

Breaking the Rules

KURT WRIGHT

Chapters 1 & 4

REMOVING THE
OBSTACLES TO EFFORTLESS
HIGH PERFORMANCE

CPM Publishing

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Chapter One



Being On a Roll

This book is about being on a roll. Notice I did not say learning to be on a roll. This is because I believe our natural state is to be on a roll, and getting back to that state involves a lot more unlearning than learning. Being on a roll is the product of a state of mind that leads to WHOLEHEARTED commitment, and this state of mind is only reached when we follow the guidance of our hearts, rather than allow ourselves to be ruled by our heads. To be on a roll, we must break free of rules that keep us out of touch with our hearts—so we can get back to the effortless ease of WHOLEHEARTED commitment.

In this book you will discover why our conscious, rational minds are attempting to play an unintended role of master over our intuitive minds, and why they are failing so miserably at it. You will learn how our rational minds are perfectly designed instead to be servants to our inner, intuitive minds. You will also learn the steps taken by effortless high performers to develop this more productive relationship. Hence, this book invites us to unlearn many intellectually based rules about how things should work and replace them with a practical, proven, intuition-based system of self-management. This system is based on

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asking RIGHT QUESTIONS. As we learn to practice it together, we will each move back toward a state of WHOLEHEARTED commitment and effortless high performance. When applied at an organizational level, mastery of this self-management system as a leadership style can lead to effortless high performance there as well.

I invite you to join me now as we explore a fundamental question which has led to all of the insights presented in this book: “What are you and I like at our very best?” Over the past 27 years, my relentless pursuit of answers to this question has transformed my life. It is now my intent to make the life-transforming benefits of this question available to everyone who chooses to read this book.

What Are We Like At Our Best?

So, what *are* you like at your best? When does it happen? What is your level of awareness about this for yourself as we begin this journey? For example, when things are going especially well for you—i.e., when you are truly on a roll—have you taken time to really explore how and why you got there? Or, are you like most people who wait until they fall off their roll and then wonder what’s wrong? Could it be possible we have been asking the wrong questions . . . and at the wrong time? If we wait until we’re down and then try to figure out what’s wrong, we are failing to learn the key steps required to get ourselves back to our natural state of being on a roll. This is why it is so important for us to discover how and why people get on a roll. We have much to gain by recalling and exploring our own experiences of being in this wonderful state, whether we are someone who enjoys being on a roll much of the time, or if we just aspire to get there in the future.

This book explains why we must make a fundamental shift in our approach to asking questions—from one of inquiring about what is not

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working, to one of learning to identify and build upon what *is* working. But it doesn't stop there. It shows exactly how to bring this shift about, and how this will allow us to reach higher levels of personal achievement—and do so with less effort than we may have ever thought possible. In other words, we are about to explore a set of insights that can bring us back to a natural style of inquiry found to be always at work in people who are WHOLEHEARTEDLY committed and on a roll. By adopting this style of inquiry, each of us can return to and remember how to sustain ourselves in the euphoric state of effortless high performance—which I again propose is our naturally intended state.

A quick example will show what kind of results can be achieved by making this simple shift. The president of a printing company in California once asked if my approach could help him solve a costly problem of rework. As he went on to describe his concern, I learned that in a typical month seven percent of his printing orders had to be redone because of errors. I also learned this had been going on for years, in spite of many different attempts to solve the problem, and that it was eating up much of the company's profits. During dialogue with the company's management team, I encouraged them to shift their focus of inquiry onto what produced perfect orders rather than why others contained errors. Their agreement to make a shift didn't come instantly, but soon included most team members. After several years of failed attempts to "solve" their seven-percent rework problem, it took that team only 30 days to move the plant's output from 93% to 97% perfect. Output went on to exceed 98% perfect during four of the following 12 months.

The ideas being set forth here actually grew out of a life-changing experience which occurred for me in October of 1970. By way of background, I can tell you I grew up with a failure pattern. I grew up

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with a wonderful father who just happened to judge it “not okay” for me to need attention. As a result, he made it a point to withhold any attention from me for doing things well. In response, I learned to fail in order to get his attention. It worked every time. Among other things, this is a personal story of how I came to recognize my failure pattern, and how I managed to remove it as an obstacle in my life. It is also about how, in the process, I was able to develop a model to help me and others achieve our goals in life with effortless ease.

Psychological Theory?

Some readers may be tempted to view the insights offered here as psychological theory. That would be puzzling, however, since the field of psychology is so focused on the study of sick people to find out what’s wrong. My approach has been exactly the opposite: it has been to study the super-well to find out WHAT’S RIGHT. Besides the many fresh insights produced by this approach, it also exposes the painfully high cost we incur as a society for our all-pervasive “find-what’s-wrong-and-fix-it” mind-set. It also reveals why efforts to manage change that rely on “yet another theory” to fix WHAT’S WRONG are destined to fail. Thus, it is surely not my intent to continue this practice here. I seriously question the need for yet another theory when, deep inside us at an intuitive level, each of us already knows all we need to know to be at our best. Yes, that is a core finding from my study. Here is another.

No Advice, Please

Those who operate most of the time in the state of effortless high performance didn’t get that way by following advice given by others. This is why I’ve delayed writing this book for several years. I simply do not wish to reward anyone for looking to me for answers. In this book

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I have no intention of giving advice. Instead, I shall raise wonderful questions which are used to find your own answers deep within. Thus, if you are accustomed to looking outside yourself for answers, and hope to find those in this book, you may encounter some initial discomfort with the approach used here. My findings convince me that being at our best is a natural state which *cannot* be accessed via the overlay of “yet another theory.” Asking ourselves and being asked RIGHT QUESTIONS (in order to regain conscious access to what we already know intuitively) is a path far more certain to put our lives on a permanent roll.

The key to getting on a roll and staying there is learning to frame questions in such a way that they cannot be processed analytically. When we do this correctly, our questions are automatically processed by our intuition. When applied personally, the intuition-based system of inquiry being introduced here has proven far more productive, and at the same time less stressful and more fulfilling, than any other I have ever seen. This intuition-based approach to inquiry can also be applied directly to organizations—and to teams of people who work together. Using this approach, team members have often enjoyed far higher levels of cooperation, commitment and motivation than they had ever seen before, or perhaps had even thought possible. Visionary leaders give us a wonderful glimpse of this system of inquiry in practice.

Visionary Leaders

My experiences from studying visionary leaders for many years have made a significant contribution to my understanding in the area of effortless high performance. One experience in particular will be instructive. *Business Week* ran a cover story in its 1/25/85 issue entitled, “The New Corporate Elite.” This story featured 50 visionary leaders from American businesses, and was the first time I can recall visionary

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leadership being given such high visibility. For me, the article's high profile was a welcome validation of my commitment, since by that time I had already dedicated nearly 15 years of my life to the study of visionary leaders.

After reading the article, I was prompted to write a letter to several of the leaders identified. I wished to extend my congratulations for the example they were setting, and to include a complimentary copy of an article I had written about how visionaries think. Eventually I sent letters to 43 of the 50 leaders. This correspondence created an opportunity for me to personally interview five featured leaders, only four of whom turned out to be true visionaries. My experience with the fifth leader, the non-visionary, was a watershed. It gave me a first glimpse into the vast difference between those who are vision-driven and those who are theory-driven.

A Surplus and Abundance World View

The first four leaders I interviewed—those I later came to realize were true visionaries—demonstrated a consistent and remarkable openness to new ideas. It was as if they simply couldn't wait to get another idea to help lift their vision to another level. In contrast, it was as if the leader who was theory-driven had to hold every new idea at arm's length until he could confirm it would not risk upsetting his theories of how things should work. It felt energizing to be in dialogue with the four who were vision-driven. After leaving my meeting with the leader who was theory-driven, I felt emotionally drained. It felt like we were adversaries, and for no apparent reason. This felt very different from all of my dialogues with true visionaries, where an awesome sense of partnership always seems to occur. By seeking to understand these differences, I learned how the thought process practiced by visionaries

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works to generate a surplus of creative energy. This excess energy allows them to sustain a “surplus and abundance world view,” which leaves them completely open to new ideas. This is a very different picture than the illusory world view of depletion and shortage, which is initially created by and then reinforced by the theory-driven thought process.

You may as well know right now that it will be impossible for any of us to experience WHOLEHEARTED commitment and become effortless high performers as long as we remain theory-driven. No amount of good advice will get us there either. The natural and self-sustaining source of creative energy needed to enjoy this level of commitment is simply not available to us as long as we continue to look *outside* ourselves for answers. Hopefully this book will not reward anyone for looking to me for answers. Instead, it will equip us all to look more skillfully *inside* ourselves—not to our egos or intellects, but to our hearts and our intuition—where the only true answers for guiding our lives await our discovery.

Organizations Can Be Put On A Roll, Too

Since the very beginning of my study I have noticed striking similarities in the way organizations and individuals function. It soon became apparent to me that any insights I might gain into what each of us is like at our best as an individual must be equally valid when applied to an organizational entity as a whole. In this context, perhaps it would be helpful to present a case study. The following experience provided many insights into how my findings could be applied to the task of putting an entire organization on a roll.

The situation presented itself as follows. I received a call from a client who for the preceding year had been doing an excellent job of implementing our intuition-based system of management within his

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area of responsibility. This client found himself suddenly placed in charge of a huge software development project which was deeply in trouble. The project consisted of a \$100 million effort involving some 400 software engineers who were 38 months into a 60-month government contract requiring them to deliver a distributed bus system for running a piece of military equipment. The technical requirements of the contract were so complex that the team slipped its schedule in each of the first 38 months of work on the contract. By the time my client asked me to look at the situation and make recommendations, work had fallen an estimated 18 months behind schedule. Everyone was particularly concerned about a contract stipulation of \$30 million in penalties if the team remained 18 months behind schedule at the 48-month milestone—a mere ten months away.

Fortunately, my client was a true visionary. He had also experienced the power of our intuition-based system of management during the previous year. As a result, he looked upon his new situation as a perfect opportunity to demonstrate to the entire company the power of asking RIGHT QUESTIONS. We both knew if we could simply change the question the team was running on from “What’s going wrong?” to “What’s going right?” we’d have the problem licked. My client also knew that the crisis would allow him to justify a budget large enough to assure full implementation of our system within the troubled project. Once he secured a budget commitment for \$150,000, he issued me an employee badge and put me to work. He added, “There’s more money where that came from if you need it, so don’t come out of there until you’ve got it right.” (Talk about a consultant’s dream!)

My vision for how to turn this situation around was to get everyone on the team running on the same question—in precisely the same manner as visionary leaders run on a single galvanizing question. I

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knew my success depended on choosing a question powerful enough to capture everyone's imagination and lead to WHOLEHEARTED commitment. I also knew the only way I could ever hope to identify the perfect question would be to fully immerse myself in the energy of the project for a few days.

I began by taking teams of 18 to 20 engineers off-site for a two-day team dialogue designed to bring about a fundamental shift in thinking from WHAT'S WRONG to WHAT'S RIGHT. (This book is intended to produce a similar outcome.) I also found the intense interactions which always took place in the team dialogues to be a perfect place for me to get fully engaged in my search for the perfect question. From the work I had done with visionaries, I knew what kind of a question it would take to truly capture their attention. The moment of insight occurred in the second week, when it dawned on me that our question had to be: "What will it take to finish this project a week early?" This question met every one of the criteria I had identified.

It was fascinating to watch people's initial reactions. On the surface, of course, the question was preposterous. It was considered by most to be totally impossible, but this was one of the criteria it had to meet in order to work. It was so preposterous, in fact, that on more than one occasion I found myself being summoned into a supervisor's office and sternly advised to stop asking this question. First one, and then another, would say to me with great conviction, "These people are engineers, Kurt. They know this can't be done. You'll just destroy your credibility if you keep asking this question." In response, of course, I had to thank them profusely for saving my skin. I then went right back out into the hallways and continued asking my preposterous question.

Later in the book, after we have developed a better framework within which to understand their implications, we will explore several

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aspects of this case in much more detail. For now I will just let you know I completed my commitment to the project in six weeks. I used only \$90,000 of the \$150,000 budget, and left after describing to my client all of the reasons I now felt the project would succeed. Some eight months later, this critical phase of the project was completed right on schedule—exactly on the 48 month milestone date, and \$15 million under budget. Add the \$15 million savings to the vanished \$30 million penalty risk, and we have a \$45 million payoff. All of this from a mere six-week effort to shift the mode of thinking from WHAT'S GOING WRONG to WHAT'S GOING RIGHT among 400 software engineers. Some folks would say that's a pretty good return on investment for breaking a few rules. From my perspective, it's not an uncommon experience at all when WHOLEHEARTED commitment is engaged.



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Developing a Strengths Awareness

Now the fun begins. Here we get to roll up our sleeves and jump right into our project of constructing a fully operational “build on strengths” mind set. Let’s begin with a simple exercise that asks you to jot down on a sheet of paper what you consider to be six of your greatest personal strengths and six of your most bothersome personal weaknesses. It might be helpful to list them in two side-by-side columns, but that is not essential. Do your best to list six of each, noting that the entire success of the exercise is dependent on having you pay careful attention to any and all feelings you may have while you jot down each item on your list. What you write down on your list is nobody’s business, so please don’t think you will need to show it to anyone. You must write the six items down in each category, however, if you wish to enjoy any of the marvelous insights available from this exercise. And, while you may think you have done this before and thus want to keep right on reading, it is doubtful you have done it with our special focus on the feelings associated with the process. I believe this aspect of the exercise is necessary if we are each to gain all the insights available as it unfolds.

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Therefore, please set aside this book and make your two lists. **PAUSE**

Here are some questions I would like you to reflect on once your two lists are complete. Which of the two lists do you have the strongest feelings about right now as you read them over again—your strengths or your weaknesses? What words would you use to describe your sense of enjoyment or appreciation of such introspective exercises as this, where you are asked to examine your strengths and weaknesses? Is it pleasure? Pain? Or are your feelings rather neutral?

Please go back to your two lists now and place a check mark (✓) by as many as five of the characteristics on your list you would most like to see changed over the next 12 months. **PAUSE** We are now ready to explore some of the additional feelings you may have noticed so far in this exercise. First of all, which column did you choose to start making your list—your strengths or your weaknesses? It's fascinating to be a mouse in the corner and watch people do this when we are working with a group of 12 to 16 team members. We never look at what people list as their strengths or weaknesses, but we do notice some who list all six strengths quite easily and then labor over listing four or five weaknesses. It works the same way in reverse sometimes, too. Some people quickly list six weaknesses and then labor over listing their strengths. Then occasionally we notice someone who lists one strength, one weakness, a second strength and second weakness, etc. The point of this is to simply wonder together, what feelings must be guiding all those choices? Quite often we also find people listing the same character trait on both lists. What feelings do you suppose might be prompting all of these fascinating choices? None of these feelings are either good or bad, you understand, it is just extremely useful to raise our awareness of how powerfully we are being guided by them.

Speaking of being guided by feelings, let's try this one. Notice

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which character traits you placed your check marks beside to indicate those you would most wish to see changed in the next year. We have a special way of scoring your check marks. For each one you placed beside a strength you wish to build up, please give yourself a score of minus one (-1). Then, for each mark you placed beside a weakness you would like to correct, please give yourself a score of plus one (+1). Total your net score (your possible range is between a -5 if you checked all five strengths and a +5 if you checked all five weaknesses) and make note of it where we can refer back to it during a later exercise. **PAUSE**

Lots of us will notice another feeling when we have perhaps two or three character traits left to jot down on one side or the other and can't think of any more to add. What should we do about our list not being complete, we wonder? Is it a stab of guilt we feel? After all, we "should" complete the assignment, shouldn't we? Fascinating how powerfully we are guided by our feelings, isn't it?

Perhaps the most important feeling we might want to explore is what happens to our energy levels while we are putting attention on our strengths as compared to our weaknesses. How did this work out for you? Did you feel your energy level going up or down while you were focused on preparing your list of strengths? What about when you were listing your weaknesses? What insights are you gaining from your answers? Remember, feelings are a major message medium for our intuition. Most of us could use a good deal more practice at putting our feelings into words before we will have any real confidence in reading the messages our intuition wishes to send us. Out of nearly 10,000 people with whom we have interacted around this specific set of questions, I can assure you a clear majority actually feels the energy level rise while they are putting attention on their strengths and then fall while attention is being put on their weaknesses. We happen to think this is

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highly significant. It also relates directly to the energy we must all learn to generate if we are to reach the state of effortless high performance. What is your intuition telling you about this right now?

Finally, someone nearly always brings up the frustrating point about the items on their list of weaknesses being exactly the same as those listed five years, ten years or sometimes even 15 years ago. Now what is this telling us? No puzzle here! Clearly the approach we have all learned to use for correcting our weaknesses is failing miserably everywhere we turn. I can promise you, the old approach for dealing with weaknesses is one of the most important practices we expect you will wish to change as a result of reading this book. In fact, we are working on that change in this very chapter.

Before we move on, however, I'd better not forget to ask at least a couple of my mentor-coaching questions. I myself am feeling rather delighted at the moment over having captured the above material in writing for the very first time. I have worked with it verbally hundreds of times in my team dialogues, but have never before attempted to capture the enlightening power of the experience in writing. This also reminds me of an experience from years ago when I was invited to conduct one of our team dialogues for a group of insurance company managers in Bogota, Colombia. I was told everyone would be able to speak English. As it turned out, 15 of the 18 participants did, in fact, speak English. About two hours into the dialogue, however, it suddenly occurred to me that while most of them spoke reasonable English, I was the only one in the room who "thought" in English.

From that moment on, I continued to ask my questions in English, but encouraged everyone to respond in Spanish. I realized it was not important for me to understand their answers. It was important for them to experience success after success at putting their feelings into

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words. A bit like the experience I am having right now as I furnish you with questions, but don't have the direct pleasure of seeing the insights you are gaining as you express your feelings back in return. Perhaps it would be good for all of us to remind ourselves from time to time of what I learned in Bogota. It was amazing how the language difference prevented my ego from interfering with their learning.

So what are the two most useful insights you have gained from exploring your own feelings around your strengths and weaknesses? In what special ways did you benefit from being given a peek at the wide variety of different feelings other people have expressed around their feelings in this area? Have you noticed any changes beginning to occur in how you view your own strengths and weaknesses? If so, what might those changes look like?

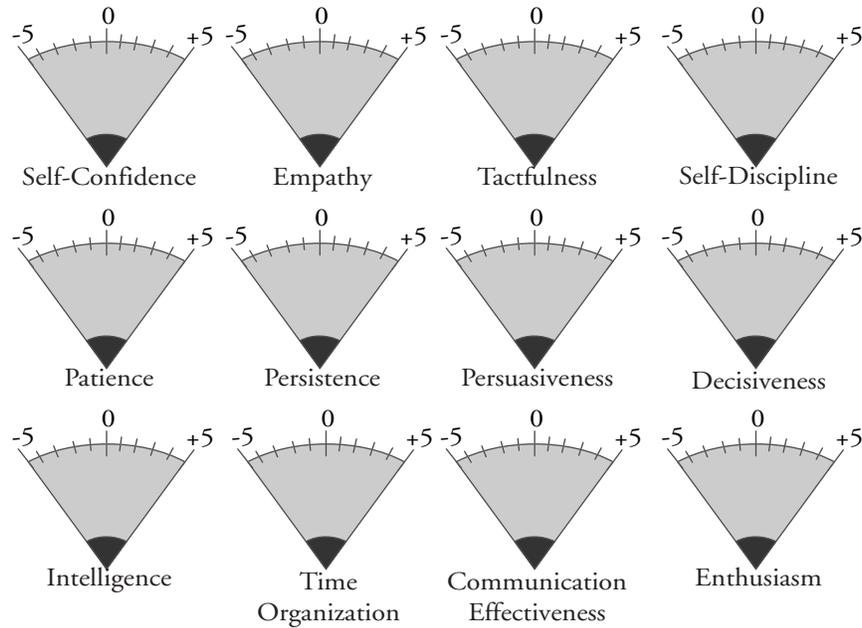
Mission Control

For our next step we'll need to apply some imagination. Let's pretend we're sitting in the mission control center of our personality. Before us (see next page) lies a bank of gauges which allow us to take an accurate reading of the relative value of our strengths in each of a dozen personal productivity areas. Each gauge represents a personality trait or characteristic normally associated with being a highly productive, successful person.

Please take a few moments right now and use a pencil or pen to position a needle on each gauge to signify where you would intuitively rate yourself in each area at this time. Since it is not intended for anyone else to ever see your answers, please make a concerted effort to be as totally honest with yourself as you are capable of being. Remember, too, your first answer is usually best. The insights that are available later for those who complete this exercise can be quite profound. **PAUSE**

As I prepare to walk alongside of you through our next exercise,

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I am especially aware of the limitations of not being there with you in person. Perhaps we can offset some of those limitations if you will make an extra-special effort to follow my directions exactly. Let's imagine I'm either sitting beside you with a pad of paper and a pencil, or standing beside a flip chart in front of you and a small group of your peers. I now proceed to give you a careful set of instructions before I begin writing on the pad. My instructions are as follows. Please pay very close attention to what I am about to do. I am going to put some numbers on the pad. If you see anything you agree with, please speak up and tell me about it . . . or if you disagree. I then proceed to write the following numbers on my pad, expressing each one out loud as I go along: "4 plus 6 equals 10, 11 plus 8 equals 19, 6 plus 3 equals 9, 7 plus 11 equals 16, 3 plus. . ." and about then either you or someone else will speak up to stop me, saying, "Oops! 7 plus 11 is not 16."

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| | | | | |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| 4 | 11 | 6 | 7 | 3 |
| <u>+6</u> | <u>+8</u> | <u>+3</u> | <u>+11</u> | <u>+9</u> |
| 10 | 19 | 9 | 16 | 12 |

At this point I will look puzzled and ask, “What about the rest of these?” Without a moment’s hesitation I then add with a fair amount of intensity, “Why is it that the only thing you have told me about is what I did wrong? Didn’t I ask you to pay very close attention to what I do, and if you see anything you *agree* with, please speak up and tell me about it?” As you might guess, this usually triggers a fair amount of rationalizing—with which we can also have some fun. Sometimes it is even helpful to ask the person doing the rationalizing to check their feelings to see what is driving the rationalizations.

I must mention here that I have personally conducted this exercise one-on-one more than 1,000 times during the past 20 years, and hundreds of times in small groups, too. In all that time, I have seen only 24 occasions when someone spoke up immediately after I put up the first set of numbers and said out loud, “I agree.” This certainly points out how focused we are as a culture on WHAT’S WRONG, doesn’t it?

One more very powerful lesson remains to be learned from this experience. Perhaps more than anything, this exercise makes it abundantly clear that the vast majority of us are negatively motivated. To be more precise, most of us are motivated to avoid pain. And the pain we most want to avoid is having to feel, once again, a negative emotion we’ve felt before and never, ever want to *ever* feel again. (Didn’t you think all those never ever’s did a great job of demonstrating the intensity of this desire we have to avoid pain?) We are only kidding ourselves, however, if we think this approach is helping us. This is because in our efforts to avoid negatives, we mistakenly keep ourselves on high alert to spot any

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and all negatives we might wish to avoid. And, in case you missed it, this is negative motivation, pure and simple. It is a compulsive focus on the negative, and all of the attention we put on the negative does more to create negatives in our lives than most of us would ever imagine. You can be sure this is one of the practices we will soon be changing with this book.

A Look at Self-Image

For our next exercise I will ask you to picture a simple round circle in front of you. The circle symbolizes our self-image. In other words, it represents both how we see ourselves and how we imagine other people see us. From another perspective it will also represent a mixture of every one of our many strengths and weaknesses. To illustrate the relationship between our strengths and weaknesses, let's draw a tiny little wedge in the left portion of the circle and give it a darker shade to represent our weaknesses. We can then give the entire remainder of the circle a lighter shade and have it represent our strengths, as shown in the diagram.



Does this diagram offer a reasonably accurate representation of strengths and weaknesses present in your own self-image? What's your rational mind wanting you to say right now about your reactions to this picture? What kind of a feeling message is your intuition trying to give you about it? Are you able to distinguish the difference?

Since 1975 when I first developed this illustration, I have shared it over 1,000 times in one-on-one discussions and more than 500 times in front of small or large groups. Nearly all participants respond by telling me I have drawn the wedge of weakness too small. Occasionally while

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sharing it in a personal discussion, and almost always while sharing it with a group, someone will speak up and say, “I think they should be flip-flopped.” Lots of people have responded by suggesting they would be more comfortable drawing a vertical line down the center to make it half and half. Isn’t all of this a fascinating commentary on our self-images?

But let’s take a deeper look at this for a moment. To think we could really make any kind of an accurate assessment of the relative balance between our strengths and weaknesses would actually be quite challenging, wouldn’t it? When we note the actual energy expended in thinking about our weaknesses, as compared to what we expend on our strengths, however, most of us would say the above diagram misses the mark completely. Would you agree that the energy and effort most of us put into our perceived weaknesses is far greater than the energy invested by most of us in our strengths?

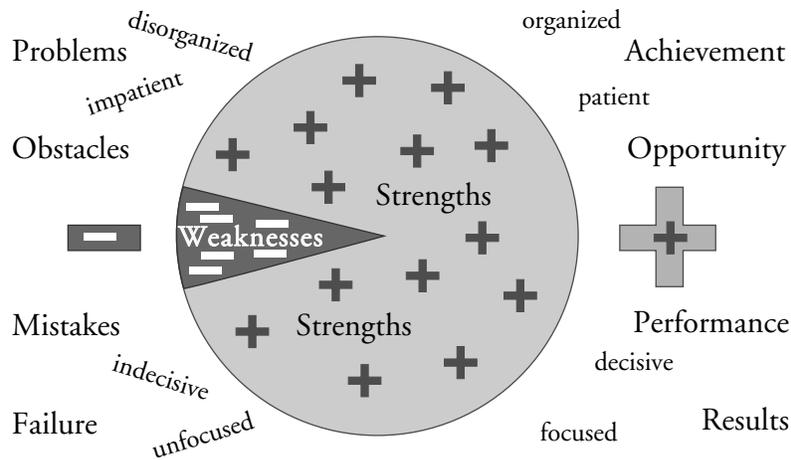
Energy Flow

It really is an energy issue, isn’t it? Speaking of energy, do you know what a physicist would tell us about the flow of electrical energy? It causes a magnetic field to develop around that flow. Isn’t it interesting how few people have thought about the way human emotional energy has a similar effect. Energy we focus on our weaknesses—whether to shield them from other people’s view or to go in and dig them out by their roots—sets up a powerful “magnet like” attraction for problems, obstacles, mistakes and failure. Yes, it’s true! The energy we focus on negatives in our life creates the magnetic effect of attracting the very undesired consequences we think we are trying to protect ourselves against. This is particularly true when our energy is focused on trying to keep our weaknesses from being exposed. It is equally true, however,

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when our efforts are focused on trying to “fix” our weaknesses so they are no longer a source of concern. Wow! Did you get that? Could our notion of trying to find WHAT’S WRONG and fix it be WHAT’S WRONG and we’ve found it? You got it. Not only that, but it can’t be fixed! Just think of how wonderful it will be to abandon this self-limiting illusion and discover an alternative that actually works!

How about all the energy we focus on our strengths? You guessed it again. This has the wonderful, effect of magnetically and effortlessly attracting to us the results we desire. This magnetic effect means those of us who master the discipline of identifying and building on our strengths will find ourselves achieving results we desire with far less effort than we would normally expect. Are you beginning to see the foundations being put in place to enable each of us to reach and sustain the wonderful state of effortless high performance? Do you also see, as mentioned above, how the whole notion of “find-what’s-wrong-and-fix-it” may be precisely WHAT’S WRONG, and that we have actually found it? Reminds me of that fun statement from Pogo, “We have found the



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enemy and it is us!” As you review the diagram on the next page, please remember effortless high performance is much more a by-product of energy management than of fact management.

Defensiveness

Before we begin this next section on defensiveness, I must ask you to return to page 51 and retrieve the score you gave yourself around the traits you would most like to see changed over the next year. If you recall, you were asked to give yourself a negative score for every strength you checked, and a positive score for every weakness you checked. The resulting net score is your defensiveness rating. A score of -5 would mean you are entirely free from defensiveness and are putting all of your attention on building up your strengths. If you gave yourself a plus score, it means you put more attention on your weaknesses than strengths and may be experiencing some defensiveness. If you happened to check all five weaknesses and have thus ended up with a $+5$ score, this suggests you may want to take a serious look at what defensiveness is costing you and how you can go about changing that.

Defensiveness is a phenomenon we associate with energy we put into our weaknesses. It is largely an unconscious, involuntary mental reaction. Its role is to protect us from the anticipated feelings of anxiety, discomfort, or pain associated with having our weaknesses, shortcomings or other undesirable attributes exposed to others. All defensiveness is self-induced. We trigger defensive reactions in ourselves whenever we decide, after quickly analyzing a situation in front of us, that we are at risk of “losing face,” or that our competence or some other aspect of our self-worth is in doubt or about to be criticized.

One example of defensiveness we can all identify with is the feeling we get whenever we are introduced to someone and immediately forget

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their name. How many of us will spend the next few minutes trying in vain to pay attention to the conversation while at the same time trying to keep from looking ridiculous because we simply cannot remember the person's name? What prevents us from simply admitting we have forgotten the person's name and asking for it to be repeated? Is it concern over our image? What about lack of confidence? Yes, defensiveness is clearly a symptom of low self-confidence—which I define as being unable to separate our doubts about our worth and value as a person from our need to meet perfectly all of society's wonderful "shoulds" and expectations.

What is the price we pay for being defensive? It certainly makes it more difficult to get fully committed, to accept criticism, to resolve conflicts, to deal with adversity, to accept responsibility and to bring about desired changes in our attitudes. Defensiveness also keeps us from reaching the state of effortless high performance. Several common but sometimes unrecognized forms of defensiveness are shown below:

| | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Resistance to change | Temper | Nervousness |
| Role-playing | Poor communication | Jealousy |
| Political posturing | Overcompensating | Prejudgment |
| Intellectualizing | Empire-building | Rationalization |
| Sensitivity to criticism | Turf-guarding | Authoritarianism |
| Lack of initiative | Procrastination | Resentment |

One additional form of defensiveness is particularly difficult to identify. It shows up frequently in a person who gives all outward appearances of being super-confident, yet is quite insecure internally and uses an overbearing form of pseudo-confidence or bravado to cover up those private, hidden feelings of insecurity.

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As you might imagine, defensiveness in any form is a self-defeating behavior. It is also a major impediment to performance improvement. Defensiveness actually defeats itself by magnetically attracting the very undesired consequences against which we think we are protecting ourselves. “Self-fulfilling prophecy” is the label often given to this phenomenon. What do you suppose could happen if we all understood how a prolonged focus of our energy on protecting ourselves against negatives might just have the actual effect of setting up a powerful magnetic force that attracts to us the very negatives we are trying to avoid?

How Defensiveness is Caused

All defensiveness begins the moment we assign negative value to facts. In and of themselves, facts are neither positive nor negative. It is we who attach a positive or negative value to them, and in so doing, cause all our own defensiveness. Yes, it's true. By being critical of ourselves, by finding fault with ourselves or others or by judging things negatively in any way, we set in motion a chain of events which causes every single bit of our own defensiveness—along with all of its undesired, self-limiting consequences. In other words, the negative judgments we make, which in turn trigger our own defensiveness, are a key set of obstacles serving to limit our growth and development.

This means whenever we try to be the analytical expert on what's wrong with something, each of us can be held personally responsible for blocking our own growth. Also, whenever our defensiveness does get triggered, we shift into a costly “protect” mode that depletes our supply of creative energy. Perhaps we can think of one or more personal examples to illustrate this. Can you recall a time, for example, when you might have felt emotionally drained immediately after an experience of having been in the defensive mode?

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Notice how difficult it can be to think objectively or be productive for some period of time after such an experience! Have you noticed how important it is to give yourself extra time to replenish creative energy lost through defensiveness? How does one go about doing this?

Is there a personal example you can think of right now? Perhaps you can think of an example where defensiveness may have resulted in an identifiable loss of time, energy or money; or even damaged a relationship in your life. Are there others around you who could participate in a discussion with you about your thoughts and feelings about what you have just read?

Freedom from Defensiveness

We are now ready to address our vital first step in the process of learning to free ourselves from defensiveness. Can we first agree that all defensiveness is related to the energy we put into our weaknesses—whether we are trying to shield those weaknesses from view or dig them out by their roots? If we can agree on this, it is then clear we must find a better way to deal with our weaknesses.

One fun way to expand our perspectives around weakness is to ask if you could show me a way to measure darkness. After giving this a few moments of thought, you might very well respond with some kind of a suggestion involving the measurement of light. It would then be my job to quickly point out this was not my question. I specifically asked to be shown a way to measure darkness, not light. After a bit of additional time, it will probably dawn on you that there is actually no way to measure darkness. It is only possible to measure light in degrees up from none, or zero.

My next question is to ask you to show me a way to measure cold. Again, most of those who have participated in this exercise with me

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have responded with some kind of a suggestion requiring the measurement of heat. After reminding them that my question did not address the measurement of heat, but rather asked for a way to measure cold, the awareness dawns more quickly that it is no more possible to measure cold than it is to measure darkness. We can measure the amount of heat in degrees up from absolute zero, but in no way can we actually measure the amount of cold.

Weaknesses Do Not Exist

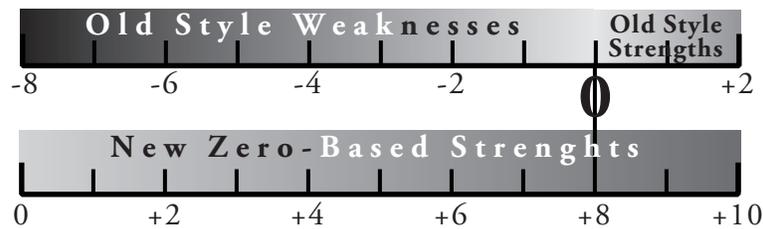
The obvious question we must now ask is, “If we can’t measure darkness or cold, then how do we propose to measure weakness?” The same principle has to apply, doesn’t it? In other words, if there is nothing less than zero, there can be *no such thing* as a weakness. As soon as we begin to make this rather profound leap in our understanding, we also begin to make a shift in where we put our attention—away from what used to be our weaknesses and self-doubts and onto our strengths. How would our lives be different if we could accept the powerful reality that there is no such thing as a weakness? What a wonderful breath of fresh air this could bring into our lives! Can you feel the warm breeze?

The concept of weakness is an imaginary construct of the human mind. In reality weaknesses cannot and do not exist! We must learn to recognize the truth that reality consists only of degrees of strength. This principle is illustrated by the scale below. Note how each of our strengths can best be measured on a scale from 0 to some X point, which we will call 10.



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When we stop to think about it, just how could it be possible for anyone to have less than a zero level of any given strength! But just imagine all of the painful and unnecessary difficulties we create for ourselves when, in response to negative feedback in our lives, we “choose” to install an artificial zero point well above true zero on our own personal scale. For example, let’s imagine we have imposed an artificial zero point on the scale above at about 8. Given this imaginary rule, we find ourselves judging any strength falling below the new artificial zero point (8) to be a weakness. In other words, a true level-six strength is judged to be a -2 level weakness. Look at what just happened. We set up our own defensiveness by choosing to view a level-six strength as a -2 weakness.



Unfortunately, all of our self-imposed negative judgments, as well as those imposed on us by others, can too easily trigger defensive reactions around any and all strengths we judge to fall below the artificial zero point. An actual two-level strength, for example, is now judged to be a -6 level weakness and a defensive reaction is as sure to follow as night follows day.

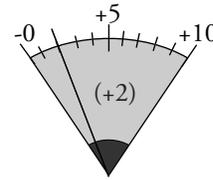
Re-calibrating Our Gauges

To illustrate this point a bit further, turn back to the mission control page earlier in this chapter where we rated a dozen of our personal productivity characteristics. What happens to our energy level and our sense of self-esteem as we review our previous assessments from

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the standpoint of this new zero-based input? Notice the changes we must now make to the calibration of each gauge. What was initially a -5 now becomes a zero, a former zero now becomes a $+5$ and the former $+5$ becomes a $+10$. As you can see by the re-calibrated gauge shown here, a former reading of -3 now becomes a $+2$. Please go back and review your strengths using this new viewpoint.

As you do so, I invite you to reflect on the question, which is truly the more honest way of actually seeing yourself? While doing so, please recall how the initial instructions were quite explicit in asking you



be as honest with yourself as you are capable of being. Opens up a lot of questions, doesn't it, about our ability or inability to be truly honest with ourselves? **PAUSE**

This is a perfect time for some more mentor-coaching questions to help crystallize additional insights from this powerful set of examples. *What would you say is the most significant adjustment beginning to take place in your thinking since reading the past few pages? What area of your life do you suspect will be the first to be impacted by any changes that may be taking place in your outlook? Were you able to identify any ways in which defensiveness might have been inhibiting your effectiveness more than you realized? What do you think will be the biggest benefit from this expanded awareness? What progress are you making toward accepting our proposal that we each cause all of our own defensiveness? If you have not yet fully embraced this idea, can you put a finger on what might be holding you back? If you were to fully accept our observation that defensiveness can only occur after we have assigned negative value to a fact, what immediate changes might take place in your life? Who around you might be most threatened by such changes? What kind of extra support might be most useful to you in moving forward with any changes you would desire to make?*

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While we are at it, let's now take this question of whether or not we know how to be honest with ourselves about our strengths to a new level. Did you happen to mark any of the 12 strength areas in mission control as a minus on the first go-around? Hopefully you did, because those negative self-assessments can give us major clues for helping to identify your greatest single strength. Here is how it works. Whichever item you marked the lowest—if it fell below zero before the gauges were re-calibrated—will typically be enough of a clue to enable us both to identify your greatest single strength. Let's try some examples.

Seeing Our Little Strengths In a New Light

If you happened to rate self-confidence as the lowest of all your strengths, I would be delighted to inform you that your self-confidence is positioned to eventually become your greatest single strength. Here is how this one works. I have found that anyone who rates their own self-confidence to be unusually low often places such a high value on the trait that they place anyone with an abundance of confidence on a pedestal. It is as if they rate the highly confident person as being a 16 on a 10-point scale. They then rate themselves as being a -8 by comparison, which actually puts them at about an honest 8. In other words, such a person already possesses far more inherent confidence than they give themselves credit for. Not only that, but their desire to be a confident person is often so great it will inevitably lift the person into the desired level of confidence. It is particularly fun to point all of this out to someone while they are discovering it for the first time among a group of peers. The admission of low self-confidence always triggers looks of astonishment from those peers. In other words, when someone holds a view of their own confidence as being low, that view is seldom shared by others around them.

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A similar set of circumstances is typically associated with those who choose either enthusiasm, persuasiveness or communication effectiveness as the lowest of your strengths. We again see similar patterns of people placing an unusually high value on the traits and as a result comparing themselves against a distorted perception of others. Similar reflections of surprise from peers will usually show up here, too.

If you happened to rate patience as the lowest of all your strengths, it is a sure sign that your greatest strength is the speed with which you grasp the big picture. The trouble with this strength lies with one little item which often fails to show up in the big picture which you typically see so quickly. Since each of us sees the world through our own set of eyes, it seldom occurs to us how others may simply be unable to see the big picture as quickly as we can. Watch our patience soar as we deliberately add this overlooked awareness item to the big picture we see so quickly.

If you rated either time organization or self-discipline as the lowest of all your strengths, your greatest strength is sure to be capacity for commitment. This is not to say you have mastered the ability to exercise your capacity for commitment, but it definitely is your greatest strength. Now imagine what would happen to either your time organization or self-discipline strength if you successfully applied your capacity for commitment to those areas. Either one could be quickly transformed into a dominant strength if you were to do so.

Whenever someone judges tactfulness to be their lowest, I find it a most rewarding situation to work with. Inevitably the person's greatest strength will be how deeply they care. And, since they do care so deeply, they are always touched when the truth of their strength is brought into the open. What a wonderful experience it is to share this with someone where it fits. As I'm sure you know, we live in a world where most

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people haven't a clue about how to deal with someone who cares so deeply. I have seen time and again where such people have a history of being repeatedly burned while attempting to express their caring. The natural response, of course, is to pull back and withdraw their caring from people around them and invest it instead in ideas that capture their interest. This is where tactfulness can become an issue. It is clearly related to the force of unexpressed caring that lies hidden behind their ideas. This often causes those ideas to be poured out too forcefully onto others who can be overwhelmed by the intensity with which they are expressed. Fortunately, a simple solution is available. We must face the fact that caring truly is our greatest strength. We must then learn how to shift the focus of our caring back onto the people receiving our messages instead of allowing all that suppressed energy to remain focused on our ideas. Everything we cover about learning to put our feelings into words will be immensely helpful in reducing the pressure, too.

Decisiveness is also an interesting trait to work with whenever someone judges it to be their lowest. If you happened to pick it as your lowest, this would typically point to empathy as your greatest strength. Here is how it works: If decisiveness is a concern for you, take a quick look at the tremendous amount of feeling you have for the potential value of each of the options or alternatives you are considering. This is called empathy. It gets kind of challenging to make clear decisions when you have this much feeling for each option, doesn't it? What would happen instead, if you were to go out at least ten years from today and use this empathy to create a picture of the ideal future for yourself and your family? You could then use your empathy strength to develop powerful feelings for several aspects of the picture. Can you now feel how this process could quickly transform your perceived low level of decisiveness into a dominant strength? Fascinating, wouldn't you say?

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If you happened to pick empathy as your lowest strength, we are facing a paradox. Even though you may have picked it as your lowest, my experience with others who have done so suggests it may be your highest. As a result, many who know you well may see empathy as one of your greatest strengths and if so, might be quite surprised by your choice. One possible explanation could be that your high awareness of feelings makes you also aware of how much you can *not* feel. This may seem confusing to many readers, but will be crystal clear if it fits you.

The only mission control item we have left to cover is intelligence. First of all, it is rarely picked as someone's lowest. Second, later in the book we will introduce some profound new insights about the effects of high intelligence on motivation and performance. These insights are based on our discovery in 1978 of a direct correlation between our level of mental capacity and our emotional intensity. I certainly do look forward to sharing them with you.

So, what has been the biggest benefit to you from our efforts to give you quite a different perspective on weaknesses? Were you able to identify with any of the "little strengths" for which I was able to point out a corresponding dominant strength? Were there any special surprises in this for you? Did it raise any new questions for you?

In Summary

To summarize this chapter, we've learned how our negative self-image is created by aspects of ourselves we see as falling below an artificially imposed zero point on our scale of strengths. These "smaller strengths" are those formerly labeled "weaknesses." Thus, whatever forms of low self-esteem we might be wishing to abandon are quite likely caused by these artificial, negative judgments. Any concern we may have felt over our weaknesses, over poor self-image, low self-esteem and any other

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negative attitudes we may have been struggling to overcome are direct consequences of our own choice to set an artificial or imaginary zero point above true zero on our scale of strengths.

From this moment on, you have a golden opportunity to fully accept and begin enjoying this new awareness that only strengths exist. This requires simply moving your zero point from wherever you might have arbitrarily set it to the new point where it can be permanently anchored at true zero. As soon as this is accomplished, you will have gained a new freedom from wasting emotional energy on defensive actions. I cannot say it is easy to make this change. I can only point out its utter simplicity and encourage you to invest the time, self-discipline and patience required to make it fully operational in your life.

Are you ready to make the commitment right now to begin shifting those arbitrary zero points on your scale to the more powerful and functional true zero point? For many of us, this could easily qualify as the highest priority short-term objective in our life! We must always remember that the nurturing of weaknesses grows weaknesses, and that mastery of the zero-based strengths perspective can be a giant step in building the disciplines required to manage our own growth and move toward that wonderful state of effortless high performance. The next seven chapters are focused on ways to make this shift a permanent reality in our lives.



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