complete small tasks while travelling.

Stress

You may be your own worst enemy. For example, do you suffer from lack of self-discipline? Get yourself to take action regardless of your emotional state.

Stress and fatigue can sap away your time. So ensure you have adequate rest. Take a vacation to recharge, and work on achieving a work-life balance.

Unforeseen events

Do you find yourself constantly fighting fires at work? Try to pre-empt potential problems. Build time into schedules to cater for unforeseen events.

Indecision

This can waste a lot of your time, and other people’s too. Learn to make clear and well-informed decisions.

Finally, delegate tasks where you can to suitably qualified personnel.

Once you are aware of your worst time stealers, you can take steps to tackle them!
LESSON 4: DEALING WITH SETBACKS
ACCEPTING AND RESPONDING TO SETBACKS

Setbacks

We simply cannot control everything that happens in our lives. Inevitably, things happen that are outside of our control. We call them setbacks, because they set us back in our plans of action in work and in life. And guess what? Everyone has experienced a setback before. So you are not alone!

How do you feel when you face a setback? Most of us get depressed and experience low-energy. This is because we are conditioned to view a setback as something negative, or a failure.

However, if you change your mindset, you can change your reaction to a setback. Indeed, you could view a setback as forward progress in camouflage. You don't have to see it as a negative thing. It all depends on how you look at it!

The first step is to accept your failures and the situations in which they occur. In other words, own the setback or failure. Then try to gain an accurate understanding of why things went wrong. And when you understand what happened, then strategize, plan, action, and learn from the failure.

Responding to setbacks

So how should you respond to a setback?

- **Acknowledge the pain and turn toward the problem.** If you're disappointed, acknowledge that disappointment. Don't try to ignore the feelings. But then focus on the problem in order to unearth why the setback occurred.

- **View the setback as an opportunity for change.** What do you need to improve in order to prevent similar setbacks occurring in the future? Commit to improving. Pick one small, distinct change and make a change. Make that change today!

- **View the setback also as an opportunity to learn.** After all, if you are not making mistakes, perhaps you are not trying hard enough.

- **Don't believe the negative self-talk.** It's easy to fall into a negative spiral when things don't work out. Try to take a step back and reason with yourself. Acknowledge the emotions, of course, but analyze the situation logically.

- **Gather facts so that you can develop an accurate overview of what's happening.**

- **Consider the narrow and wider elements of the situation.** Put the setback in its proper context.

- **Consider the impact of the setback on you personally, and on the organization.** What are the consequences? Bear in mind costs, such as time, resources, and money.

Building support

Remember, you don't have to deal with setbacks on your own. Gather a supportive team around you. Listen to their advice. Consider your life and work environment when you experience a setback. Does it support you or is it perhaps sabotaging your efforts to recover from the setback?

Ever notice how some people seem to bounce back from failure better than others do? Well, bouncing back from failure actually starts before the failure occurs! Again, it's all about mindset. You need to develop a dogged, tenacious outlook. Say to yourself, "Yes, I will fail sometimes. However, I will also always pick myself up, learn from that failure, and go again!"
Bouncing back in action

To help you respond to failure and bounce back from it, consider the saying, "Feel afraid, yet choose to act." Have you ever been in this situation? Ever done something that initially made you feel afraid? Let's dig into that a bit.

What did you observe, think, and feel at the time? Suppose you decided to go on a rollercoaster. You might have initially felt butterflies in your stomach as soon as you saw the rollercoaster.

What did you or the people around you say, think, and do to help you face your fear? You might have said to yourself, “Hey, if children can go on it, so can I!”

Remember how you felt when you took action. At what point did your fear start to go down? How did you feel afterwards?

Now think back to a situation in your childhood when you faced your fear. Was it the same or different than the first adult situation you described?

Finally, think of a workplace situation you are currently facing that creates fear or anxiety as a result of a setback. What are you most afraid of? For example, you might be afraid that you won’t be able to answer a specific question in a meeting.

Now consider, is there a way to apply the same skills you used in the two earlier situations to be more courageous in this situation? If you survived the rollercoaster, what do you need to do to survive the meeting? Remind yourself that you have the necessary skills and have used them successfully in the past. Ask yourself, what mental or environmental barriers stand in the way of using these skills? How can you cope with or get rid of these barriers?

Repeat this exercise over the course of a week, using each example of courage we just looked at. On the seventh day, come up with your own bespoke definition of courage, one that is most meaningful to you. Now repeat the whole exercise, with this definition. This then becomes your own pathway to finding your courage to bounce back from a setback.

IDENTIFYING THE REASON FOR A SETBACK

Viewing setbacks with clarity

Although they are usually unpleasant, setbacks do happen for a reason. And viewing a setback with clarity is key to helping you find that reason. If you cannot be clear about what has occurred, and why, you will not be able to respond effectively to the setback.

So, after you’ve recovered from your initial disappointment, your first step is to investigate the setback fully. Now, this isn’t a 'blame game'! Remember that knowledge is power, and you need the knowledge to ascertain how and why the setback occurred. This means you need to examine the processes, people, politics, bad luck, changing market, organizational politics and culture, and so on. And be objective. Filter out your own perceptions and emotions to gain clarity. Just gather the facts!

The investigation will help you to get an overview of all of the facts. Then you can use this overview to make informed decisions.
Buzan's mind-mapping process

A useful method you can use to gain an overview of a situation is Tony Buzan’s mind-mapping process. Buzan developed this thinking technique, having been inspired by other great thinkers such as Leonardo da Vinci and Albert Einstein.

According to him, “A mind map is a graphical way to represent ideas and concepts. It is a visual thinking tool that helps structuring information, helping you to better analyze, comprehend, synthesize, recall and generate new ideas. Just as in every great idea, its power lies in its simplicity.”

In the context of gaining an overview and comprehending a possibly complex situation, mind-mapping is an invaluable review tool. There are numerous apps you can use for this process. However, pen and paper or whiteboard are best, because using them allows you to tap more effectively into your memories and the information flow is smoother.

Using mind-mapping

Tony Buzan has developed ten tips for effective maps:

- Start in the center with an image of the topic, using at least three colors.
- Use images, symbols, codes, and dimensions throughout your mind map.
- Select keywords and add them to the map using upper- or lower-case letters.
- Remember that each word or image is best left alone, sitting on its own line.
- Pay particular attention to the lines in the map. Remember that the lines should be connected, starting from the central image. The lines become thinner as they radiate out from the center.
- Make the lines the same length as the word or image they support.
- Use multiple colors throughout the mind map, for visual stimulation and also for encoding or grouping.
Develop your own personal style of mind mapping. This could involve writing your own codes.
Your map needs to be clear at a glance, so use emphasis and show associations in your mind map.
Keep the mind map clear by using radial hierarchy or outlines to embrace your branches.

Investigating and discussing

At this stage, the initial panic after the setback should have subsided, and you have established an overview of what happened. It's now time to get everyone together to discuss what occurred. In this process, do not jump to uninformed conclusions. At the debriefs, people will inevitably share opinions and conclusions. Now, this can be a useful group exercise because it gives people a chance to vent frustrations. However, biases and internal politics might come out and the collective opinion may just be incorrect. Your opinions could veer the team in the wrong direction.

Remember what we said about the blame game? Everyone tends to blame everyone else, internally and especially externally. Most people think they are doing a great job and so the setback must be somebody else’s fault! Don’t fall into this negative thinking trap. A setback is usually caused by a combination of factors, some obvious and some obscure, and most often outside of your control.

However, be prepared to ask tough questions of yourself and your team as to why and how this setback occurred. Challenge versions of events that you are given, and dig down to the root cause. Keep asking questions and listen carefully to those answers. And then ask more questions and repeat until you move beyond blame. Keep going until the root cause is exposed.

You can use mind mapping to help your colleagues map out their own version of events. Use the knowledge you have gathered from your investigation to locate and focus on the internal processes and then who was at fault.

Make sure you are fully informed as to the root cause of the setback before you engage with those that were responsible. You need to make sure that you don’t blame the wrong people for the setback! Once you’ve identified who was responsible, support them in learning where they went wrong, offer mentoring and retraining, and monitor future performance.

Whether you are a manager or employee, everyone needs to focus on the root cause of the setback in order to uncover its learning value. Otherwise, the problem will reoccur again and again.

**DEMONSTRATING RESILIENCE**

Cultivating a resilient outlook

You need resilience in order to deal with setbacks. But what exactly is resilience? Essentially, it is the ability to bounce back from the problems that life throws your way. Resilience is a very useful trait to develop!

Here are some tips to help you cultivate a resilient outlook.

**Aim to be mindful**

Being mindful means you pay attention, without judgment or prejudice, to the present moment. Think of it as ‘living in the now’. When you are mindful, you have an overview of yourself and can view
yourself from afar, objectively and compassionately. You live in the moment and you are wide awake to your present.

**Be self-aware**

Linked to being mindful, you need to be self-aware. Being self-aware means that you have a clear understanding of who you really are, in terms of your skills, values, emotions, and character. You know what makes you tick. You are acutely aware of your drivers, such as your emotions, strengths, weaknesses, values, vision, mission, and motivations. When you are self-aware, you’re able to look into the mirror and view how others see you. You understand their perceptions of you and how you are viewed by the outside world. And if you don’t like what you see, you can alter your behavior.

**Practice self-care**

Remember what we said earlier about being compassionate when you’re mindful? In order to be resilient, you need to look after yourself. Practice self-care. Real self-care means being actively engaged in yourself as you go about your daily life. You have a strong grasp of who you are as you actively engage with others around you.

**Have a purpose**

Having a purpose helps you build up resilience. When you’re purposeful, you understand where you stand in society and in the world, and how you contribute to that society. Our purpose could come from our job or from membership of a club, or indeed many other sources. Our purpose gives us direction and meaning. And when we act with purpose for those around us, we have a greater sense of belonging.

**Build positive relationships**

Speaking of belonging, you can cultivate resilience by building positive relationships. Having positive relationships means supporting others and yourself. Having friends in life and work is very valuable. You have people around you, with whom you can be yourself. These people make you feel fulfilled, supported, and ultimately happier – in good times and bad throughout our lives.

**Increasing resilience**

You can use a number of simple strategies to increase your resilience.

- Use the concept of **failure as your personal learning tool**. To put it another way, learn from your mistakes!
- **Don’t dwell on your past mistakes.** Bounce back from them. Build resilience by forgiving yourself and moving on.
- Instead of dwelling on the past, **focus on your future goals**. This will help to spur you on! Focus on potential future achievements. Motivate yourself towards the future, and away from your setback.
- The going does indeed get tough at times. What should you do then? **Keep going!** As Elon Musk says, “Persistence is very important. You should not give up unless you are forced to give up.” So don’t give up – ever!
- Do you suffer from **imposter syndrome**? This is a psychological pattern where people doubt their accomplishments and have a persistent internalized fear of being exposed as a ‘fraud’.
When you have a setback, don’t convince yourself that you’re a failure and a fraud. This will drag you down.

Accept that setbacks happen, this is life, and this is normal.

Remember the American inventor Thomas Edison? He famously made over one thousand unsuccessful attempts to perfect his lightbulb design. Each one ended in failure!

A reporter asked him, “How did it feel to fail one thousand times?”

Edison replied, “I didn’t fail one thousand times. The lightbulb was an invention with one thousand steps.”

**TURNING SETBACKS INTO OPPORTUNITIES**

When dealing with setbacks, it’s important to remember that, in many cases, setbacks can be turned into opportunities. A setback could be an opportunity to grow, gain new insights and knowledge, streamline processes, advance in new directions, and to succeed in future endeavors. It all comes back to your mindset. If you have tenacity, doggedness, and resilience, you can always see the silver lining in any failure and open yourself up to new opportunities.

**First, do nothing**

When dealing with setbacks, the first thing to do is nothing. It’s important not to over-react. Don’t give into blind panicking or indulge in blaming others. Do nothing. Pause in the moment instead. Take time to physically pause, take a deep breath, and compose yourself. Step back from the situation for a minute. Consider the specific setback and the resulting challenges it brings. And only then consider a range of solutions and possible associated opportunities.

**Invite negative personal feedback**

We all know that it’s not very pleasant to listen to negative feedback about ourselves! However, it can prove incredibly useful, as it may unearth information you would not otherwise get to hear.

You can gather negative personal feedback in two ways.

**Negative assertion**

This involves giving negative feedback to yourself. Not an easy thing to do, I know! But, by stating something negative about yourself, you can take ownership of your weaknesses and mistakes assertively. And you are not hiding from your weaknesses.

Then, if someone makes a fair criticism of your setback, your response should be: “Yes, I agree.” You are being honest and could benefit from this criticism. The critic, in turn, now knows that you have listened and are considering what they have said. And your honesty is also likely to disarm the critic!

**Negative enquiry**

This is where you proactively invite criticism. Again, this may not be very pleasant, but it will enable you to find out precisely why someone is angry, displeased, or critical of your actions regarding the setback. It is called negative enquiry because you ask specific questions, which could result in you hearing something negative about yourself and your actions. For example, “Why do you feel that I did
not give you enough information to complete the task?” By asking questions like this, you gain more knowledge, and can learn from and respond to the situation.

Remember, knowledge is power. If you do not ask the tough questions, you will never get to hear what it is that you need to listen to, to turn setbacks into opportunities.

**Study others who have previously failed in your company or sector**

People are more willing these days to share with others how and why they failed, what they learned, and how they got back on track. We all need to learn from our own mistakes, but it can be very useful to try to learn from other people’s mistakes too. This may help you gain useful insights that you can turn to your own advantage.

However, as you can imagine, you need to be diplomatic in this situation. Be careful how you phrase your questions when approaching a peer or colleague about a previous setback. Do not ask them to ‘help’ you to understand the reasons for their setback. Asking another person for ‘help’ often triggers a fear response. The person being asked for help is now imagining having to revisit the setback, which may produce emotional feelings of failure in their memories.

How you frame your question can determine the type of response you receive. So don’t ask, “Can I ask for your help to understand the recent setback?” Frame the question as appealing to the experience and knowledge of the other person. Ask, “Can I ask for your assistance to understand the recent setback?” Asking for ‘assistance’ is less of an emotional trigger than asking for ‘help.’

**Opportunity in action**

For example, I coached a number of scientists in a cancer research facility. They were tasked with one overall aim: to find a cure for cancer. Every three weeks, they had to make a video call to their Canadian and Belgian investors to brief them on progress to date.

On a daily basis, they mostly failed in their primary objective. They hadn’t yet found a cure for cancer. However, from their list of failures, they gathered valuable research data and defined new processes. These were then patented and turned into revenue streams. Out of continuing failure came a return on investment!