



FIVE SECRETS OF THE MOST PRODUCTIVE PEOPLE

Audit self-talk and self-regulation

1. List three things that perhaps detract from the goals you have for yourself but you find them hard to resist.
2. List three things that could detract from the goals you have for yourself but you find them easy to resist.
3. Considering what you wrote in the second list, what sort of self-talk enables you to resist those temptations and exert self-control.
4. Now consider your self-talk in those situations when you find it hard to resist temptation and your self-control is weaker.
5. What are the differences?
6. Are there any factors in your environment that differ when you consider these two types of situation?
7. What have you learned from this exercise that could be useful to you, helping you to become more productive and achieve your goals more easily?

Reduce decision fatigue

“You’ll see I wear only grey or blue suits,” Obama explained in a 2014 interview with magazine *Vanity Fair*. “I’m trying to pare down decisions. I don’t want to make decisions about what I’m eating or wearing because I have too many other decisions to make!”

Psychologists have long known that the act of making a decision erodes your ability to make later decisions. It’s called decision fatigue. It’s the reason why a supermarket trip can be exhausting and why judges give harsher rulings towards the end of the day. Making lots of choices and decisions depletes you because sustained cognitive control is tiring.

Psychologist Roy Baumeister has suggested that the quite common failure of people in high office to control their impulses in their private lives may be attributed to decision fatigue, stemming from the intense burden of continuous decision-making. Big decisions, small decisions, they all add up. Choosing what to eat for breakfast, what to wear, what to eat for dinner, who to hire, how much to spend, how to manage the continuous stream of decisions involved in managing a complex project - all this depletes your ability to decide.

Baumeister concludes that good decision-making is a state that fluctuates. He’s shown that the most productive people establish habits that eliminate the mental effort of making too many small everyday choices. Like Obama, instead of counting on their mental energy remaining robust all day, they conserve it so that it’s available for important decisions and critical efforts. Productive people focus their decision making energy.

Design a supportive internal world

It’s becoming much more appreciated that self-talk plays a key role in how we see ourselves, how we perceive our abilities, and how we grow and change over time. Self-talk can be positive or negative, encouraging or distressing. Realistic, positive self-talk impacts how you feel about yourself and how you feel about what you can achieve. It affects your self-esteem and self-confidence. Self-talk helps you to plan what you want to do before you actually do it, by helping you think through different scenarios, the risks and their possible consequences. Thus it supports behaviour change and goal achievement. It also has a motivational function. You can praise or critique yourself. In this way self-talk can be an error correcting mechanism. Finally, it can consist of language that helps you to achieve a psychological state that will help you perform effectively.

One of the key ways that we can change ourselves reliably is by focusing on the characteristic way we talk to ourselves about our capacities and our

abilities. Productive people pay attention to their self-talk, ensuring they speak to themselves respectfully and supportively.

Choose good things for your present self

Self-control refers to your capacity to engage in the behaviours required to achieve your long-term goals. It’s about your ability to defer gratification. It also tends to be time inconsistent! For example, in multiple experiments, researchers have found that about 70% of us will choose chocolate today but fruit next week, a lowbrow, tuning-out film now but a highbrow film next week, fun today but important stuff next week! In other words, we’re very good at choosing good things for our future selves, but not so good at choosing good things for our present selves. In contrast, productive people make sure they choose good things for their present selves! They use checklists and simple rules to offset the potential risk of making poor choices when tired, stressed or hungry. They focus on doing the right thing for themselves now. They don’t postpone useful actions.

Focus on exactly how you’ll achieve an outcome

Simply stating your intention or resolve to do something isn’t as effective as focusing on exactly how you’ll achieve what you want. A particular type of self-talk has been found to lead to goal directed behaviour. For example, saying or writing down ‘I will do this’ turns out to be nowhere near as effective as generating some questions, such as, ‘Will I do this? Why will I do it? When will I do it?’ It seems that questions mobilise your mental processing resources by provoking a response. When you ask yourself questions about your potential behaviour, it increases the likelihood of that behaviour happening. Productive people have figured out that questions prime the brain for goal directed actions.

Don’t waste time fantasising

A popular method of goal attainment that many people have tried to use is called positive thinking. This is where you visualise how great things will be, once you have achieved your goal. But a research team at New York University, headed by Gabriele Oettingen, has debunked this in an important series of studies. They found there is no power in positive thinking by itself. In fact, they found it leads to more negative outcomes than if people had never engaged in it to begin with. It seems that spending time in future oriented fantasies acts as a brake or a block that stops you figuring out the actual steps to take. It feels good in the moment but distracts your attention and undermines your efforts.

Instead, they found that visualising the steps you need to take (by working backwards from the desired future to your present challenges) helps you get started. Productive people focus on action plans, not fantasies.