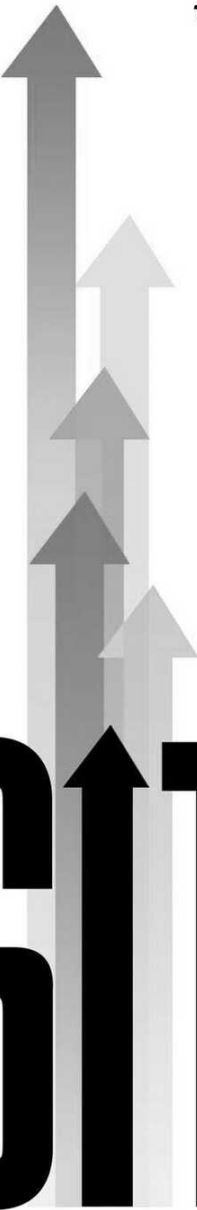


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SITUATED



Find the People and Places
That Bring Out Your Best



**ANGELA
DUCKWORTH**

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*For Mom—
When I am my best self,
I am my mother's daughter.*

Prologue



Is this safe? I mean, my mom is eighty-six years old.”

The captain hands me a face mask, snorkel, and fins. He’s already done the same for my mother. She smiles brightly, as if to remind me that she’s the healthiest, most energetic eighty-six-year-old I know.

The captain is also smiling. “The most dangerous thing you’ve done today is get in your car and drive here from Miami.”

“Okay,” I say doubtfully. Then I finger the floppy yellow plastic vest he’s pulled over my head. “Are you going to inflate these, or do we do that?”

“Oh, no. You won’t need those. You only blow them up if you’re in trouble. But if it makes you feel better, I’ll blow up your mother’s.”

After inflating my mom’s vest, the captain glances at me. I must look worried. “Here, I’ll give her a noodle,” he says as he threads a bright pink Styrofoam tube through the armholes of her vest. He looks at her with satisfaction. Then he reminds us to keep our heads down and our mouths tightly closed around the mouthpiece.

“Don’t breathe through your nose,” he adds. “And don’t forget to enjoy the view.”

Then, pointing to the reefs where we’re heading, he explains that our boat can only get so close. “You’ll need to swim against the current to get there,” he says. “After a couple of hours, when you’ve seen enough, let the current carry you back in this direction.”

It's a windy day. I'm gripping the railing to keep my balance.

I look at the captain. He looks at me.

"Trust me, the views of the tropical fish and coral will be worth it."

My mom jumps in and I follow.

The moment I hit the water, I know I'm in trouble. Worse, I know *my mom* is in trouble.

I know because I'm a capable swimmer. I'm in my fifties, not my eighties. Even so, the ocean current is so strong that I immediately feel it dragging me backward.

My poor judgment in dropping my mother miles off the Atlantic coast for an underwater adventure is suddenly apparent.

Frantically, I look toward the reef. I'm hoping to catch up with my mom and signal to her that we must swim back to the boat. But she's nowhere to be found. When I turn around, I realize that the current has swept her backward, sending her many yards behind the boat. I reverse direction and swim to meet her.

When I reach her side, I point to the boat, gesturing that we need to swim toward it. She nods.

We begin swimming together, but before I know it, she's no longer by my side. I turn around again, this time finding her just a few feet behind me. Face down. Motionless. Instinctively I grab her hand. It's completely limp. My mom is a floating body.

I flip her over and rip off her face mask. Her eyes are glassy and unfocused. Her head is heavy in my hand. She isn't struggling for air. She doesn't seem to be breathing at all. The noodle and her vest are keeping her body afloat, but I have to hold her head to keep her nose and mouth above water.

Mustering all my will, I use my free arm to claw through the water, trying to drag both myself and my mother back to safety. I know my strength is her only hope.

But I can't do it. No matter how frantically I thrash, or fiercely I pull and kick, the ocean swallows my efforts. Lungs burning, legs heavy, I feel

the mighty current carrying us farther and farther out to sea.

I switch tactics. Treading water with my legs, I use one hand to keep my mom's head above water and wave the other wildly in the air. "Help!" I scream, more terrified than I've ever been. "Help us! Help! *Help!*" Even as the boat grows smaller in the distance, I'm determined to make the captain notice us struggling.

For what seems like hours but must only be seconds, I watch as the tiny figure of the captain paces back and forth across the deck, looking in every direction but ours. By the time he notices us, pulls up anchor, and brings the boat to where we are, I have no idea whether my mom is still alive. Even if she *is* alive, I have no faith she'll ever be the same.

And then...

And then this nightmare has a happy ending. My cries reach the ears of a snorkeling instructor on a nearby boat, and he and our captain reach us at the same time. The Good Samaritan snorkeling instructor administers CPR, and after gathering the other snorkelers, our boat races back to shore at top speed. An ambulance whisks my mom from the dock to the emergency room in record time, where remarkably skilled doctors and nurses are ready to receive her. Three months later, on my mom's eighty-seventh birthday, we celebrate her miraculous full recovery.



I'm sharing this harrowing tale for one reason. The mighty ocean—a force that can't be overpowered through sheer determination alone—is a metaphor for your *situation*.

What do I mean by "situation"? I'm referring to the set of objective physical and social circumstances you inhabit: not just the actual spaces but also the company you keep, not just the objects within sight and reach but also the cultural norms that, like an invisible net, influence your behavior without your awareness. Your situation is quite literally everything and everyone around you. *All of it.*

So what *isn't* part of your situation? What's in your head—including how you interpret everything taking place in your external reality. Your thoughts *matter*, of course, but they aren't the same thing as your situation, which is what I want to draw your attention to in this book.

The power of the situation is both indisputable and, in the thick of pursuing a goal, easily neglected. In those moments, you may overlook a plain fact: effort is necessary for achievement but not always sufficient. A successful situation amplifies your effort, while a losing situation diminishes it.

What's more, your situation isn't merely a matter of good or bad luck. You have choices. Your circumstances are almost never entirely beyond your control. Whether you're set up to succeed or fail is partly up to you.

For instance, despite our captain's assurances to the contrary, the most dangerous thing I'd done that day—and perhaps the most foolish of my life—was dropping my eighty-six-year-old, 107-pound mother into a heaving, churning, away-from-shore ocean current. That wasn't bad luck. It was epically poor judgment. A near-fatal failure to avoid a losing situation.

And what saved my mom wasn't just good fortune, either. It was *situational* awareness—recognizing, just in the nick of time, how very strong the tides were that day—followed by *situational* agency—realizing that I had the power to change my situation for the better.

When I understood I wasn't nearly strong enough to tow my mother to safety on my own, I stopped fighting the current and signaled for help instead. The rescuers who came to our aid knew more than I did about how to handle this kind of emergency. Together, they got my mom out of the deep and onto the boat deck, and then to solid ground, and finally into the hands of expert medical staff who could care for her properly.

Today my mother is the healthiest, most energetic ninety-one-year-old I know. When we celebrate her ninety-second birthday, I assure you it will *not* be with a snorkeling expedition off the coast of Florida.



I am a psychologist and professor who researches motivation and achievement, and I began my career studying remarkably successful individuals. After a decade of study, I took a six-month sabbatical and did my very best to tell their stories. My first book, *Grit*, summed up everything I'd learned about passion and perseverance for long-term goals—a common denominator of world-class performers, no matter their area of specialization.

Now another decade has passed, and in that time, I've turned my attention from the psychological profiles of high achievers to a different common denominator—the strikingly similar features of their situations. In other words, my curiosity has taken me from what goes on *inside* the minds of high achievers to everything and everyone *around* them.

What I've learned is that situations wield enormous influence—and yet, strangely, we're largely oblivious to their power. *Mind over matter*, we say. *You can't control the situation, but you can control how you react to it.* It's true that what we *do* is influenced by what we *think*—but it's equally true that what we *think* is, in turn, influenced by *where we are*. Like it or not, our every thought and action is profoundly shaped by our peers and mentors, by our culture, and even by the objects in our personal space.

Over four hundred years ago, the French philosopher Michel de Montaigne wrote an essay about how easy it is to overlook the power of the situation. Reflecting on his own “inconsistencies,” as he put it, he found himself by turns a hero or a coward, a giver or a taker, a saint or a sinner—depending on the situation. “We do not *go*,” Montaigne wrote. “We are carried—like things afloat, now gently, now violently, as the water is angry or calm.” It is an inconvenient truth, he acknowledged, and one we resist, because we much prefer the notion that we are in full command of our thoughts and actions.

In this book I go further. I want to convince you that recognizing the power of the situation doesn't undermine your own agency. Why not?

Because whether you're rich or poor, young or old, established in your career or just starting out, your circumstances aren't fixed—not entirely, anyway. It's true that the world isn't always fair, and some of us have much more freedom to change our situation than others. But alongside the realities you have no power to change, there's almost always something you can.

Consider, for example, your personal space. It's your choice whether to surround yourself with irresistible temptations or, instead, with reminders of what you actually want to achieve. You can also pick your peers—ideally a group of like-minded people who will keep you accountable, inspire you, and, most of all, enable you to do the same for them. And you can proactively attract mentors who will teach you what they know, believe in you when your confidence falters, and open doors to opportunities you can only imagine. Even changing where you work or live is a possibility, allowing you to establish roots in a culture where “the way we do things around here” is the way you want to do things, too.

And if your primary concern is helping someone else succeed, this book shows how helping them indirectly—by setting up a *successful* situation—is not only the most effective way to do so but also the most ethical.



The situation, it turns out, is a difficult subject to write about, to talk about, and even to think about. *Background. Backdrop. Backstory. Periphery.* The English language, even, lacks a rich vocabulary to describe it.

By a large margin, these pages represent the most challenging intellectual work of my life. And in ways that may surprise you, the most personal. Because understanding the power of the situation hasn't just made me a better psychologist, it's made me a better person. And my hope is that it does the same for you.

In his commencement speech to the 2005 graduating class of Kenyon College, the writer David Foster Wallace begins with this parable:

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?"

And the two young fish swim on for a bit. And then eventually, one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"

"The point of the fish story," Wallace says, "is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about."

Much of Wallace's speech is about mindfulness, and how, if you try, you can notice your inner thoughts and how they influence your behavior.

In this book, I explain how the outer situation gives rise to those inner thoughts. Can you learn to notice the water you're swimming in? Can you exercise agency over your situation? Can you find the people and places that bring out your best?

I did, and I know you can, too. Let's begin.

PART 1

SITUATIONAL AWARENESS



“Look around you.”

—CHRISTOPHER WREN, ARCHITECT

CHAPTER 1



Beyond Grit

“Without Bob, my story is different—100% different.”

—MICHAEL PHELPS

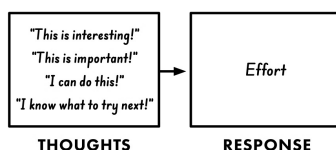
On the first day of my PhD program, I was thirty-two years old, pregnant with my second daughter, and still nursing the first. Compared to my spry and single classmates, I felt like a senior citizen. But I had one thing going for me: *I knew why I was there.*

In seeking a career as a psychologist, my singular purpose was to answer a question I’d been asking since childhood: *What makes some people more successful than others?* What I discovered—across domains and age groups, and in dataset after dataset—was that high achievers have a combination of passion and perseverance that I call “grit.” Sometimes very talented, and sometimes less so, the successful strivers in my studies worked harder, longer, and more consistently than their less successful peers.

This discovery held special meaning for me. I’d grown up with a father who shared my fascination with excellence, but remained convinced that top performers were simply blessed with extraordinary natural ability. And because I was no prodigy—not even the smartest kid in my sixth-grade homeroom—I took delight in proving that excellence is earned, not given, and life is a marathon, not a sprint. In sum, my first big insight as a psychologist was that the highlight reel of world-class performance leaves thousands of hours of unglamorous, unfun-to-watch effort on the editing room floor.

By the time I finished my PhD and became a professor, I knew grit was the hallmark of high achievers, but I wasn't satisfied. What made them tick? Where did all that effort come from? My initial guess, and one that satisfied me for a long time, was also the simplest: willpower.

But digging deeper—particularly by interviewing high achievers about what drives them—I arrived at a second breakthrough: grit isn't just grinding through misery by sheer force of will. Yes, Olympic athletes, Nobel laureates, and CEOs all talked about the rewards of hard work. But surprisingly few attributed their persistence to willpower alone. On the contrary, these paragons of grit insisted that they *love* what they do. More often than white-knuckling their way through difficulty, admonishing themselves to “Just do it!” they listened to an inner voice that sings out with authentic excitement: “This is interesting!” “This is important!” “I can do this!” and “I know what to try next!”



Glimpsing the Situation

After investigating what goes on *inside* the heads of successful strivers, I began to wonder what might be special on the *outside*, too. What situations lead a person, however gritty or talented, to view their work as interesting, important, doable, and improvable? Could it be that effort rises and falls, not only because of what a person brings to a situation but because of the situation itself?

Take West Point. My research showed that in any given year, its grittier cadets were more likely to complete the most difficult stages of training. But looking *across* years, I noticed the probability that any given cadet would complete training was steadily increasing—a trend that had begun

in the 1970s, with no changes in admission criteria or graduation standards.

“It’s not the cadets, it’s the culture,” explained General Robert Caslen, who graduated from the academy in 1974 and later served as its superintendent. He then described a shift from the academy’s long-standing “attrition model,” as he put it, to a “developmental model.” An evolution from weeding out the weak to helping every cadet grow stronger.

Gradually, I began forming a hypothesis. To stay motivated through the countless hours of practice that separate amateurs from experts, grit is necessary but not sufficient. The situation also matters—and to an astonishing degree: Culture matters. Mentors matter. Teammates matter. Even the objects in your personal space matter. How you think about your goals and what you’re willing to do to achieve them depends on both you and your situation. Grit is one thing; a great situation is another—and fully realizing your potential requires both.

Today I wake up every day asking the same question that led me to psychology in the first place: *Why are some people more successful than others?* But I no longer believe that a complete answer begins and ends with the individual. Now whenever I interview successful strivers, I listen for details about the people and places that have made their success possible.

Situational Awareness

Talent is obvious—you can spot it in a highlight reel. Grit takes more patient observation—to bear witness, you may need to sit in the bleachers for hours, days, weeks, months, and years. But even less obvious—because we’re not accustomed to look for them—are situational advantages. It requires both patience and a wide-angle lens to become conscious of the people and places that make effort pay off—and that inspire effort in the first place.

Consider Michael Phelps.

When he retired at the age of thirty-one, Michael had won twenty-eight Olympic medals—twenty-three of them gold—making him, by far, the most decorated Olympian ever.

“Right away, I knew he was special.” That’s what Michael’s lifelong coach, Bob Bowman, told me. Bob remembers coaching swim practice on May 5, 1997, when in skipped a little boy who, at age eleven, was years younger than the other swimmers in Bob’s group. Almost immediately, Bob saw that Michael’s height and wingspan, his strength and flexibility, and his intuitive feel for the water were especially well-suited for swimming.

But in Bob’s view, it was Michael’s passion and perseverance that set him apart from equally talented peers. “The thing he had that most people don’t see, but I saw for twenty years,” Bob says, “is an unbelievable work ethic. When I say unbelievable, I mean three hundred and sixty-five days a year without missing a single practice. Saturdays, Sundays, holidays, birthdays. When he was feeling great and when he wasn’t, Michael came in and trained. After a hard set or a disappointing practice, or even [after] failing to reach a goal he’d worked hard to achieve, his commitment didn’t waver. He did the work—consistently. It was practice, not raw ability, that made him the best ever.”

The image of young Michael swimming his heart out, day after day after day, is about as perfect a picture of grit as you’ll ever see. What I wanted to know was whether Michael would have achieved such greatness in *any* situation. And why Michael himself has said, and I quote, “Without Bob, my story is different—*100% different*.”

Humbly, Bob pointed out that when their paths crossed, Michael was already an outstanding swimmer, particularly in his best stroke, the butterfly. But when pressed, Bob admitted that together they achieved what neither could have dreamed of accomplishing on their own.

“So,” I asked, “what makes your practices different?”

“A lot of coaches like to play things by ear,” Bob said. “Not me. I plan everything in advance.” Then he held up a lined notepad divided into sec-

tions and, in careful all-caps shorthand, the drills he was going to put his swimmers through that afternoon.

Then Bob's explanation got a little technical. I'm sure I didn't follow it entirely, but I didn't have to understand the fine points to appreciate how seriously Bob takes crafting what he calls an "environment of excellence." A situation in which, as he puts it, if "you buy in and you do the work, you're practically guaranteed to improve." A situation in which "special things can happen."

For Michael, Bob's remarkable dedication provided something far more important than a strategic edge. It gave him confidence. "He was somebody who trusted me," Michael says. "He believed in me." And when Bob told Michael that he had a shot at qualifying for the Olympic team, Michael believed in Bob, too. "I think from that moment forward, we just decided that we could do absolutely anything that we put our minds to."

Advantageous circumstances are typically chalked up to good luck. And indeed, Michael claims no credit for being raised ten minutes away from the premier youth aquatic center in the country. One that included two fifty-meter pools—one outdoors, which made it a joy to swim in the summer, and one indoors, which made it possible to train year-round. Maybe most important, the aquatic center possessed a culture that was unapologetically geared toward world-class performance, so much so that its leadership scoured the country looking for brilliant, ambitious young coaches like Bob Bowman. Serious, seven-day-a-week training is not the norm for youth swimming, but it was the way they did things at the North Baltimore Aquatic Club, which attracted motivated young swimmers like Michael from all over the region.

Situational Agency

But what if you're not so lucky?

“A wise man does not wish to change his situation,” said Leo Tolstoy. “The more upset a person is with other people, and with circumstances... the further he is from wisdom.”

Since time immemorial, philosophers, coaches, and parents have advised looking within, not without, in order to succeed. For a very long time, I was no different. *Try harder!* That’s what I used to tell myself as I chased my academic and professional goals. In my prior life as a public school math teacher it’s what I told my students, too. Effort was not like height or being double-jointed or walking into practice with the world’s greatest swim coach. Unlike talent or circumstance, effort seemed like something a person could just will into existence, and thus, dwelling on how the situation could be better seemed not only futile but downright cowardly.

Now I think differently. And it is because, having scrutinized the stories of the grittiest strivers, I’ve discovered that heroic grit and situational awareness are compatible.

Consider, for example, Léon Marchand.

If the moral of Michael Phelps is that the situation is essential to realizing your potential, then the lesson of Léon Marchand is this: Your situation isn’t fixed. You have choices. You don’t have to be wealthy or powerful to change your situation for the better.

At a very early age, Léon was identified as a swimming prodigy. Léon’s uncle, who once swam for the French Olympic team, remembers the day his six-year-old nephew stepped into a pool. Encouraged to push off from the wall “like a rocket,” Léon effortlessly glided fifteen feet—much farther than his uncle had ever seen a child so young glide before. “Was that good, Uncle?” Léon asked when he got out on the other side.

Very good, thought Léon’s uncle, who urged his brother and sister-in-law, also former Olympic swimmers, to sign up their son for lessons at the local club, Les Dauphins du TOEC, just a few minutes by bicycle from where they lived. Like the North Baltimore Aquatic Club, this was not your run-of-the-mill community swim club. TOEC stands for Toulouse

Olympique Employés Club, and the century-old complex in Toulouse, France, includes a heated fifty-meter, eight-lane outdoor pool. All are welcome, but the TOEC's primary purpose is to support elite national and international swimmers.

Initially, Léon didn't exactly take to swimming like a fish to water. "I was like, really skinny and the pool was just awful," he says. Too cold. "So I quit swimming for two years." But after experimenting with martial arts and rugby, he returned to the pool. It didn't take long for "little Marchand" to earn praise as "a model student" who did everything he was asked, with the consistency of—well, the consistency of a young Michael Phelps. "Little by little, Léon discovered the tenacity of his father and his uncle," says his first swim coach, Peggy Dutilleux. "Because the Marchand brothers—you could always spot them in the water, they never gave up."

When Léon was eight years old, the TOEC's athletic director, Nicolas Castel, took over his coaching. Like Michael's technique at the same age, Léon's approach needed work. Under Nicolas's guidance, Léon made steady progress. At the age of nineteen, he placed sixth in the 400-meter individual medley at the 2020 Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo.

Léon was very happy in Toulouse, but after the Tokyo Olympics, he made a decision that would define his career: he packed his bags and moved halfway around the world to Tempe, Arizona.

Months earlier, Bob Bowman, then the head swimming coach at Arizona State University, found this email in his inbox:

Dear sir,

I am a French swimmer, my name is Léon Marchand (18 years old). I would like to join the university of Arizona State in summer 2021 for swim and compete in NCAA with your amazing team. Do you think I could benefit from a scholarship? What level of education is required? (TOEFL, SAT...) You will find attached my presentation sheet. Thank you for the time granted to my request.

Sportingly,

“I wanted to go abroad, discover another culture, meet new swimmers, and race against the best swimmers in the world—because *that’s where they are*,” Léon said of his decision. And, of course, he wanted to train under the coach who’d trained Michael Phelps.

Still, moving across the Atlantic was no small feat. “I learned a new language and met new people. New culture, new classes, new coach,” Léon said of the move. Training with Bob meant leaving his entire world behind.

And yet his new life beckoned. French swimmers familiar with Bob’s coaching style assured Léon that Bob wasn’t just demanding but also “very kind” and “super attentive.” What’s more, Léon had heard great things about the other coaches at ASU, and he knew Bob’s team was on the ascent. There were serious swimmers on Léon’s home team in Toulouse, but at ASU, he’d later say, all twenty swimmers “think they can win it all.” “There’s someone in each stroke that can push me. We push each other every day in practice and in competition, too.”

Last but not least, the physical setup was a big step up from the pools in Toulouse: “The facilities are amazing,” he later told the French press. “Three outdoor pools, the weight room, the dorms, everything is close by.” And “it only rains about fifteen days a year!”

Before committing, Léon went to his parents for advice. “Go for it!” they urged. “And don’t overthink it! If you don’t go now, you’ll regret it later.”

When Léon showed up at ASU, his new coach immediately recognized untapped potential. Though lacking his idol Michael’s unique hydrodynamic features, Léon had the same feel for the water. More important, Bob recognized a similar approach to training. “On a day-to-day basis, they’re extraordinarily consistent. They’re *always* pushing themselves.”

Always working at the edge of his ability wasn’t just a product of Léon’s grit. In addition to providing peers who were Olympic hopefuls

and NCAA champions, Bob's program piled on mileage and intensity, building a massive aerobic base and relentlessly rehearsing championship conditions. Technical details were drilled with the same precision Bob once demanded of Michael. "Actually, Léon has benefited from everything I learned in the years I trained Michael," Bob told me with a chuckle. "He's gotten a better version of me."

Within two years of changing his situation, Léon won gold in the 400-meter individual medley at the 2023 World Aquatics Championships, and in doing so, shattered Michael Phelps's last-standing individual world record. In a sport in which races are decided by tenths if not hundredths of a second, Léon had slashed his personal best by nearly nine seconds, continually making improvements in every stroke and at every distance.

In 2024, Léon returned to his native France for the Paris Olympics. There, he won four gold medals—the 400 IM, 200 IM, 200 butterfly, and 200 breaststroke—each in Olympic-record time. With every victory, the home crowd erupted in deafening cheers. At the closing ceremony, Léon was chosen to carry the lantern with the Olympic flame—the twenty-two-year-old local hero who'd won more individual gold medals than any other athlete in the Games.

What do world records and Olympic medals have to do with you? In my view, *everything*. Because you, too, have dreams—and one life in which to make them come true. Like the best of the best, you, too, can proactively seek out situations optimized to achieve your fullest potential.

And why is this particular lesson so consequential? Because the situation is an ally we don't call on enough. Instead of *commanding* ourselves to work harder, we should seek mentors, peers, physical spaces, and cultures that *inspire* us to work harder. Instead of *urging* ourselves to make the best of a situation, we can *improve* the situation itself.

In those moments when your challenge seems daunting, ask yourself, what would Léon do? And remember what he *did* do: Léon Marchand got on a plane.

A Hero's Journey

One day while working on this book, I took a break to watch Olympic coverage from Paris. A Toyota commercial caught my attention. Eight women crouch like tigers at an indoor track's starting line, the camera zooming in on one runner, whose expression blazes with particular intensity. "This is the 200-meter final," the announcer declares. "*Get ready, get set...*" Before the announcer shouts, "Go!" more than a dozen non-runners rush onto the track behind her—smiling, clapping, shouting encouragement. The runner wins, naturally, and when she crosses the finish line, that same crowd returns and envelops her in celebration. The commercial ends with these three words: "Start your impossible."

That sixty-second commercial is one of a series entitled "No Journey Is Taken Alone," and it reminds me of what Bob Bowman says is so hard to appreciate about Michael's and Léon's extraordinary achievements. "The success they've enjoyed is the product of teams," he says. "I don't mean just me, and I don't mean just the other swimmers. I mean a whole complex *support system*. Family, of course, which is so important—but beyond that, other coaches, not to mention doctors and trainers and sports psychologists and administrative staff. People the public never sees."

Léon agrees that he's the product of an incredibly supportive situation. "I'm not alone in this," he says. "You're alone in the lane, but behind me, there are so many people."

In April 2025, *Time* recognized Léon Marchand as one of the hundred most influential people in the world, and Michael has graced the cover of the magazine. Bob Bowman has done neither; coaches are rarely in the spotlight. But if fame and influence were meted out according to the positive effect one person has on others, Bob should be considered. In fact, I'd love it if, every time we celebrated a hero's journey, we also took the time to learn their *backstory*. Because it is at least as inspiring, and often more useful, to understand the *outside* forces that enable a person to fulfill their potential.



These days, Léon spends most of his time with Bob and his team, but regularly travels back to his native Toulouse to work with his childhood coach, Nicolas Castel. What does Bob say about splitting the coaching responsibilities? “Nicolas is a terrific coach. We work as a team.”

And what does Nicolas think? “Performance is individual,” Nicolas says. “Success is collective.”

CHAPTER 2



How Do We Change?

Years after I completed my PhD and became a professor, I attended an academic conference that would shift—and widen—the scope of my entire research program. The question at the top of the agenda captured the attendees' shared focus: *How Do We Change?*

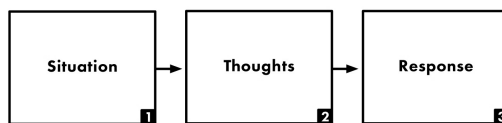
The first speaker was James Gross, a professor at Stanford and a world expert in emotions and how we regulate them. Managing emotions, James began, is tricky. Like thunderstorms, emotions often take us by surprise. Without warning we find ourselves awash with anger or anxiety or sadness or joy.

For instance, imagine yourself at Thanksgiving dinner. The conversation turns to politics, and your brother-in-law drops a bombshell that sets your teeth on edge. Instead of losing your temper, you can make yourself feel calm.

What most people don't realize is that all emotions take time to develop. They do so in *stages*.

To illustrate, James put up a slide with boxes and arrows, a version of which I've sketched below. Box One represents a given situation. Box Two is how you think about it. And Box Three is your response.

THE THREE BOXES MODEL

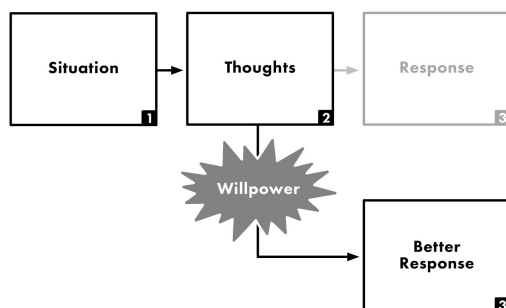


First, there's your *situation*. You're in a certain place and with certain people. This is your objective reality.

Second, your situation provokes *thoughts*. You notice some aspect of your situation, and your mind immediately interprets it. This happens so fast that you're typically unaware of the countless judgments that take place beneath conscious awareness. It may seem like you directly experience reality, but you don't—you experience your brain's *interpretation* of reality. Thoughts are subjective.

Third, your thoughts provoke a *response* to the situation. It is only at this final stage that you *feel* an emotion regarding it. People often assume that it's their feelings that lead to their thoughts, James said, but in fact, it's the other way around. Your feelings don't show up until Box Three.

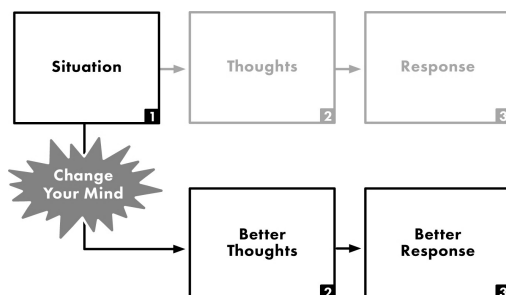
The most direct way to change how you feel, James continued, is to modify the way you respond to your thoughts using willpower.



But as we all know, using willpower to effortfully suppress anger doesn't work very well. I leaned forward in my seat, eager to hear what James would say next.

It's more effective, he said, to intervene earlier—by changing your *thoughts*. For example, you could direct your attention to something less upsetting than the politics that are being discussed—like the pumpkin pie you're looking forward to for dessert. You could also reframe the situation. Instead of thinking, *My brother-in-law is an idiot!* you might consider, *I don't have the same view. What does he see that I don't?*

When you change your thoughts, you automatically change your response.



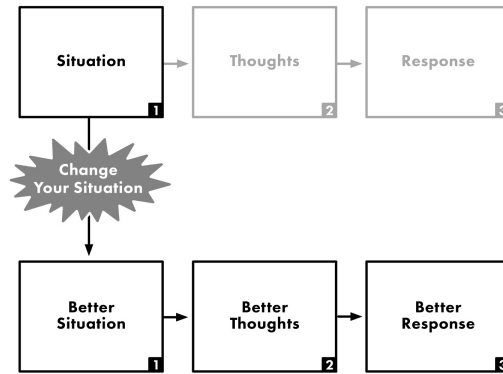
The idea of rethinking the situation—changing your attitude about it rather than using brute-force willpower—was exciting. My mind raced with possibilities. You could think about all the qualities you like about your brother-in-law. Or recall the favors he’s done for you in the past.

But James wasn’t finished. And it was what he said next that radically shifted my view of how we change. It was simultaneously both plain as day and nothing I’d considered before.

Earliest of all, you can change yourself by changing your situation.

For instance, when settling in for a three-hour Thanksgiving feast, you might choose a seat at the other end of the table from your brother-in-law. Or, if he monopolizes the entire table’s conversation, you might volunteer to clear the dishes and wash up in the kitchen. Or you might sidle up to your grandmother, whose warmth and humor never fail to bring out your most appreciative self.

By changing your situation, you automatically change your thoughts, which automatically change your response. Box One leads to Box Two, and Box Two leads to Box Three.



“This is a very simple framework,” James concluded modestly. “But for me, it’s so helpful. For the longest time I struggled to make sense of all the things people do to change their emotions.... There are so many strategies, and it was hard to see why some were more effective than others. What’s more, I couldn’t even keep them straight. This model takes an endless jumble of tactics—like an endless stack of Post-it notes, each reminding you of a helpful tip or trick—and puts them in a sensible, deeply true order.”

Indeed, putting this all together into a three-box framework—and, in particular, opening my eyes to the hidden power of changing the situation—was revolutionary.

JUST DO IT Doesn't Do It

When I was still in graduate school and trying to understand what made some people grittier than others, I thought a lot about willpower. It was around that time, when my daughters Lucy and Amanda were three and four years old, that I used to read them the story of Frog and Toad and the cookies.

One day, Frog and Toad bake a big batch of cookies. They’re so delicious that Frog and Toad cannot stop eating them.

“We need willpower,” says Frog.

“What is willpower?” asks Toad.

“Willpower is trying hard *not* to do something that you really want to do,” says Frog.

“You mean like trying *not* to eat all of these cookies?” asks Toad.

“Right,” says Frog.



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Even at their young age, my daughters nodded in recognition when, earlier in the story, Frog says to Toad, “I think we should stop eating. We will soon be sick.” And both girls smiled sympathetically when we turned the page and watched Frog and Toad declare that they would eat “one last cookie,” only to succumb to temptation—again and again and again.

Grown-ups, too, understand that exercising willpower can be very, very hard. In national surveys of American adults, lack of willpower is “the most commonly cited barrier to making lifestyle and behavior changes.” When I was in graduate school, this was also the prevailing view among psychological scientists. For instance, laboratory experiments were showing that whether resisting cookies, holding your hand in a bucket of ice water, or keeping a straight face while watching a tear-jerking video, resisting the impulse to give up reliably led to feelings of exhaustion. It was as if, like a muscle, willpower grew fatigued with use.

For a time, I likewise reasoned that you could build grit the same way you strengthen a muscle—by just forcing yourself to do hard things. With great enthusiasm, my students and I dreamed up a whole array of just-do-it challenges. Some were physical: like working out on an indoor rowing machine or squeezing shut a handgrip for as long as you could stand it. Others were mental, like trying to get through an entire day without once uttering “like” or “ya know.” But to our great disappointment, our just-do-it interventions failed spectacularly, producing no improvement whatsoever in behavior.

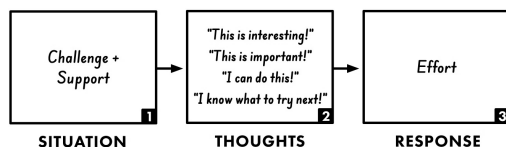
The day I learned about the Three Boxes model was the day I realized why these interventions were so unsophisticated: They attacked the motivation problem at the last possible moment. They assumed that exercising willpower is the *only* way to intentionally change behavior, and they accepted the situation as a given. By contrast, appreciating the full situation-thoughts-response sequence—and recognizing that you have agency over your situation—opened up a universe of more proactive strategies.

For instance, you’re more likely to think, “This is interesting!” when you’ve removed distractions from your workspace.

You’re more likely to think, “This is important!” when you’re surrounded by like-minded peers.

You’re more likely to face setbacks with optimism—“I can do this!”—when a mentor holds you to high standards and assures you that you can meet them.

And the thought “I know what to try next!” comes naturally in a culture where pursuing excellence is the norm.



In other words, a challenging and supportive situation encourages positive thoughts, which lead you—without having to force yourself—to

put forth your best effort. There are no shortcuts to excellence, but getting *situated* makes doing hard things *easier*.

First Things First

James and I are now close collaborators. Together, we've coauthored a dozen scientific articles. Our research shows that of all the ways you can change your behavior, willpower is the absolute worst.

In one study, we surveyed nearly twenty thousand American high school students. Students who relied on willpower—for example, saying they “just forced” themselves to study—actually studied *less* and earned *lower* scores on the SAT college entrance exam. In contrast, students who used situational strategies—for example, saying they “set a concrete study schedule somewhere I would see it regularly”—studied *more* and earned *higher* test scores.

In other studies, both adolescents and adults rated situational strategies as more effective—and less effortful—than brute-force willpower.

James and I are not alone. For instance, soon after we met, a landmark study called “Everyday Temptations” was published. Hundreds of adults were surveyed every few hours over the course of a week. Contrary to intuition, the people who successfully pursued their goals rarely relied on raw willpower. Instead, they avoided temptations in the first place.

Here's an example James and I discussed in a recent article. Say you're trying to get more exercise. You could, as many people do, rely on willpower to get out the door. That's changing behavior at Box Three. One step earlier, however, you could change your (Box Two) thoughts and remind yourself, “Exercise will make me feel good!” Thinking that way makes it easier to get going. But even earlier, you can change your (Box One) situation. For instance, the night before, leave your shorts and sneakers right next to your bed. Putting your workout clothes within arm's reach, directly in your line of sight, *automatically* changes your

thoughts. And changing your thoughts, in turn, *automatically* changes your behavior.

Is changing your situation effortless? No. But a little willpower goes a long way when you use it to get *situated*.

Succeed More, Suffer Less

Several years after we began working together, James and I and our collaborators began to wonder: Is changing the situation a strategy that can be taught directly?

First, we asked young adults to name a goal they could achieve in the following week. Next, we randomly assigned them to one of three conditions.

In the *situation change* condition, we said: “The most effective self-control strategies actually involve removing temptations from sight rather than trying to resist them directly.” Then we showed videos with tips on how to change the physical situation to make resisting temptation easier. For instance, they learned how moving candy just a few feet away reduced the chances they’d eat it.

As a comparison, in the *willpower* condition, we said: “People can actually strengthen their self-control ‘muscle’ with repeated practice that consists of actively resisting immediate temptations.” Then we showed two videos with tips on how to do so. For instance, we told this group about how it was possible to “just say no” to alcohol.

And finally, in the no-treatment condition, we didn’t give any advice at all.

A week later, everyone reported on their progress toward their goals and answered this question: *How tempted did you feel by distractions in your environment last week?*

Young adults encouraged to change their situation were significantly more successful at achieving their goals—19 percent better than the no-treatment group and 16 percent better than those encouraged to use

willpower. In addition, they reported lower levels of temptation—11 percent less than the no-treatment group and 13 percent less than those encouraged to use willpower.

In other words, learning to change the situation, rather than muster willpower, not only led to more success, it also reduced the suffering of resisting temptation.

So yes, you *can* learn to change your situation. And when you do, you make doing hard things easier.

Let's revisit the cookies story I read to Amanda and Lucy when they were growing up. What happens after Frog tells Toad that willpower is trying hard not to do something you really want to do? What happens when they discover that just trying hard not to eat the cookies simply doesn't work?

Turn the page, and you learn that wise Frog puts the cookies in a box, ties a string around it and puts it up on a high shelf.

Toad is skeptical: "But we can climb the ladder and take the box down from the shelf and cut the string and open the box."

Then Frog thinks for a moment. Toad has a point. They have made it more difficult to eat the cookies—but not impossible.

Finally, Frog takes the box down from the shelf, cuts the string, and walks outside, shouting, "Hey, birds, here are cookies!" And the birds come, pick up the cookies in their beaks, and fly away.



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Change Your Situation, Change Your Life

You might think of changing your situation as a life hack, a clever trick. Research shows it's much more profound than that.

For instance, psychologists once asked over a hundred people to write about major life changes. Some participants yearned to make progress in their careers. Others wanted to further their education. Still others sought to improve their relationships. There were also the familiar resolutions to get in shape and kick bad habits.

Half of the adults were randomly assigned to write about “sudden and dramatic” improvements they'd successfully brought about in their lives. The other half wrote about improvements they *wished* they'd achieved, but so far hadn't. The researchers then systematically coded essays from both groups, searching for patterns that distinguished successful life changes from failed ones.

A finding that stood out was that failure stories were more likely “to describe change in terms of willpower.” Success stories, in contrast, described “mastery over the environment.” Specifically, 36 percent of adults who succeeded in achieving their goals had actually picked up and moved to a new neighborhood or town—versus only 13 percent of those who failed. Success stories were also significantly more likely to mention support from friends and family, solicited or otherwise, and accountability to another person—like a spouse imploring them to quit smoking.

In other words, attempts at making big life changes were more successful when aimed at the Box One situation rather than the downstream Box Three response.

Three Boxes, Daily

“The image I cannot get out of my mind—in almost every conversation we have now, Angela—are those three boxes with the arrows between.”

This is what the journalist Stephen Dubner, coauthor of *Freakonomics*, said to me one day on our podcast, *No Stupid Questions*. “I’ve been using the Three Boxes daily,” Stephen continued. “*Multiple times* daily. I love it. I can’t believe it took three years of making *No Stupid Questions* for me to get something useful out of it! No, there have been many, many things—but seriously, this is the best and the biggest.”

Much later, when I mentioned to Stephen that I was writing this book, he practically whooped in excitement. He then shared that, as a daily reminder, he’d drawn himself a sketch—three boxes connected by two arrows—and made it the screen saver on his computer. “Very clever,” I said. “You changed your situation to remind yourself to change your situation!”

A visual reminder helps Stephen remember that the situation should never be taken for granted. “I’ve been looking at that first box as, okay, these are the facts,” Stephen added. “And the reason I find it’s useful to have that in a box is because I feel we often rush past that in our decision-making.”



In some ways, it’s understandable that we rush past the facts of a particular situation—assuming our circumstances are a given—and focus our energy on how to respond to it. After all, many aspects of the situation lie beyond our control. I agree entirely with the adage dispensed by coaches everywhere: *Control the controllables—and don’t worry about anything else.*

Very often, coaches follow up this directive by quoting Viktor Frankl, who described surviving the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Dachau in *Man’s Search for Meaning*. “When we are no longer able to change a situation,” Frankl wrote, “we are challenged to change ourselves.”

As an illustration of the meaning one can create even in the face of the most horrific of adversities, Frankl offered this example: “We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

And yet, the assumption that *all* aspects of our situation lie beyond our control is fundamentally incorrect. In the passage that follows, which I have never seen quoted, Frankl wrote, “But let me make it perfectly clear that in no way is suffering necessary to find meaning. I only insist that meaning is possible even in spite of suffering—provided, certainly, that the suffering is unavoidable. If it *were* avoidable, however, the meaningful thing to do would be to remove its cause, be it psychological, biological or political. *To suffer unnecessarily is masochistic rather than heroic.*”

In short, when we are able to change our situation for the better, we absolutely should.

CHAPTER 3



The Sweet Spot

What? I can't hear you!"

I knew my husband, Jason, was calling to me from the kitchen, but I couldn't quite make out what he was saying. He made a second attempt, and a third—and, briefly, it occurred to me that I should probably get up and see what he wanted.

Then my attention drifted back to *Top Chef*. *Wow, I just love Padma's jumpsuit*, I mused, wondering if I could ever pull off an outfit like that. And instead of getting up, I remained where I was: lying down, starfish-style, on the wall-to-wall carpet in my parents' family room, eyes glued to the TV.

"Ang, it's time for lunch!" Jason repeated, this time appearing in the doorway to make the announcement in person. "Sweetheart, your mom has lunch ready."

With a sigh, I hoisted myself upright and shuffled behind him into the kitchen. My mom and dad and Lucy and Amanda were all sitting at the table, which was spread with an astounding array of homemade Chinese dishes. Apparently, everyone had been waiting patiently for Jason to come fetch me.

This sort of thing never, ever, *ever* happened when my mom and dad visited our house. When they came to see us, I was nothing less than a whirling dervish of industriousness. If I wasn't cooking or cleaning up or running around after the girls, then I was working away on my laptop. Not once during those parental visits did I sprawl out in front of the TV, mindlessly channel surfing, until someone dragged me into the kitchen

for lunch. In fact, it was *only* in my childhood home that I behaved like... well, like the teenager I was when I lived there.

This metamorphosis never ceased to amaze Jason—not least because this side of me could be turned on and off like a light switch. On the drive home, with the girls asleep in the back and me slouching in the passenger seat with my feet on the dashboard, Jason joked that my childhood home was like kryptonite for my inner grit. The transformation, he joked, might qualify me for a diagnosis of multiple personality disorder.

That innocent remark was enough to trigger yet another transformation. Suddenly, I was no longer the Angela who'd regressed to her childhood self, content to have her mommy take care of her. Now I was Professor Angela Duckworth, sitting straight up in my seat, eager to correct a common misunderstanding about the nature of personality.

I dropped my voice a half octave. "Actually, that term isn't used anymore," I replied, all business. "Nowadays, it's called 'dissociative identity disorder.'"

Jason kept his eyes on the road, but I could tell he was listening intently. So I carried on: "This very rare disorder means having identities that are so disconnected that each self is unaware that the others exist. But here's the thing: we *all* have multiple personalities."

Personality 101

Here's a version of the lecture I delivered to Jason on the day he noticed how different I was in different situations.

It's instinctive to label people in terms of their personality traits. For instance, I am generally an upbeat and optimistic person. Like my mother, I tend to search for the silver lining in every cloud.

My dad, on the other hand, was a world-class worrier. His default expression was a subtle frown and a furrowed brow, his default posture, crossed arms and hunched shoulders. On weekends, he liked to walk the family through what he called "risk management"—a fancy term for

imagining worst-case scenarios (Fire! Bankruptcy! Not getting into Harvard!). I remember laughing out loud from the back seat once, when after driving over an unexpected speed bump in the mall parking lot, Dad cried out, “Disaster!”

Personalities differ because each of us has different goals, interests, beliefs, and habits. We see evidence of this every day: two people with different personalities can walk out of the same movie or meeting with opposing interpretations of what just happened, which, in turn, can lead to wildly divergent feelings and actions in response.

What’s tricky is that personality traits are like the weather. A given climate may, on average, be hot and dry, or cool and damp, or anywhere in between. Nevertheless, it occasionally rains in Phoenix, and it’s sometimes sunny in Seattle. In other words, personality traits describe how someone *tends* to be. It’s no surprise that your average cheerfulness won’t be the same as everyone else’s. What is surprising is *how much variation there is around that average*. To an astonishing degree, your personality has *range*.

As I said, I’m *generally* an optimist. But there were times when the challenge of writing this book turned me into a world-class pessimist. I moped. I catastrophized. I gnashed my teeth. Many evenings when Jason asked how the book was going, I snapped at him, accusing him of being a nag. And one day, when a friend innocently asked how I was doing on a scale from 1 to 10, I barked, “Minus three!” On the worst days, it became painfully apparent to me that I could get as discouraged as my dad. More than that, I realized that, in a very real sense, there is a confident Angela *and* an insecure Angela.

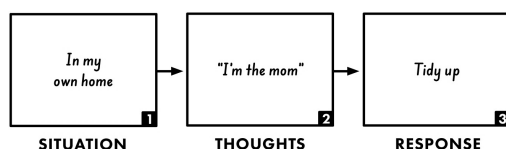
Likewise, on reflection, I could see that my dad wasn’t *always* a pessimist. In his thirty-five-year career as a chemist at DuPont, he took more than a few bold risks. Had he shied away from every challenge, there’s no way he could have invented a chemical that prevents car paint from fading in the sun—an innovation that set the standard for top-coat finishing in the automobile industry for more than two decades. When he retired, my

dad had achieved the highest rank of any scientist in the company, and there's simply no way he could have discovered all he did if there hadn't been, along with the pessimist I so often encountered at home, an optimist who relished tackling the very toughest problems at work.

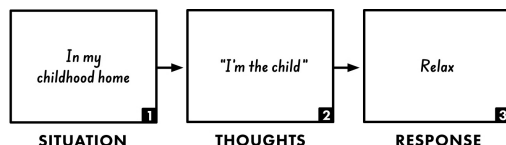
Understanding Your Multiple Selves

The Three Boxes model illuminates a feature of human nature that's easy to overlook. You don't have a single identity but *several*, and the specific triggers that elicit your different selves are embedded in the immediate situation: the people you're with and the physical place you're in at the moment.

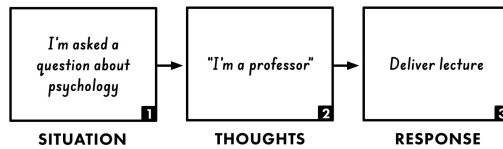
For instance, in the anecdote that opened this chapter, I'd manifested three different Angelas over the course of hours. In my own home, while we were packing the car and trying to get out the door, I assumed the role of responsible parent.



Then, when we arrived at my childhood home, I instead saw my mom as my caretaker and—*click!*—reverted to a version of my teenage self.



Finally, triggered by Jason's offhand comment about multiple personality disorder, I manifested Angela the professor, a responsible grown-up who took pride in her profession.



Over time I've noticed that these aren't the only selves I'm capable of. I'm a different Angela when I'm alone with Jason than when the two of us are together with our girls. These versions of me are different from the Angela my roommates from college know, and different from the Angela who runs into neighbors at the supermarket.

Likewise, in my research, I've documented that while some people are, on average, more self-controlled than others, these averages belie enormous variation in how self-controlled any given person is across different everyday situations. Even the most disciplined souls have a situational Achilles' heel—a tendency, in certain circumstances, to lose their ability to make farsighted choices.

In one of my favorite studies, researchers spent a season observing Little League Baseball coaches. They sat in the stands making notes on how different coaches interacted with their players in different kinds of situations. While some coaches were, in general, more critical than others, there was tremendous variability around each coach's average. And the situational cue that triggered a certain response in one coach wasn't always the same for another. For instance, when his team was winning, one coach responded by lavishing his players with praise. But another coach showed the opposite pattern, more often shouting out encouragement when his team was losing.

Most research shows that the situation matters at least as much as the person. Whatever your *average* level of grit, self-control, cheerfulness, extraversion, or any other trait, your personality has *range*—morphing in ways you don't realize as you move from one situation to the next. Here's how Walt Whitman conveyed the idea of multiple selves in the poem, *Song of Myself*:

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

The philosopher Michel de Montaigne captured the notion of multiple selves perfectly in an essay entitled “Of the Inconsistency of Our Actions.” “We are more unlike ourselves,” Montaigne wrote, “than we are unlike other people.”

The Fundamental Attribution Error

Underestimating the impact of the situation on behavior is what psychologists now refer to as the *fundamental attribution error*. Here’s the origin story.

In the fall of 1969 a man destined to become one of the most influential psychologists of the twentieth century returned to Columbia University to defend his doctoral research. Lee Ross had already been appointed to the faculty at Stanford University, but obtaining his PhD required him to pass an oral examination at Columbia.

“My examiners were quite jovial as they displayed their wit and erudition both to me and to their co-inquisitors in posing questions about my doctoral studies,” Ross later recalled. At one point an “eminent perception researcher” asked about the specific wavelength of light that Lee had used in one of his experiments. “Things went downhill from that point, as the questions grew more pointed.”

Eventually, the committee brought the proceedings to a close and gave their collective thumbs-up, awarding Lee the doctorate he needed to keep his new job. Still, his confidence was shaken: “Flying back to Palo Alto, I ruminated about my lack of readiness for the role I was about to resume.”

Less than a month later, the tables had turned, literally. Ross sat alongside fellow faculty around a table while a Stanford PhD student nervously defended a draft of his dissertation. “I found myself asking questions de-

signed in part to test the candidate but also in part to show my senior colleagues that I knew a thing or two about our field.” It was now Ross’s turn to appear witty and wise as the PhD student squirmed and struggled.

Soon after, Lee began to wonder whether the same person can look smart or stupid, depending on their role in a given situation. To test his hypothesis, he devised the famous “quiz bowl” experiment. He invited Stanford undergraduates into the lab and told them they’d be randomly assigned to one of two roles: questioner or contestant. The questioner’s task was to come up with ten difficult trivia questions whose answers they happened to know. The contestant’s job was to try to answer them.

What unfolded re-created Ross’s own experience. After the question-and-answer period, despite knowing that roles had been assigned by a coin flip, contestants rated themselves as less generally knowledgeable than their questioners. In a follow-up study, a different group of Stanford students watched reenactments of the “quiz bowl” interactions and reached the same conclusion.

Ross went on to study the *fundamental attribution error* for decades, leading him to the conclusion, published in one of the last articles of his long career, that “when making judgments about each other, people tend to be *insufficiently sensitive to the impact of situational factors* and too ready to make unwarranted attributions about traits, abilities, and other dispositions.”

Why are we so blind to the power of the situation? Neglecting the situation isn’t intentional—it reflects limitations in how our brains process information. Because we lack the bandwidth to process everything we take in through our senses, we tend to prioritize the person over their surroundings. Our view of the world is, by default, like a phone camera in portrait mode: we see a sharply focused image of the person in the center and everything around them is blurred. Research on visual processing shows this is exactly what happens. Without conscious awareness, our brain parses any visual scene into object and background, then suppresses

information about the background to create a high-resolution representation of the object.

For instance—



Quite obviously, this is the letter *F*. Now focus on the background. Do you see another letter—in fact, two? Of course you do. A capital letter *G* and its mirror image.

The situation is hard to see—until you look for it.



My PhD student Danny Southwick didn't need evidence from neuroscience to know that too often we privilege the person and discount the situation. Like me, Danny had acquired a decade of work experience before entering grad school to repurpose himself as a psychological scientist. But unlike me—or, to my knowledge, any PhD psychologist before him—Danny's prior chapter as a professional athlete included playing quarterback in the NFL.

By the time we began working together, Danny had had a full decade to reflect on his own performance, including inconsistencies that weren't obviously attributable to ups and downs in talent or grit. As a quarterback, Danny knew the truth of what Gisele Bündchen once said of her then-husband, New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, in response to crowds of Giants fans who heckled them mercilessly as they were departing the stadium: "My husband cannot f—ing throw the ball

and catch the ball at the same time!” The quarterback depends on his receivers—as well as, of course, his offensive line, his coaches and trainers, and more. And yet it is the quarterback who is blamed for every interception and turnover—and celebrated for every touchdown and victory.

Using sixteen years of archival performance and salary data from the NFL, along with field survey data from scores of NFL scouts, coaches, and executives, Danny and I have found compelling evidence for the *fundamental attribution error*: Quarterbacks are rated more favorably and paid more handsomely in accordance with the number of yards gained per play, which includes both the yards the ball travels in the air and, in addition, the yards the ball travels once the receiver catches it. A quarterback’s “air yards” stats show consistency when the quarterback leaves one team to join another. But his “yards-after-catch” stats—which depend on the speed and skill of the receivers who catch the ball—show no consistency from team to team. Nevertheless, yards-after-catch statistics account for substantial differences in quarterback salaries and in ratings by NFL talent evaluators.

It appears that even when making multimillion-dollar decisions, we tend to misattribute behavior to the individual rather than their situation.

Of course, it’s not just wide receivers who contribute to a quarterback’s performance. Tom Brady, the paragon of grit who was picked 199th in the 2000 NFL draft, but eventually guided his teams to seven Super Bowl victories, has said: “I’m really a product of what I’ve been around, who I was coached by, what I played against, in the era I played in. I really believe if a lot of people were in my shoes, they could accomplish the same kinds of things.” Brady has also pointed out that quarterbacks in the NFL are regularly ranked from best to worst, but the support staff (including offensive coordinators and quarterback coaches) are not. In Brady’s view, they should be: “Not everyone knows how to develop a quarterback.”

“People think Tom is just being modest,” Danny says. “But I understand exactly what he means. His observations are just like his passes: *accurate*.”

Why Inconsistency Is a Feature, Not a Bug

Despite the inherent range of our personalities, most of us reject the idea that we are all chameleons who change the way we talk, act, and feel to suit the situation.

Here are three statements researchers have developed to gauge a person’s need for consistency. To what extent are these true for you?

It is important to me that those who know me can predict what I will do.

I want to be described by others as a stable, predictable person.

I want my close friends to be predictable.

Initially, I scored pretty high on the need for consistency. I resisted the notion that I was a paragon of productivity under my own roof, but a couch potato when visiting my parents. Today, I understand that when it comes to personality, inconsistency is not the exception; it is the rule. What’s more, I have come to see inconsistency as a feature, not a bug.



Handelsman

"Strange, isn't it? Normally, I'm a very caring person, but in your case, for some reason, I don't give a damn."

J.B. Handelsman/The New Yorker Collection/The Cartoon Bank

I have Tim Beck, the founder of cognitive therapy, to thank for this shift.

Early in his career, Tim discovered that depression, anxiety, and other problematic (Box Three) responses originate in maladaptive (Box Two) thoughts. For many decades, he and his protégés developed and refined therapeutic techniques for correcting those maladaptive thoughts. If you tend to catastrophize, for example, a cognitive therapist helps you take a step back, gain perspective, and come to a more rational interpretation of your situation.

But it was the final iteration of Tim's theory that opened my eyes to the possibility that the right situation is nothing less than transformative.

Appropriately enough, it was a fortunate situation that made our friendship possible: Tim happened to live just a few blocks away from me. In the last years of his life, when he was feeling up for it, I'd visit him on Sundays. Between visits, we exchanged emails. Tim's devoted assistant would read aloud at his bedside what I'd written, and within hours, I'd receive the reply he'd dictated and she'd transcribed. In one exchange, Tim excitedly shared an article he'd recently written, in which he explains that for all of us:

Personalities can shift drastically and holistically depending on their fit with their environment at any given moment. These different personality states that become temporarily activated are labeled as modes.... These modes are reflexive and when activated, become expressed even though the individual may prefer not to express them.... [They] represent the state of personality at a given time.

When we move from one situation to another, the immediate demands and opportunities change. Accordingly, like a gearshift, our personality snaps from one mode to another:

Click! Angela-the-professor!

Click! Angela-the-mom!

Click! Angela-the-pessimist, scanning the horizon for risks!

Click! Angela-the-optimist, confident she will succeed!

Flexibility, Tim explained, "is broadly a marker for mental health and wellness." In other words, our personalities have range *by design*.

Finding Your Sweet Spot

Personality modes are very often adaptive responses to our environment. It's good to click into "vacation mode," "work mode," and even "survival mode" when appropriate. But not all mode switching is optimal or constructive. It's possible for situations to trigger excessive anxiety, anger, jealousy, or sadness, for example. In other words, to bring out our worst. And that, Tim said, is why it's so important to proactively navigate toward situations that bring out our best.

"In therapy," Tim explained, "we call the elements that activate energy and passion in individuals 'the *sweet spot*.'" In making this point, Tim offered the story of David, a thirty-seven-year-old patient hospitalized for hallucinations and other psychotic symptoms. David often spent his entire day lying on the couch in the dayroom of the hospital, rejecting invitations to participate in any kind of activity, seemingly impervious to every kind of therapeutic approach. David could go days without speaking.

One day, David's therapist asked him what activity he'd liked most in the past. He thought for a moment. "McDonald's," he said finally. "I've always enjoyed going to McDonald's for a hamburger."

The therapist then suggested something unusual. Why don't they get up and take a walk over to the hospital cafeteria?

Upon arrival, a miraculous transformation occurred. Suddenly, David was alert to his surroundings. He cheerfully ordered and paid for his meal, joking with the cashier before taking his food. Had you been in the cafeteria that day, you'd have never guessed that David lived in a mental hospital. Or that, once he and his therapist left the dining area, his psychotic symptoms would return.

It was his observation of these on-off-on-again personality modes that inspired Tim to develop a psychotherapeutic approach for patients who don't improve in traditional cognitive therapy. The implications extend to all of us, not just those struggling with mental illness. A situational approach to mental health is asset-oriented. The therapist helps the client to

identify his personal interests and values and then to consider situations that “cater to these attributes and provide new learning.”

For instance, in the months following their visit to the cafeteria, David and his therapist delved deeper into the person he became when preparing and serving food. Together they discovered that David had a deep desire to care for others. David’s team then changed the situation. Instead of staying in his hospital room all day, he was given access to a kitchen so he could develop his cooking skills. Soon enough, David was cooking for other patients in the hospital. Eventually, he was able to leave the hospital altogether, live on his own, and hold down a full-time job at a restaurant.

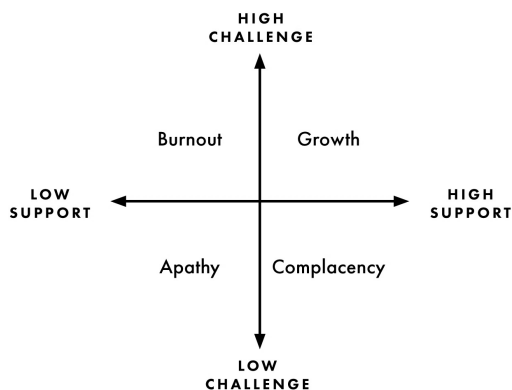
Everyone, Tim points out, yearns to feel accepted, respected, effective, and connected to others. And in the right situation, “when individuals shift into an adaptive mode,” he explains, “these critical needs and meanings in their lives can be met.”

In effect, there was a psychotic David who was completely untethered to reality. But there was another David who was surprisingly sane, able to communicate, and eager to be helpful. The difference between David at his worst and David at his best? A change in Box One, which sparked a change in Box Two, and then a change in Box Three.

The Wolf You Feed

How do you find your sweet spot? My advice is to look for situations that, like Bob Bowman’s training center, are both challenging and supportive—the upper-right quadrant in the figure below. Any other combination is less than optimal.

Most obviously, the polar opposite—low challenge and low support—creates apathy.



[Description 1](#)

Support without challenge leads to complacency. This is the problem with giving every child a participation trophy. But complacency isn't just a problem on America's youth soccer fields, it's equally endemic in the workplace. Kim Scott, the Google executive who advocated for high-support, high-challenge feedback in her bestselling book *Radical Candor*, blames "the human instinct to be nice." Managers who bungle the opportunity to help employees learn and grow most commonly fall into the same trap: they sidestep honest conversation about the gap between expectation and reality, missing the chance to identify ways to close it.

Finally, challenge without support creates burnout. Christina Maslach, the psychologist who coined the term, has defined "burnout" as a constellation of exhaustion, detachment, and helplessness. After a lifetime of research on its root causes, she says burnout can almost always be traced to a mismatch between what an employee needs and what their situation provides—not just in terms of workload but also autonomy, collegiality, mission, and trust. And yet, she says, "there is a bias toward fixing people, rather than fixing the job situation."

The formula for bringing forth the best in any of us—challenge plus support—is universal. It raises the ceiling on your expectations and builds the floor so you can reach them. This was my message when, very recently, a group of students from Milton Hershey School came to my office to ask me questions about grit. Founded by the chocolatier Milton S.

Hershey and his wife, Catherine, this one-of-a-kind boarding school was once a haven for orphan boys but now accepts both boys and girls from low-income, disadvantaged backgrounds.

“But what if you’re not lucky enough to have parents who are demanding and supportive?” one girl asked.

I looked her in the eye, realizing she understood adversity and resilience better than I ever could. Then I said: “It’s true you can’t pick your parents. But you can apply to colleges where giving your best effort is baked into the culture. When you get to campus, you can spend time with classmates you genuinely admire and respect. And you can go to office hours—believe me, you’ll be one of the few students who do. And you can sit in the front row of every class.”

In other words, you have situational agency. The people you know and the places you go are, to some extent, up to you.



There’s a parable Tim liked to use to explain the monumental importance of noticing our different personality modes—the multiple selves that inhabit our single mind. It begins with an old man talking to his grandson.

“A fight is going on inside me,” the old man says to the boy.

“It is a terrible fight, and it is between two wolves. One is evil—he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.”

“The other is good—he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you—and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thinks for a minute and then asks, “Which wolf will win?”

And the grandfather simply replies: “The one you feed.”

CHAPTER 4



The Courage to Change

When things are going badly, it may seem more courageous to look in the mirror and ask, “What’s wrong with me?” than to look around and ask, “What’s wrong with my situation?” If you think about it, both questions are valid. But for many of us, it seems like a cop-out to blame your situation.

For much of his life, that’s the way Aaron Carroll felt—that trying harder was the only honorable path forward.

But one day, while on vacation with his wife and friends, Aaron received multiple pieces of bad news. This triggered a panic attack, which led to him passing out and falling partway down a mountain.

Although Aaron survived, the incident served as a wake-up call: “It was clear I wasn’t okay.”

Professionally Aaron has always been *more* than okay. He graduated from all the best schools, always at the top of his class. At the time of his accident, he was a beloved pediatrician, a distinguished professor, and a prolific author.

For a long time, only his inner circle knew that despite these achievements, Aaron was battling anxiety and depression. As a physician he knew that prescription medications were an option, but their precise mechanisms were unknown. “I also believed that, if I was *strong* enough, I didn’t need medication.”

Nearly dying opened his mind. He decided to give antidepressants a try. Almost everyone around him noticed the difference. “I was more optimistic, friendlier, and more engaging,” he says. And “I was forced to re-

consider why I had avoided taking the medication for so long.” Ultimately, he concluded that the idea of using medication to manage his emotions “felt like an admission of failure.” Using “a drug that greatly helped my situation... felt like a crutch or a shortcut.”

More recently Aaron faced another identity-threatening dilemma. Should he get a prescription for one of the newly available GLP-1 drugs? Perennially on a diet, religious about getting his steps in (no matter the weather), Aaron had nevertheless been overweight for most of his adult life and, according to his body mass index, had officially crossed the line into obesity.

Aaron’s father had also been obese. “I begged my father, who was also a physician, to lose weight,” Aaron remembers. “And he never could. In the back of my mind, I, like many others, blamed him for his failures and considered it a lack of resolve.”

“I blamed myself, too,” he says. “I felt like a failure, which led to self-hatred and anger.”

Aaron was aware that all medications come with risks and side effects. GLP-1 drugs, for example, make some patients extremely nauseous. Also, because GLP-1s had only recently been prescribed for weight loss, it wasn’t possible to know for certain what their long-term effects might be.

But none of these reasons accounted for Aaron’s hesitating to ask his physician for a prescription. As had been the case with using antidepressants, using medication to lose weight felt like cheating.

Again, life provided the necessary wake-up call: a good friend lost his younger brother to heart disease. This tragic news convinced Aaron to give weekly GLP-1 injections a go.

“It’s hard to explain what life is like on GLP-1 medication to people who don’t have trouble controlling their weight,” he says. “I’m not hungry all the time. I’m not thinking about food incessantly. I’m not obsessing about what I wish I could eat and what I can’t.”

In his first five weeks on the drug Aaron lost fifteen pounds, and at his current weight is no longer obese. “And I’ve done it with ease.”

Taking medications to control his mood and his weight has been nothing short of transformative. Aaron finally has the upper hand on both his mental and physical health. He's doing exactly what he's advised many of his own patients to do—and he's published a *New York Times* op-ed that asserts as much.

Even so, it's been hard for him to shake the feeling that he's cheating. "On some level," he admits, "I still feel shame."

Beyond Shame

Like any other behavior we want to change, overeating can be reverse-engineered using the Three Boxes model.

For starters, eating more than we should is a (Box Three) response that lies downstream from (Box Two) thoughts about food. These, in turn, lie downstream from a problematic (Box One) situation: the obesogenic environment in which most of us now reside.

The most common way to attack the problem of overeating is to use willpower. Like Frog and Toad at the beginning of the cookies story, we try to *just try harder* to stop eating when we know we've had enough.

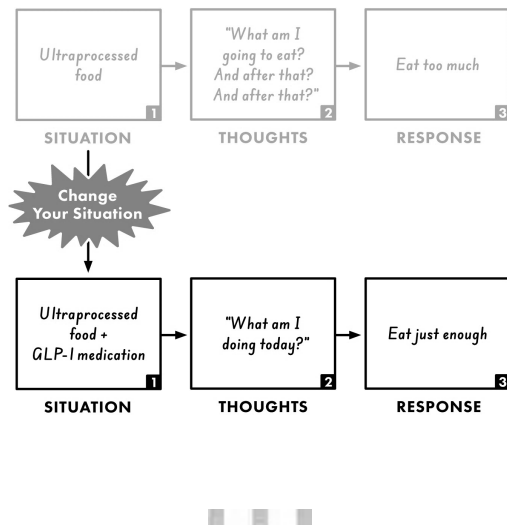
One step earlier, you can change your (Box Two) thoughts by, say, reminding yourself that you'll live longer in the future if you eat better today. Or you can direct your thoughts away from food altogether—noticing the beautiful weather or thinking about your to-do list for the day. *Think differently.*

And finally—or perhaps I should say firstly—you can change Box One by changing your situation.

For me, minor tweaks to the situation do the trick. It's enough to stock the fridge with salad greens, purge the pantry of potato chips, and have lunch with colleagues who are themselves healthy eaters. Unfortunately, for those plagued by obsessive thoughts about eating, these Box One changes are not enough. Today, more than half of the calories in the average American's diet come from ultraprocessed foods so

high in sugar, fat, salt, and flavoring, and so quickly digested that they precipitate a dopamine response similar to nicotine. But unlike cigarettes, ultraprocessed foods are *everywhere*. Just try eating healthy at a baseball game, shopping mall, airport, or children’s birthday party. It’s next to impossible.

Medication may not seem like a situational solution to overeating, but I believe it is. A prescription drug is something you deliberately introduce to reduce the situation’s grip over your thoughts and actions. Like Aaron, many patients report that when they changed Box One by getting a weekly injection of GLP-1, they immediately experienced a change in Box Two. Perhaps because GLP-1 drugs simulate a natural hormone that signals fullness to your brain, their incessant thoughts about food disappeared. In their place? A million things. Pretty much everything that matters to them in life *other than food*.



Aaron Carroll is not the only striver who, despite obvious grit, has struggled to maintain a healthy weight. So has Oprah Winfrey. On her 2024 prime-time television special *Shame, Blame, and the Weight Loss Revolution*, Oprah said: “I’ve been a food addict for my entire adult life.”

Like Aaron, the most famous yo-yo dieter in the world was initially reluctant to take a GLP-1 drug: “I felt [like] I’ve got to do this on my own because if I take the drug, that’s the easy way out,” she said. “There’s a part of me that feels... I’ve got to do it the hard way. I’ve got to keep climbing the mountains. I’ve got to keep suffering. I’ve got to do that because otherwise I somehow cheated....” But when she finally gave medication a try, the impact on Box Two thoughts was immediate and dramatic: “It quiets the food noise. I’m not constantly thinking about what the next meal is going to be.” And, in turn, Box Three: “[Now] I can eat a half a bagel and be fine.... I just want less of the bagel.”

No less miraculous than the transformation of her body was the transformation of her self-image: “I realized I’d been blaming myself all these years for being overweight, and I have a predisposition that no amount of willpower is going to control.” At the end of her special, Oprah looks directly at her audience: “Let’s stop the shaming and blaming,” she says. “*Stop the shaming and blaming.* There’s no place for it.”

Worshipping Willpower

Why do we cling to the notion that just forcing ourselves to try harder in a tough situation is more heroic than changing our situation in the first place? Why do American adults trying to live healthier lifestyles say they’re *five times* more likely to “force myself” than to “seek support from a friend or family member”? And why, when I’ve asked teenagers how they would advise others to achieve their goals, do they come up with countless sensible ideas—*Give your phone to your mom so you can’t use it. Don’t hang around kids who are a bad influence. Ask someone you trust for help*—and yet, when asked what they tell themselves, why does their self-coaxing sound more like bullying? *Don’t be a baby. Stop whining. Just suck it up and keep going.*

Around the time that Aaron Carroll went public about taking medication to control his mood and weight, colleagues of mine published a pa-

per entitled “‘Good People Don’t Need Medication’: How Moral Character Beliefs Affect Medical Decision Making.” The psychologists leading this research identified a half-dozen medical conditions—including depression and complications of being overweight, like diabetes—that could be addressed either by taking a prescription drug or, alternatively, by changing behavior. In a series of tightly controlled studies, they found that across the board, taking medications was judged the inferior option, primarily because doing so implied a lack of willpower, which in turn was an indication of poor character.

Another investigation has shown that we doubt the moral integrity of people who, instead of relying on willpower, change their situations. For instance, if we know someone relies on an app to block distracting websites or on a friend to keep them accountable to their workout goals, we tend to automatically assume that person is less trustworthy.

Given how other people may judge us for improving our situations to improve ourselves, it’s no wonder that doing so feels shameful. In one study, teenagers and young adults were interviewed about how they cope with digital temptations. On their own many had learned to close their laptops, disable browser access to distracting apps, or otherwise hack their situations in order to get their work done. What was it like, asked the researchers, to use something external to control yourself? “It was just so easy,” replied one participant. “I’d be like: ‘Oh, I can’t [use Facebook]. Well, then I’ll have to pay attention!’” But, she added, the fact that she needed such strategies was “embarrassing.”

My collaborators and I recently surveyed adults trying to spend less time on social media. By a large margin, they said changing the situation was preferable to relying on raw willpower, but when asked what they *actually* do, the pattern was reversed: using willpower is common, changing the situation is rare. Later, we asked participants why they insist on willing themselves to just try harder, even when they know that changing their situation is a far more effective strategy. One of the most common

explanations offered was: *Because I'd rather be the type of person who can achieve goals by using my willpower alone.*

Taken together, research shows that most of us equate willpower with self-control and character. Mistakenly, we idealize effort in the absence of external support.

How about you? How do *you* feel about Box One versus Box Three approaches to achieving goals? Take the Strategy Beliefs Scale to find out:

A person has inadequate self-control if they have to use strategies to achieve their goals.

If someone has to trick themselves into keeping their goals, that would mean that they lack self-control.

A person who avoids temptations to make it easier on themselves is weak-willed.

The more you agree with these statements, the more you confuse willpower with self-control—an error that neglects both the power of the situation *and* the power of the individual to change the situation to their advantage.



Putting willpower on a pedestal is nothing new.

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato compared controlling our impulses to pulling on the reins of a stubborn and ill-tempered horse—by necessity a “difficult and unpleasant task.”

In 1859, a Scottish journalist named Samuel Smiles published *Self-Help*, a wildly popular book that gave birth to an entire literary genre of the same name. “Help from *without* is often enfeebling in its effects,” Smiles declared. “But help from *within* invariably invigorates.”

In 1910, the poet Rudyard Kipling published “If—”, perennially voted the most popular poem in England. Addressed to his four-year-old

son, “If—” encapsulates Kipling’s paternal advice on the challenge of becoming a man, including these four magisterial lines:

*If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: “Hold on!”*

In 1976, the movie *Rocky* was released. Though much of the film is about how the underdog boxer drew not only from grit but from the support of his unfailingly loyal girlfriend and coach, its theme song is a veritable ode to willpower:

*Trying hard now
It’s so hard now
Trying hard now*

In 1988, Nike began selling sneakers with the three-word, all-caps rallying cry JUST DO IT.

And the other day, I passed a billboard depicting a Marine determinedly sloshing his way through a muddy river, with this caption in all caps: *BATTLES ARE WON WITHIN*.

I don’t disagree that there are times in life when all we can do is will ourselves to try harder. What worries me is how rarely we seek strength in our situations.

Behavior Setting

Roger Barker is the most famous psychologist you’ve never heard of. No statues commemorate Barker’s achievements; no modern textbook includes his name.

But his story is worth telling.

Roger Barker earned his PhD in psychology at Stanford University, where he met a budding biologist named Louise Dawes Shedd. During their courtship, Barker tagged along with his future wife on research expeditions to the marine field station in Monterey Bay. Crouched at the edges of tide pools, Louise methodically catalogued the minute-by-minute behaviors of crabs and snails, while Barker found himself captivated by two subjects—the creatures themselves and Louise’s patient, systematic approach to observing them.

Years later, Barker had the epiphany that psychologists could study people the same way biologists studied animals in the wild. Indeed, wouldn’t it be better to make meticulous minute-by-minute observations of people in their native habitats as they ate and talked and worked and played, rather than in sterile fluorescent-lit laboratories?

In 1947, Barker established a field station dedicated to the study of human behavior. The Midwest Psychological Field Station was located in Oskaloosa, Kansas—a one-square-mile town of only 725 residents. For the next twenty-five years, Roger and Louise made their home there. Together, at the station, they supervised a small army of graduate students and research staff—all equipped with clipboards, stopwatches, and seemingly infinite patience.

Initially, the station produced what Barker termed Day Studies of individual children. Under his supervision researchers would follow a child from waking to sleeping, documenting behavior minute by minute in half-hour, relay-style shifts. Very soon, “it became clear that how a child behaves is not only determined by what he or she wants to do but by *where he or she is....* It became obvious that places *‘do’* things to people. They *require* certain behavior.

“Second-graders,” for example, “cease writing, reading, spelling, sitting, whispering, and so on with startling swiftness and unanimity when they cross the line from the school classroom to the school playground.”

Over time, Barker saw that at any age, people reflexively adapt to the specific situation they happen to occupy at the moment.

In the drugstore: *Click!* People behave *drugstore*.

In the courthouse: *Click!* People behave *courthouse*.

At a church potluck dinner: *Click!* People behave *church potluck dinner*.

In powerful yet invisible ways, the places that motivate us to think and feel and act in one way or another are what Barker came to call *behavior settings*.

If we want to understand behavior, Barker concluded, we must train our eye on the place, not the person. If we don't follow the script of a behavior setting, he said, the setting *coerces* us into compliance. Through social norms and sometimes physical obstacles, we're constrained to behave in the way the setting demands. And if you don't fall in line, Barker warned, then the setting *veto*es you. It kicks you out, literally.

For example, you can't do cartwheels in a grocery store. If you tried, the other customers would give you a piece of their mind. Management would call security. And even before any of that, you'd find yourself knocking into shelves and carts. Grocery stores, Barker said, have social and physical features that are mightier than any individual's personal motivation.

Another example: my local news station once aired security camera footage of a teenage boy ordering a burrito at Chipotle. There was nothing remarkable about the scene. Just a teenager standing at the counter waiting for his food. But minutes earlier, the same boy had committed a brutal crime, also captured on video. On a quiet side street, he and his three friends had mugged a complete stranger, beating the victim mercilessly and then fleeing with their wallet and credit cards, which the teenager then used to pay for his burrito. Frankly, I was shocked by the disparity between the violence of this crime and the ensuing calm behavior at Chipotle. Roger Barker wouldn't have been. At Chipotle: *Click!* People behave *Chipotle*.

For a time, dignitaries, scientists, students, and philanthropists from around the globe made their way to Oskaloosa to see the Midwest

Psychological Field Station in action. They'd trail Barker up the staircase to the second floor of the old bank building and into a fireproof, tornado-proof vault, where his thousands of pages of field notes steadily accreted. This new science of the situation—what eventually became known as *environmental* psychology—was exciting.

One prominent economist at the time predicted that “Barker’s concept of behavior settings may come to play as important a role in the social sciences as the cell concept does in biology.” Unfortunately, that economist was mistaken. The power of the situation over the person was not, it seemed, an inherently hopeful subject. Though Barker never said so, his research seemed to question the very idea of human agency. For if the situation controls us, how can we say that our fate is in our own hands?

Over time, the station’s visitors stopped coming, and graduate students stopped applying. In 1972, when funding had dried up completely, Barker shuttered the Midwest Psychological Field Station entirely. The situation—which was center stage for Barker—sank back into the shadows, and the attention of mainstream psychologists returned to the individual and what was going on inside, not outside, their head.

Remembering Roger Barker

On September 15, 2015—more than four decades after Roger Barker closed the Midwest Field Station—a public health expert at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine named Val Curtis peered into a darkened auditorium and asked her audience: “Are you in control of your own behavior? Put your hands up if you think you are.”

Most of the hands shot up in affirmation. “Well, I’m a behavioral scientist,” she continued. “And I think we’re *not* in control of our own behavior. I think there are invisible forces controlling what we do.”

Curtis paused, then asked for a volunteer “to just hop up on your chair and sing a song for me.”

“Not a difficult thing to do,” she pointed out.

“Come on,” she urged after another pause. “It’s really easy.”

More waiting.

“No one?... Okay, it’s fine.... Why did you laugh and giggle embarrassedly? Why did people refuse to meet my eye? Why were you starting to think, ‘Oh my God, does she mean me? Does she really want me to do it?’ Well, that’s because we *can’t* do it, because we’re in a *behavior setting*.

“This is a TED Talk,” Curtis continued. “A TED Talk is a particular sort of behavior setting.... We *have* to do what the behavior settings *tell* us.”

This was a “forgotten idea,” she said as a giant photo of Roger Barker appeared on the screen above her, and one that was “really important to revive.”

A lifetime of field experience had taught Curtis that successful behavior change was, as she once put it, a chain reaction: “To change behavior, first of all we have to change minds. And to change minds, we have to change the environment.

“Behavior is held in place by objects, by places, and by people,” she explained.

At one point in her talk, Curtis admitted that she was an unlikely messenger for this subject. “I’m an aging hippie, you know? The idea that there are invisible forces coercing me into behaving in ways that I’m not really deciding for myself, you’d think I would hate that idea.”

“But actually, I’m a massive fan of settings.”

Curtis described an intervention that one of her graduate students, Om Prasad Gautam, completed in Nepal. The behaviors being encouraged were washing hands before eating, cleaning utensils between uses, and establishing other food hygiene practices.

Gautam and local women worked together to organize kitchen makeover parties. Neighbors would gather in one woman’s home, and together they pledged aloud to adhere to five safe food behaviors. Everyone

would pitch in repainting and decorating the area where the host typically prepared and served food.

On the screen Curtis flashed a photo of a home's kitchen makeover. One corner was divided from the rest of the hut by a line on the wall, a rafter and pillar painted bright blue, and a string of flags. These cues made it easy to remember that this area was not for sheltering animals or for sleeping.

And the results? The percentage of mothers practicing all five targeted food hygiene behaviors soared from just 1 percent at baseline to 43 percent after the kitchen makeovers.

"How about you?" Curtis asked the audience. "Have you got behaviors you'd like to change? Would you like to, maybe... do a bit more exercise? I think we'd all like to do that. So here's a trick from behavior settings. Don't spend the morning thinking, 'Oh God, I really should go out for a run.'" Instead: "Put your running shoes on. Put your track top on. And wait and see what happens."

Controlling the Controllables

Years after he'd retired and the world had forgotten his name, Roger Barker summed up what his life's work had taught him: "When people understand behavior settings and learn to create and operate them, they *greatly increase their power* by managing the environment that has so coercive an influence over them."

And yet few people see things this way. Two months before Barker's death, one of his students reflected on how hard it is to appreciate what he called "dignity through environmentalism." Instead, we assume that "the only way to show proper respect for the worth of human beings" is to believe that our "most adaptive and positive choices and behaviors originate *inside...*"

Why does it feel like cheating when we change our situations to change ourselves? In my view, the crux of the problem is this: we assume

that “controlling the controllables” means changing our (Box Two) thoughts and our (Box Three) responses—*not* our (Box One) situation.

It’s true, of course, that there are always aspects of our situation we cannot control. This may explain the popularity of the Serenity Prayer, which reminds us to accept realities we have no power to change:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can;
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

But if you stop and think about it, controlling the controllables includes situational agency, too. After all, in addition to aspects of the situation you *cannot* control—like the ubiquity of junk food in American society—there are others that you *can*—like which snacks you choose to leave out on your kitchen counter. And while there are aspects of who you are as a person that you *can* control, like your mindset about food, there are others that you cannot—like a genetic disposition toward overeating.

		UNCONTROLLABLE	CONTROLLABLE		
OUTSIDE	UNCONTROLLABLE	The modern world Your siblings and parents The culture of your birthplace	Your personal space Your peers and mentors The culture of where you work and live now	OUTSIDE	CONTROLLABLE
		Your genes Your past	Your mindset Your goals		
INSIDE					
		UNCONTROLLABLE	CONTROLLABLE		

[Description 2](#)

Roger Barker once likened discovering the power of the situation to having the scales lifted from his eyes. I feel the same way. Here is the

Serenity Prayer again, with annotations that make the prayer more complete:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;

Not just immutable aspects of my situation, like my parents and place of birth—but also enduring features of who I am, like my genes and my past

Courage to change the things I can;

Not just what's inside my head, like my mindset and goals—but also the things I allow into my personal space and the company I keep

And the wisdom to know the difference.

Because these nuances bring humility and hope in equal measure.



Can we recognize that changing ourselves by changing our situations is an honest, hopeful, and even heroic endeavor? Can we learn to worship strategy as much as strength?

Some wise souls already have. The English word “strategy” comes from the Greek word for military general. How appropriate, then, that one of the most eloquent advocates for situational agency was Sun Tzu, the celebrated Chinese general and author of *The Art of War*. Writing more than two thousand years ago, Sun Tzu proposed a radical departure from the primitive warfare practices of his time. And almost any of his principles could inspire an anthem for situational agency:

*The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.
Indirect tactics, efficiently applied, are inexhaustible as Heaven
and Earth.*

*What the ancients called a clever fighter is one who not only wins
but excels in winning with ease.*

And finally, if you're a lover not a fighter, here's a poem by the actress
and singer Portia Nelson:

Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

I

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost... I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes me forever to find a way out.

II

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place
but, it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

III

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in... it's a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.

I get out immediately.

IV

I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I walk around it.

V

I walk down another street.

CHAPTER 5



Saving a Marriage from the Outside In

The other day, I asked Jason about his proudest accomplishment. His answer—and the swiftness and certainty with which he delivered it—surprised me: “Our marriage.”

After we took a trip down memory lane, recalling how, despite falling crazy in love, we nearly split up, I had to agree. Saving our marriage was indeed the hardest thing Jason or I ever did. And we did it from the *outside in*.

Here’s the story of how we got wise to our situation—just in time to confront a crisis that otherwise would have ended our fairy-tale romance. It’s also the story of my life and how one gritty girl learned that just trying harder gets you very far in life—but not far enough.

If my life were a play, it would have three acts:

ACT I: Just Try Harder

ACT II: Burnout

ACT III: Setting Up Happily Ever After

Act I lasted the longest—forty years. It’s the act I’m known for, the one that won me a MacArthur Fellowship, and the one about which I already wrote an entire book.

Act II was the shortest—just a year, maybe two, depending on where it actually began and ended. It’s an act filled with tears and anguish and

shame, a full-blown crisis the proportions of which I could never have imagined, and a story I haven't told until now.

And Act III is ongoing—fifteen years and counting. If I live as long as my mom, then Act III will end up being the longest. Regardless, the third act is by far the wisest, the one that has made me proudest, and the example I hope our daughters will emulate more than any other.

Act I: Just Try Harder

Once upon a time, in an upwardly mobile New Jersey suburb called Cherry Hill, I was a little girl who wanted to please her father. I wanted my mother's love, too, but her love was given freely and didn't have to be earned. It was Dad who smiled when his children succeeded and frowned when they failed.

When you grow up equating achievement with love, you're doubly desperate to do your very best. I soon figured out that I could not succeed by talent alone. It was abundantly clear to my dad, who told me so, that I was no genius. The way Dad went on and on about our brilliant cousins in Boston—all of whom had gone to Harvard, he liked to remind me—you'd think there was nothing for me to do but concede defeat.

But by his own example, Dad had shown me a way forward.

Every morning, sometimes so early it was still dark outside my bedroom window, I'd wake to the baritone rumble of the garage door opening. Then, moments later, the same short serenade would sound in reverse as the door closed. In the silence that followed, I knew Dad was off to work at DuPont, a company he loved, it seemed, as much as his family.

Every evening, when Dad returned, he'd sit on the couch, arms folded, staring blankly past me as he pondered some problem he assumed I wasn't old enough to understand. On weekends, summer vacations, and often in the middle of the night when he couldn't sleep, he would adopt the same pose—sometimes unfolding his arms and absently opening and

closing his right fist in midair, as if to grasp a solution that was just beyond his reach.

He may have preached the gospel of genius, but my dad was the living testament of *trying hard*. When he was breathing, he was working—not just nine to five at the lab, not just during waking hours. As my dad explained one day when I dared comment on his self-absorption, even while his conscious mind took a break from problem-solving, his subconscious mind was hard at work. On the bottom shelf in his home office sat a baby-blue three-ring binder with “Recognition” handwritten in his tight script on the spine. Inside were newspaper clippings, personal notes of congratulation, and photos from award ceremonies—none commemorating his children’s achievements, all celebrating his own. Nobody tried harder than my dad.

Soon enough, *trying hard* became my salvation, too. Many years later, I would establish with data that talent and effort are not at all the same thing. But as early as I can remember, I understood that how hard I worked was something I could control. Unlike talent, effort was a dial I could turn up and down myself. I quickly learned to keep the dial up almost all the time.

And for forty years, trying hard worked like a charm.

Trying hard earned me an A in calculus class.

Trying hard landed me a solo in chorus.

Trying hard secured my place on the cheerleading squad.

To my father’s infinite delight, trying hard even got me into Harvard.

In my twenties, trying hard made me a decent management consultant, and after that an effective classroom teacher.

When I left the classroom to become a psychologist, succeeding through effort became the central focus of my entire research program.



It was during Act I that I met Jason. To say that sparks flew would be an understatement.

The two of us were a perfect match in so many ways. I loved his eyes, which were blue or green or gray, depending on the light, and the flop of brown hair that framed them. I loved his kindness. I loved the way he called his mom and asked, with all sincerity, how she was doing. I loved that he prayed about how to be a better person.

I loved that as a boy, he'd been passed over for his school's gifted and talented program, but nevertheless earned admission to Princeton. In fact, meeting Jason was like looking in the mirror. Here was a fellow striver who met every obstacle with indomitable grit. Together, we thought we could accomplish anything.

Less than two years after we met, Jason and I were married. Three and a half years after that, our daughter Amanda was born. A year and a half later came our second daughter, Lucy.

By the time Amanda and Lucy were in preschool, I was back in school myself, at the University of Pennsylvania, pursuing a PhD in psychology. Meanwhile, Jason was thriving as a real estate developer. He and I had moved to Philadelphia so that he could work with his father, a longtime home builder who shared his vision for creating walkable, nature-preserving neighborhoods. Together with two trusted partners, they founded Arcadia Land Company, named after the mythical sylvan paradise of ancient Greece.

Like any working parents, we had our hands full. But our efforts were paying off. We were achieving our professional ambitions and, at the same time, lavishing our little girls with the love and attention they deserved.

The magic of trying hard was working. Until it wasn't.

Act II: Burnout

It's difficult to say when things started falling apart. Was it 2007, when the U.S. housing bubble burst? Or 2008, when the entire global economy

slipped into recession?

For Jason and me, there were no headlines alerting us that a marital crisis was at hand.

Here's what happened.

To save the business, Jason scrambled to tourniquet projects that were hemorrhaging cash. He and his dad made the difficult decision to lay off half their staff. Wherever and however possible, they were picking up consulting gigs, mostly for local banks that suddenly found themselves in possession of thousands of acres of residential land nobody wanted.

These exertions meant longer hours. Never a nine-to-five sort to begin with, Jason started leaving the house earlier and earlier and staying at the office later and later. At one point he was logging a hundred hours a week. I know that sounds impossible, but it's true. I counted. After dinner with the girls and tucking them into bed, he'd get in his car and drive back to the office, where he'd work until two or three in the morning, come home and crawl into bed for a few hours of sleep, and after an early breakfast with us, he'd do it all again.

I, too, was trying harder. By then I'd been appointed an assistant professor at my university. I was on tenure track, meaning that there was now a clock counting the days until my department would vote on my case.

It was around then that the streak of achievements I'd enjoyed as a graduate student came to a sudden end. In its place: a worrisome dry spell. Journal rejections. Unsuccessful grant proposals. One failed just-do-it intervention study after another.

After so much successful striving, failure felt like a fifty-pound weight on my shoulders. One day at home with the family I muttered aloud, to no one in particular, "I'm *never* going to get tenure." Lucy, who was in earshot, put her hand on my knee and smiled brightly. "That's okay, Mommy. If you don't get *ten*-ure, maybe you'll get *nine*-ure."

There were other moments of comic relief—both Amanda and Lucy were endlessly charming, funny, and sweet. But laughter, delight, and

connection became the exception, not the rule, as Jason and I threw ourselves even further into the grim, gaping maw of our work.

The only thing we did other than work was parent. Every moment Jason wasn't at his office, he was with the girls. When we weren't on our laptops, we were with Amanda and Lucy at the playground, or making breakfast or dinner, or loading the dishwasher, or packing lunches, or dustbusting the kitchen floor, or giving the girls a bath, or reading to them, or playing arbiter in sisterly disputes.

Judging by our Christmas card photos, our little family was picture-perfect. But the stress of trying hard, and then harder, and then harder still was taking its toll. Jason was increasingly irritable. He didn't yell. He didn't slam doors. He never blamed me or the girls for anything. But still, it was as if, all day long, he was walking around with a pebble in his shoe. Though I wouldn't have admitted it at the time, I'm sure I was doing much the same.

And what about *us*? The sparks-flying, violins-playing romance that we'd enjoyed in our early years seemed a lifetime away. Now we were just soldiers in the same foxhole.

Each night after we'd put the girls to sleep and before Jason went back to his office, we'd sit on our bed for a few minutes and talk. Mostly I listened while Jason complained about one incompetent business associate or another, an unfair zoning decision, a completely impossible contractor, a builder who wanted to cut his lot prices yet again. Wall-to-wall doom and gloom.

Then, more and more often, Jason began to turn his critical eye to himself. "You and the girls are the only things in my life that are good."

"That's not true," I'd say.

"No, it is," he insisted. "You're the only thing I've done right. You're the only thing that makes me happy."

And then, because the clock was ticking and the housing crisis was not getting better—and because, for me, there were still the tasks of putting away the leftovers and clearing out my inbox—Jason would stand up to

leave, and I would stand up, and we would hold each other for a moment. And then we'd let each other go. I'd hear the screen door shut behind him, and the engine of his car, and the sound of the wheels on the driveway as he backed out... and then just silence. And I'd sit back down on the bed, and very quietly, because the girls were just down the hallway, I'd have a good cry.

I don't know how long things went on this way. But I do remember the warm summer evening when I told Jason I couldn't do this anymore.

The girls were sleeping over with my parents, and Jason and I were taking a walk he thought was spontaneous, but which I'd planned in advance.

"I'm not happy," I said. "I'm crying myself to sleep every night. In the morning, before you and the girls get up, I splash cold water on my face. It doesn't work. My eyes are still puffy at breakfast. The girls don't notice. And I don't want them to notice. But the thing is, *you* don't notice. Sometimes, after you get into bed, I lie there inches away from you, and I turn the other way, and I cry so hard it's like a waterfall is running down the side of my face and soaking the pillow, and still you don't notice. I'm miserable, and you're miserable. And no matter how hard I try to be happy, and to make you happy, this isn't working."

We'd come to a stop, but were still holding hands. Jason was staring at me, first in shock and disbelief, then searchingly, then in wide-eyed terror as the real message sank in.

"I don't know if we're meant to be," I said, feeling Jason's grip tighten. "I thought we were soulmates. But if we really were, I don't think I'd feel this way."

He said nothing, probably unable to believe what he was hearing.

"I just can't do this anymore," I said again finally. "I think we need to take a break."

Jason remained perfectly still for a few moments. And then, when I turned away, he embraced me. "It's okay," he said. "Let's talk. I want to hear you." But I didn't want to talk anymore. I wanted him to just agree

with me that it was over between us. Instead of agreeing, he countered. “I’ll spend more time with you and the girls. I’ll pay more attention to what you need. I’ll try not to be so gloomy.”

“But you *can’t* try any harder,” I told him. “Look at us. *Neither* of us can try any harder. It’s not humanly possible. We’re both exhausted. And I, I want... I want to be happy. And even if that’s not my right, even if it’s selfish to want to be happy, it can’t be good for the girls to grow up with a mother who is this sad.”

That night we must have talked until dawn. Vaguely I remember trying to convince Jason that giving up on the airbrushed fairy tale was better than persisting with the grim reality we’d been living day in and day out. But honestly, in my mind’s eye, the end of Act II and the beginning of Act III are a teary blur.

Act III: Setting Up Happily Ever After

In Act III, Jason and I learned a lesson that life had never taught us before. We learned that sometimes trying harder to overcome an impossible situation is *not* the solution. And neither is blaming yourself. And neither is assuming the situation is fundamentally and irrevocably flawed. Sometimes what you need to do is step back, get a little perspective, and look for ways to make the hard work of building a life together easier.

In Act III, instead of trying harder to solve our problems on our own, Jason and I asked for help.

For the first time we confessed to our parents and our closest friends that we were really struggling. Doing so was like calling in the cavalry. They rushed in to listen without interruption, to sympathize without judgment—blanketing us in love and assurance, shielding us from shame.

Jason started seeing a therapist. At Jason’s urging, and with tremendous reluctance, I did the same. Together, we saw a *third* therapist to work on how we communicated. Honestly, the very idea of consulting three therapists for two people in one marriage was a tremendous threat

to our just-do-it identities. And for two strivers raised as frugally as we had been, it was painful to watch the stack of therapy bills grow while our bank account shrank.

But for several months a triple dose of therapy was exactly what we needed. On our own, we found it difficult to let down our defenses. But in the presence of these warm and wise professionals, we were able to speak candidly about the sadness, confusion, fear, and doubt that each of us had been carrying in silence. As it turned out, therapy was an investment that would pay dividends for the rest of our lives.

My therapist helped me see that my husband's happiness wasn't my responsibility, nor was mine his. I learned that even soulmates go through rough patches—and that fairy tales edit out all the messy bits that are the warp and woof of real life. Together we learned that if you aren't creating a situation in which you can sleep, exercise, and laugh a little *every single day*, then even the strength of Hercules won't prevent you, at some point, from burning out.

It was in Act III that Jason restructured his work situation. He set up an advisory board of older and wiser real estate developers, convening these mentors twice a year so that they could opine on how he planned to move forward for the next six months. He also joined a group called EO, short for Entrepreneurs' Organization. To my amazement, on the second Monday of each month, Jason left the office a few hours early for his EO meeting with eight other small-business owners. There Jason discovered the power of peers. He opened up about his struggles in the collapsing housing market, and he listened to others as they recounted their own hardships. Together, he and his fellow EO members created a culture that kept confidence afloat like a life raft. Among them was a shared understanding that struggles with personal and professional challenges are to be expected—and that, by learning from and supporting each other, they can be overcome.

Eventually, the housing market rebounded. But even more important, Jason learned from his mentors and peers new strategies for delegating,

prioritizing, and managing. For instance, he learned that beyond a certain point, the marginal hour of toil is self-defeating, and having internalized that lesson, he never logged a hundred-hour workweek again.

I, too, changed my approach to work. It was in Act III that I met my friend and mentor James Gross. It was in Act III that I gave up, once and for all, my *just try harder* intervention studies. And it was in this act that I decided all of my projects, from that point on, would be team efforts. I joined other researchers' projects and invited them to join mine. It was in Act III that I met my academic BFF Katy Milkman and, together, we co-founded Behavior Change for Good, an initiative that recruits psychologists, economists, sociologists, physicians, and other scientists to help people make choices that benefit themselves and others.

Act III is not a fairy tale, but I can tell you that the crisis of Act II led to what Jason and I sometimes call our "second marriage." In profound ways our relationship is leagues more mature, mutually respectful, and joyful than when we fell in love. Our routine now includes more time together—walking, talking, or my favorite: both. More sleep, more exercise. No burning the midnight oil. Our professional ambitions, while still lofty, take second place to our loved ones, who help us keep things in perspective.

Jason and I are still strivers. We rise with the sun, share coffee and breakfast, and then disappear into our work. In the evening, we make dinner together, talk about how our respective projects are going, what we did for our daily workout, and whether either of us happened to touch base with the girls that day, or our moms. Afterward, we put away the leftovers, do a few loops around a nearby park, then settle in with our laptops to tackle our inboxes.

And we're also still deeply in love. Just the other evening, we stepped out, hand in hand, for our post-dinner stroll, and another middle-aged couple who was doing the same stopped us on the street. "I'm sorry," the gentleman said. "It's just that I don't often see people as happy as you two look! I mean, you two could be teenagers!" Jason and I smiled at them,

then turned to each other and drew closer. “We’re very lucky,” we said before going on our way. “Honestly, we’re in a great situation.”

Recently, we discussed the advice we’ll give our grandchildren. We know what we’ll say. We’ll tell them our story. We’ll say that one of the first things we learned in life is that *trying hard is good*. We’ll say that neither of us was born especially gifted, but each of us learned that hard work can take you places that talent never will. But we’ll also tell them that after many years of striving successfully, the superpower of trying harder nearly led to our downfall. We’ll say that when you’re bleary-eyed and bone-tired, when you’ve given everything you have but aren’t getting where you want to go, it’s then you learn that *trying harder is not good enough*.

And finally, we’ll tell them what we know now, that in love and work, grit is necessary—but not sufficient. You *also* need a situation in which persistence pays off. Seek—and you shall find—the people and places that bring out your best.

PART 2

SITUATIONAL AGENCY



*“Look at the big picture and ask yourself,
‘Where can I be better and who can help me get better?’ ”*

—OLYMPIC COACH BOB BOWMAN

Exactly how do you get situated for the life you want?

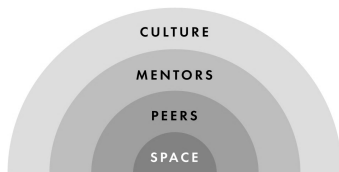
Situational agency has four essential elements.

First, *set up your space*. You may not be able to control the world at large, but you reign supreme over your immediate surroundings. What will you choose to add or subtract, once you become aware of the gravitational pull of objects within sight and reach?

Next, *pick your peers*. Whether or not you're blessed with siblings who are soulmates, you can find a tribe that shares your values and interests. Whose company will you keep when you understand the power of peers?

Third, *attract mentors*. You don't get to choose your parents, but you do get to choose your mentors. How will you invest your time differently once you understand why mentors are a need-to-have, not a nice-to-have, and how anyone can become a mentor magnet?

And finally, *choose your culture*. You can't change where you were born, but you can change where you work and live. Once you understand status quo bias and its antidote, will you decide to make a move?



There's a reason I'm inviting you to examine your situation in this particular order—from near to far, from concrete to abstract, and from what you can change immediately to what may take weeks or months to figure out. My hope is that unpacking your (Box One) situation in this sequence will make the idea less intimidating.

At the end of the book, you'll find a short quiz called the Situated Scorecard, and it follows the same order: *space, peers, mentors, culture*. The quiz helps you zero in on specific areas for improvement. It's fol-

lowed by a Three Boxes blueprint for reverse-engineering behavior change, plus a Situation Change Playbook with practical tips applying what you'll learn in the following chapters.

Why all the scaffolding? To show you what's possible. Very often, the greatest obstacle to getting situated has nothing to do with money or privilege or power. Rather, it's assuming it can't be done.



To get started, I want to share a story.

One night, many years ago, I was putting five-year-old Amanda to bed after a long and weary day. The details have faded with time, but I vividly recall Amanda being especially difficult—including, more than once, erupting into full-body tantrums, her tiny arms and legs flailing, her little lungs howling with all their might.

"Amanda," I said sternly, "today you were..."

Amanda looked up at me innocently.

"Today..."

Big eyes. I took a moment to collect myself. I wanted to tell Amanda she'd been a pain in the you-know-what, but needed a word that was appropriate for five-year-old ears.

Finally, I said, "Today, Amanda, you were... *trying*."

Amanda beamed. Then she patted my hand, as if I were the child who needed the world explained. "Mommy, *everybody's* trying! Everybody's doing the best they can."

It took me a beat to realize that Amanda had misunderstood. Whereas I'd intended to communicate that she'd been impossible to deal with, Amanda had heard me describe her earnest effort.

If there's one lesson I've learned in two decades of studying behavior change, it's this: Amanda was exactly right. Nobody wakes up in the morning and says, "Today I'll deliberately make poor choices. Today I in-

tend to be foolish. Today I'll take pains to undermine my goals and sabotage my dreams."

Sure, everyone makes mistakes. But what Amanda had to say that night is more profound, and more helpful, than the message I'd originally intended to deliver. Truly, *everyone is trying*.

The thing is, some ways of trying are better than others. For instance, perseverance is good. But trying hard—and then harder—in an impossible situation can be tragic. Effort pays off when you make your situation your ally.

Situational agency means taking charge of your circumstances, choosing to be with people and in places that bring out your best.

CHAPTER 6



Set Up Your Space

Jerry Seinfeld once sat down with David Letterman to talk about his two selves.

SEINFELD: Late at night, I think, “Well, it’s night, I’m having a good time, I don’t want to go to sleep, I’m Night Guy. Getting up after five hours of sleep, that’s Morning Guy’s problem. Let him worry about that—I’m Night Guy, I’ve gotta party.” Then you get up after five hours of sleep, you’re cranky, you’re exhausted... Night Guy always screws Morning Guy. There’s nothing Morning Guy can do to get back at Night Guy.

LETTERMAN: What a lovely figure of speech that was.

SEINFELD: Night Guy always screws Morning Guy. I think the only thing Morning Guy can do is oversleep enough times so that Day Guy loses his job and Night Guy doesn’t have any more money to go out.

LETTERMAN: There you go, exactly.

SEINFELD: That’s the only way [Morning Guy] can get back at him.

LETTERMAN: You’ve done an excellent job of crystallizing the dichotomy of modern American life.

SEINFELD: Night Guy... Morning Guy.

Seinfeld’s predicament is a familiar one. And it’s terribly frustrating. One version of ourselves is full of good ideas for a better life. We’re going

to start exercising. We're going to stop procrastinating. We're going to remember to count our blessings. Unfortunately, when the time comes to take action on those good intentions, an entirely different self is in charge.

The disparity between what we intend to do in the future and what we actually do once the future finally comes around is what behavioral scientists call the *intention-action gap*.

How big is it? By some estimates, people fail to follow through on nearly half of their intentions. If we gave our goals report card grades, most of us would get Fs.

Is there hope? There must be, because all joking aside, Seinfeld is a paragon of productivity—so famously dedicated to his daily writing routine that he's hardly missed a day since 1975. And writing comedy is hard work: "You know who's great?" he says. "The people [who] just put a tremendous amount of hours into it. It's a game of tonnage. How many hours are you going to work—per week, per month, per year?"

As a young comic, Seinfeld quickly discovered that willpower was not going to get him through all those hours: "My writing sessions used to be very arduous, very painful, like pushing against the wind in soft, muddy ground with a wheelbarrow full of bricks."

An older and wiser Seinfeld has observed that the mistake people make about pursuing their goals—including his younger self—is "they just try and do it." If that's your approach, he says, "you're going to fail."

The key, in Seinfeld's words, is to "*build a system*."

I agree. And a good system is more than a bunch of rules you try to keep in your head, principles you promise yourself that you'll remember and obey in the future. In fact, a good system is not in your head but outside of it. A good system is a setup with tangible, visible features designed to guide your future choices—even when you forget, and regardless of your motivation at the moment. A physical setup is more enduring—and more powerful—than any promise.

Even better, a well-designed space sets you up for more than a one-time win. Over time, making a sound decision in the same situation,

again and again, teaches your brain to make a habit. And once that habit is learned, the (Box One) situation automatically cues the desired (Box Three) response—without any (Box Two) thinking at all. And that, of course, is the ultimate victory.

This chapter is about the first essential element of situational agency: *setting up your space*.

The Empathy Gap

Why do we have so much trouble following through on our intentions?

Since ancient times, philosophers have grappled with this question, but only recently have behavioral scientists come to a satisfying answer. The problem, it turns out, is empathy. Not your ability to understand what another person is thinking and feeling, but empathy with your own past and future selves.

For instance, Night Guy cannot fully appreciate how cranky and exhausted Morning Guy will feel when he wakes up. Morning Guy, on the other hand, cannot fully grasp Night Guy's desire to stay out late and party. The self who makes New Year's resolutions is a different self from the one who has to carry out those resolutions for the rest of the year. And the self you are now—very likely a rather reflective self-motivated person apt to choose long-term gain over short-term pleasure—is not the same self you'll be when actually confronted with those decisions.

Here's how George Loewenstein came to this epiphany. One day George was out jogging with a friend in hilly Pittsburgh, where he teaches decision sciences at Carnegie Mellon University. At some point they found themselves on an upward incline so steep they weren't sure they would make it to the top.

"That hill was so steep, climbing it just about killed us," he told me. "We were huffing and puffing. It was *insanely* hard. But finally, we made it to the top—and then we started jogging downhill.

“Only five minutes later, I turned to my friend and said, cheerfully, ‘I could do that again!’ That was the moment I realized how little empathy my present self had [for] my past self. I literally couldn’t make myself think or feel the way I thought and felt just five minutes earlier.”

To test the hypothesis that the intention-action gap is essentially an *empathy* gap, George and his collaborators designed a series of clever experiments.

In one study, people who’d recently quit smoking were asked to judge their capacity to control cigarette cravings and to indicate the extent to which they proactively avoided temptation. Four months later, only one out of three ex-smokers had successfully abstained from cigarettes, while two out of three had relapsed. Which smokers were more likely to stay on the wagon? Paradoxically, the smokers who were initially more *pessimistic* about their capacity to control cigarette cravings. It was this group who’d proactively changed their situations—explaining that they intentionally avoided people who smoked; asked people around them not to smoke; made sure there were no cigarettes in their home, office, or car; and when stressed, took pains to steer clear of opportunities to smoke.

This study and many others confirm George’s original intuition. When making decisions in a “cold,” reflective state, people fail to anticipate just how powerfully their “hot” emotional states will sabotage those decisions later.

Bind Yourself to the Mast

Many years before George and his collaborators began studying the empathy gap, a long-time smoker named Thomas Schelling figured out how to kick his habit for good. In addition to quitting smoking and living to ninety-five, Schelling was an economist and Nobel laureate. In the 1950s his pioneering application of game theory to nuclear strategy profoundly influenced policymakers—contributions widely credited with reducing the risk of nuclear war.

Reflecting on the conflicts within our own minds, when one self wants what another self doesn't, Schelling wrote: "The two [selves] are in continual contest for control." One self, for example, may crave a cigarette, while the other prefers "clean lungs and long life." Your better self wins the war by playing "little tricks." The self that wants to quit smoking, for instance, flushes every last cigarette down the toilet. Or, if your vice is oversleeping, then put your alarm clock on the far side of the room. Late to meetings? Set your watch a few minutes ahead.

When explaining what he called "the intimate contest for self-command," Schelling often told a story from Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*. The story begins with the Greek king Odysseus, who spends ten long years away from home laying siege to the city of Troy. When, finally, Odysseus and his men defeat the Trojans, Odysseus eagerly prepares his ship for the voyage home. Before he sets sail, the goddess Circe appears, warning that on his journey Odysseus will confront the Sirens, sea nymphs whose beauty and sweet song no sailor can resist.

Odysseus is famously strong-willed and wants nothing more than to be reunited with his family. But wise Circe knows that willpower is not enough: "Order your men to tie your hands and feet to the mast," she tells him. "For however resolved you are now, in the presence of the Sirens you will forget your intentions and instead succumb to temptation."



Ivy Close Images/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

The moral of the story, Schelling explains, is that while you have your wits about you, you must physically, tangibly bind yourself to the mast.

In other words, attempting to bridge the empathy gap by strengthening your inner resolve is fruitless. You must externalize your commitment. Good intentions are here today and gone tomorrow, but strategic modifications to your physical situation endure.

Nudge Thyself

Thomas Schelling isn't the only Nobel laureate to have recognized the problem of multiple selves and to ponder how to solve it. Richard Thaler, the behavioral economist who won his Nobel Prize twelve years after Schelling, likes to call the clearheaded, highly motivated self you are now the Planner, and the distractible, reluctant self you become later, the Doer. Personally, Thaler identifies more with the latter. Willpower is not

his forte. “Put it this way, I have a habit of daydreaming and a lifelong dislike for tedious work,” he says. “The better you know me, the more likely you are to call me ‘lazy.’”

When Thaler started his PhD in economics, he was taught that people are rational decision-makers who intuitively maximize their long-term benefits and minimize their long-term costs. This struck him as a reasonable description of an optimal Planner, but it didn’t seem like an accurate description of anyone Thaler knew in real life—including himself: “If you look at economics textbooks, you’d assume that the average person can think like Albert Einstein, store as much memory as Google does in the cloud, and exercise the willpower of Mahatma Gandhi. Really. But the folks we know are not like that.” Instead, the folks Thaler knew were just like him: *human*. In the heat of the moment, they were more reactive than reflective.

How can we get our forgetful, lazy, and impulsive Future Self to choose wisely? Behavioral economics recommends changing the situation in ways that nudge us in the right direction. More specifically, we set up our Future Self for success by making wise choices more obvious, easy, or rewarding—and ideally, all of the above.

For instance, in one study, a hospital cafeteria nudged customers to buy water instead of soda by swapping the position of water bottles so that they were at eye level in the refrigerated section. After the change, water bottle purchases increased by 26 percent, and soda sales decreased by 6 percent. Another study showed that employees are 50 percent more likely to participate in a retirement savings program when it’s the default option—the box already checked for you—on the enrollment form. A third study showed that you can encourage people to take the stairs by re-programming a building’s elevator; adding just six seconds to the time it takes elevator doors to close reduces elevator use by a third.

Some nudges make such a big impact on behavior, you hardly need a randomized controlled trial to detect it. For instance, rumble strips, which make driving fast both bumpy and noisy, have been shown to slow

down trucks by up to seven miles per hour. In Stockholm, awarding free lottery tickets to drivers who obey the speed limit reduced driving speed by about 22 percent. And at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, a small black housefly was etched into the porcelain of men's urinals. The tiny image gave users a target, and spillage reportedly dropped by around 80 percent.

Changing the situation to change behavior is so cost-effective that over three hundred local, state, and federal governments around the world have created "nudge units," administrative offices dedicated to improving the public welfare without resorting to taxes, fines, mandates, or bans.

When Katy Milkman and I created the *Behavior Change for Good* network, Richard Thaler was among the very first scientists to join. The nudges devised by Behavior Change for Good scientists have raised the report card grades of 2,000 high school students, increased physical exercise among 60,000 members of a national chain of gyms, encouraged flu vaccination in a national sample of 700,000 patients, boosted math achievement in a national study of 3 million elementary school students, and most recently, increased deposits to savings accounts among 2 million customers of a large U.S. bank.

The good news is that you don't need a PhD to make nudges work for you. Once you understand what makes behavior change so challenging, you can set up a situation that makes it easier. You can, in effect, *nudge thyself*.

From Goals to Habits

Very often, what you hope to do in the future, you hope to do repeatedly: Eating right. Exercising. Getting to bed on time. Reading. Saying "thank you." The list goes on.

In these cases, setting up your space is absolutely key. Why? Because what you really want to do is build healthy habits—and habits are, by definition, reflexive (Box Three) responses *to a particular (Box One) situation*.

For instance, when you get into a car, you buckle your seat belt. When you see a red light, you hit the brakes. And if you're like me, when you walk into the bathroom in the morning, you reach for your toothbrush.

You take all these actions automatically—without deliberating, without weighing the costs and benefits, and without considering alternatives.

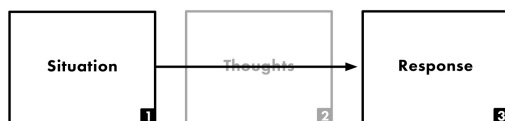
You might wonder why it is that you, a member of the smartest species on the planet, so often act without thinking. One reason is that acting without thinking is fast. Another is that acting without thinking is efficient, preserving your limited mental bandwidth for more important work. As the psychologist William James put it more than a century ago: “The more of the details of our daily life we can hand over to the effortless custody of automatism, the more our higher powers of mind will be set free for their own proper work.”

In short, habits save both time and energy. And so it is that by design, when you enter a familiar situation, your brain switches into an acting-without-thinking mode that neuroscientists call *neural autopilot*.

Red light! Stop!

Green light! Go!

In the language of the Three Boxes model: these (Box One) situations directly trigger certain (Box Three) responses without wasting time and energy on (Box Two) thoughts.



How do habits come to be? Many people assume that if you do something over and over again, you eventually build a habit. That's not true. As the Three Boxes model reveals, repetition is necessary but not sufficient. Habits link situational cues to automatic responses, so building a habit requires repeating the same behavior in the same *situation*.

And not just any situation. The situations that set up healthy habits are special. They contain salient cues that make it *obvious* to your Future

Self what to do; they minimize friction so it's *easy* to take action; and they make that action immediately *rewarding*.

Make It Obvious

When we resolve to do something, it's the most important thing in the world. Moments later, we forget. How often do goals slip our mind? By some estimates, about half of the things we forget on a daily basis are intentions.

The research on forgetting explains why you sometimes make a beeline for the refrigerator, open the door, and stare blankly at the shelves, wondering what in the world you came looking for.

For example, in several experiments, young adults were assigned a simple task on a computer. After delays as short as *5 seconds*, they forgot to perform the task nearly 10 percent of the time. If, during the 5-second delay, they were asked to perform an additional task, they forgot 25 percent of the time. And when interrupted unexpectedly during the delay, they forgot 33 percent of the time. However, when researchers added a small blue dot on the computer screen and explained it was there to serve as an external cue, a reminder of their assigned task, the negative effects of interruption were eliminated completely.

Even in matters of life or death, forgetting is astonishingly common. The surgeon and author Atul Gawande offers the example of inserting a catheter into a major vein. Minimizing the risk of infection entails five simple steps, beginning with washing hands with soap and water and ending with putting a sterile dressing over the catheter site. You'd think that after repeating this five-step procedure throughout their entire careers, doctors wouldn't need reminding. And yet, Atul writes, about a third of the time, doctors at Johns Hopkins Hospital were forgetting a step—and as a result, one in ten of their patients went on to develop an infection.

What's the solution to forgetting? *Externalize*. Modify the situation for your Future Self by installing a physical, impossible-to-miss cue that reminds you what to do.

For instance, taking inspiration from the checklists airline pilots use for takeoff and landing, doctors at Johns Hopkins began relying on a one-page sheet that listed the five safety steps. Nurses were empowered to keep track of the doctors and hold them accountable. Once checklists became standard operating procedure at Johns Hopkins—check, check, check, check, check—the line-infection rate dropped to *zero*.

Here's a question asked on a recent Reddit thread about golfing: *How often do you forget a club on/near the green? I feel like it happens to me way too often—at least once every two rounds I play. Am I oddly forgetful?* Most replies imply situational agency, including this one: *Once you use it, put it in your path back to your cart/bag. Like literally in your walking path.*

Thomas Schelling recommended writing goals in lipstick on your bathroom mirror. My colleague James Gross prefers Post-it notes. An eye-level Post-it on his bathroom mirror reminds him to think of “three good things” every morning and evening while brushing his teeth. Remember the SAT study I mentioned in chapter 2? If you make a study schedule, be sure you make a hard copy and hang it somewhere you can't miss it. For Richard Thaler, there's no shame in relying on reminders. “If I get sent to the supermarket and need to buy more than two things,” he says, “I need a list!”

The legendary martial artist Bruce Lee also knew better. He was not ashamed to keep laminated note cards in his appointment book to remind himself of his daily goals. He wore a gold pendant around his neck with the symbol for Jeet Kune Do, the unique form of martial arts he pioneered. And in his home, he installed a sign that read “*Walk on!*” to “encourage himself to keep moving forward.”

I once asked Atul Gawande about his evangelizing the idea of checklists—not just for surgery but for anything anyone wants to get right. “The thing I've learned about checklists since writing the book, and what

continues to perplex me, is how often people resist using them. It's hard to convince people that they're needed. They assume they're just going to remember everything they need to do. And of course they don't."

Where will your Future Self be looking? Install a cue that puts wise choices front and center.

Make It Easy

Once you remember what you need to get done, you're more likely to do it if getting started is easy.

Amazon figured this out. "They have the one-click ordering," Jerry Seinfeld says. "One click, that's it. You need me to click twice? I don't even want it anymore."

Indeed, when Amazon patented one-click shopping in 1999, it was a massively profitable innovation. Now pretty much every shopping website in the world tries to minimize the number of clicks between you and your purchase.

My collaborator Asaf Mazar is an expert on friction. His research shows that, to a stunning degree, people systematically underestimate the influence of friction on behavior. For instance, when asked why people do or don't vote in elections, almost nobody thinks about how close a voter happens to live to their polling station. But as it turns out, the convenience of a nearby polling station matters enormously. It's the same story with how far out of your way you have to go to get a COVID shot. A few extra steps shouldn't matter, really, but they do.

You might be wondering whether friction is an enemy only the weak-willed have to worry about, but I assure you that's not the case.

Consider a paragon of grit like Alistair Brownlee. Widely recognized as the greatest triathlete of all time, Brownlee is a two-time Olympic gold medalist and four-time triathlon world champion. In his words, he was "obsessive about removing the barriers to do what I needed to do." Now retired, he has said of his peak training periods, "I made sure my equip-

ment worked, my kit was dry, and my running and cycling shoes were warm and dry next to the door. I even bought my first house because it was close to the largest number of trails.” Did setting up his space diminish his grit? In his opinion, quite the opposite: “My mantra in life has always been to take the first step,” he says. “Establishing those habits and removing those barriers made me more resilient.”

When it comes to temptations, of course, friction becomes your ally.

The power of friction to curb bad habits came to Frederik Riedel when he was twenty-four years old. That was when his dependence on social media began spiraling out of control. “My whole brain felt like a washing machine afterward,” he told me. “It was really hard to focus. And yet I kept going back.” Sometimes he’d come to his senses, finding himself sprawled on the living room couch with his phone in his hand, with no clear idea of how long he’d been there or even what he’d been doing.

Very briefly the thought crossed his mind to get rid of his cell phone entirely, but he soon realized that living without a phone was impractical. That’s true for most people, but especially for Frederik. A coding prodigy who developed his first app at age fifteen, he’d grown up to become a full-time app developer, and he couldn’t abandon his phone without abandoning his profession. Instead, he used friction. He built himself an app called *One Sec*.

Once you install *One Sec*, you can’t get to Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, or any other app you specify without an incredibly frustrating delay. You’ll laugh, but for me, the great temptation of my phone is Gmail. Before installing *One Sec*, I’d interrupt whatever I was doing to check my inbox dozens if not hundreds of times throughout the day, often without conscious intent.

So entrenched was my Gmail habit, in fact, that when my mom decided to paint my portrait, she chose to portray me on my phone. In the background, there are colorful sculptures and mobiles, but I’m hunched forward, my hair like a curtain hiding my face, staring so intently at the

phone in my hand that I'm entirely oblivious to the beauty around me. When I asked my mom why on earth she chose that particular composition, she explained that that's how she saw me most of the time.



Photo by Matthew Dodd

Installing One Sec changed everything. Now, whenever I click on the Gmail icon, the screen turns black and displays this infuriating message: “It’s time to take a deep breath.” Then the screen verrrrrry gradually turns gray and, at the same snail’s pace, turns red. Then a number appears: a reminder of how many times I’ve clicked on the Gmail app in the past twenty-four hours. Finally, I’m asked to make an intentional choice: I can click on a big white button that says “I don’t want to open Gmail”—or below that, I can click on the smaller, unhighlighted text that says “Continue to Gmail.” Installing One Sec has turned my one-click Gmail habit into a two-click chore.

A recent study showed that One Sec reduces the number of times people open problematic apps by 57 percent. But for me, the change was even more dramatic. In fact, after only a few weeks, like many One Sec users, I was out of the habit of checking my email every few minutes.

How about you? My research suggests that people differ in what tempts them, but everyone is tempted by something. Whatever you find irresistible, the solution is: *friction up*. Place an obstacle—even if that impediment is relatively minor—between you and your vices, and suddenly you’ll find them easier to resist.

Likewise, everyone has goals. And nobody is immune to the feeling of dread that sometimes wells up when we need to take action on them. You can’t take the hard work out of hard work, but you can make getting started easier. Modify your situation: *friction down*.

Want to read more books? *Keep books on your nightstand.*

Watch less TV? *Cancel a streaming subscription.*

Eat healthier? *Put a fruit bowl on the kitchen counter.*

Snack less? *Don’t buy snacks.*

Send more thank-you notes? *Stock up on stamps and stationery.*

Spend less time on your phone? *Install One Sec.*

Set up your Future Self for success by making the best choice the path of least resistance.

Make It Rewarding

If you remember what you need to do and there’s no friction to get started, you’ll probably do it. But to do it again and again and again—so many times that you’ve forged a habit, it must be immediately rewarding. The cold, hard fact is that human beings (and, it turns out, all animals) absolutely hate to delay gratification. So if you want to make a behavior a habit, make it rewarding *now*.

Immediate gratification is not a concept we associate with virtue, but we should. This is because, as William James put it, “our virtues are habits

as much as our vices”—and you can’t make virtuous behavior habitual unless that behavior is fun, interesting, or in some other way instantly rewarding.

So how do you make what’s good for you later feel great *right now*?

Some people use Box Two strategies, changing the way they think about a chore. It’s possible, for example, to mentally reframe doing push-ups as a game or as a demonstration of character. But the most successful strivers look to Box One, changing the situation itself, literally setting themselves up to enjoy what they need to get done.

For example, in one experiment, gym-goers were presented with a menu of six weight-lifting exercises. Half of the gym-goers were asked to select an exercise they’d immediately *enjoy*. The other half were asked to choose the exercise that, given their health goals, was most *useful*. The gym-goers who chose an exercise they enjoyed ended up working out 39 percent more than those who instead chose an exercise that was useful.

What about the chores you *don’t* get to choose?

When what you need to get done is inherently, and ineluctably, unfun, try *temptation bundling*. This genius idea comes courtesy of my collaborator Katy Milkman, who coined the term. The basic idea is to do two things at once—the chore you have to do plus an additional activity that brings you immediate pleasure. For instance, if you hate going to the gym, you could bundle that chore with the temptation of listening to an audiobook you crave. When Katy and I gave gym-goers a free audiobook of their choice and taught them the trick of temptation bundling, they went to the gym 10 percent more often—an effect that lasted for months after our intervention.

By the same principle, you can *subtract* immediate reward from temptations that compete with your goals. My husband, Jason, for instance, keeps his ancient, battered phone on grayscale. A friend of ours keeps his newer, shinier phone in full color but has stopped using a phone case. He says “the terror of dropping and breaking my phone prevents me from checking it every few minutes, which I used to do.” And when our girls

were growing up, we opted not to get a subscription to cable television and the hundreds of channels that would compete 24/7 with reading and board games and going to the playground.

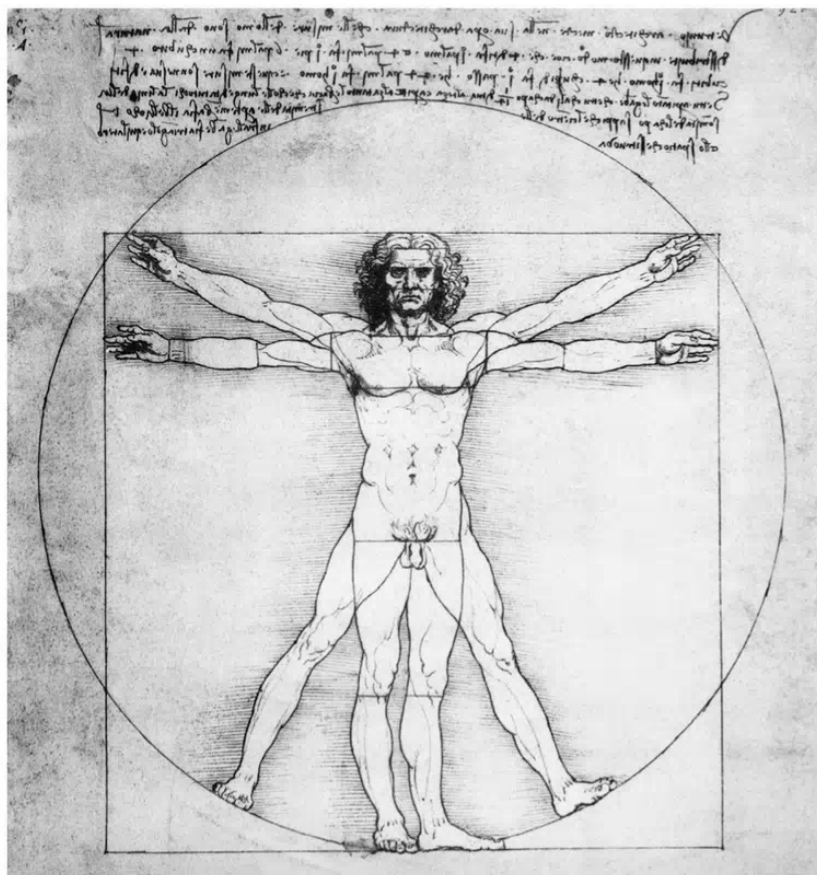
Use Physical Distance to Create Psychological Distance

The ways you might subtract reward from temptations are endless, but there's one trick that works on anything and everything: *physical distance*. And guess what? It does triple duty. In one fell swoop, you render a temptation less obvious, less easy, and less immediately rewarding when you move it farther away. As a rule, therefore, being your best means tidying up your personal space, ridding it of the distractions that will, in moments of boredom, anxiety, fatigue, or indecision, lure you away from what you really want to do.

By personal space, I mean, specifically, what lies within sight and grasp. The famous sketch by Leonardo da Vinci of a man in the middle of a box, his arms outstretched from one end to the other, is a reasonably accurate guide to its boundaries—approximately three feet in any direction. Want to see how big *your* personal space is? Reach your arms out straight in front of you and then above your head, and then to either side. Psychologically, the objects within that space—including, by the way, the clothes you're wearing—loom large. Where you are shapes who you are, but the power of the situation to influence what you think and do is a function of proximity. This nuance is tremendously practical, because while you can't wish away the modern-day inventions of junk food and social media, for the most part, you reign supreme over your personal space.

Consider, for example, your phone. Where is it at this very moment? In the palm of your hand? In another room? The farther your phone is from sight and reach, the less likely it is to attract your attention, the more work it is to pick it up, and, because the human brain discounts any

reward that it has to wait for, the less tempted you'll be to snatch a look at it.



Your personal space extends three feet in any direction.

Bettmann

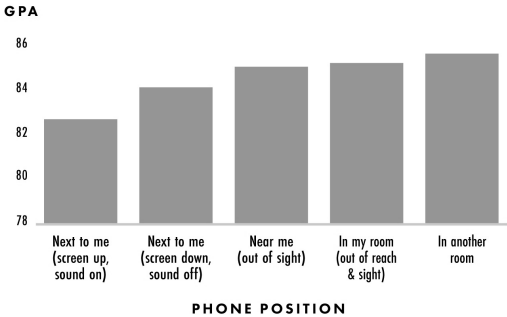
This last bit—how little we care about what happens in the future—is one of the great discoveries of twentieth-century social science. Research shows that all animals, including humans, steeply discount rewards that lie in the future. By how much? In laboratory studies, waiting even a few seconds has been shown to make a reward *half* as powerful as when that reward is received instantaneously. That's why the number of seconds it

takes a website to load matters enormously. Even when what you’re waiting for is seriously important—for instance, a platform amateur coders use to learn how to program, or a website for students to do their math homework—delays of only one or two seconds measurably decrease both engagement and performance.

For all these reasons, physical distance creates psychological distance. That principle is so important that I’m going to say it again: *physical distance creates psychological distance*. So what you want to do more, draw near. And what you want to do less, push away.

For instance, I once surveyed thousands of teenagers, asking where they keep their phone when studying for a big test. There were five options: The closest of these options was keeping their phone next to them with the screen up and the sound on, and the farthest was keeping their phone in another room.

At the end of the school year, I matched responses to official report card grades. Here’s what I found, not only in this dataset but also in a nationally representative sample of teenagers collected in partnership with the Gallup organization: *the farther the phone, the higher the GPA*.



[Description 3](#)

Keeping temptations as far away as possible may seem like common sense. But how common is it, really, considering that 58 percent of Americans wish they spent less time on their phones, and yet 83 percent of Americans keep their phones nearby “almost all the time”?

Set Up Your Space

The empathy gap is real, and I know of no way to bridge it other than strategic, physical changes to your (Box One) situation. Unless you're stronger than Odysseus, smarter than a Nobel laureate, and more conscientious than a doctor at Johns Hopkins, then you, too, must find ways to bind your Future Self to the mast.

Here are a few of Seinfeld's tricks.

To get going in the morning? *Water*. "The first thing I do is put water on my face.... That's how I change modes from lying down to standing up. It's like on Broadway: You need a curtain to come down between the first act and the second act. To me, that's water on your face."

What about stand-up? The *jacket*. "When my tour producer says, 'Five minutes,' I put on the jacket, and when the jacket goes on, it's like my body knows, 'Okay, now we've got to do our trick.'"

There's a different set of props for his daily writing session: *coffee cup, yellow legal pad, BIC clear-barrel blue pen*. "The coffee goes here," Seinfeld explains. "The pad goes here. The notes go here."

And a calendar. The old-fashioned kind you hang on a wall, with a red magic marker nearby. For each day that he writes a joke, Seinfeld marks the day's box with a big, red X. The calendar both reminds him to write jokes and rewards him for keeping up his streak.

"You've got to treat your brain like a dog you just got," Seinfeld says. "The mind is infinite in wisdom. The brain is a stupid little dog that is easily trained."



Courtesy of Netflix



In this chapter, I've explained how the situation holds the key to habits—the holy grail of behavior change. Once you understand the power of the physical objects in your immediate surroundings, you realize how foolish it is to rely on willpower. Instead, set up your space in advance. You can make wise choices obvious, easy, and rewarding. In doing so, you're effectively telling your Future Self that in *this* particular situation, it's best to perform *this* particular action. Over time, your brain will get the message. And instead of weighing the pros and cons of every choice, forcibly resisting temptation while struggling to keep front and center your best intentions, you'll do what's right automatically.

Setting up your space may seem like a trivial life hack, but the effects compound over time. That's what one of my closest friends told her two boys—as she removed the flat-screen TV from the family living room. Her sons complained, of course. And when they did, she reminded them

of the Hindu teaching her own mother had passed on to her: *You worship
what you sit next to.*

CHAPTER 7



Pick Your Peers

“Man is a social animal.”

—ARISTOTLE

The power of *we* is infinitely stronger than the power of *I*.”

That’s Diana Nyad’s summary explanation of her fifth, final, and only successful attempt to swim more than one hundred miles through shark-and-jellyfish-infested waters from Havana, Cuba, to Key West, Florida.

Nyad was sixty-four years old when she became the first and only swimmer in history to accomplish that feat. Far older than any man or woman who’d ever swum as long—more than two days and two nights—in the open ocean, without rest. Well past her athletic prime. But never wiser.

During four earlier attempts, a crew of other people played important roles. Trainers. Cartographers. Her best friend, Bonnie Stoll. Still, in Nyad’s mind, this large cast of supporters was not much more than a group of extras in a movie in which she was the star. Yes, they played their roles, but it was her name on the marquee. It was she who would be remembered for her stunning, singular, individual grit.

“When I was younger, I was so *ego*,” she said. “It was all about me, me, me. I’m so great, no one can do it like I can.”

And then something changed. “I found grace. I found a humility to know that it’s not just me out there.... The power of that was much

stronger than my twenty-something self who said, ‘I did this, I do everything myself.’”

Two hours before reaching the shore of Key West, Nyad paused, began treading water, and asked the team to gather around. This included Bonnie, of course, and the boat captain, but also Nyad’s personal physician, a world-renowned jellyfish expert, four divers tasked with jumping into the water and poking sharks in the nose if they got too close, and a flotilla of kayakers who, in ninety-minute shifts, watched over Nyad, singing and talking to her to help keep her awake. In all, three dozen team members.

“I am going to stumble up on that shore and somebody is going to take my picture,” Nyad said. “But don’t you ever forget we did this, we did this *together*.”

When, finally, Nyad heaved herself up out of the surf and took her first steps on land in three days, she said: “I have three messages: One is: we should never ever give up. Two is: you are never too old to chase your dreams. And three is: it looks like a solitary sport but it takes a team.”



This chapter is about the second essential element of situational agency: *picking your peers*. You’ll learn why *peer accountability* is the secret to personal responsibility. How *peer learning* is smarter than individual genius. And perhaps most surprising—how *peer solidarity* puts you in your place, reminding you that the real hero’s journey is from “I” to “we.”

In short, you’ll discover how a team makes you better as an individual performer, but paradoxically, why belonging to a group draws your attention away from personal concerns altogether.

What this chapter is *not* about is friendship. Friends are, of course, enormously important to a happy, healthy life, and the underlying principles of accountability, learning, and solidarity apply to purely social relationships, too. It’s also true that a colleague can become a close personal

friend, and vice versa. For instance, if you made a list of your ten closest friends and, separately, a list of your ten closest professional peers, there might be at least one person on both lists. If so, you're likely reasonably happy at work, because after decades of research in all kinds of industries, the Gallup organization has found that a remarkably reliable predictor of job satisfaction is the answer to one simple question, "Do you have a best friend at work?"

But to be clear, the peers I refer to here are like-minded strivers who share similar goals, values, and interests. And my simple message is that you should seek them out. Like the advice to set up your space, this recommendation might seem unnecessary. If you already understand, at a deep level, the magic of Alcoholics Anonymous, Y Combinator, or every team dynasty in any sport ever played, then feel free to skip ahead. But speaking personally, I wasted too many years as a solo striver.

Understanding the science of social connection in the context of goals and achievement inspires you to ask: "Who are my closest professional peers?" "How much time do we spend together?" "Are we making the most of that time?" After reading this chapter, you might conclude that you're ideally situated. Alternatively, you may decide that there's room for improvement. If so, like my husband, Jason, you may end up joining an established professional organization. Or like me and my academic BFF, Katy Milkman, you might create a team from scratch.

However you pick your peers, do so with the conviction that where there's a "we," there's a way. Because modern research shows this timeless proverb is true: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

Peer Accountability

When Bob Ladouceur was hired to coach football at De La Salle High School in Concord, California, the De La Salle Spartans had not once in their history finished a season with more wins than losses. By the time

Coach Lad retired, the Spartans were in possession of the longest winning streak in American football history at any level: 151 back-to-back wins across twelve consecutive years. During that run, they regularly outscored their opponents by thirty-five or more points—often defeating schools with twice or three times their enrollment.

Unless you know football, it's hard to appreciate the magnitude of this achievement. The legendary NFL coach John Madden had this to say about the Streak: "I know how difficult it is to win two games in a row. How can a team win 151 games in a row? I mean, 151 straight games, with different players and different eras, and different times, and different opponents.... It's one of the greatest accomplishments in the history of the sport."

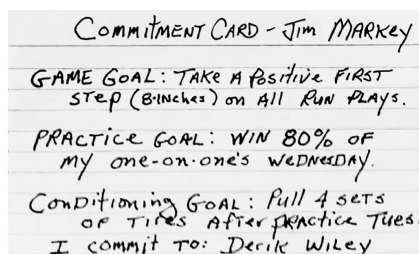
Coach Lad is now retired, but he said yes when I called and asked if I could spend a day with him and the team's new coach—and, with my own eyes, see what's so special about the De La Salle Spartans. How is it, I wondered, that this team continues to punch far above its weight, finishing every season with at least six times as many wins as losses, and earning near-mythic status among those in the know? What's going on at this all-boys Catholic school of only a thousand students, and how does it so reliably triumph when, unlike larger, wealthier rivals, it does absolutely no statewide or national recruiting and offers exactly zero athletic scholarships?

The first thing Coach Lad wanted me to know is that the Streak is beside the point. Football, he added, is also beside the point. Even *winning* is beside the point. What matters, he said, is how much each player grows as a person—throughout the season and beyond.

"And if I had to choose just one lesson these boys learned playing for the Spartans," he continued, "it would be how to make a *commitment*. Commitment to a person other than yourself. Essentially, commitment means that I am going to expect the best from you and you can expect the best from me."

And if Coach Lad had to choose just one team tradition that taught this lesson? *The Commitment Card*.

The technology of Commitment Cards couldn't be simpler. Every Thursday, Coach Lad handed each player a blank 3 x 5 index card. At the top, each player wrote his name. Below that, observable, measurable goals. Goals for practice and goals for the game on Friday night, and goals for physical conditioning. And finally, at the bottom: "I commit to..." followed by the name of his Commitment Card partner for the week.



[Description 4](#)

Courtesy of Bob Ladouceur

One by one, each player would stand and read his goals aloud as the rest of the team watched in solemn silence. Then that player handed the index card to his chosen partner for that week, looking him in the eye and vowing, "I commit this to you. Hold me accountable." Next, it was his partner's turn to do the same. Before sitting down, both players embraced—giving each other a bear hug right there in front of the entire team.

During my visit with the Spartans, I got to witness the Commitment Card ritual in person. In total, it took more than an hour for each of the team's fifty-four players to declare their intentions in this public way.

"It does take a long time," Coach Lad said, chuckling. "That's okay. Accountability is serious business."

On Friday nights the Spartans would jog onto the field in what was an unusual formation for high school football: two by two, each player holding hands with his Commitment Card partner.



David Madison/Getty Images

Throughout the game and the following week, every player did their best to fulfill their self-set goals. In parallel, they quietly kept tabs on how their partners were doing.

The following Thursday, before passing around new cards, each player would stand and read his teammate's goals aloud, announcing whether these goals had been achieved. And because it is the Spartan way to set ever more challenging goals, Commitment Card partners would almost always be in the position of reporting a mix of successes and failures: "Pull four sets of tires after practice. *Achieved*. Take a positive first step on all run plays. *Not achieved*. Jim only did that on 80 percent of plays."

I have quite literally never witnessed this sort of unfiltered negative feedback delivered in the round, peer to peer. Had I not visited in person, I'd have a hard time believing it was possible. It's difficult to describe the experience. The energy in the room was intense—equal parts brutal honesty and unwavering support. The feedback was sharp, direct, unflinching. Coach Lad's successor, Justin Alumbaugh, sat shoulder to shoulder with the other coaches, listening and very occasionally chiming in with his own observations. But mostly, the voices filling the school cafeteria that Thursday evening belonged to the players themselves. I sat wide-eyed as these adolescent boys absorbed their criticism like men. Not one objected. Not one made excuses. You could hear a pin drop as each Commitment Card partner took his seat.

Later, I asked the coaches to explain this miraculous absence of defensiveness. Coach Lad's answer was simple but profound: because every player has been on both sides of the feedback, they understand that it's a

gift—one that is both difficult to receive and difficult to give. It is this cost—the inherent discomfort and effort required on both ends—that endows feedback with value.

And why peer feedback specifically? “If I assessed them, they could rationalize: ‘Oh, you’re the coach, you’re never happy. You’ll always find something wrong,’” Coach Lad explained. “But when they hear it from their peers, it means way more.”

There’s no such thing as a perfect person, Coach Lad liked to tell his players. But a measurable, realistic goal to which you’re held accountable by no authority higher than your peers empowers you to put forth, as he put it, “perfect effort.”

When a journalist at *Forbes* magazine interviewed Bob about the Commitment Card innovation, he said, “The majority of our players have kept those cards throughout the years as a reminder to always live up to the commitments that they’ve made to those who once believed in them.”

It’s been more than twenty years, but former Spartan co-captain Scott Hugo still remembers giving and receiving Commitment Cards as if it were yesterday. After playing quarterback as a De La Salle Spartan, Scott went on to UCLA, then Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship, and then Harvard—for joint degrees in law and public policy. With no disrespect to these academic institutions, Scott considers playing for Coach Lad his greatest education. And it was the lessons he learned as a Spartan that motivated him to move back to California—not twenty minutes from where he grew up—to work on affordable housing.

“Commitment Cards crystallized the principle of being a person who can be counted on,” Scott says. “I wanted to know, and I wanted my teammates to know, that when things got hard, I would be there in the trenches alongside them.”

I Commit to You; You Commit to Me

With uncanny fidelity, Commitment Cards encapsulate just about every key finding in the modern research on goal setting.

For example, goal setting has been shown to be more effective when you have an audience. In one study, telling voters that their neighbors would later be informed about whether they'd made it to the polls increased voter turnout by 27 percent.

Studies also show that goals are best shared in a face-to-face interaction. So while there's value to announcing your New Year's resolutions on social media, it's even more effective to look another person in the eye and declare what you intend to do.

As far as I know, no scientist has tested the added value of reciprocity. But having an accountability partner, I think, makes all the difference. I believe that your best self emerges when accountability is mutual—when your partner holds you accountable to your goals at the very same time as you, in turn, hold them accountable to theirs.

And that's why, when I teach goal setting to my students, I now do it the Spartan way. I pass out white index cards and ask everyone to write down one personal goal for the week. Students then pair off. Each partner looks the other in the eye and reads their card aloud, ending with "This I commit to you."

The following week, each student has two tasks: take action on your own goal and check whether your partner is doing the same. When we gather again, Commitment Card partners report to the entire class on what happened.

Compared to prior years, when about half of students failed to follow through on goals they'd set privately, the vast majority of the class successfully does what they'd promised. Even more important, everyone learns a lifelong lesson about the power of peer accountability.

In sum, research affirms what Coach Lad intuited: when I publicly commit to you and you publicly commit to me, we're each motivated to be our very best.

Peer Learning

The architect and inventor Buckminster Fuller declared at the end of his career that, for him, puzzles were better solved alone than with others: “I sought to operate only on a do-it-yourself basis,” he said, “and only on the basis of intuition.” Whether or not Fuller was, as some claim, a grandiose narcissist, it’s clear from scientific research that DIY is not the wisest approach to achieving your goals. And not only because, by doing everything yourself, you miss out on the power of peer accountability. Peers also make you smarter, in ways that eventually dwarf individual ingenuity.

Take it from Paul Graham, cofounder of the startup accelerator Y Combinator.

“The whole ‘doing things in batch’ [approach] we discovered by accident. But it worked so well, we decided, ‘All right, well, we’re going to keep doing this.’”

That’s how Paul recalls the decision to throw a small group of promising young tech entrepreneurs into one crazy-intense, three-month boot camp. Today, he is a legend in the world of venture capital. But in the summer of 2005, when he made his first investment as a cofounder of Y Combinator, he was just a computer scientist and entrepreneur with only the vaguest of hunches about how to seed other startups.

“We knew undergrads got temporary jobs at tech companies during the summer,” he’s said. “Why not organize a summer program where they’d start startups instead?” Initially, hundreds of aspiring entrepreneurs responded to the announcement Paul posted on his personal website. After interviews the pool was winnowed to eight teams, mostly cofounders working as pairs or trios.

In exchange for 6 percent ownership, YC invested a mere \$6,000 per founder. Over the past two decades, those numbers have grown, as have the number of startups per batch. But the Y Combinator formula—funding and fellowship—is pretty much unchanged. And why change a

good thing? The very first group included the founders of Reddit, Twitch, and OpenAI.



A photo of the first Y Combinator cohort, posted in 2020 by Justin Kan

Funding a batch of startups simultaneously is so effective, Paul explains, “because they can all help one another.” He has gone on to say that “ambitious people are rare, so if everyone is mixed together randomly, as they tend to be early in people’s lives, then the ambitious ones won’t have many ambitious peers. When you take people like this and put them together with other ambitious people, they bloom like dying plants given water.”

Today, hundreds of venture capital firms have imitated Y Combinator’s batch model, all based on the principle that seeding the next Airbnb, DoorDash, or Dropbox requires something more precious than cash. These accelerators have now been around long enough for researchers to ask and answer two basic questions: *Do they work? If so, why?*

It turns out that while not all accelerators make good on their name, the best ones indeed *accelerate* the development and success of startups. Entrepreneurs with nearly identical credentials in terms of education,

work experience, and prior startup track records fare better when they're in a high-quality accelerator than when they try to make it independently.

So why do top accelerators work? Research suggests an active ingredient that has nothing to do with money: *learning from others*. In particular, high-performing accelerators imitate the structures Y Combinator has put in place to accelerate learning: Group office hours. Group dinners. Guest speakers eager to share their own startup experience.

Relatedly, Y Combinator strongly favors teams of cofounders over solo entrepreneurs. “Starting a startup is too hard for one person,” Paul says. “Even if you could do all the work yourself, you need colleagues to brainstorm with, to talk you out of stupid decisions, and to cheer you up when things go wrong.”

One can only imagine that if Buckminster Fuller were alive to start an accelerator today, he'd seek out founders who want to go it alone. The latest research, however, suggests Paul Graham is right. Compared to solo founders, cofounders collectively possess a wider range of skills—from marketing to management to design to finance and technology. This may explain why, on average, they outperform solo founders in building profitable, high-growth companies.



“Absolutely, your peers make you smarter.” That’s the lesson that Aaron Kahane has taken from YC. “So often, you think the problem you’re trying to solve is unique. You think you’re the first person in the world to struggle with it. But almost always someone else’s experience is going to help you. *A lot.*”

Aaron is a former student of mine who graduated from Y Combinator in Batch S22—YC-speak for the summer of 2022. When Aaron and his two cofounders, Drew Schneider and Salo Serfati, were accepted as Batchmates, they quit their jobs and began working full-time on Chariot, a startup that makes donating money to charity easier.

“For instance, at one point, we needed to develop a core feature for our product. We were scoping out how long it would take to build. We figured twelve to eighteen months, at least. Then we reached out to a YC alum. Right away he got on a call with us and told us he’d had a similar problem. With his guidance, we were able to develop that feature in a matter of weeks.”

I asked why they’d been quick to ask for advice, given that entrepreneurs so often talk about needing to fail fast and fail often—to learn, in effect, from trying, failing, and trying again. “Believe me, we learn from our own mistakes, too,” Aaron assured me. “But that’s slow and expensive. If I can call up a Batchmate and get smarter about something fast, *that’s so much better.*”

To facilitate peer learning even after the initial boot-camp experience is over, Y Combinator created an internal messaging platform for Batchmates and alumni called Bookface. I wasn’t surprised to learn that Aaron and his cofounders log on to the platform daily, looking for advice about whatever problems they’re struggling with at the moment.

What surprised me is that they log on just as often to look for questions.

“Absolutely,” Aaron said. “Doesn’t matter what batch the founder is from. If they have a problem, I’m going to drop everything and see if I can help solve it.

“It’s basically a *havruta*,” he explained. “*Havruta* is Aramaic for ‘fellowship.’ Jews like Drew and Salo and me know better than to study the Torah all by ourselves. No matter how smart you are, it’s too hard to learn on your own. You need a learning partner. As it says in the Torah: Two scholars sharpen one another.

“*O havruta, O mituta*,” Aaron continued. “That comes from a story in the Babylonian Talmud. It translates to ‘Give me havruta or give me death.’”

The Collective Brain

Not every budding tech entrepreneur is eager to get into an accelerator like YC. Many worry that talking too much to other people is a surefire way to lose sight of your own vision. In so many words, they suggest that groupthink can undermine creativity.

Generally, however, it's unwise to forgo asking peers for advice, a mistake I've made in the past and, regrettably, still do occasionally. Too often, all of us fall prey to what psychologists call *the illusion of self-sufficiency*, assuming we can figure things out on our own when in fact the number of possibilities is so astronomically high that without guidance, it's unlikely we'll stumble on the solution by ourselves.

Humans are not only social animals but also *social learners*. For our species it provides the ultimate edge. Our primate cousins, the chimpanzees and orangutans, are surprisingly similar to human toddlers in how quickly they figure out a wide array of physical and mental puzzles, but they're dramatically worse at learning from one another. When shown how to do something, toddlers learn effortlessly, whereas chimps and orangutans learn almost nothing.

Our comparative advantage is what Harvard evolutionary biologist Joe Henrich calls the *collective brain*: "Humans may be smarter than other creatures, but none of us is nearly smart enough to acquire all the information necessary to survive...." In even the most primitive civilizations, Henrich points out, the array of tools, beliefs, and skills required for survival is simply impossible for any individual to master on their own. "We owe our success to our uniquely developed ability to *learn from others*." In other words, what's special about humans isn't so much that our brains are bigger, it's that our brains are more social.

For example, the power of peer learning is the punch line of a relay race experiment in which participants were tasked with re-creating images using unfamiliar software, either learning from five previous participants or just one. Over ten "generations," those learning from one predecessor showed almost no improvement, but those learning from five improved

dramatically. By the final round, even the weakest performer in the five-model group outperformed the best in the one-model group.

From this and other evidence, Henrich has argued that shared wisdom, not solitary genius, drives most of human innovation.

Henrich's collective brain hypothesis is in some ways radical. And yet the power of peer learning is ancient wisdom. A proverb attributed to the Chinese philosopher Confucius advises that learning from your own mistakes is the most bitter wisdom, whereas learning by imitating others is the best. Likewise, the modern English word "idiot" derives from the ancient Greek term *idios*, meaning "on one's own."

Peer Solidarity

My college roommate could easily be mistaken for Reese Witherspoon. Big blue eyes. Platinum-blond hair. Lovely, lilting Southern drawl. A gigawatt smile that lights up the room. And the wit of Oscar Wilde.

In addition to all of the above, she's also a recovering alcoholic—now sober for sixteen years.

I'd intended to share her story anonymously, but when I mentioned my plan, she insisted she had no qualms about being identified. Film buffs may recognize Stokely Chaffin as a producer of box office hits like *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and *Sweet Home Alabama*—whose main character, as it turns out, was played by none other than Reese Witherspoon.

"How did you do it?" I once asked about her path to sobriety. The two of us were sitting in her Los Angeles home.

"I tried everything," Stokely said. "Acupuncture. Therapy. Hypnosis. I mean, everything and anything—you name it, I tried it. *Nothing* worked. But then my biggest drinking buddy started going to AA. When he celebrated one year sober, I literally thought, 'Hell, if that drunk can do it, I know I can, too.' And that's how I went to my first meeting."

I knew that researchers had long wondered how gathering together for Alcoholics Anonymous meetings—without a trained facilitator or a detailed script for how the meeting should proceed—had become for many alcoholics a lifesaving treatment. When I asked Stokely how she thought the process worked, I expected her to credit the Twelve Steps to recovery, beginning with Step One: *We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable*. Or she might have told me that AA was essentially a religious experience. Step Two: *We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity*.

As my mind raced through possibilities, Stokely laughed softly, as if anticipating my surprise. And then, with a playful twinkle in her eye, she gave me her answer: “Peer pressure!”

Peers are indeed at the heart of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Unlike hospitals, where those who are unwell are cared for by those who are healthy, AA defines itself as a “fellowship of people who come together to solve their drinking problem.” An AA meeting requires nothing more than two alcoholics talking to each other. By design, AA gatherings are not led by therapists, but are chaired by a member who volunteers for the responsibility.



Every AA meeting opens with members reciting these words in unison:

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of people who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.

The chair may then ask if there are any people new to AA who'd like to stand and introduce themselves—with or without giving their name. After that, there might be a reading from what AA members call the Big Book.

Meetings often end with a moment of silence, followed by a collective recitation of the Serenity Prayer.

First published in 1939, the Big Book includes the Twelve Steps to recovery. Since its second edition in 1955, the Big Book has also included the Twelve Traditions, a set of guiding principles for maintaining unity and support among group members, including avoiding “quarrels over membership, leadership, and money... strivings for power and prestige [and] schisms which would [otherwise] split AA apart.”

The original text included the recovery stories of the first one hundred members of AA. Those accounts have changed over time to reflect the changing membership of AA—but the book still begins with the story of Bill W., the author of the Big Book itself.

To Keep It, Give It Away

Bill W. was twenty-one years old when he took his first drink. Despite abstaining from alcohol during his teen years, he quickly developed a dependence that eventually threatened his career, marriage, and life. Over and over again, he'd quit, only to start drinking again.

The turning point came during what would be his last hospital stay due to drinking. It was while lying in his bed at Towns Hospital in New

York City that Bill experienced a spiritual awakening—the sudden calming presence of a higher power to whose authority he submitted his fate. He never drank again. But it was not the day that he quit drinking that marks the birth of Alcoholics Anonymous. For Bill W. had yet to meet Dr. Bob. Dr. Bob was a surgeon in Akron, Ohio. Each day, after seeing his last patient at about four in the afternoon, Dr. Bob started drinking. He didn't stop until he passed out. The next day, he'd manage his "morning jitters" with sedatives to hold him over until he could drink again.

Just a few months after his epiphany in the hospital, Bill W. traveled to Akron on business. When the proposed deal unexpectedly fell through, Bill was faced with profound disappointment and a strong temptation to drink. Standing in the hotel lobby, the clinking of glasses and laughter calling to him from the bar just steps away, Bill had a second epiphany: Relying on a higher power was insufficient. He needed to connect with another alcoholic who could relate to his struggle. Not only that, it was only by helping that fellow drinker that he might strengthen his own resolve.

Instead of sliding up to the bar, Bill W. found a pay phone and a church directory. He called a local reverend to ask if he knew an alcoholic he could talk to. That call eventually led him to Dr. Bob, who allotted him a visit of fifteen minutes.

You can date the founding of AA to that evening in 1935 when two strangers met and, for fifteen minutes that stretched into several hours, spoke not just about their drinking but about their fears, failures, shame—and hope. For the first time, each man saw himself in another: not as a moral weakling or hopeless case, but as someone who could be understood, helped, and perhaps even healed.



Soon after, Bill W. and Dr. Bob began working together to help other alcoholics, not as experts but as equals. They discovered that mutual aid—one alcoholic helping another—was more powerful than any advice, sermon, or prescription.

From those humble beginnings, AA grew. First to a few more members in Akron and New York, then into a fellowship that now spans the globe. Its guiding principles, including the Twelve Steps, have helped countless alcoholics find recovery—not just from alcohol but also from despair and isolation. AA now has more than 2 million members in 180 countries.

The long-term efficacy of AA has proven to be superior to any other treatment, including individual psychotherapy. Why? It turns out that Stokely's playful answer—peer pressure—is more right than wrong. In the most rigorous, longitudinal research on how AA works, what emerges as a common denominator for recovery is a shift in a recovering alcoholic's social networks—particularly the four most important people in their lives—from pro-drinking to pro-abstinence. This pattern holds true for drinkers of all degrees of alcoholism, young and old, male or female.

Separate research shows that, in general, a person's five closest friends take up the lion's share—about 40 percent—of time spent socializing. Remarkably, the peers we connect with at least once a week take up as much time as we divide among the scores and scores of acquaintances we see less frequently. Accordingly, it is the number and quality of our intimate peers, rather than our distant acquaintances, that so powerfully influence our long-term health and happiness. In addition to providing companionship, our closest peers define what feels normal. Their habits, standards, and outlook become the water we swim in, shaping our own behavior without us even noticing.

In a personal letter to Bill W., the psychoanalyst Carl Jung observed that AA provides to drinkers what every person needs: “the protective wall of human community.” My friend Stokely puts it this way: “What AA gives you is solidarity. Suddenly, you're not alone. You're surrounded by people who have lived what you're going through. And when you become a sponsor, and you're helping another alcoholic stay sober, that gives you, at possibly the lowest moment of your entire life, newfound esteem. AA globally transforms our roads' drunk drivers into an army of service workers. No small feat.” Or as a former student of mine said about his own experience in AA, the opposite of addiction isn't sobriety—it's *connection*.

Teams Make the Best Even Better

As a professor, I've found that when I assign a group project, at least one student protests. This happened just the other day. "I am acutely aware of the downsides of working in a group," a student emailed me after I announced in class that final projects would be completed in teams. "Inevitably, there is misalignment on priorities, unequal work distribution, and so on."

It's true that working as part of a team has its challenges. And yet, as I explained to my student, research shows that the power of peers can work miracles even among the highest performers. Consider, for example, the superforecasters—outliers who are even more extraordinary when working together than alone.

Forecasters are ordinary citizens who, as a hobby, try to predict the future. Just as meteorologists try to predict the weather, forecasters try to predict the unfolding of world events. They do so using the internet, basic statistics, and logic. For instance, forecasters make educated guesses to questions like: "What will Amazon's stock price be at the end of next week?" or "What will the president's approval rating be next month?"

Superforecasters are forecasters whose predictions are more accurate than 98 percent of their peers. My colleagues Barbara Mellers and Phil Tetlock study superforecasters, or Supers, as they call them. They've found that Supers are both smart and gritty. But their dazzling performance made Barb and Phil wonder: *If they worked together, rather than separately, could they, as individual performers, get even better?*

On the face of it, the idea seemed implausible. Laboratory experiments had shown that groups can lead to social loafing, slacking off, assuming others will compensate. Research had also shown that when a group brainstorms the solution to a problem, one person's outspoken opinion can unduly influence the rest, which puts the kibosh on independent thinking. And, of course, even if they didn't suddenly turn into slackers or conformists, Supers assigned to work together might find it difficult to put egos aside and harmonize their efforts.

Nevertheless, Barb and Phil thought the upside of groups could outweigh the downside *if groups were designed wisely*. So they went ahead, assigning Supers to teams of twelve and giving each team an orientation, including best practice recommendations for working together.

For instance, they asked Supers to picture success the way football players picture scoring a touchdown: “Everyone has to work together towards a common goal.” They emphasized independent thinking: “Diversity of thought is key,” they said. “Be confident enough to defend your position, but if you see that someone has new evidence, better analysis, or more experience on the subject, don’t be afraid to adjust accordingly!” And they made being kind to one another an explicit goal: “Be a *giver*. Many of the most successful people in the world are givers, contributing more than they receive in an almost selfless manner.”

During the first year of their experiment, Supers assigned to teams proactively volunteered to answer *more than 50 percent* more forecasting questions than they had answered alone the year prior. Being on a team also *doubled* the number of times Supers updated their forecasts for any given question—and, most important, it shattered the ceiling on their already awesome individual performance—leading to forecasts that were *50 percent more accurate*.

“To our surprise, getting Supers to work together was far more effective than anything we ever tried before,” Barb told me. “Putting Supers on teams was like putting them on steroids. When they met, they just fell in love with each other. They started giving each other nicknames. They became friends. Allies. It was like they’d found their tribe. And best of all, they *stayed* that way.”

I recently asked Elaine Rich what it was like to join a Super team. Elaine began competing in forecasting tournaments as an individual but, in her third year, was assigned to work with eleven other Supers.

“Oh, *you can’t even compare* the amount of time I spent on a team to when I worked alone. I’d say I put in three times as many hours. On my

own, I just worked whenever I felt like it. But on a team, it was totally different. My teammates and I were emailing each other every single day.”

This level of devotion astonished Elaine, who was holding down a full-time job as a pharmacist. As was the case for her teammates, forecasting was an unpaid hobby. “The social aspect became inseparable from the task,” Elaine told me. “The duty to respond socially equaled my duty to perform well as an individual. You know, I said to myself, ‘I am no way going to be the slacker on this team.’”

What else changed, other than the quantity of time on task?

“The *quality* of time. Because different people were looking for information in different places. And there was more information than any one person could handle. Together, we learned more than any one person could learn on their own.”



Life *is* a team sport. You can’t choose your brothers or sisters, but you can pick your peers. Pick wisely, and your peers will be, as they say in Y Combinator, a “force multiplier.”

But even more important than the benefits of peer accountability and peer learning is what you gain in perspective. To be part of and in service to a group is far more satisfying than any individual achievement, for as the psychiatrist David Viscott once said: “To love and be loved is to feel the sun from both sides.”

CHAPTER 8



Attract Mentors

In 1997, the Emmy Award for Lifetime Achievement went to an ordained Presbyterian minister named Fred Rogers.

As the auditorium burst into applause, Mister Rogers kissed his wife, rose from his seat, and took the stage. The host and creator of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* had these words for his star-studded audience: "So many people have helped me to come to this night," he said, and then paused. "Some of you are here. Some are far away. Some are even in heaven. All of us have special ones who have *loved us into being*."

Another pause.

"Would you just take—along with me—ten seconds to think of the people who have helped *you* become who *you* are? Those who have cared about you and wanted what was best for you in life? Ten seconds of silence...."

Mister Rogers smiled gently and looked down at his wristwatch. "I'll watch the time."

At first, the gesture drew giggles. And then, as it became obvious that he was serious, a hushed silence fell over one and all. Some looked down at their feet. Some looked up at the ceiling. Some kept their eyes on the stage, but looked past Mister Rogers, remembering someone who'd loved them into being.

When the ten seconds were up, many in the sequined, tuxedoed audience were holding their hands to their chests, or dabbing their eyes. All were listening.

“Whoever you’ve been thinking about, how pleased they must be to know the difference you feel they’ve made.”



Most people know that mentors are great. Some know they’re *indispensable*. Very few know that anyone can become a *mentor magnet*.

The third essential element of situational agency is *attracting mentors*.

When I say mentors are “indispensable,” it may seem like hyperbole. But I’m not exaggerating. In every domain studied, there’s clear evidence that mentors matter. For instance, in a study of research scientists, quality of mentorship predicted a two-fold to four-fold increase in a protégé’s likelihood of going on to conduct prize-winning research of their own. A different study that followed a representative sample of American teenagers found that even one mentor makes a difference: high school students who identify a teacher, counselor, or coach as a mentor are 17 percent more likely to make it to college.

Personally, I’ve benefited beyond measure from the wisdom, encouragement, and sponsorship of not just one or two but a long list of mentors. And nearly every world-class achiever I’ve ever interviewed agrees with Oprah Winfrey: “Anybody who’s had any level of success in their life got to where they are because somebody somewhere was a guiding light.”

Or as Oprah’s own mentor, the writer and civil rights activist Maya Angelou, put it: “Nobody, but nobody, makes it out here alone.”

Mentors Teach

Why, exactly, are mentors a need-to-have, not a nice-to-have? For starters, practicing anything without a mentor is like trying to fill a leaky bucket: *dramatically inefficient*.

The acronym DIY (do-it-yourself) is about 50 times more common today than when it was introduced in the 1950s. And in a recent in-

ternational survey of 11,000 learners aged 16 to 70 years old, 81 percent predicted that education will become more self-service in the future than it's been in the past.

I marvel at what people of all ages manage to teach themselves by watching YouTube videos. But anyone who assumes they can *master* a skill with 10,000 hours of DIY practice is mistaken. In fact, Anders Ericsson, the cognitive scientist whose research gave birth to that number, was to his dying day adamant that the most important insight of his work had been misunderstood.

Anders studied the learning curves of experts. In music, sports, and other domains where skill could be measured with precision, he found that experts are distinguished by their cumulative hours of what he called “deliberate practice.” And yet it is a grave error to fixate on the astonishing *quantity* of practice experts invest to improve. Anders’s key discovery was that their practice also differs in *quality*. Experts not only practice more, they practice more effectively.

Here’s the script of an animated video that Anders and I cowrote explaining how experts do more than “try hard” to improve. The jazz legend Wynton Marsalis performed the voice-over:

Some people are so good at what they do, you doubt you could ever be as great.

Are they born with it? Not at all.

Research shows that you can become an expert, too, with the right kind of practice.

Expert practice has three steps.

First, take the thing you want to do well. Break it down into smaller parts and pick one part that’s just a little harder than what you can do now.

Second, practice that one skill with absolute concentration. Even short practice sessions are powerful if you focus completely.

Third, seek feedback on your performance and reflect on that feedback.

Expert practice is not always easy, but as you perfect many small skills, you begin to see how the whole improves... to create dazzling mastery.

Great musicians, doctors, writers and athletes all use expert practice. They used it as students, too. You can become great at whatever you envision. What will you choose to master?

When I play this video to a live audience, I elaborate by explaining that deliberate practice is something of a paradox.

On one hand, practicing with complete concentration is almost always done in solitude—without anyone to interrupt or distract you. Now in his sixties, Wynton Marsalis, for example, has racked up tens of thousands of hours—and counting—of focused nobody-else-in-the-room practice.

On the other hand, the student depends on a mentor to identify what to practice in the first place and, afterward, to provide feedback. As Anders emphasized in his very last sole-authored scientific article: “The practice task *must* be designed and performed in accordance with individualized instruction and guidance of a *teacher*.”

In other words, high-quality practice is precisely the opposite of DIY.

Even prodigies rely on teachers who, even if they’re less gifted than their pupils, are still able to zero in on nuances the prodigy can’t see or hear on their own.

“As a boy growing up in New Orleans,” Wynton says, “I remember my father, Ellis, a pianist, and his friends talking about ‘sheddin’.’ When they got together, they’d say, ‘Man, you need to go shed,’ or ‘I’ve been sheddin’ hard.’ When I was around eleven, I realized that sheddin’ meant getting to the woodshed—practicing. By the age of sixteen, I understood what the shed was really about—hard, concentrated work. When my brother Branford and I auditioned for our high school band, the instructor, who knew my father, was excited about Ellis’s sons coming to the band. But my audition was so pitiful he said, ‘Are you sure you’re Ellis’s son?’ At the time, his comment didn’t bother me because I was more interested in basketball than band. Over the next several years, however, I began practicing

seriously. Practice is essential to learning music—and anything else, for that matter. I like to say that the time spent practicing is the true sign of virtue in a musician. When you practice, it means you are willing to sacrifice to sound good.”



Photo by Dan Hyde

But “JUST DO IT!” Wynton knows, is not especially helpful advice. “Even if practice is so important, kids find it very hard to do because there are so many distractions. That’s why I always encourage them to practice and explain how to do it.” When Wynton advises up-and-coming musicians, he begins with this cardinal rule: “First, find an experienced teacher who knows what you should be doing.

“A good teacher,” Wynton says, “will help you understand the purpose of practicing and can teach you ways to make practicing easier.”

What Would Wooden Do?

Invariably, in addition to pointing out what you're doing wrong, your mentors will teach you by example.

Consider John Wooden, the UCLA basketball coach at the top of nearly every list of “greatest coaches in history.” As a player, Wooden was a standout point guard. But at least as relevant, before his NCAA coaching career, he taught English in high school for fourteen years and then another two at Indiana State Teachers College. As a physical reminder that he was, first and foremost, a teacher, Wooden always kept an apple on his desk.

During his very last season—which ended with his UCLA basketball team bringing home a record-setting tenth NCAA championship—researchers asked to attend afternoon practices. Sitting in the bleachers with clipboards and stopwatches, they meticulously coded more than 2,000 coach-player interactions. What they discovered was that in 75 percent of these interactions, Wooden was *teaching*.

Sometimes that teaching took the form of verbally explaining what the player needed to attempt next, but often, Wooden would simply grab the ball and model what he wanted his players to do. “His demonstrations are rarely longer than three seconds,” researchers noted, “but are of such clarity that they leave an image in memory much like a textbook sketch.”

After playing for Wooden for four years, one of his players thanked him by writing a poem entitled “The Four Laws of Learning.”

At the start of all your teaching,
You would show me what to do.
Always leading by example,
DEMONSTRATION of “how to.”

Then you'd say, “Why don't you try it.
I have shown you how to be.”
IMITATION—I attempted,

As you watched me lovingly.

“Do it this way. Do it that way.

Try it once again like this.”

Your CORRECTION drilling habit,

As we watched my skills progress.

With occasional assistance,

You retreated humbly.

You were finished—I had learned it.

REPETITION was the key.

Many years after winning two national championships under Wooden’s tutelage at UCLA and then two championships in the NBA, another of Wooden’s players said, “Everyone’s job in life is to search for, find, and learn from a master teacher.” That player, whose passing in 2024 was mourned by millions of fans, was Bill Walton. When Bill decided to become a sports commentator, he knew he was the furthest thing from being a natural. “I’m a lifelong stutterer,” he explained. Even as a young man, “I was incredibly shy and never said a word. [I had] red hair, big nose, freckles, a goofy, nerdy-looking face, and I couldn’t talk at all.”

Wooden had taught Bill that with the right teacher, almost anything can be learned. So, instead of working hard on his own, he sought the advice of a veteran sportscaster, Marty Glickman, who took him under his wing. In the end, Bill ended up spending more years as a sportscaster than as a professional player—winning an Emmy in 2001 for the best live sports broadcast on television.

“Never underestimate the value—the power—of a mentor,” Bill liked to say. “No one makes it to the top alone. I wanted to be great. I wanted to be the best.... I quickly learned and realized... that I could not get there by myself. And so my life has been spent in search of trying to find and then learn from the master teachers.”

Mentors Believe

The beauty of deliberate practice is that no matter who you are and what you're trying to master, you can continue to learn and improve. The catch is that you have to stick with it—even on the bad days.

Is what keeps you going some inexhaustible wellspring of self-confidence? More often than is acknowledged, that sort of faith is borrowed. You believe in yourself because someone else you respect and admire believes in you. Psychologists call this the *Pygmalion Effect*.

In 1965, psychologist Bob Rosenthal and school principal Lenore Jacobson conducted a study called “Pygmalion in the Classroom.” The study took its name from the Greek myth of Pygmalion—the sculptor who carved an ivory statue of such beauty that he fell in love with his own creation. Through fervent prayer to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, Pygmalion brought his statue to life. Similarly confident about the power of transformative belief, Rosenthal theorized that another person’s certainty about our potential powerfully shapes what we become capable of achieving.

To test his hypothesis, Rosenthal administered an IQ test to students at Spruce Elementary School in South San Francisco. He then gave each classroom teacher a list of names of those students who, he said, had earned scores indicating they would “bloom intellectually” that year. In fact, however, Rosenthal had chosen these students completely at random.

One year later, Rosenthal retested the students. Remarkably, the students Rosenthal randomly labeled as “bloomers” had indeed excelled, with the youngest students demonstrating the greatest gains. For instance, compared to classmates not labeled as gifted, first-grade bloomers increased their IQ scores by an astounding fifteen points.

When Rosenthal and Jacobson published these results, many educators felt it validated their personal experience: a mentor’s expectations are a powerful self-fulfilling prophecy. Skeptics, however, criticized the study, dismissing its conclusions as wishful thinking.

Six decades on, what do researchers make of the Pygmalion Effect? What can we conclude now that there have been literally hundreds of studies on the power of high expectations—in contexts ranging from military training to medical care to the workplace?

Many questions remain open, particularly regarding when, to what degree, and how the expectations of other people at some point are internalized as our own. But there is unanimous agreement in the research community—even among the fiercest critics of the original Pygmalion study—that self-confidence is not entirely self-generated. So very often, the inner voice that says, “I can do this!” begins with an outer voice: a mentor who assures you, over and over, in word and in deed, by what they say and how they say it—“Without question, I believe you can!”



Call it the power of Pygmalion. Call it surrogate grit. Or, if you’re a fan of the Emmy Award–winning television show about the American football coach who turns around an underdog soccer team in the English Premier League, call it the *Ted Lasso Effect*.

One of the first things Ted Lasso does as the new coach of AFC Richmond is tape a sign above the door connecting his office to the locker room. Seven letters, all caps, blue paint on yellow construction paper: BELIEVE.

That hand-lettered sign is a feature in nearly every episode, but it isn’t until the third season that Ted Lasso gathers the team around the sign to reveal its deeper meaning. Belief is not something you do by or for yourself, he explains. What matters is not just “believing that *things* can get better, that *I* can get better,” but, crucially, “that *we* will get better.” What’s fundamental, he says, is not just “to believe in yourself” but “to believe in one another.”

And believing in others is precisely what Ted Lasso—whose mastery of the Xs and Os of soccer was clearly not a strong suit—did for his play-

ers, fellow coaches, his boss, and anyone else lucky enough to find themselves in his orbit. Jason Sudeikis, who co-created the show and plays its title character, says the idea of transplanting a college football coach from Wichita, Kansas, into a fictional English Premier League soccer team “was really about mentoring.”



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And mentoring is about seeing another person’s potential, especially when they themselves find it difficult to do so: “A great mentor,” he says, “is someone that sees something in you that you are unable to see in yourself based on your baggage.... I’ve had the good fortune of people seeing things in me that my imagination didn’t allow me to see because of my own baggage.”

In his acceptance speech for the Emmy for best actor in a comedy series, Sudeikis thanked his own mentors by name. More recently, in explaining how he created the character of Ted Lasso, he attributed it to:

“taking the best parts of all the different mentors and teachers and coaches I’d had in my life.”

Mentors Open Doors

Mentors teach, and mentors believe. But learning and motivation don’t take you *everywhere* you want to go. You also need connections.

To be clear: I’ve never cared for the adage *It’s not what you know, it’s who you know*. In my view, mastery of your domain matters more than having a great Rolodex. Nevertheless, because all of us rely on the people we know and trust to vouch for the people we don’t *yet* know and trust, connections count, too. And mentors, by virtue of being more senior in status and experience, are especially well-positioned to usher you into those rooms you dare not dream of walking into by yourself. They are, as some put it, in a position to “sponsor” you, advocating for you when opportunities arise, and putting their own reputation on the line by vouching for your competence.

In my very first year of graduate school, for example, my mentor Marty Seligman introduced me to the top brass at West Point. One conversation led to another, one relationship spawned the next, and before long, I’d formed the connections that enabled me to launch a study, then another, and eventually more than a decade of foundational research on grit and achievement at the oldest military academy in the United States.

Marty also brought me along to exclusive gatherings with his fellow luminaries in psychological science. A complete rookie, I’d sit mouse-quiet as my academic heroes took turns holding forth. But at some point in the discussion Marty would direct the spotlight my way. “This is Angela,” he’d say. “She has a question you’ll find intriguing.” Those leading lights—and the colleagues to whom they, in turn, introduced me—are now my peers.

The sociologist Anindya Kundu calls this *circle* jumping—navigating from one social network to another, picking up valuable skills and im-

proving your opportunity horizons as you do, and thereby propelling yourself forward toward your goals. For instance, one young man Kundu interviewed credited his high school English teacher with kicking off his circle-jumping process. His teacher connected him to her friend in the music industry for an internship. That internship, Kundu says, “expanded his interest in finance, and eventually led him down a path to his current lucrative career in investment banking.”

In a recent poll of American adults, “family connections” was ranked the most important determinant of wealth and success, after “hard work and grit” and “ambition.” I don’t doubt that some people—including my own children—benefit disproportionately from family connections. But it’s not only your relatives who can open doors.

The single most cited study in the history of sociology is entitled “The Strength of Weak Ties.” In the study, originally published in 1973, researchers asked hundreds of professional, technical, and managerial job changers in the Boston suburbs how they’d found their new jobs. The original assumption was that close friends and family would prove the most helpful conduits to new employment. The data, however, produced the opposite pattern: When people got a new job, it was more likely to come from an acquaintance than from a close friend or family member. And most often, a new employer turned out to be not one degree of separation away but two—a connection of a connection.

In retrospect, of course, these findings make sense: “Those to whom we are weakly tied are more likely to move in circles different from our own and will thus have access to information different from that which we receive.” Put differently, a key function of your social network is to *broaden* your horizons.

More recently, research confirms that when it comes to career advancement, the most helpful people in your social network are, in fact, people whose ties to you are weaker, not stronger. In one study, researchers collaborated with LinkedIn to carry out the largest-ever longitudinal randomized controlled experiment on social ties. In total, their study in-

volved over 20 million LinkedIn members around the globe, who over the course of five years created 2 billion new connections, recorded over 70 million job applications, and accepted 600,000 new jobs through the social network site. Researchers varied LinkedIn's "People You May Know" algorithm to offer recommendations that varied in tie strength. A clear pattern emerged: compared to strong ties, weak ties were more likely to lead to a new job.

Put together the evidence for the strength of weak ties with the plain fact that mentors are better connected than you are, and you can see why opportunities come easier when your situation includes mentors.

Mentor Magnets

Put simply, a mentor magnet is someone who proactively *attracts* mentors.

Here's how I know when I've met a mentor magnet. Without prompting, I find myself offering to do favors and make introductions. My eagerness to share advice exceeds their explicit asks. And almost immediately, I feel as if the relationship is special—even when I discover, as is almost always the case, that I'm far from the only mentor in their orbit.

Who gets more out of a mentoring relationship—the mentor or the protégé? Who would miss the other more if, suddenly, the relationship came to an end? I know I'm mentoring a mentor magnet when the answer is *me*.

It's commonly assumed that mentors happen to you—if you're lucky. Perhaps it's the rarity of mentor relationships that makes them seem like a Box One blessing you can only hope for. A recent Gallup survey found that 60 percent of working adults in the United States lack even a single mentor at work. Other researchers have found that twice as many employees think mentors at work are important as report they have one currently.

When we watch the Emmys, or the Oscars, or flip to the back of a book and read the acknowledgments, the gushing gratitude expressed toward lifelong mentors can often make them seem like saints. What mentors do is indeed priceless, but the truth is, they're just people. Mere mortals, flesh and blood like anyone else—only special in that, relative to their protégés, they're a few steps further down the path, and in that sense, wiser. Very often they're older, too. But when you look for a mentor, what you're primarily looking for is someone who is eager to be helpful.

Your possibility set for mentors broadens considerably when you understand that a connection with a mentor transcends superficial similarities. For example, research shows that the quality of mentoring relationships is better predicted by shared values and interests than either race or gender.

And the most important qualification for mentors is that they derive satisfaction from making a difference. In perhaps the most highly cited study on mentoring ever published, researchers interviewed mentor-protégé pairs at a large company. One mentor, whose protégé had recently been promoted and moved to a different department, said:

To see them do an excellent job and see them get recognized for it is probably the most gratifying thing, like seeing your son graduate from college... it's that kind of pride that you take.... It's like raising children.... When you see those people get promoted... you're really pleased. And you say, "You know, I've had something to do with that."

As Mister Rogers reminds us, mentors are pleased to see the difference they've made.



If you think that having mentors is beyond your control, I want to persuade you otherwise. And so do the mentor magnets I've asked for advice to pass along.

Chris Gardner started out in life with an empty Rolodex. Born into poverty in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, he joined the navy to escape his abusive stepfather. From there his career and life took a series of unexpected twists and turns—including a period of homelessness in San Francisco when Chris was interning as an entry-level stockbroker but not earning enough to pay for a room for himself and his toddler son.

The movie *The Pursuit of Happyness* tells the story of Chris's gritty ascent to becoming a full-time stockbroker.

"The y in 'happyness' is not a misspelling," he told me in a conversation in his front yard—a quarter-acre grassy veranda on the thirty-seventh floor of a glass and steel luxury high-rise in downtown Chicago. "I saw it spelled that way one day when I was picking up my son from day care. It was a time of struggle, a time I really needed to smile. And it worked. But more than that, the y stands for *you*. Because you don't wait around for your situation to improve. You take responsibility for making change happen."

The real-life epilogue continues far beyond Will Smith's Academy Award-nominated portrayal of Chris, who went on to found his own institutional investment firm and, after running it for twenty years, sold his stake for millions of dollars.

Fundamental to his success, Chris says, were his mentors. One of them was the church pastor at the soup kitchen where Chris and his young son ate during their year of homelessness. Then came the supervisors at each and every one of his jobs as Chris climbed the career ladder in finance. Then the titans of banking. Then Oprah Winfrey, Barack Obama, Nelson Mandela—and Maya Angelou, who encouraged him to write his story.

When I asked him the most important thing anyone needs to know about mentorship, he replied, "That it *can* happen! That it's *possible*!"

Chris is a calm man, but he delivered this with such emphasis that I almost jumped when he said it. Nearly every mentor magnet I've interviewed agrees: Don't assume that mentors just happen to you. *Take responsibility* for bringing them into your life.

Once you realize it's up to you to find a mentor, where do you look? Should you shoot for the stars? Or are the mentors who will change your life hiding in plain sight?

Look in Your Backyard

The year after Mister Rogers asked for ten seconds of grateful silence, it was Oprah's turn to receive the Emmy Award for Lifetime Achievement. Her longtime mentor and journalism legend Barbara Walters made the presentation. "Oh, Oprah! Wondrous Oprah!" Barbara exclaimed before calling her to the stage and handing her the statue. And in her acceptance speech, Oprah called Walters a "beacon of light," illuminating the path for her and so many others. Oprah later told Walters in an interview: "I've said what a mentor you've been for me. Had there not been you, there never would have been me."

In addition to Barbara Walters, Oprah Winfrey was mentored by musician and producer Quincy Jones and Nobel Peace Prize winner and anti-apartheid visionary Nelson Mandela. But some of Oprah's other mentors aren't household names—Mary Duncan, for example. When Oprah was in the fourth grade at Wharton Elementary School in Nashville, Tennessee, Mrs. Duncan was her teacher. Twenty-five years later, the producers of Oprah's nationally syndicated talk show hatched a surprise. It took a beat to connect the dots when she looked up at the teleprompter and read the name of her next guest: "Mary Duncan."

Mrs. Duncan strolled across the stage and gave Oprah a hug before taking the seat at her side. Meanwhile, Oprah struggled to gather herself. Tears ran down her cheeks ("My mascara is running, sorry!") while Mrs. Duncan waited, beaming, with her hand on Oprah's arm.



© CBS Studios

When Oprah regained her composure, Mrs. Duncan put her hand on Oprah's and recalled that young Oprah was "just an ideal student.... If I'd had a class full of students like Oprah, I would've been floating on air!"

"Did I talk a lot?" Oprah asked.

"No, you were quiet. And furthermore, if anybody else was talking, you would put your finger to your lips and remind them that 'uh-uh, you should be listening!'"

By the end of the interview, there wasn't a dry eye in the house.

Oprah later reflected on the outsized influence of her first mentor—someone who, as she put it, made her unafraid to be smart. At a time when "I didn't have a lot of other adults who I thought were really interested in me," Mrs. Duncan "often stayed after school to work with me." And "it was in her class that I really came into myself."

Research shows that mentors don't have to be rich or famous to change your life. In fact, we're most likely to follow the lead of ordinary people we can *relate* to because we share similar life experiences. What's more, relatability is a wonderful two-way street. Whatever it is you have in common will make it easier for your mentor to identify with you as well.

Here's the advice of Scott Hugo, the mentor magnet I met when researching Coach Lad and the De La Salle Spartans. Scott asks himself three questions when scouting potential mentors:

Has someone gone out of their way to include you—such as to invite you to an event, to introduce you to someone they know?

Has someone showed you an unexpected kindness? Maybe something as simple as sending you an article or book they think could be helpful?

Is someone doing more for you than what is strictly necessary for their position?

Most mentoring relationships never become, as Oprah once described Maya Angelou, your “mentor-mother-sister-friend.” Mrs. Duncan, for example, was a mentor for just a year of Oprah’s life. Her impact was lifelong, but their interactions were not.

Mentor magnets aren’t just influenced by one kind of mentor. On the contrary, they benefit from mentors for a *reason*, mentors for a *season*, and mentors for *life*.

Mentors for a Reason

Mentors for a reason influence you at a single juncture in your life. But the brevity of these interactions does not diminish their significance.

So says Pooja Bavishi, an entrepreneur who almost didn’t become an entrepreneur—except for a sage comment from a business school professor. At the time, Pooja was in the home stretch of her MBA and, like so many of her classmates, applying for jobs in marketing, finance, and management consulting. She had a habit of showing up at the office hours for any professor whose material struck a chord, and that included Professor R. Kabaliswaran, who taught a class called “Power and Politics.” One of the class assignments was to write down a goal and then to draw a map, visually thinking through all the connections and steps that would collectively make the goal possible.

“My classmates had these simple, straightforward maps,” Pooja told me. “Not mine. My original goal was to start a food business, and my map was wild and crazy. Not at all linear. With just so many people and places and nonobvious connections.” It was Pooja’s map that her profes-

sor chose to put up on the screen at the start of the next class. “Whose map is this?” her classmates wondered aloud. “Whoever it is, they’re like, insane!”

“No, this is amazing,” Professor Kabaliswaran said, and then proceeded to guide the entire class through a discussion of Pooja’s map as an example of how, no matter how audacious your vision, you can get where you need to go if you can build from one connection to another. That exercise reminded Pooja, just in the nick of time, that starting a food business was the reason she’d applied to business school in the first place.

“I’d gotten distracted,” she told me. “Instead of pursuing my dream, I was doing what everyone else was doing.” In the office hours meeting that would set her back on course, Pooja expressed her frustration. “Nothing is sticking,” she lamented. “Like, nothing is attracting me to any of these positions that I’m applying for.”

“But Pooja,” her professor replied. “You’re applying for every position under the sun! What is it that you *want* to do?” Pooja hesitated. “I want to do it all.” “Well, that’s what an entrepreneur does. It sounds like you should start that dessert business you’ve been talking about for the past year and a half.”

And that’s exactly what Pooja did. Three weeks after graduation, the founder and CEO of Malai—figuratively translating to “cream of the crop” in North Indian languages—sold her very first scoop of ice cream at a Brooklyn food fair: rose with cinnamon roasted almonds, a flavor that’s still on the menu today. Since founding the startup in 2015, Pooja has expanded Malai from a single cart at weekend food fairs to a brick-and-mortar shop in Brooklyn to stores in Manhattan, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia (where my husband and I are regulars) and national distribution through Whole Foods and other markets as well as an online shop that ships nationwide. The mission of Malai, she says, is to celebrate the South Asian spices and ingredients of her childhood—like ginger, nutmeg, cardamom, fennel, and saffron—and to show how they belong in the lexicon of mainstream American cuisine.

Pooja's mentor for a reason remembers her fondly and is happy for her success. "I probably told her what I tell all my students," he said to me. "To start with a vision that you're emotionally invested in. The heart should lead and the mind should follow."

Curiosity Conversations

If you'd like to meet a mentor for a reason, don't wait for them to reach out to you.

For instance, long before Oprah Winfrey came to call Maya Angelou her mother, her sister, and her friend, the twentysomething anchor of the six o'clock evening news in Baltimore, Maryland, phoned and requested an interview. Dr. Angelou turned her down.

"If you'll give me *five minutes*. I promise you I will only spend five minutes!" young Oprah pleaded.

"All right, all right," Maya said, "because of your persistence."

Oprah was so prepared for that meeting, Maya later recalled, and had such good questions, and was such a good listener, that at the end, when Oprah said, "Thank you so much, Dr. Angelou. I appreciate it, and goodbye," Maya looked at her watch and saw that *precisely five minutes* had passed. And it was Maya who kept the conversation going into overtime. "What did you say your name was? Tell me your first name again!" Oprah's version is only slightly different: "In my memory, you looked up, and you literally said, 'Who are you, girl?'"

You don't have to be a television news anchor with a story assignment to contact someone you admire. Introduce yourself. Ask if they'd be willing to have a five-minute conversation. "Feel free to say no," I write when I make such a request. "But if you're willing, I'd love to ask you some questions about your work."

Curiosity conversations are the trademark strategy of media mogul and mentor magnet Brian Grazer. And a curiosity conversation, in fact, is how Brian and I met. He'd heard of my research on grit and wanted to

learn more about how I approached my work. He wanted to know what I was currently really excited about. As he later explained to me, he wanted to know what he wants to know in any curiosity conversation: my secret. The secret to my process.

That first conversation was so much fun, we had another. And another. And now I assign curiosity conversations for homework to both my undergraduate and MBA students. For some, curiosity conversations with strangers become an every-other-week ritual—as they have been for Brian for over thirty years.

One year, Brian visited with students in my MBA class. By way of introduction, I mentioned his numerous Oscar nominations (49 and counting) and Emmy nominations (326 and counting), then played a sizzle reel of movies and shows Brian had produced, including *Splash*, *Apollo 13*, *Friday Night Lights*, and *A Beautiful Mind*.

At first, I was just a nobody, he told them. A nobody who didn't really know how things worked. "So I developed this little system of reaching out to people to ask them questions," he said. "What is the industry about? Why are you in it? I would do research, and every single day I would reach out to *somebody*. That became very enlightening. It demystified the language of show business."

Over time, Brian explained, curiosity conversations "create networks of people, constellations of individuals all over the planet who know who you are."

The two curiosity questions Chris Gardner favors are: *What do you do?* and *How do you do it?* The answers to those questions changed Chris's life forever—beginning the moment he posed them to a complete stranger, who handed him the keys to a fire-engine-red Ferrari when Chris was working as a valet in San Francisco.

"'What do you do? And how do you do it?'" The words came wailing out of my mouth like I was Miles Davis blowin' on the trumpet," Chris recalls.

The guy he asked answered the first question by explaining that he was a stockbroker at the San Francisco Stock Exchange. The answer to the second was more complicated, so he invited Chris to shadow him on the trading floor that very week. And that was the beginning of Chris's career in financial services.

"Relationships are more valuable than money," Chris says. "Find mentors to challenge you. When you look at them, you see what you can be. When they look at you, they remember who they were."

Mentors for a Season

On occasion mentors for a reason become mentors for a season.

For instance, I become a *mentor for a season* when a young person calls me for advice and ends up doing an internship. I play the same role for students who take my classes. And for young professors with whom I work on a particular project. Almost always, there's a *purpose* to this extended relationship. Often, my assistance is sought in setting goals, or to give feedback on progress.

Here's a tip: If you want a relationship to extend beyond one curiosity conversation, offer to assist your mentor on a project that's already in progress—any endeavor for which elbow grease and a positive attitude will be an asset. Don't hesitate, since the very worst response you can get is "No, thank you." And you'll be surprised how often, instead, you'll hear "Wow, really?"

And then what?

"Reward the feedback!"

This was what Kim Scott told my students when they asked how to invite constructive criticism—or what Kim likes to call "radical candor." Kim is both a mentor magnet and a seasoned mentor herself. Years ago, when she was a new executive at Google, Kim was mentored by her boss, Sheryl Sandberg. Sheryl gave Kim invaluable feedback. For instance, she told Kim that she said "um" every third word and advised her to work

with a speech coach to help her correct the habit. Kim listened. She understood. And she thanked Sheryl. But Sheryl didn't stop there. "It's not enough to say, 'Thank you for the feedback.' You have to show action. You have to make your listening tangible. And then you have to ask, 'Did I go far enough?'"

"One of the best pieces of advice I ever got [from] Sheryl Sandberg was when she said, 'If you get some feedback, you have not addressed the feedback until you've *overcorrected*.'"

What Kim was getting at is this: A mentor magnet rewards their mentors chiefly by benefiting from their mentorship. Mentors don't need flowers or boxes of candy. They just want to be *helpful*. Research shows we have an inkling that lending a helping hand feels good, but that we systematically underestimate just how good. People are much happier to help—more willing, less put upon, and more gratified after the fact—than we can guess. In my experience, almost anyone is delighted to support another person who is genuinely curious about what they have to say, eager to watch what they do, and ready to learn from their example.

To quote the mentors I've interviewed, be the protégé who is "coachable," "first to arrive, last to leave," with "eyes like saucers," and "soaks up advice like a sponge."

Mentors for Life

It's difficult to predict which of your mentors will become a mentor for life.

One day you'll notice that a certain mentor has stuck around. You'll realize this perfect stranger has become nothing less than *family*. There's almost nothing they wouldn't do for you—and you for them.

In other words, a mentor for life is something like a surrogate parent.

Indeed, we owe the modern English word "mentor" to a Greek character of the same name. Mentor is an elder comrade of Odysseus. Before setting off for the battle at Troy, Odysseus turns to Mentor, who is too old

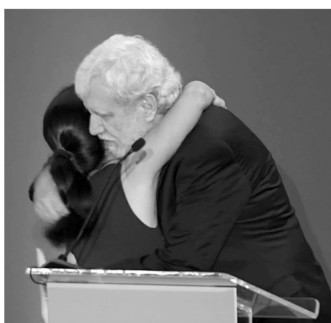
to fight, and asks: Will you stay with my son? Will you guide him, teach him, and encourage him? And Mentor agrees to stand in as surrogate father.

Like parents, mentors do not ask you to do for them what they've done for you. Relationships with mentors are asymmetric by design. But in appreciation for all you've been given, you can do what mentor magnets do: You can express in words what you feel in your heart. You can write a *gratitude letter*.

The instructions couldn't be simpler: *Write a letter to someone you haven't properly thanked*. You start with the salutation—*Dear Anders*, for example—and, I promise you, the rest will come unbidden, as day follows night.

The letter can be short or long. You can read it aloud in person or send it by mail. Either way, gratitude letters have been scientifically proven to make both the sender and the receiver happier.

Research also shows that people hesitate to write gratitude letters, worrying unnecessarily about eloquence and significantly underestimating their impact. That's why, when I assign writing a gratitude letter as homework in my class, I confess that I waited too long to write one to Anders Ericsson. I share that because Anders died suddenly at age seventy-two, I could only read my letter to his family at his memorial service.



With my mentor Anders Ericsson at a conference in 2018

Courtesy of the author

In my letter, I began with an apology for not writing sooner. “And yet I can imagine you smiling, crossing your arms, and assuring me that it’s perfectly acceptable to be doing this now. You were always so patient. And so kind. Unfailingly so.”

Years into our relationship, I said, it became second nature for me to call when I felt adrift:

At several critical junctures in my entire research career, confidence faltered. It was at these times that we’d talk, and you’d listen, and then ask me questions that put me back on track. Once you asked, “So, is there anyone who you’d say is the ideal you’re striving for?” And Anders, you know what? I think I could easily say that you represented a North Star for me.

In closing, I said: “Thank you, Anders. I simply cannot imagine what my life, and so many lives, would be like had you not been in this world to make it, and all of us, better.”

In truth there’s no way to express with complete satisfaction all that your dearest mentors have done for you. But by example your mentors have shown you how to *pay it forward*.

So perhaps the most important thing you can do as a mentor magnet is this: mentor the next generation.



Mister Rogers put it best: *Mentors love you into being*. They teach you what you can’t learn on your own. They believe in you when you’ve lost faith in yourself. They open doors you may not even know exist.

A good place to start your journey is to think about the people in your life who have, in one way or another, loved you into being. If someone has cared about you and wanted what was best for you, you can take ten

seconds right now to reflect on the difference they've made. Ten seconds. I'll watch the time.

Good. Now ask yourself two questions. First, would you like to attract more mentors into your life? And second, is there someone in your orbit you can love into being next?

CHAPTER 9



Choose Your Culture

What if Taylor Swift never moved to Nashville?

Maybe, from her hometown of Wyomissing, Pennsylvania, Taylor would have become one of the most iconic musicians of all time anyway. After all, plenty of aspiring musicians move to Nashville, and very few shoot to the top of the *Billboard* charts. Moving to a place where you think you can achieve your dreams is by no means a guarantee that things will work out as you hope.

Nevertheless, young Taylor was onto something: Research shows that where you grow up powerfully influences what you achieve professionally. For example, children who happen to live near adults who are inventors are significantly more likely to become inventors themselves. This is true even when taking into account a child's early academic performance and, in addition, characteristics of their parents like annual income and whether they hold patents. Most tellingly, kids who live near inventors are especially likely to become inventors in the same field. Living near *biotech* inventors, for instance, makes it more likely you'll grow up to be a *biotech* inventor. The Lost Einsteins study, as it's become known in economics, is one of many to show, convincingly, that place matters.

In Taylor's case, the idea of migrating hundreds of miles to a city and state she'd never visited in person came to her when she was just ten years old. "I was obsessed with watching *Biography* TV shows about Faith Hill and Shania Twain," she says. "And I noticed that both of them went to Nashville to start their careers. From that point on I began relentlessly

nagging, begging, and pleading with my parents to take me on a trip there.”

When Taylor turned eleven, she convinced her mom to take their spring break in Nashville: “We drove up and down Music Row,” Taylor recalls. “She would wait in the car as I scampered into record labels one by one, handing my demo CD to the receptionists. I remember thinking it was so odd and wonderful that all of these important record labels were all on one street, most of them in small buildings and old houses. I remember being charmed by how kind people were to strangers and newcomers like us.”

Wyomissing—with its leafy suburban streets, manicured lawns, and solid public schools—might seem like an ideal place to grow up. But it was a place where music was a hobby—not a career path, much less a calling. In Wyomissing, a teenage girl with the dream of writing country songs about heartbreak was an oddball. Her peers were focused on science fairs, SAT prep classes, and weekend trips to the mall—not open mics and recording contracts.

In Nashville, music was in the air, literally. Everyone seemed to be writing, recording, performing, or managing someone who was. You could order a coffee from a barista who’d sung backup for a country star the night before. You could sit at a dive bar and hear a song that would be on the radio six months later. In Nashville, a teenage girl with a guitar and a notebook full of lyrics wasn’t eccentric—she was part of the ecosystem. It was a city that didn’t just tolerate ambition; it ran on it. There was no need to explain why you wanted to write songs for a living. You just had to prove you could.

That first visit, Taylor says, led to “more and more trips.” And then, at age fourteen, she and her family went all in and moved there. That same year, strumming her guitar and singing her heart out at the Bluebird Cafe—where her idol Faith Hill had been discovered years earlier—Taylor was discovered. The following year she signed her first major recording con-

tract, and the year after that, at age sixteen, she released her debut album, *Taylor Swift*.

Today, Taylor is on every list of greatest performers, greatest songwriters, and most inspiring entertainers. Fourteen Grammy Awards and counting, and fifty-eight nominations. Her twelve original studio albums have sold well over 100 million albums worldwide. In 2023, Taylor was *Time* magazine's Person of the Year. It's hard to think of a bigger star.

The truth is that nobody will ever know what would have happened to Taylor Swift if she'd stuck it out in the sleepy suburb of Wyomissing, Pennsylvania. What do I think? I think moving to the country music capital of the world was a key to everything that happened afterward. I think culture matters.

The fourth essential element of situational agency is *choosing your culture*.

The Way We Do Things Around Here

What is culture, anyway?

Culture includes language—the way we talk. Rituals—our traditions and routines. Artifacts—everything from the way we dress to our tools to the colors that identify us. Norms—how most people behave. Values—what we hold to be important. And identity—who we think we are.

Most succinctly: Culture is *the way we do things around here*.

A nearly foolproof way to improve your situation is to change where you work and live. Because, inevitably, the way *we* do things around here becomes the way *you* do things, too. The strength of social norms has been demonstrated in countless laboratory studies, but real estate mogul and *Shark Tank* investor Barbara Corcoran sums it up best: everybody wants what everybody [around them] wants, and nobody wants what nobody [around them] wants.

The tendency to assimilate was revealed in a study of families who were assigned to one of thirty-eight different military bases around the

United States. Results showed that the body mass index of both parents and children drifted—either up or down—toward the average BMI of the county to which they moved. The longer the families lived there, the stronger this association grew. More generally, economists summarizing the vast literature on environment and health have concluded that “where one lives matters for when one dies.” For instance, life expectancy in the United States ranges from a low of 69.1 years in East Carroll Parish, Louisiana, to 89.5 years in Cheyenne County, Colorado. In Europe, the life expectancy ranges from 70.4 years in Latgale, Latvia, to 84.8 years in a portion of Madrid, Spain.

Research further shows that the life-extending benefits of healthier regions go beyond factors like better hospitals and more doctors. As Harvard economist David Cutler puts it, “Behavior is the key. When we compare geographic regions, the dominant factor driving health differences is how Americans *behave*. [The residents of] unhealthy areas smoke more, drink more, and eat to excess; [those who live in] healthier areas avoid these behaviors.”



But just how powerfully can culture change behavior?

Consider what happened to the eighteen-year-old boys drafted to serve in the Vietnam War—and what happened when they returned home.

In May 1971, two U.S. congressmen returned from visiting the troops in Vietnam. By their estimates, one in ten soldiers there was “addicted to heroin in one form or another.” On the face of it, this seemed impossible. The high school seniors drafted to serve a year of duty in Vietnam were a cross-section of America, and at the time, the use of heroin in the United States was limited to low-income urban communities. Within weeks a panicked President Nixon declared drug abuse America’s “public enemy number one” and ordered a top-priority investigation into the scope and

severity of the problem. The project was entrusted to Lee Robins, a renowned Harvard-trained sociologist.

Robins and her team conducted structured interviews with nearly a thousand soldiers within a year of their return to the States and followed up three years later with a representative sample of the same men. Their official report, *The Vietnam Drug User Returns*, began by stating that the heroin problem in Vietnam was actually much worse than even the first alarming estimates suggested. Robins estimated that almost half of the enlisted men had tried either heroin or opium at least once, and one in five had become addicted. The report's most astonishing finding, however, was that within a year of their return, 95 percent of the men who'd been addicted in Vietnam no longer were. Though the use of heroin specifically was slightly higher, the overall rate of narcotic use among returning vets was nearly identical to the rate before they left for Vietnam.

Twenty years after her report was presented to Congress, Lee Robins was asked to reflect on what might be learned from the more than tenfold spike in heroin use among soldiers during—but not before or after—Vietnam.

For starters, there was the physical situation. In Vietnam it was easier for a soldier to buy heroin than Coca-Cola. Little plastic vials of heroin beckoned from countless roadside stands. One soldier remembered it was practically “falling out of trees.” What's more, the heroin itself was so pure that it didn't need to be injected. And, unlike marijuana, it was odorless, so it could be mixed with tobacco and smoked unobtrusively. As another soldier recalled, “You can salute an officer with your right hand and take a hit with your left hand.”

But peers were at least as important. There was, Robins concluded, “the absence of disapproving friends and relatives.” In fact, as more and more soldiers tried taking it, heroin became, quite literally, a trend.

And the soldiers' assigned mentors—their commanding officers—rarely reprimanded their troops for taking the drug. One historian specu-

lates that the officers were simply grateful that heroin kept suffering, dissent, and the questioning of authority to a minimum.

Today, scientists consider the mystery of heroin use in Vietnam to be solved. Any behavior—however aberrant or self-destructive—seems “natural” when it’s what everyone else is doing. We are, all of us, born mimics. Without our awareness, and sometimes counter to our better judgment, we fall in line. As the psychologist Howard Rachlin put it: “Unlikely as it seems, our deepest desires are *situational*. That is, we do not carry our cravings around with us wherever we go. Rather, our cravings come and go depending on where we are.”

Living Longer

In some ways, changing *where you live* is the most daunting task in the world. In other ways, it’s the most efficient way to change your situation. “By far, the most effective thing to do is to pick up and move.” That’s what Dan Buettner said recently when I asked how he’d advise anyone to live a longer, healthier, and happier life.

Dan popularized the term “*Blue Zones*” in 2008 with his bestselling book of the same name. He cedes credit for the term to two researchers—Michel Poulain and Gianni Pes—who identified the Mediterranean island of Sardinia as one region where people live especially long lives. Poulain and Pes used a blue pen to mark villages on their map where there was an unusual concentration of centenarians.

Other researchers have since criticized how centenarians in the original Blue Zones studies were identified. Also, apart from culture, there are undoubtedly regional differences in government policies, healthcare systems, economic opportunity, and education that contribute to life-span. Nevertheless, nobody in social science disagrees with the commonsense conclusion that “the way we do things around here” is massively powerful in shaping individual lifestyle choices. Medical research shows that unhealthy behaviors like smoking and overeating account for a full third of

premature deaths in the United States. And the fact that the average Japanese woman lives to eighty-eight, while the average American woman reaches just eighty-two, cannot be merely a matter of better genes.

“Basically, I got to wondering whether we could reverse engineer longevity. And not just a longer life, but a better life,” Dan told me. This research led him to identify the lifestyle habits of people who live the longest. They include taking the stairs, walking to work, and otherwise moving as part of daily routines; eating more vegetables and fruit and less meat; working toward a beyond-the-self purpose; spending quality time with friends, family, and neighbors; and belonging to a faith-based community.

“It’s all about your surroundings,” Dan continued. “Sure, you can *will* yourself to eat a salad for lunch. But if you don’t see anybody else doing it, if it’s inconvenient to do that, if it’s not basically part of the routine, and not just for you but everyone around you, then eventually, you’re going to go back to your unhealthy habits. If you want to live longer and be healthier, don’t try to change your behavior directly. That never lasts in the long run. You need to change your environment. When you do that, a happy, healthy life just happens *to you*.”

Very recently, a team of scientists studied what happens to lifestyle when you move. Using three years of cell phone data from over 2 million Americans, they asked a simple question: *When a person relocates, does the walkability of their new neighborhood change their behavior?* The answer: *Yes!* In their data, people who moved from a less walkable town to a more walkable one took more than a thousand additional steps per day. A massive improvement—without an iota more willpower.

The first person I thought of when I read that study was my mother-in-law. Mah, as we call her, lived for years in an apartment about six miles away from where she lives now. Her old place was lovely, but by the metrics in the study I just mentioned, scored only 66 out of 100 on walkability. The Walk Score of her new place is the highest of any neighborhood in the city of Philadelphia—99 out of 100—because all her daily errands,

like grocery shopping, walking the dog, and going to the bank, can be accomplished on foot.

“It’s incredible,” she told me of the change. “I used to drive everywhere. Now I walk everywhere. I’m probably walking four times as much as I used to, and it’s not because I’m forcing myself. It’s because of where I live.”

I’ve witnessed this transformation in her lifestyle, and I have to say, it’s even more remarkable because Mah isn’t just older; chronic back issues mean she now requires a walker. There wasn’t much she could do about her physical limitations, but when she retired, she had a choice about where to live. And very deliberately, she chose a neighborhood where walking is easier. Very recently, Mah finished a 5K, the only entrant with a walker, in just forty-nine minutes—a personal record, she told me proudly, and one she plans to beat next year.

In the Middle of It

Excellence is never easy, but it’s far easier in some places than others.

Consider Chu Teh-Chun. In 1955 the Chinese painter immigrated from Taipei, Taiwan, to Paris, the epicenter of the art world. But he was torn. The love of his life, Tung Ching-Chao, had recently moved to Austin, Texas. He had to choose between art and love.

In the end, the love of his life made the choice for him. *Paris*, she told him. *Without question, Paris*. For his sake. And for hers.

In many ways Austin made more sense. Tung had an older brother there. It was more affordable. Born in China, both she and Chu had learned a bit of English in high school and university. Paris, in contrast, was intimidatingly huge—more than thirty-five times larger in population than Austin. Neither of the pair spoke more than a few words of French. Even living like a monk in a rented room the size of a walk-in closet, Chu knew their life savings would run out within the year.

But in Paris there was *art*. In Paris there was the Louvre and its treasures. The Latin Quarter on the Left Bank with its many galleries. Art lovers. Places to buy the best canvas and the right brushes and every kind of paint. Government-subsidized apartments and studios reserved expressly for artists. And, of course, Paris was home to all the other artists who were drawn to the City of Light for these benefits and, perhaps most of all, for one another.

In other words, Paris was a *scene*. And if you weren't in the middle of it, you were out of it.

Technically speaking, Paris in 1955 was an *agglomeration* for fine art. Agglomerations are what economists call geographic hot spots for a particular industry. As Silicon Valley is for high tech, and Nashville is for country music, Paris in the mid-twentieth century was the absolute center of the universe for anyone who wanted to buy, sell, view, critique, or make fine art.

So Tung chose Paris for both of them. And what happened next? Chu haunted the museums and galleries on weekends and painted in his tiny studio nearly every other waking hour. Tung apprenticed herself to the business side of the art world. Both learned French and befriended local artists. The couple raised their two sons to speak French first and Chinese second.



Foundation Chu Teh-Chun

Chu developed a style of abstract landscape painting that blended the techniques of classical Chinese ink on paper and Western oil on canvas. This unique perspective was almost immediately successful, and in 1997, Chu became the first artist of Chinese origin to be inducted into the prestigious Académie des Beaux-Arts. His paintings have been acquired by more than fifty museums, libraries, and other institutions around the world. He's been featured in more than four hundred personal exhibitions. Seven years after Chu's death, Sotheby's auctioned off one of his oil paintings for \$29.5 million.

Austin, it turns out, developed from a quiet, slow-paced town in 1955 into a first-class hot spot—not for art, but for technology. Think Motorola and Texas Instruments, and, later, Dell and Tesla. So Austin, too, is a scene—but for engineers, not artists.

Would Chu have been just as successful in Austin, Texas? I ask my mom. Before he immigrated to Paris, Chu was her college art professor,

and Tung was her best friend. “There’s no doubt he was a genius,” she says. “And so driven. So I’m sure he would have been great anywhere. But in the middle of Texas? Who knows? Maybe he would have ended up a great art teacher.”

Wherever You Go

Not everyone believes in the power of changing your situation. “Wherever you go,” the old adage holds, “there you are.” Indeed, many alcoholics say it’s foolhardy to try to escape addiction by “pulling a geographic.” Your problems are yours, and you can’t run away from them.

I don’t disagree that you need to come to grips with your problems. Moving is no miracle cure. In a *Saturday Night Live* skit, Joe Romano of Romano Tours says: “Remember, you’re still going to be *you* on vacation. If you’re sad where you are and then you get on a plane to Italy, the *you* in Italy will be the same sad *you* from before—just in a new place. Does that make sense?

“There’s a lot a vacation can do,” Joe continues. “Help you unwind. See some different-looking squirrels. But it cannot fix deeper issues. Like how you behave in group settings. Or your general baseline mood. That’s a job for incremental lifestyle changes sustained over time.”

Watch the whole skit—it’s hilarious. But in all seriousness, change is a heck of a lot easier in some places than in others. Shepard Siegel, a pioneer in the research on addiction, advises drug users who want to quit to embrace the real estate mantra: location, location, location. Or more to the point, he urges them to “relocate, relocate, relocate!” Addiction, he points out, results from the association of situational cues with drug-related reward. Thus, moving to a new environment that is *not* filled with drug-paired cues decreases the likelihood that the ghost of addiction will appear.

Wherever you go, there you are—so choose where you go wisely.

Status Quo Bias

Of course, moving isn't always a possibility. Even when adjusting for inflation, the median price for a new home in the United States has more than doubled since the 1960s, which is a major reason why the fraction of Americans who move in any given year has dropped by more than half over the same period.

And yet the assumption that only the wealthy can relocate oversimplifies reality. Consider immigration. Recent arrivals to the United States typically have less than a quarter the wealth of their domestic counterparts, yet manage one of life's most dramatic relocations—moving across international borders to start anew.

The fact is that even when they can afford to move, many people—myself included—instinctively resist the idea. Years ago, I was at an academic event when I crossed paths with the technology and design legend John Maeda. John is now a top executive at Microsoft, but he's also been a venture capitalist in Silicon Valley, the president of the Rhode Island School of Design, a professor at the MIT Media Lab, and an artist.

"Consider moving," he said to me, as casually as one might say "Pass the salt" at a dinner party. Earlier in our conversation, I'd confessed that, having reached a few milestones professionally, I was tempted to rest on my laurels. "What do you mean, consider moving?" I asked, somewhat flabbergasted at his out-of-the-blue suggestion. "I mean, consider moving somewhere other than here. You said you're living in your hometown, right?" John was referring to Philadelphia. Well, technically I'd grown up in the near suburbs, but yes, it's true that our conversation was taking place literally blocks away from the hospital where I'd been born.

Immediately, I thought of all the reasons I couldn't possibly move. I couldn't imagine getting a new job at a new university in a new city. My husband Jason's company was here, too—and he couldn't very well uproot the employees or magically transport the land in which he'd already invested. Our parents lived nearby and weren't getting any younger—and if we moved, our girls would miss growing up with their grandparents.

I furrowed my brow, mentally ticking off all the reasons why staying put was a thousand times more sensible than moving. “I move every several years,” John said before I had a chance to respond. “It keeps me learning.”



The visceral urge to stick with our current situation when a better option is available is what social scientists call *status quo bias*. There are countless studies documenting the mistake of sticking with the status quo longer than we should, but most are carried out in the lab, where the consequences of this error in judgment are trivial. Enter the Heads or Tails study. This was the brainchild of my friend Steve Levitt, the economist who, with the journalist Stephen Dubner, wrote *Freakonomics*. Levitt set up a website offering help to anyone “having a difficult time making a life decision.”

“Sometimes in life you face a major decision,” the landing page read. “And you just don’t know what to do. You’ve considered the issue from every angle. But no matter how you look at it, no decision seems to be the right decision. In the end, whatever you choose will essentially be a flip of a coin.”

Then, by the toss of a (virtual) coin, visitors were advised to make a change (heads) or stick with the status quo (tails).



Freakonomics Experiments

More than twenty thousand people ultimately registered a life decision they’d so far struggled to make on their own. Some choices were big—like

“Should I quit my job?” “Should I start my own business?” “Should I propose?” Others were trivial: “Should I dye my hair?” “Should I try on-line dating?”

“It might seem implausible that anyone would come to such a website and flip a coin, much less follow the dictate of the coin toss,” says Levitt. And yet, he continues, “the results obtained speak to the contrary.” When followed up two and six months later, participants who’d flipped heads were indeed significantly more likely to make a change, versus sticking with the status quo. And “the coin toss was roughly equally influential on men and women, the old and the young, and across income levels.” Six months later, participants who’d been nudged to make a change (heads) rather than stick with their status quo (tails) were substantially happier with their outcome, particularly for more significant life choices like ending a relationship or quitting a job.

These results, as well as a raft of other random-assignment experiments, affirm Levitt’s own conclusion from this clever experiment: Status quo bias—excessive caution when facing life-changing choices—is a universal human affliction. But it’s also curable. We can make changes if we’re encouraged to do so.



It often takes a shove, not just a nudge, to get people to pick up and move. In the coin toss experiment, there was only one life decision the coin toss failed to influence: *Should I move?* The bias to stay where we live, it seems, is even stronger than the bias to remain with our current job or romantic partner.

Levitt was also on the team of economists who studied the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. When the storm hit New Orleans in August 2005, it destroyed over 200,000 homes and forced a record number of families to relocate. The long-term economic impact of this displacement was expected to be catastrophic—but in fact, earnings for victims of the storm

rebounded and within a few years surpassed those of comparable people from similar cities. And in mortality data, people who'd lived in New Orleans the year the storm hit were about two percentage points *more* likely to be alive eight years later than a matched comparison group. In both studies, researchers attributed these surprisingly positive outcomes to the more prosperous and healthier places where storm victims moved. In other words, despite the trauma of being uprooted, being forced to start over in a different situation was at least in some ways more a blessing than a curse.

As a species, we yearn for change but cling to the familiar.

Recently, neuroscientists have discovered that overcoming status quo bias—even in non-life-changing laboratory experiments—taxes the part of the brain tasked with impulse control. So, then, is this a catch-22? If you need willpower to overcome status quo bias, then haven't we come full circle? Yes and no. As with setting up your personal space, or seeking out like-minded peers, or proactively cultivating relationships with mentors, a little bit of willpower goes a long way when you use it to change your situation. "I call it strategic discipline," Dan Buettner told me. "But you could call it situational willpower. Whatever you call it—it's the only kind of willpower I have."

My brief conversation with John Maeda—it couldn't have lasted more than a few minutes—made a lasting impression. Honestly, it bothered me to have reacted so defensively when challenged to venture outside my comfort zone. And it planted the idea that someday, moving might, in fact, be better than staying.

Culture Is Local

In its "Guide to Big Life Decisions," *The Economist* magazine cites moving as the single most important thing a person can do to improve their prospects for a better life. Why? Because it's not just who you are, but where you are, that determines your income. For instance, one study of

what economists call the “place premium” found that a thirty-year-old worker who immigrates to the United States from a poor country can expect to increase their annual wages by nearly \$14,000.

Moves on such a grand scale can make the prospect of choosing your culture especially daunting. After all, most of us lack the temerity of a teenage Taylor Swift. But there are also sizable differences between what social scientists call *microcultures*. For instance, big data analyses of the trajectories of cell phone users show that most people spend nearly all their waking hours within just five miles of their home or workplace. It’s no coincidence that five miles is also the approximate radius of your (in-person) social network. Beyond that distance, no matter how much you like a person, the chances that you’ll have a face-to-face encounter with them plummet.

Research also shows that when it comes to influencing your behavior, microcultures are mighty. For example, smokers who work in an office with a no-smoking policy are *twice* as likely to quit. And smokers who live in a home where nobody else smokes are *ten* times more likely to quit. College students who, by chance, were assigned to live in a residential hall known for its politically active culture are themselves, twenty-five years after graduation, measurably more civically engaged. Undergraduates assigned a roommate who drinks a lot of alcohol are more likely to end up binge drinkers themselves. They’re also more likely to follow a roommate’s lead when it comes to joining a fraternity or sorority, staying in shape, or getting a high-paying job after graduation.

There’s an adage that all politics is local. Culture is, too.

Five Miles Is a World Away

One way to mark the beginning of Act III—the chapter of my life in which I finally learned to change my situation—is the day Jason and I overcame status quo bias. For all the reasons I thought of when John Maeda suggested I consider a change of scene, we didn’t move to a new

country or even a new state. But we did change neighborhoods—5.6 miles, according to Google Maps—from 19072, which included the Borough of Narberth, to 19103, the heart of Center City Philadelphia.

When we announced our decision, many of our friends and most of our neighbors were puzzled. Why leave paradise? Narberth was like a Norman Rockwell painting come to life. There was a redbrick library next to a sandlot playground next to an emerald-green baseball diamond. Children, including our own, safely scampered through neighbors' backyards barefoot. And the public schools were among the best in the state.

All those affordances made for an idyllic childhood. But as our daughters approached their teen years, our priorities shifted. For one thing, we wanted Amanda and Lucy to have classmates and friends from a larger and more diverse swath of society. For another, we wanted their middle school to be a short walk away, not a long bus ride. And we wanted them to enjoy a degree of independence as teenagers that ran counter to the social norms of our suburban neighborhood.

Personally, Jason and I both wanted to walk more and drive less. We dreamed of walking to our offices in the morning and stopping on the way home to buy groceries. Though we didn't need to live in a fancy neighborhood, necessarily, we did want one with coffee shops and restaurants and a gym. We wanted to live close enough to friends who could pop by for dinner.

Moving to Center City Philadelphia made all those wishes come true. Will we stay here forever? Maybe. Maybe not. We'll move if priorities change again, and if, in a different place, getting what we want most out of life is easier.

A Great Place to Work

You don't have to move where you live to change where you work. And since many of us spend half our waking hours working, finding a truly great place to work can change your life. For instance, research shows that

life satisfaction varies more with workplace trust than the salary you earn there. Nobody understands that better than Tim Risser.

Tim is the store manager of the Wegmans supermarket in Malvern, Pennsylvania—and a self-described “Wegmaniac.” He told me that, second only to marrying his wife, Katie, taking a job at Wegmans is the best decision he ever made.

Eighteen years ago, Tim was working at a different supermarket when Wegmans opened down the street. “I figured it was worth applying,” Tim said. “I’d never been to a Wegmans before, but like everyone in my industry, I’d heard great things about them. I thought maybe the way they do things there was better than where I was.”

Tim scored a first interview, and then another, and a third—but was still waiting to hear back when two of the Wegmans managers who’d interviewed him happened to walk into his store. They waved and said hello. “I know that doesn’t sound like a big deal,” said Tim, “but it was.” Minutes earlier, his own district manager had walked past without acknowledging him. “I remember thinking, ‘These guys I don’t even work for said hi to me. I want to work where they do.’”

Before meeting Tim, most of what I knew about Wegmans came from my mom, who is something of a Wegmaniac, having fallen in love with the branch in my hometown of Cherry Hill, New Jersey. “Everyone there is so genuinely nice,” she told me. “And they seem happy!”

And indeed, every year since 1998, Wegmans has been named one of *Fortune* magazine’s 100 Best Companies to Work For.

“Our values. Our mission. It’s all true,” Tim insisted, showing me the rainbow-colored poster that hangs in every Wegmans location. At the bottom, there’s a quote from Robert Wegman, whose father and uncle started the company as a fruit and vegetable cart in 1916: “Always help others.”

I confessed my skepticism. Pretty much every company has a poster about their values, I pointed out. Then, to my surprise, Tim got emotional. “Values are just words unless you live them. And we really, really do.

After my wife and my two kids, the people I trust most in the whole world are the people I work with at Wegmans.”



[Description 5](#)

Courtesy of Wegmans

Then he told me this story: “After a few years at the location near where I grew up, my wife and I moved so I could help open a new store in Collegeville. She was pregnant at the time, and our baby girl was born the week before Thanksgiving. I called my manager, and I said, ‘Katie’s going into labor,’ and he cut me off and asked, as if he wasn’t my boss but a member of my family: ‘What are you still doing here?? Go! Get to the hospital!’”

Then Tim shared something more personal. “There’s another layer to the story that I don’t talk about a lot, but it’s important. I’ve been sober for seven and a half years. And I have so many people at Wegmans to thank for supporting me.” That first Christmas after getting sober, employees who didn’t know about Tim’s drinking problem gave him bottles of wine and beer as gifts. His store manager pulled him aside: “Put those bottles on my desk, and I’ll give you the money they paid for them. That way, you don’t even need to be near them.”

That manager eventually moved to Rochester, New York, where Wegmans is headquartered. “These days, I almost never see him,” Tim continued. “But he knows the anniversary of when I got sober. He texts

me every year to congratulate me and asks for a picture of my AA coin. He doesn't have to do that. But he does. And it means so much."

Unconditional support is great, I said, but what about uncompromising standards?

Tim recited from memory Wegmans' second core value: *High standards are a way of life. We pursue excellence in everything we do.* "High standards and caring go hand in hand," Tim continued. "That same manager who told me to get to the hospital? He was also really hard on me. When I was working in the produce section, he noticed an empty bin. I gave him an excuse and he said, 'The customers don't care about why we're out of stock. They just want to buy what they need.'"

Tim paused. "And he would never fully answer a question. He'd ask me first, 'What do you think?' Basically, he challenged me and let me make mistakes—but never big enough to get myself in trouble." Those lessons carried home. Now Tim tells his two teenage daughters, "You learn, in part, by screwing stuff up. It's okay to make mistakes as long as you learn from them."

When I asked Tim to sum up how he feels about his career, he answered: "It's hard work, this business. People sometimes ask, 'Oh, you work at a grocery store?' And I say, with real pride, 'Yeah, I do. I'm happy here. I feel like I'm in my sweet spot.'"



So often, when we think of culture, we think of where we're from, not where we can go. But if culture is simply, "the way we do things around here," why not choose a place to work or live where "the way we do things" is the way you want to do things, too? And while you may choose a culture that's across the country or even around the world, it's important to remember that culture is local. Even a local move can change your world.

More than any other aspect of situational agency, choosing your culture may be the hardest to embrace. When I urge people to consider changing where they work or live, I get the same response: “I can’t.” And when I press on, asking for specific reasons why moving, even locally, is impossible, the response is often: “Well, even if I can, *most* people can’t.”

Of course, I can’t say whether moving is a possibility for you. Maybe it isn’t. But I can say that clinging to the familiar is human nature.

Recalling the moment he decided to leave his old job and join Wegmans, Tim Risser told me: “I was nervous, of course. That nervousness of switching from something you know well to something totally new. I wasn’t happy where I was. But still I was nervous because it was the unknown that I was going to. Looking back, it was silly to be nervous. But I think that’s kind of the way it works, right? It’s always worse in our heads.”

PART 3

SITUATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY



“Environments shape behavior.”

—BILL STRICKLAND

I didn't write this book just to help you. I wrote it to help the people you care about.

After all, whether you're a parent, a leader, or a concerned citizen, *you* are an important part of *other* people's situations. What can you do to bring out their best?

The most direct way to motivate another person is also the most instinctive. So often, when we know a person can do better, we simply tell them so. Unfortunately, this tactic rarely works.

The Three Boxes model explains why. Just as mustering willpower in our own lives is, ultimately, an unproductive strategy, so, too, is exhorting other people to simply try harder. It is ever so much more effective to ask, without judgment, what (Box Two) thoughts might drive (Box Three) behaviors that are misaligned with their goals—and, in turn, what (Box One) situation inclines them to think that way in the first place.

For instance—

Is their personal space a den of distraction? If so, you might help them edit their space, banishing temptations from sight and reach.

Are they isolated, toiling nose to the grindstone on their own rather than shoulder to shoulder with like-minded peers? They may benefit from joining a team.

Do they lack mentors? You, or someone you know, might enjoy providing advice and encouragement.

Are their hopes and dreams at odds with the cultural norms of where they work or live? Perhaps you can help them find a better place.

Situational responsibility means doing what you can to set up others for success. Compared to just delivering a pep talk, this takes a lot more time and energy. But as with achieving your own goals, the indirect path to changing behavior is often the most effective. It avoids unnecessary frustration—and not just for the person you're trying to help. You benefit, too. Instead of exasperation—*What the heck is wrong with this person?*

—you experience curiosity: *What might be wrong with this person's situation?* And a sense of possibility: *What can I do to help them change it?*

Finally, helping indirectly does something a pep talk never can: it shows respect. It's not the person that needs fixing, it's their situation. This honors a fundamental truth—that people can and do change when their situation makes change possible.

CHAPTER 10



Situational Parenting

Toward the end of his life, Fred Rogers put together all of his favorite parenting advice in a book called *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*. In the chapter on discipline, Mister Rogers writes, “There’s a world of difference between insisting on someone’s doing something and establishing an atmosphere in which that person can grow into wanting to do it.” Then, several pages later, he encourages parents to make a paradigm shift: “‘Why can’t my boy concentrate?’” he writes, “might be rephrased ‘Where can my boy concentrate?’ Perhaps we could find a missing link in a child’s development that way.”

This chapter is about that missing link. I call it *situational parenting*.

When children are young, situational parenting means setting up their personal space. As they grow older, it means selecting a school and a neighborhood where their peers will be a positive influence, and where they’re more likely to encounter mentors who will teach them everything they know. One day, your children will be old enough to decide where they live and work, but before that time comes, it’s you who shapes their culture for them. These decisions are consequential—monumentally so—and that’s why situationally wise parents make any sacrifice necessary to make the best choices possible.

Situational parenting isn’t just for parents. If you have a special young person in your life—a niece or nephew, a little sister or brother, a grandchild or a godchild—this chapter is also for you. In these pages, you’ll learn that what Mister Rogers intuited has been confirmed, not only by

rigorous scientific research but also by the hyper-intentional choices of parents whose children grew up to be happy and successful.

Together, the latest research and these wise choices provide something of a road map for anyone who loves a young person and, because they love them, feels responsible for bringing out their very best.

Home: Your Child's First Place

Let's begin at the beginning. From the moment children are born to their very first day of school, their home is their sun, moon, and stars. What do you want that world to be like? What do you want to be within sight and reach at all times? And what do you wish were far, far away?

There's no one feature of a child's environment you can point to as the sole determinant of their life outcomes. But as one of my favorite writers, John McPhee, is fond of saying, "A thousand details add up to one impression." Any one detail is dispensable, but collectively they make certain behaviors easier and others more difficult. Most important, the physical features of a child's home communicate that family's values. What is front and center in a child's home says to that child: "This is important! This is interesting! You can do this! Here, try this next!"

Take books. The number of books in a child's home reliably predicts their lifetime educational attainment, income, and health. One twenty-year study that controlled for an array of family background factors found that living in a home with five hundred books has as great an effect on lifetime educational attainment as having college-educated parents. The same study found that while more books are always better, as few as twenty books in the home make a measurable difference. "You get a lot of bang for your book," the lead researcher has said. "It's quite a good return on investment."

In contrast, screen time—which for the average American teenager, stunningly, now averages nearly nine hours a day—predicts all the same outcomes in the *opposite* direction. Situationally wise parents don't rush

out to buy their children the latest iPhone. Instead, they purchase as many books as they can afford, line their walls with bookshelves and not TV screens, and take their children to the library on weekends. A home where books are bountiful and screens are scarce says, loud and clear, that around here, we value education over entertainment.

Of course, children don't only notice, absorb, and learn from the physical details of their world, but also—and even more profoundly—from the people who populate it. You could raise your child in the middle of a library and, if they never see you crack a book, effectively teach them the lesson that reading doesn't matter. Research shows that children learn primarily through *imitation*. Babies are born with “intrinsic connectivity to other human beings,” says Andrew Meltzoff, the neuroscientist who first discovered that within days, newborns spontaneously imitate the adults around them. You smile at a baby, and the baby smiles back. You stick out your tongue, the baby sticks out its tongue. You touch your hand to your face, and the baby does the same. “Babies look at you and see themselves,” Meltzoff says. “The brain is sculpted by the environment. Even when they are in the womb, babies are listening to us. Parents are brain builders.”

Research also shows that the instinct to imitate continues throughout our lives. From cradle to grave, we look around, see what other people are doing, and from that figure out what the right and best thing is for us to do. Situational parenting, therefore, means being intentional about the behavior you model. Because imitation is not only the highest form of flattery, it's the most primal form of learning.



Children see, children do.

Illustration by Amanda Duckworth

Shondaland

While you can't shield children from pain, loss, failure, or heartbreak, you *can* set them up to develop character and competence. How so? If you'll permit a moment of fangirling, let me tell you what it was like to grow up as Shonda Rhimes. Author, producer, and media mogul, Shonda is exactly the sort of gritty, gutsy, and gracious role model I hope my daughters might emulate. They need no convincing. Without Shonda, there'd be no *Grey's Anatomy*. No *How to Get Away with Murder*. No *Scandal*. Without Shonda—perish the thought!—there'd be no *Bridgerton*. And a world without Daphne and the Duke is not a world we want to live in.

The daughter of university academics, Shonda grew up in a comfortable Chicago suburb. There was nothing fancy about the Rhimes home, but for a shy child with a wild imagination, it was a safe place to dream: “My earliest memories are of sitting on the floor of the kitchen pantry. I stayed there for hours in the darkness and the warmth, playing with a kingdom I created out of the canned goods.”

With two loving parents and five patient older sisters and brothers, there was no shortage of support: “Because I was the baby in a family of eight, at any given moment, someone was available to read to me, applaud whatever story I'd come up with, or let me listen in on their teenage secrets.... I was loved, I was a star.... [And] I was just an unusual kid.

“Lucky for me, my parents held the unusual in high regard. And so when I wanted to play with the cans in the pantry for hours on end, my mother didn’t tell me to stop messing around with the food and go somewhere else to play. Instead, she declared it a sign of creativity, closed the pantry door, and let me be.”

As Shonda grew older, the library replaced the pantry as her favorite play space. “When forced outdoors for fresh air and sunshine, I grabbed a book and stuffed it down the back of my pants to hide my contraband. Then I’d climb the willow tree in our backyard and read until my mother allowed me back in.” For a spell in grade school, Shonda spent every spare moment in that willow tree reading books. Then—right there in the middle of Illinois—pretended she could only speak French, that her *real* family lived in Paris, and that any minute now they were going to walk through the door and whisk her off to the Sorbonne.

And what did her parents think about Shonda spending, as she says, “about 85% of my time with my nose buried in a book” and “most nights huddled under the covers with my flashlight, reading Stephen King novels and short stories”? How did they feel about her filling notebook after notebook with bad poetry and imaginary friends whose homes and families and parties and dates she described with the attention to detail of a future screenwriter? “That’s interesting!” they said. “Do more!”

Dreaming is nothing without doing, as Shonda would later say in the commencement speech she delivered at her alma mater, Dartmouth College. “I think a lot of people dream, and while they are busy dreaming, the really happy people, the really successful people, the really interesting, engaged, powerful people are busy doing.... Dreams do not come true just because you dream them. It’s hard work that makes things happen. It’s hard work that creates change.”

And as for so many gritty strivers I’ve studied, the work ethic of this self-described “hard-working, straight-A, obsessive perfectionist” was, simply, *the way we do things around here* at the Rhimes home. “I grew up in a family where hard work was not optional,” Shonda says. “At some

point, it dawned on me that the reason I had such a great childhood and never wanted for anything was because my parents worked extremely hard so we could have crazy things like food and gas and clothes and tuition. In high school, I got a job scooping ice cream at Baskin-Robbins and I have had a job ever since.”

In 2004, when Shonda advanced from solo screenwriter to the head of her own production company, she decided to call it “Shondaland.” This was the name she’d given to the imaginary place where she’d lived, mentally, since childhood. Shondaland is a space where, as she says, a “highly intelligent, way too chubby, incredibly sensitive, nerdy and painfully shy” girl with “Coke-bottle-thick glasses” could be as safe as she’d felt in her mother’s pantry. A place where “everyone is the main character of their own story.”

Kerry Washington, who has starred in *Scandal* and several other Shondaland productions, reflected on walking into the company’s reception area for the first time and seeing “Shondaland” in giant letters. Initially, she was apprehensive, wondering whether the name came from “a place of ego.”

“It took one meeting for me to be like, ‘No, this land is a place [where] I’d love to live and play’... ‘Shondaland’ was an expression of joy and service. It was providing a place for people to thrive—not wanting to own the space that people live in but wanting to create *a space where people could do incredible work and play.*”

When They Leave the Nest

What about teenagers? For all mammals, including humans, adolescence is the transitional period between childhood and adulthood. When children become adolescents, their world suddenly expands beyond home and family. Rather than imitating their parents, adolescents are wired to find their own way. Accordingly, compared to their younger counterparts, teenagers spend more hours with, and are dramatically more influ-

enced by, their same-aged peers. And when they do stop and listen to what an adult has to say, that adult is very likely *not* their own mother or father.

You might think this spells the end of situational parenting. It doesn't. A parent can, in fact, influence *which* peers and mentors will replace them as trusted authorities on how to dress and speak and eat and think and dream. They do so by choosing the one place where teens are most likely to develop relationships with peers and mentors—and where they absorb, without even realizing it, the prevailing cultural norms: *school*.

Some school cultures, for example, encourage a growth mindset—the belief that ability is malleable. Other school cultures, in contrast, imply that ability is fixed. Here are a few items from a school culture questionnaire I presented to over a thousand teenagers attending different schools in my home state of Pennsylvania. To assess a school's *growth* mindset, students were asked to indicate their agreement with statements like—

This school is a place where teachers believe all students can learn.

In this school, mistakes are okay as long as we're learning.

Trying hard counts a lot in this school.

In contrast, to assess a school's *fixed* mindset, students indicated their agreement with statements like—

This school is a place where teachers treat kids who get good grades better than other kids.

Teachers in this school only care about the smart kids.

Adults here have given up on some of the students.

Separately, four different teachers were asked to rate each student who took the questionnaire on their passion and perseverance for long-term goals. And finally, we collected report card grades from official school records. What did we find? Regardless of demographics like ethnicity and socioeconomic status, the stronger a school's growth mindset culture, the

more its students demonstrated grit. More grit, in turn, predicted higher report card grades. Fixed-mindset cultures, in contrast, had exactly the opposite effect.

Of course, there are constraints. You can't just pick up and move *anywhere*. Still, within your budget and a reasonable commute to work, you can hunt for the best school culture possible.

For instance, my friend Bridget Terry Long moved from Columbus, Ohio, to the Chicago suburbs when her father changed jobs. The process of deciding where, exactly, to locate the family was made by getting out a map, dropping the needle of a compass to where the father's new promotion at Xerox would take him, then drawing a circle that extended thirty miles from that office—the maximum he could commute and still spend as much quality time with the family as he'd hoped. Next, Bridget's parents asked locals what was considered the best school district within that circle. And finally, Bridget's mom, a high school teacher herself, took fourteen-year-old Bridget to visit each of the three high schools in that district. "Many kids go on college tours, but I went on high school tours," Bridget told me. "My parents wanted a school with great teachers and lots of advanced classes—and the expectation that any student could succeed. And maybe more than anything, they wanted me to be surrounded by classmates and friends who were all going to college. A culture where excellence was *expected*."

That's how it came to be that Bridget graduated from Naperville North High School, then Princeton with a degree in economics, and then Harvard with a PhD in economics. When Bridget was recruited back to Harvard to become dean of the Graduate School of Education, she told students that education was a "driving force" in her family. Her family's choice of the best school possible taught her a lesson she'd later substantiate in her data: "Education is not only the answer to changing the cycle of poverty but also the ability to take hold of one's own destiny."

The Smallest House in the Best District

“What have we learned about economic opportunity?” Raj Chetty wondered aloud recently while delivering a lecture to hundreds of other academics, including me.

Like Bridget, Raj earned his PhD in economics from Harvard, where he is now a professor and the founding director of the Opportunity Insights lab. Raj was born in New Delhi, India, to ambitious parents who, like Bridget’s, raised him to value hard work and education. When he was nine, his family immigrated to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he graduated as valedictorian of a well-resourced private high school. Witnessing firsthand the sharp contrast in opportunity offered by India and the United States would later inspire his life’s work, which has earned him the highest academic honors, including the John Bates Clark Medal.

Raj specializes in wrangling economic insights from very large, privacy-protected datasets. How large? His projects have used the IRS tax records of over 40 million children and their parents, New York City public school records for about 2.5 million students, patent data on roughly 1.2 million U.S. inventors, and 21 billion Facebook friendship ties from 72 million adults. Stated simply, Raj’s top-level goal is to identify situations in which children grow up to live wealthier, healthier, and happier lives than their parents.

“If I had to summarize in one or two sentences,” Raj continued, “I’d say that the determinants of economic mobility are *hyperlocal*.... Drive a few miles down the road, and it’s like going from Alabama to Iowa.” Why? Because in just a few miles, you change neighborhoods and school districts. The hyperlocal nature of economic mobility is also the summary conclusion of a longitudinal study of 760,000 children in military families who were arbitrarily assigned to army bases in different zip codes across the United States. The good fortune of growing up in a better neighborhood predicted higher SAT scores, higher rates of college enrollment, and higher salaries in early adulthood.

Not surprisingly, schools are one of four factors that have emerged as the most important features of upwardly mobile zip codes. As expected, a second factor is the mix of household incomes in the neighborhood: poverty begets poverty. A third factor is the percentage of two-parent families.

And finally, there's a fourth factor that's more difficult to quantify but, in Raj's view, is the key driver to a better life: social capital. For instance, using privacy-protected data from both Facebook and IRS tax records, Raj and his collaborators constructed a simple measure of social capital: among Facebook users with below-average incomes, the percentage of their Facebook friends with above-average incomes. This simple number, it turns out, is the single strongest predictor of economic mobility that Raj or any other economist has identified to date. Perhaps most remarkable is this: social capital differs not just from state to state or county to county but from neighborhood to neighborhood.

What is it, specifically, about knowing people in a higher socioeconomic class that can lift people out of poverty? At Raj's lecture that day, I leaned in with the rest of the audience to hear what he'd say about that. He paused his otherwise precise, measured delivery. Then, in a rare moment of emotion, he said, "It's not just job referrals and connections. It's *aspirations*. If you've never met anyone who's gone to college, you don't even have college on your radar screen." That's one reason, he explained, that the children of immigrants do better than their countrymen. "My own parents came to this country in search of opportunity for their children," Raj said. "That was the focus, that was the goal. When [you have] that goal, you do whatever it takes. You buy the smallest house in the best school district in order to help your kids get ahead."

Where Children Can Be Their Best

It's hard to say who is grittier: Olympic legend Michael Phelps or his mother, Debbie.

Debbie is known among friends and colleagues as a force of nature. A single mom who raised Michael and his two sisters while also teaching middle school full-time, Debbie remained in education, including working for many years as a middle school principal, long after her son had achieved fame and fortune. Very recently, Debbie has been the one picking up awards—most of which honor her unrelenting dedication to children in her fifty years of public school service.

One thing is clear: there could be no better role model for the power of situational parenting. Because as adorable, affectionate, and fun-loving as Michael was as a little boy, he was also a handful. Almost as soon as he began school, Debbie started hearing from his teachers.

The comments could be mild, such as “Michael has a hard time sitting still” or “Michael doesn’t show much of an interest in reading” or “He needs to take more time with writing,” or harsher, such as “His inability to focus and maintain attention is disruptive to the classroom, and there is a possibility that difficulties will lie ahead of you.”

At age nine, Michael was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

To the teachers who saw a low ceiling for what her son might accomplish, Debbie’s reply was respectful but firm: “You’re wrong.” As an educator, she’d long believed that all children deserve high expectations and support. As a mother, she’d seen what Michael was capable of when he was engaged and interested. “He could absorb massive amounts of information, process it, distill it, and then understand.” As Michael’s chief advocate, she’d go to class and talk to his teachers. “Michael won’t sit down,” they’d say. And Debbie would reply, “Put him in the back of the room. He needs to stand up and walk around.” “I can’t put him back there!” they’d protest. And Debbie would insist, “Yes, you can!”

And when they did, they found she was right. To learn, Michael needed to move. There was also a situational fix to Michael’s exceedingly annoying habit of grabbing his classmate’s papers: seating him at his own table. When he complained, loudly, about how much he hated reading,

Debbie handed him the sports section of the newspaper. And when he struggled to pay attention in algebra, she hired a tutor, who made up word problems tailored to his interests: “If you can swim 1.5 meters per second, how long would it take you to swim 500 meters?”

Debbie soon discovered that “the swimming pool was the best possible classroom for Michael.” And for the teachers who continued to question his fundamental capacity to focus on anything, she’d say, “You haven’t seen him arrive at the crack of dawn for a swim meet, sit on a bench for four hours, and wait for his turn to swim, often for just a few minutes. Don’t tell me he can’t focus; he can.” What she did not add—but absolutely thought—was that if what the students were doing in the classroom was more interesting, then everyone, including her son, might behave themselves. After all, in her experience, “when learning is meaningful and authentic, a child will sit forever.”

Debbie wasn’t opposed to medication. In fact, she took Michael to get tested and supported his doctor’s recommendation that he be given Ritalin—which Michael took three times a day, from age nine when he was first diagnosed with ADHD until age eleven when he announced to his mom that he didn’t need it anymore. But in Debbie’s view, “what Michael needed most was structure.” It didn’t have to be swimming—it could have been another sport, or art, or another extracurricular activity. The key, Debbie says, was “any structured activity in which he could be successful—not on his own but with guidance and support to attain consistency, time on task, and a feeling of fun and fulfillment.”

Have Minivan, Will Travel

Why swimming, then? Initially, swimming lessons were a suggestion from the family pediatrician, who believed that “children should learn water safety at a young age.” By the time Michael was old enough to start, both of his older sisters had joined a local swim team, discovering that they enjoyed daily practices in the pool more than their weekly music or dance

lessons. One day, with precocious situational awareness, Michael's older sister Hillary announced to her mother: "I want to go to North Baltimore [Aquatic Club]. That's where the big girls swim fast and win." That particular club was one of the top aquatic centers in the nation, as well as the new home of a young, brilliant, tough-love coach named Bob Bowman.

Inconveniently, this mecca was a one-hour drive, but for a time, Debbie undertook the schlep—even though it "meant that many nights the girls were eating dinner in the minivan, sometimes even doing homework on the way there and back." Her credo, she jokes, was *Have minivan, will travel*, and that "kept me going even on weekends and evenings when I would have preferred being home, planning and writing lessons, grading papers, and taking care of all the other responsibilities that come with being a full-time middle school teacher."

And what about young Michael? Whether it was a meet or just another day of practice, the little boy whose teachers would later complain couldn't focus was entirely captivated watching his sisters: "From the time that he was a toddler," Debbie recalls, "when I would scoop him out of the minivan in his royal blue blanket sleeper and then let him toddle around inside, he was *paying attention*." What's more, hours of quiet observation gave Michael "a head start, an early education in swimming." Between the ages of two and six, Debbie says, Michael "[sponged] up so much knowledge from watching Hillary and Whitney. At meets when we arrived before 7:00 a.m. and often didn't leave until after noon, he was there for hours at a stretch. Sometimes he was playing in the stands or in a large nearby gymnasium or activity room with the siblings of other swimmers. But even then, he never missed a beat. Years later, I was surprised at how much he'd been observing and studying the whole time. When he hit his first races, it was incredible to see him take off like a bullet, with perfect execution. It was almost as if he'd been developing his skills mentally in advance of actually trying things out."

I'm old enough to have watched Michael Phelps on television, along with the rest of the world, win all those Olympic races and break all those

world records. Like everyone else, I was moved by what are affectionately known, among family and friends, as “DP moments”—shots of Debbie Phelps in the stands, hands clasped at her chest, unable to hold back tears of pride and joy and love and awe.

For a parent, there’s nothing more affirming than watching your child in their sweet spot. Not because of medals and acclaim. But because we want them to become who they can be. We can’t solve their problems for them, or fight their battles, or spare them setbacks and sorrow—but we *can* create situations that bring forth their very best.

CHAPTER 11

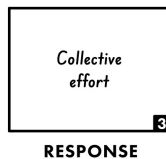


Situational Leadership

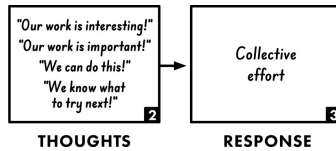
What's the difference between a great performer and a great leader?

This is the opening question in my MBA course on leadership at the Wharton School of Business. Before answering it, I congratulate my students on being outstanding performers—they've all distinguished themselves in one professional endeavor or another, earning a place in our program through a highly selective admissions process. Then I get to my point: Performers strive to deliver their best as *individuals*; leaders are responsible for bringing out the best in *others*.

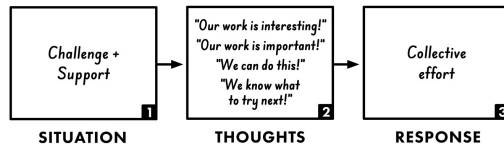
Next, I introduce the Three Boxes model—our framework for the semester ahead. I begin with Box Three. All leaders, I say, want their teams to try as hard as they themselves do. But motivating a team isn't a straightforward process. Merely encouraging everyone to try harder is tantamount to asking them to use willpower, and we know from research that doesn't work.



Working from right to left, I then add Box Two. I explain that any (Box Three) behavior can be traced back to the (Box Two) thoughts that gave rise to it. As a leader, you want a team whose effort is motivated by positive, optimistic (Box Two) thoughts: *Our work is interesting! Our work is important! We can do this! We know what to try next!*



Finally, I complete the picture with Box One—the situation. As a leader, you create the conditions that make positive, optimistic thoughts second nature. It’s your responsibility to situate your team for success. Too much challenge without support? Burnout. Ample support without challenge? Complacency. High challenge *plus* high support? The *sweet spot*. In that situation, your team will work incredibly hard and yet wake up each day energized to do so again.



A simple exercise proves the point. I ask students to remember two moments: one when they were unusually gritty, another when they were the opposite: *What were the particulars of each circumstance? Where were you working? Whom were you with?* Then they pair off and share. The conversation is always animated. The insight, unavoidable: any performer is capable of a remarkable range of performance. Motivation rises and falls with the quality of the situation.

“When you say ‘situation,’ do you mean the *physical* environment?” a student once asked while we were debriefing this activity. “Yes!” I replied. “And more. I also mean the organizational chart, processes for onboarding and professional development. I mean the behavior you yourself model as a leader.” I could have gone on, because when it comes to motivation, just about *every* aspect of a performer’s situation matters. What *doesn’t* matter—at least not as much as a rookie leader might think—are empty exhortations about hard work. As the investor Charlie Munger liked to point out, every situation has built into it rewards and punish-

ments that incentivize certain behaviors over others: “Never, ever, think about something else,” he advised, “when you should be thinking about the power of incentives.”

Situational leadership takes skill and patience and the faith that people will rise to the occasion if you set them up to do so. The complexity of this task cannot be overstated. At the same time, it’s inestimably gratifying. Because as most of us know from personal experience, giving our best in a great situation gradually *extends* our range; over time, it *catalyzes* our growth. And what develops isn’t limited to technical skills and knowledge. In the right situation, we grow more resilient in the face of failure and setbacks, more resourceful when confronted with obstacles, and more selflessly dedicated to the needs of the group.

A Case Study in Situational Leadership

As a researcher, I love data and bar graphs and regression models. But like the leaders I study, I know people learn more from stories than statistics. So here’s the story of Toby Cosgrove. I share it on the very first day of my course because it perfectly illustrates what I mean by situational leadership.

I met Toby in his final year as president and CEO of Cleveland Clinic, a healthcare system that expanded locally, nationally, and internationally during his thirteen-year tenure, more than doubling both annual visits and annual revenue. When Toby passed the baton to the next leader, the system had grown to employ over fifty thousand caregivers, making it the largest employer in the state of Ohio. Even more impressive, Cleveland Clinic rose from the bottom quartile of patient experience to the top, and was consistently named among the leading hospitals in the country by *U.S. News & World Report*.

Like other great leaders, Toby started out as a great performer. As a heart surgeon, he pioneered an array of innovative procedures that soon became standard practice in the field, performed over twenty-two thou-

sand operations, published more than four hundred scientific articles, and earned more than thirty medical and clinical patents.

“I’m not the sharpest tool in the drawer,” he told me. “But I worked and worked and worked at refining my craft. I changed the way I did things over time. I was on a constant quest to find ways to do things better.”

Working and working to do things better is exactly what Toby wanted to encourage across the organization. Not for the purpose of boosting revenue or market share or even the job satisfaction of physicians like himself. Lots of other hospitals operated that way. But as he declared in his first big speech as CEO, the singular top-level goal of Cleveland Clinic—the North Star for every member of the clinic’s team—was different. And it could be summarized in just two words: *Patients First*. For the sake of their *patients*, everyone at Cleveland Clinic would change the way they did things, working and working to refine their respective skills, and embarking on a never-ending quest to do things better together.

Why vs. Way

Moments after I set foot on Cleveland Clinic’s main campus, I knew Toby had succeeded in making that lofty vision a reality. We were scheduled to meet in his office, but my Uber dropped me off at the wrong building. A security guard volunteered to escort me on the long walk to where I needed to go. Along the way, I asked him: *What’s it like to work here? How does it compare to other places you’ve worked? What makes Cleveland Clinic different?*

Before I knew it, I was a student in an impromptu history lesson—beginning with the four doctors who’d returned from treating soldiers in World War I to cofound the system’s very first hospital. With obvious pride, my companion explained how from these humble Midwestern roots, the clinic had expanded and adapted over the decades. Finally, he helped me see how this origin story—doctors collaborating as a team to

better serve their patients—was connected to the Patients First mantra that guides the global system today. I listened with rapt attention, and not just because the history was fascinating. I listened because I was hearing not only the *why* of Cleveland Clinic but also the *way*.

The *why* of an organization is its mission. The *way* is its culture. *The way we do things around here*. An effective leader takes responsibility for both. And though the *why* can take a long time to figure out, the *way* almost certainly takes longer.

How do you know an organization has both a *why* and a *way*? In 1961, President John F. Kennedy set an audacious top-level goal for the U.S. space program: “landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the earth.” Shortly thereafter, as legend has it, on an after-hours tour of NASA headquarters, Kennedy encountered a custodian mopping the floors. “Why are you working so late?” Kennedy asked. And the custodian replied: “Because I’m not mopping the floors, I’m putting a man on the moon.”

To this example, I’ll add this: I know an organization’s moonshot *why* is connected to its everyday *way* when the security guard explains its mission as faithfully as the CEO does and, unprompted, says he’s honored to be part of it.

Situational Leadership Checklist

So how did Toby do it? How did he bring to life what has become known as the Cleveland Clinic Way? First, he set up the physical space to make putting patients first obvious, easy, and rewarding. Second, he revamped the organizational chart, dissolving traditional departments in favor of interdisciplinary teams. Third, he made authentic, life-changing mentoring relationships the norm, not the exception. And finally, Toby empowered key leaders to innovate—not just to execute his ideas but to develop their own.

These four moves—the four essential elements of situational leadership—are a useful guide for any leader, no matter the size of their team, the dynamics of their industry, or the specifics of their strategic plan.

- ✓ *Set up their space*
- ✓ *Pick their peers*
- ✓ *Make mentorship the mode*
- ✓ *Champion culture carriers*

Set Up Their Space

During World War II, the British Parliament sustained heavy damage from German firebombs. When the time came to rebuild, many of its members advocated for a new floor plan. Taking inspiration from modern legislative buildings around the world, they suggested changing the layout of the Commons Chamber to a semicircle or horseshoe. Winston Churchill was adamantly opposed. The chamber's rectangular design might seem like a trivial architectural detail—but for the prime minister, it was not. Benches on either side of the chamber separated by a long aisle in the center, he argued, encouraged debate, forcing legislators to take a side, literally, because it was not possible to sit in the middle. Stressing the consequence of the decision, which, ultimately, favored his position, Churchill declared: “We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.”

Here are a few ways Toby Cosgrove shaped the space of Cleveland Clinic.

Inspired by Steve Jobs, who said “innovation comes from people meeting up in the hallways,” Toby thought hard about how to make paths cross more often, particularly among professionals who'd otherwise be isolated from colleagues in different specialties. At one campus, for instance, a two-block-long skyway connects outpatient and inpatient facilities. Throughout the day, caregivers passing back and forth made im-

promptu brainstorming sessions dramatically more common. And because physical distance creates psychological distance, Toby also shuffled office assignments. In the new scheme, doctors working on the same disease or body system sat closer together. “Innovation generally takes place at the borders of disciplines,” Toby explains, and if “you put multiple disciplines together *physically*, and they are working on similar problems... you begin to get innovation.”

Even as Cleveland Clinic rapidly expanded both locally and globally, caregivers at every site wore name badges with identical logos. Like the culture, the logo is straightforward and intentional: four interlocking squares—two are green, symbolizing medical science, and two are blue, symbolizing infinite possibility. Additionally, the four squares represent the four facets of the health system’s work (clinical care, hospital care, education, and research). They also honor the clinic’s four physician co-founders. Finally, the center of the logo—one larger white square overlaid on the others, represents the unified focus of putting “Patients First.”

Hospital gowns were redesigned. “Patients were just never comfortable,” says Jeanne Ryan, the Cleveland Clinic nurse who led the three-year initiative. “They complained that it didn’t cover enough, that they felt exposed, and people didn’t like the way they looked. People have family and friends visit them in the hospital, and they want to look as nice as they can in that environment.” So the team worked with the fashion designer Diane von Fürstenberg to design new gowns that were full-coverage and comfortable, with wraparound closure and a V-neck that allows nurses and physicians to attend to patients without compromising their modesty.

To raise awareness of wasteful spending, a cost-cutting committee hung actual price tags on hospital supplies so that, as Toby put it, they were “right where caregivers would see them.” The same committee created scorecards, with goals like “Cut your costs on heart valve implants by 20 percent while improving quality by 10 percent.” Over a two-year peri-

od, these and other initiatives resulted in \$100 million in total savings system wide.

During Toby's tenure, smoking was banned on all Cleveland Clinic campuses. Not only inside buildings but also in employees' personal cars when parked on premises. This ban was accompanied by free smoking cessation classes, nicotine replacement patches, and other supports. Within a year of these changes, 99 percent of staff were in compliance with the smoke-free policy.

Healthy foods in the cafeteria were tagged with a special green label: *Go!* inside a green circle. Fried foods were banned. Sugared soda and junk food containing trans fats were removed from both the cafeteria and vending machines.

Open-air farmers markets began selling local organic produce at multiple Cleveland Clinic campuses, often accompanied by cooking demonstrations, yoga lessons, and health screenings.

Parking spaces were reassigned so patients—not doctors—parked closest to the clinic's entrances.

The list goes on. My point is that an organization's physical setup is key to making its priorities a reality. What is it you hope people will do? Set up a space to make that obvious, easy, and rewarding.

Pick Their Peers

When he was still a surgeon at Cleveland Clinic, Toby learned an important lesson in leadership: diverse teams, whose members have distinct responsibilities, enable individuals to do their own jobs better. Because he was part of a group practice that included administrators, for example, he didn't have to worry about billing and finances—a source of stress that's contributed to epidemic rates of physician burnout in the United States. "In medicine, we're trained in silos," Toby told me. "Doctors and nurses and physician assistants—we're all trained to be individuals, when instead we need to work as a *team*."

When Toby became CEO, Cleveland Clinic was organized like most hospitals: by traditional departments. Too often, this resulted in patients seeing a series of providers in different departments, with frustrating delays and confusion from breakdowns in communication among them.

Toby dismantled this structure. In its place, he created institutes organized around diseases and body systems. The Heart, Vascular, and Thoracic Institute, for instance, brought together cardiac surgeons, cardiologists, vascular surgeons, anesthesiologists, nurses, and researchers—everyone involved in treating cardiovascular disease. Working under one roof, these caregivers shared schedules, performance metrics, and budgets. A patient's care team could now consult in real time, in the same hallway, sometimes within minutes.

In the old system, a surgeon might perform an operation and never hear whether the patient thrived or struggled afterward. Under the institute model, the same surgeon participates in regularly scheduled case reviews alongside other members of the entire care team: *What worked? What didn't? How can we do better next time?* Often these conversations uncover insights that would otherwise be overlooked. For instance, orthopedic surgeons and rheumatologists who were treating the same patients for bone fractures began looking at aberrations in bone metabolism as a root cause.

In short, reorganizing caregivers created the conditions for peer accountability (everyone saw one another's results), peer learning (expertise flowed across specialties), and peer solidarity (success became collective, not individual). At today's Cleveland Clinic, you don't have to be unusually collegial to work across disciplines. The organizational chart makes interdisciplinary collaboration the path of least resistance.

Make Mentorship the Mode

When Toby became CEO, he found himself at the bottom of a steep learning curve. "I decided I had to become a student of leadership," Toby

recalls. “I had stacks of books on leadership, and every night when I came home, I’d go up to my little office and read.” But of course, a student can only get so far without a mentor. “Then I called up Harvard Business School professor Michael Porter.” Porter, a renowned thought leader in the field of business strategy, not only said yes to an initial curiosity conversation but also followed up by inviting Toby to visit in person. “After that, I got him to come to Cleveland,” Toby told me. “And since then, we’ve been sharing ideas.”

Toby sought the advice of other mentors, too, including veteran CEOs like Jack Welch, Jim McNerney, Jeff Immelt, and Kevin Sharer. These experienced leaders did for Toby what mentors do for all mentees: they taught, they encouraged, and they opened doors.

In my experience, nearly all successful leaders are mentor magnets. Only the very best, however, make mentorship part and parcel of organizational culture. Under Toby’s leadership, that’s exactly what happened.

Andrea Sikon saw it all happen firsthand—and to this day oversees what’s become the largest and longest-lasting mentoring program in academic medicine. An internist who joined Cleveland Clinic just before its explosive growth phase, Andrea remembers the topic of mentoring emerging in a needs assessment. “All of a sudden,” she recalls, “people didn’t know one another [the way they used to].... What they wanted was to be reconnected, to be in relationship with one another.” Andrea led the task force created to address the problem. Their goal was to establish a mentoring program that was both successful and sustainable—a rarity not only in the healthcare sector but in business in general.

Based on their research, the task force decided that mentoring at Cleveland Clinic, one of Toby’s system-wide “expected leader behaviors,” would be elective rather than mandatory. To widen the funnel of volunteers, the program encouraged mentees and mentors to find their match anywhere in the organization, not just in their home institute. Recognizing the power of peers, the program introduced a *peer coaching* element: Prior to matching with a mentor, physicians and scientists first

partner with a peer coach who helps them reflect on their personal goals and how a mentor might support their development. And finally, rather than assuming mentee-mentor pairs know how to make their relationships work, they made the program educational. They developed a one-day intensive training that gathers those interested in mentoring and coaching with those interested in being mentored. Everyone learns and practices the same listening, empathy, and accountability skills together.

In a recent survey, nearly two hundred caregivers cited coaching and mentoring support as a major reason for staying at Cleveland Clinic. But lower turnover is only a side benefit. Surveys indicate that the program measurably increases meaning, engagement, and fulfillment, as well as participants' leadership aspirations and achievements. And the real payoff may be even harder to measure: "I've been in every single training since the start and sat in thousands of coaching conversations," Andrea says. "I'm struck by how powerful it is to connect—human to human—and to recognize [no matter our backgrounds or degrees], that we're all in this together."

As for sustainability, scores of new physicians and scientists volunteer to become peer coaches and mentors every year, and there's now a four-day advanced training program for those who want to deepen these skills. Today, Cleveland Clinic has an endowed institute that provides coaching and mentoring for all leaders and staff. An online directory with mentor profiles and filters helps mentees find the right match. How mentors and mentees develop their relationship is flexible, but all pairs begin with an initial forty-five-minute curiosity conversation. After that, a curated set of guides, checklists, and other resources supports mentor-mentee pairs at every clinic location worldwide.

Champion Culture Carriers

Soon after Toby took office, he discovered that while Cleveland Clinic's mortality statistics were outstanding, ratings of patient satisfaction lagged

far behind. In particular, the system had a reputation for delivering technical excellence at the expense of empathy. “Our patients respected us,” he told me, “but they sure didn’t like us. We were healing their bodies but neglecting their souls.”

In response, Toby created a new direct-report position—chief experience officer—and recruited a young surgeon named Jim Merlino to fill it. Jim had been working at the clinic when his own father was admitted, but left, unhappily, after his father died there. It wasn’t the technical aspect of his care that was lacking. It was the experience itself: “I’m sure my father died thinking that Cleveland Clinic was the worst possible place,” Jim says. “When he asked for something, it didn’t come. The staff members didn’t seem to get along very well with one another. It was terrible.” When Toby called Jim and asked him to take the role, it was with the express purpose of fixing the things that had driven him away.

Among Jim’s many innovative ideas was a four-minute training film entitled “Empathy: The Human Connection to Patient Care.” The video opens with a quote from Henry David Thoreau: “*Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?*”

The camera then walks us through a busy hospital. No dialogue, no commentary. Just a sequence of patients, families, and caregivers—and, in captions, the (Box Two) thoughts going through their heads at that moment.



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The video closes with this question: "If you could stand in someone's shoes, hear what they hear, see what they see, feel what they feel.... Would you treat them differently?" Honestly, it doesn't matter how many times I've watched this video. I tear up every time. And I suspect the same is true for many who have contributed to the more than 8 million views on YouTube.

It was also Jim's idea to ask every employee to engage in a half-day workshop called the Cleveland Clinic Experience. Because participation was universal and seating was assigned randomly, it was not uncommon for a nurse, a neurosurgeon, a housekeeper, a parking valet, and an administrator in the billing department to find themselves at the same roundtable. Together, they shared observations, problems, and ideas about how to make the organization a better place. These discussions made clear how each staff member's current work advances the mission of putting patients first and, in addition, generated ideas for continuous improvement. At the conclusion of the workshop, every participant left with the same badge: *Caregiver*. The total cost for taking all of its person-

nel offline, in shifts, for these exercises was about \$11 million. But as every leader knows, aligning actions with mission is priceless.

Toby refuses to take credit for dreaming up these and many other culture-catalyzing innovations. But he deserves credit for championing those who did. Situational leadership is a monumental undertaking. The wise leader shares the load.

Lengthen Your Shadow

In the last lecture of my leadership course, I put up a slide with a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson: “An institution is the lengthened shadow of [its leader].” Then I turn to my students and pose one final question: *What shadow will you cast?*

A leader’s habits become a team’s traditions. A leader’s purpose becomes a team’s mission. And a leader’s character becomes a team’s culture.

How? Not by magic or mandates or wishful thinking—but by structural changes to the objective situation: Physical space. Peers. Mentors. Culture carriers who ensure the organization’s evolution. For the situationally wise leader, these elements aren’t happenstance; they’re a responsibility. Work and work to make them better. Because when you do, the way *you* do things around here becomes the way *we* do things around here, too.



Situational Citizenship

If you took psychology in college or high school, you've heard of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Open any intro psych textbook, and you'll find a five-layer, rainbow-colored pyramid illustrating this famous theory. The fact is, Maslow never drew a pyramid. And if he had, he would have done so differently.

Correcting the record is long overdue. Not just out of respect but because understanding human needs is key to helping society's most vulnerable. Maslow's hierarchy—properly understood—explains why all people yearn for challenge as much as support. It makes obvious why too many poverty programs feed the body but starve the spirit. And it reveals how creating better situations for others is one of the most fulfilling things we can do for ourselves.

Beyond Basic Needs

In his landmark 1943 paper, "A Theory of Human Motivation," Abraham Maslow identified five sets of needs that all people, regardless of age or upbringing, instinctively pursue. Maslow arranged these needs in a hierarchy, beginning with the basic physiological requirements of survival. When we're cold or hungry, for example, it's all we can think about, because meeting physiological needs is necessary to survival.

Once satisfied, our attention is drawn to the next higher level—the need for safety. Next comes the need for love and belonging, and after that the need for esteem and respect from those around us.

What made Maslow's theory so provocative was not the naming and ordering of these motives, but a fifth and final desire he called the *need for self-actualization*. This need, he wrote, can be defined as the "desire for self-fulfillment" or "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming." The need for self-actualization is as universal as lower needs, Maslow said, but the specific form it takes is more idiosyncratic. For example: "In one individual it may take the form of the desire to be an ideal mother, in another it may be expressed athletically, and in still another it may be expressed in painting pictures or in inventions." Put differently: "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write."

From its debut, Maslow's hierarchy was misinterpreted. Many readers took him to mean that we should pursue our needs in lockstep order, one at a time, from the bottom up. In fact, his argument was narrower: in crisis, when deprived of multiple needs and *forced* to choose among them, we prioritize lower-level needs over higher ones. But most often—and *ideally*—we pursue *multiple* needs simultaneously. For instance, when we prepare a family dinner, we're meeting basic survival needs but also the need for love and belonging. If we like to cook, we may also be meeting the need for esteem; if we *love* to cook, we may even be meeting the need for self-actualization.



The point is that in a life well-lived, our needs are *integrated*.

Scott Barry Kaufman, a psychologist and Maslow scholar, points out that the pyramid image can mislead, suggesting we start from the bottom and, layer by layer, make our way to higher needs: “Life is not a video game,” he says. You don’t level up to the next need and leave the prior one behind. Feeling loved, for example, doesn’t make needs for safety, food, and shelter disappear. I agree—and a careful reading of Maslow’s voluminous writings makes clear he did, too. A good life is one in which we meet our needs not in sequence but in synchrony.

Indeed, I don’t know many people who consider any of Maslow’s universal needs optional. But when it comes to caring for strangers—not our kith or kin, but less advantaged neighbors in the community—the ambition of meeting the full array of needs, including self-actualization, seems fanciful. Money and time, after all, are anything but infinite, and from a societal standpoint, there’s plenty to do at the bottom of the pyramid.

My research shows, for example, that half of the young people in the United States lack at least one necessity from the two lowest levels of Maslow’s pyramid. Some children lack access to fruit or vegetables. Some lack a quiet space to study or rest. Some lack a neighborhood where it’s safe to walk after dark. And on and on. The more necessities a young person does without, the worse their outcomes: lower self-reported happiness, weaker relationships with peers and adults, and lower report card grades.

In a world of limited resources, providing more than the bare minimum to society’s neediest might seem unrealistic. Yet throughout his career, Maslow argued with increasing conviction that meeting the full spectrum of human needs of every last man, woman, and child *is* possible—and what’s more, that it’s our responsibility as citizens to do so.

Seeing the World in Color

Several years ago, someone proved to me that Maslow was right: Bill Strickland.

Now in his late seventies, Bill Strickland is the founder of Manchester Bidwell, a nonprofit arts and job training program in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Beyond his job title, Bill is hard to describe. Is he an artist? Yes. A social activist? I'd say so. A radical? Maybe. A pragmatist? Certainly.

Here's how our paths crossed. A trusted colleague identified Bill as the most inspirational person he'd ever met. That comment led me to read Bill's memoir, *Make the Impossible Possible*. The power of Bill's words prompted me to search for his talks and interviews online. And that made me fly out to Pittsburgh to visit. I just had to know what Bill meant when he said, with the zeal of the converted, that the moral of his life story is this: "Environments shape behavior."

"The poor are like anyone else," Bill says. The two of us are seated at a polished walnut conference table in the boardroom of his art center. "They want to survive, and to feel loved and respected—but they also yearn to achieve their potential, to become excellent at what they do. They need support, absolutely, but they also need *challenge*."

Bill is speaking from personal experience. Growing up, *he* was poor. And, as he puts it, it was the very worst kind of poverty: poverty of the spirit. Yes, he was warm and fed, and reasonably safe, and in his tight-knit family, loved and respected. But he was going nowhere; he was not becoming what he was capable of becoming. "I was a Black kid growing up in a bad neighborhood. I was flunking my classes. I had no inspiration. Everything was gray for me."

All that changed one ordinary Wednesday afternoon in 1962. It's been more than sixty years, but Bill remembers that Wednesday afternoon like it was yesterday.

He was walking down a corridor of his high school, he says, when he smelled coffee brewing. Then he heard the strains of Herbie Hancock's jazz piano. Both beckoned from the open door of a classroom he'd never set foot in before. Inside, sunlight poured through large windows. Behind

a potter's wheel, coaxing a wet lump of clay into form, sat Frank Ross, the high school ceramics teacher. Mr. Ross looked up. "Can I help you?"

Bill, already entranced, asked, "What is that?"

"That's ceramics," Mr. Ross told him.

"Why don't you teach me to do that?"

So Mr. Ross invited Bill to take his seat behind the wheel: "The magic I felt when I first laid my hands on wet clay gave me the belief that I could do something interesting with my life," Bill recalls. "It opened up doors to meaning and possibility. It showed me, for the first time, that I had talents and capabilities no one had seen before and that I myself had never dreamed of. I'm convinced those insights not only gave me a vision of my future—they literally saved my life.

"The day I met Mr. Ross was the day I started seeing the world in color. It was like night and day, dark and light. And I knew I needed to go where the light is."

For the remaining two years of high school, Bill returned to that sunlit classroom every day—and not just for an hour or two but for the entirety of his morning and afternoon. And his other classes? "Oh, I would deliver my pots and vases to my other teachers," Bill says, laughing softly. "And they passed me with what they called 'passion grades.'"

One day, Mr. Ross took Bill on a field trip to Fallingwater, Frank Lloyd Wright's landmark modern home, quite literally built over a waterfall. "I was blown away," Bill says. "Here was a house that was tranquil and peaceful and aesthetically tied to nature. It was exactly the kind of environment a kid like me needed, yet never got to see. So I said to myself, 'Someday, I'm going to build a school just like that.'"

A Beautiful Situation

Bill's first school was a ramshackle row house he renovated himself—but eventually, just blocks away from his old high school, Bill created the Manchester Bidwell Training Center, located in a multimillion-dollar, six-

ty-two-thousand-square-foot building designed by a former student of Frank Lloyd Wright. Although he hadn't read a word of Maslow, Bill had nevertheless arrived at the same fundamental conclusions about human motivation and potential.

"All I knew was clay and what it had done for me," Bill says. "Intuitively, I knew the same was possible for others. And I knew what they needed—a safe, sane, quiet environment where they could escape the madness that reigned in the streets, find a way to shape something personal and beautiful, and spend time in a bright, clean, nurturing place where it didn't seem pointless to dream."

Today, Manchester Bidwell is a thriving nonprofit with two separate constituencies: Teenagers at risk for dropping out of high school come for its afterschool arts program. Adults come for its job training programs, in fields ranging from horticulture to medical technology to the culinary arts. Neither group pays a dime in tuition.

And yet Manchester Bidwell looks as if it has been built for the privileged, not the poor. Sunlight pours through its large plate-glass windows. Orchids and potted plants line every hallway. Under curved adobe brick archways, paintings and handmade quilts adorn every wall. There's an art gallery just off the entry foyer, a ceramics center equipped with sixteen potter's wheels and seven kilns, a dining room with round tables and fresh flowers that serves gourmet meals, and, in the courtyard, a spectacular fountain. Its 350-seat amphitheater hosts one of the most prestigious jazz series in the country, and five of the jazz albums recorded in Manchester Bidwell's recording studio have won Grammy Awards.

"Poverty projects look like poverty," Bill says. "If you want world-class behavior, then you need to begin with a world-class environment."

In Bill's opinion, a world-class environment addresses *all* of a person's needs—bottom to top—at the same time:

When some poor single mother walks into our place, after hours at some miserable job, after scrambling to find someone to take care of her kids, after riding buses, bumming rides, or walking on her own

two feet to get here, she gets to rest for a moment on an exquisitely made, one-of-a-kind Japanese bench handcrafted by a master craftsman just for her. How can she help but start thinking she deserves that beautiful bench? How can she stop herself from thinking she deserves even more beauty and order in her life?

Along with the VIP setting comes VIP treatment. “We have no metal detectors, no security guards greeting you sternly at the door,” Bill points out. “But there’s no graffiti and no trouble, either. The community respects us. In over fifty years of operation, we haven’t once had to call the police.”

“At school, I can’t leave my bag out the way I do here,” a high school senior in the afterschool program explained. “You want to respect this space.” That’s because, Bill says, “We show our students trust and they learn they can be trusted. We treat them with respect and get respectful behavior in return. We set the bar high, and our students work to meet our high expectations.”

Talk Is Cheap

Just a few years after beginning his ceramics program, Bill saw a station wagon pull into the parking lot. A group of adults he didn’t recognize stepped out and walked through his doors. They introduced themselves as teachers at his old high school, each of whom had a student who’d dramatically improved his or her behavior. “They’re matriculating. They’re coming to class. And they’re not disruptive. We were talking about this in the teachers’ lounge, not able to figure out why each of us has one student who’s changed so radically. And all of a sudden it clicked... they all come to *this* place after school.”

Today, high school teachers whose students attend Manchester Bidwell’s afterschool arts programs unanimously report increased engage-

ment in their classrooms. Approximately 84 percent of the adults enrolled in the vocational program find jobs upon graduation.

Manchester Bidwell has inspired similar centers in more than a dozen U.S. cities, from Grand Rapids, Michigan, to San Francisco, California—as well as international sites, including one in northern Israel that serves both Jewish and Arab students. “These centers are all different,” Bill points out. “They have their own leaders and reflect their local communities.”

And yet in one important way, they’re all the same: re-creations of Mr. Ross’s sunlit classroom. Collectively, they show that meeting the full spectrum of a person’s needs is possible, practical, and scalable: “You cure poverty by understanding that poor folks are human beings before they are ‘poor,’” Bill says, “and by providing them with access to the fundamental spiritual nourishment every human heart requires: beauty, order, purpose, opportunity—the things that give us a meaningful human existence.”

Operating Manchester Bidwell isn’t cheap. But on a per capita basis, Bill points out, it costs a lot less than operating a prison—and it keeps people out of one.

Anthony Cascione, whom Bill Strickland recruited from Harvard Law School to help lead the model’s expansion, said: “For people who grew up in circumstances like Bill did, attention to detail in the physical environment of a learning space provides indisputable proof of high expectations. A beautiful space shows students that they’re worthy of investment, and therefore, are worthy more generally. Said succinctly: *Talk, even very thoughtful talk, is cheap; beautiful art and architecture are not.*”

From Self-Actualization to Self-Transcendence

Failing to appreciate the simultaneity of human needs is not the only mistake we make when interpreting Maslow’s hierarchy. If we accept the familiar five-layer version as complete—if we assume Maslow’s very first ar-

ticle was also his last word on the subject—we miss what Maslow spent his final years trying to tell us: Self-actualization is *not* the pinnacle of human experience.

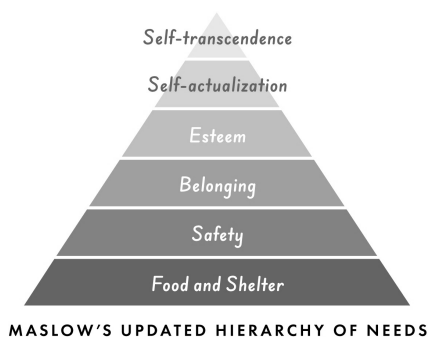
In part, Maslow's epiphany can be credited to Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychiatrist who published *Man's Search for Meaning* just three years after Maslow debuted his theory. The two great thinkers sparred in both public debates and private correspondence. "Self-actualization is not man's ultimate destination," Frankl insisted, "nor even his primary intention." Instead, we yearn to *transcend* our personal concerns—to commit ourselves to a cause, relationship, or ideal beyond ourselves: "It is a constitutive characteristic of being human that it always points, and is directed, to something other than itself." When that highest need goes unmet, Frankl said, we suffer greatly: "People may have enough to live by, but more often than not they do not have anything to live for."

After years of debate, Maslow finally conceded: "My experience agrees with Frankl's that people who seek self-actualization directly, selfishly, personally, dichotomized away from mission in life (i.e., as a form of private and subjective salvation), don't in fact, achieve it.... Or to say it in a more positive and descriptive way, those people in our society selected out as self-actualizing practically always have a mission in life, a task which they love and have identified with and becomes a defining characteristic of the self."

In delving more deeply into the lives of self-actualizing people—including historical figures like Abraham Lincoln and Eleanor Roosevelt—Maslow had found that "in all cases they are devoted to a cause or calling *beyond themselves*." A few years before his death at age sixty-two, Maslow wrote: "It must be stated that self-actualization is not enough.... The good of other people must be invoked."

As you know, Maslow never drew a pyramid to illustrate his theory. Had he done so, self-actualization would *not* have been at the top. He came to see that need as merely "a transitional goal, a rite of passage, a step along the path to the transcendence of identity." Below I've drawn a pyra-

mid that, in my view, gets Maslow right—with self-transcendence at the apex, the highest of all human needs.



This complete hierarchy—and the reminder that needs are ideally pursued simultaneously—makes clear that the good life is one in which we are warm and fed, safe, loved, respected, striving to actualize our potential, and at the very same time, looking outward, not inward, to the needs of others.

Both-And

One winter morning in 1996, Bill walked into a “jam-packed, wood-paneled lecture hall at Harvard University.” Manchester Bidwell had recently been profiled as a Harvard Business School case study in social entrepreneurship, and Bill was invited to “share a little hard-earned business savvy from the other side of the tracks.” Before taking the podium, Bill brought out a beat-up slide projector and a battered cardboard box held together with duct tape. Then he reached into that box and produced a loaded carousel of slides—photographic evidence of the impossible made possible.

“I knew that before I could convey the message I’d come to share, I had to overcome assumptions,” he explains. “Many people size me up as an urban do-gooder who has devoted his life to selflessly helping the poor. I’m proud of what I’ve accomplished along those lines, but you can’t real-

ly understand me, or what my life has been about, unless you grasp the fact that I didn't do any of it out of selflessness. I did it to be myself. I did it to enrich my own life, to deepen the quality and meaning of my own experience. I did it because it was a part of what I had to do if I genuinely wanted to be me."

Weeks before his guest lecture, Bill had been awarded a five-year, no-strings-attached fellowship—better known as the MacArthur "genius grant." "If the MacArthur people are right," Bill told his audience, "if I have even a small shred of genius in my soul, it's only because I have an unshakable belief that each of us has not only the potential to live a rewarding and purposeful life but also the responsibility to do so. It's an obligation we bear, and it's also the source of our greatest potential. Owning up to that obligation not only makes us more human, it also connects us to the bottomless reserves of passion, vision, conviction, and commitment that I believe are present in abundance in every human heart."

Recalling the day he got to teach a bunch of "bright-eyed Harvard students," he says: "I wasn't about to give those students a lecture on altruism, activism, or any other-ism; I wasn't there to convince them they should commit their lives to others. I had a more radical notion to share with them, a new definition of success.... The only kind of success that matters comes from knowing and trusting the deepest aspirations of your heart. *If you live that way, in harmony with the real needs of your spirit, then you can't help but craft a life that will automatically make the world a better place for everyone who lives in it.*"

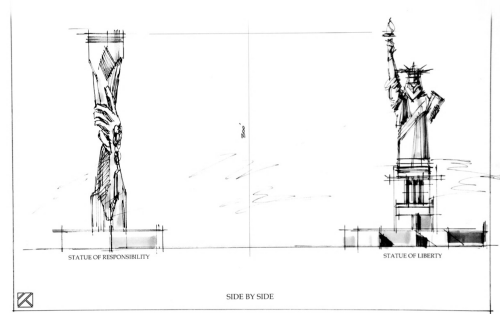
Situational Responsibility

After writing *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl traveled the world giving lectures. When visiting the United States, he would remind American audiences of the hard-won lessons from World War II: "Ameri-

ca, we in Vienna had our freedoms; those freedoms were taken from us. America, you must guard your freedoms and honor them.”

But then Frankl would deliver an even more urgent message. American culture, he observed, was excessively concerned with protecting individual freedom and insufficiently concerned with promoting the collective good: Americans were far too inattentive to improving the situation of their countrymen. “Freedom is only part of the story and half of the truth.... In fact, freedom is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibility. That is why I recommend that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.”

Plans for that project are finally underway. Comparable in height and grandeur to the Statue of Liberty, the Statue of Responsibility will depict one person’s hand reaching up for help and another person’s hand reaching down in response—two hands clasped firmly together as a symbol of our responsibility to care for those in society who need us most.



The Statue of Responsibility Foundation

Not long ago, Gary Lee Price, the new statue’s sculptor, journeyed to Vienna with a team of fellow advocates to show his design to Frankl’s widow, Eleonore. Within moments of their arrival, she stood up and asked them to follow her into her late husband’s study. In an alcove along the far wall, a bookcase gave way to a niche lined in white leather. In the center stood a wooden carving depicting a man naked from the waist up,

his head bloodied, his eyes gazing skyward, and his hands reaching upward in supplication.

Frankl had cherished the carving from the day he discovered it in a Viennese bazaar, Eleonore explained, so much so that though penniless, he vowed to bring it home one day, placing it on layaway until he'd saved enough to purchase the nameless piece he later decided to call *The Suffering Man*. "My husband Viktor would often ask the question, 'Where is the hand reaching down?'" she added with tears in her eyes. "And you, my American friend, have brought to me a sculpture that answers my husband's very question."

PART 4

CONCLUSION





From Grit to Great

From the moment we met, Cody Coleman struck me as the embodiment of grit. Now, more than ten years later, I see more. At critical moments, and with remarkable perspicacity, Cody navigated toward situations in which passion and perseverance paid off.

Here's how his story begins.

Cody was born in a jail near Trenton, New Jersey, to a mother serving time and struggling with mental illness. He has never met his father and probably never will. Raised by a grandmother who had struggles of her own, Cody had trouble keeping up in first grade, but worked his way to so-so report cards and test scores by sixth. By junior year of high school, he was earning straight A's in all subjects. When he graduated, he was awarded a full-ride scholarship to MIT. Five years later, Cody had a bachelor's and master's in engineering and computer science and, despite a wobbly first semester, a 4.9 out of 5 GPA.

"It doesn't make sense," I said years ago when Cody and I were out to dinner. We were celebrating his acceptance letters from the top computer science graduate programs in the country. And we were trying to puzzle out how he'd gotten here.

Cody nodded. "Yeah, it's just nuts."

We sat for a moment, silently mulling.

Then Cody flipped his napkin over and produced a pen. He sketched a simple graph with a horizontal axis representing time and a vertical axis for success. "Imagine working hard and steadily improving each and every year," he explained as he drew a diagonal line that *gradually* climbed up-

ward. “There’s just no way I could have gotten to where I am today if I’d just improved at this same modest rate each year,” Cody said, pointing at the graph. “I mean, I was *so* far behind when I started.

“No, it had to be *like this*.” And then Cody’s pen traced out an exponential curve. Unlike the gently ascending straight line, this curve climbed faster and faster, from the bottom left corner of the napkin all the way to the top right.

Two years later, Cody gave a TEDx Talk at Stanford, where he was on his way to his PhD. He called it “Digging Deeper: How a Few Extra Moments Can Change Lives.” He projected a similar graph on the screen behind him.

“All of us here today, we have two lives,” Cody began. “There’s our life on paper—the one captured in our accomplishments. Think of your résumé or CV. And then there’s the life you actually live.”

Then Cody pointed to the top of the slide. “You probably think that’s what my life has been,” he says, a “linear path, a nice straight line.” And indeed, the upward sloping line at the top of the graph is what people who meet Cody now assume has been his trajectory. Later, if they learn that Cody came from poverty, not privilege, they’re quick to ascribe his achievements to God-given genius.



© TED

“It’s tempting to think that I’m exceptional or gifted,” Cody said. “But I didn’t succeed because I’m special.” This part of the talk reminds me of Cody’s very first email to me, now more than a decade ago, when he introduced himself as a rising senior at MIT. “Grit explains my life,” he wrote. “I would love to talk with you.” Then, after a capsule summary of his life, he closed his email with a question so many mentor magnets like to ask. He wondered how he could be useful: “Let me know if there is anything I can do to help with your research.”

Four years after sending that email and two years after sketching that exponential curve on a restaurant napkin, Cody was trying to explain to his audience why his success required more than grit. Dig a little deeper, he said, and you see how the path was anything but straight. “What enabled me to succeed,” Cody declared, “was the incredible *encouragement* and *support* I received.”

Then Cody told another story—the *backstory*. In his words, the life he *actually* lived. Because to understand how he got here, he said, you need

to know about the headwinds of poverty and disadvantage that impeded his progress and—*just as important*—the invisible tailwinds that propelled him forward. There was his older brother, Shawn, who encouraged him to reach higher, to dream bigger. Instead of asking, “Why bother?” Shawn told Cody to ask, “Why not?” There was also Cody’s high school trigonometry teacher, Chantel Smith, who took him under her wing and into her home, showing him what unconditional, unflinching, and rock-solid love looks like. Cody now calls her “Mom.” And there was Norm, another key mentor, the high school drama teacher who, sizing up the situation, volunteered to pay for Cody’s cell phone plan during his years at MIT.

Only when we become situationally aware do we see the complete picture.

One year after that talk, Cody graduated from Stanford with a PhD in computer science, the first Black recipient in nearly two decades and the third in the university’s history. Today Cody is the CEO and cofounder of Coactive AI, a Silicon Valley startup that uses artificial intelligence to search and analyze images and videos at scale. His cofounder is Will Gaviria Rojas, an MIT classmate with similarly humble roots and a shared passion for democratizing access to AI. Recently, *Forbes* magazine singled out Coactive as one of the world’s most promising AI startups, predicting the company may one day be valued at over a billion dollars.

As one of Cody’s many mentors, I want you to know that the tailwinds in Cody’s life weren’t happy accidents. Cody is a paragon of situational agency. He proactively attracts mentors, cultivates lasting friendships with peers he respects and admires, and moves into spaces and places that bring out his best.

Consider, for example, Cody’s personal space. Cody’s childhood home was chaotic and cluttered. There was never enough to eat, strangers were always coming and going, and every few weeks, the screaming and fighting got so bad the neighbors called the police. Worst of all, the ramshackle house was also home to a menagerie of stray cats and dogs—

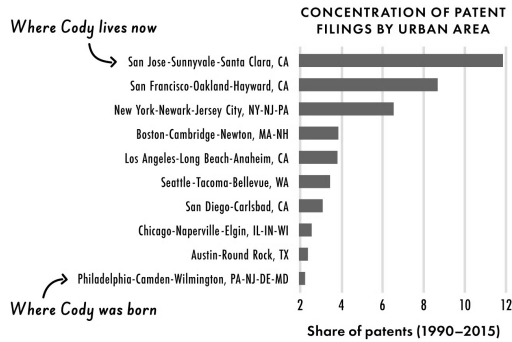
sometimes numbering in the dozens—which severely aggravated Cody’s asthma. He found peace and quiet and positive role models at school, arriving early for the free breakfast and hanging around the computer lab as late as he was permitted, often into the evening hours. Then, by earning a spot at MIT, Cody vaulted into a 24/7 culture of ideas and innovation, where everyone and everything is centered around technology. There was nothing remarkable about Cody’s dorm room: a bed, a desk, a chair, a lamp. But for him it was a palace. A room of his own where, finally, he could read and think to his heart’s content—and without a pet in sight. A place where he could breathe.

Now that Cody’s living in a slick Silicon Valley condo, whenever he’s “head down,” as he describes his most serious work mode, he keeps his phone in a different room. Rifle through the cupboards in the kitchen and you won’t find a crumb of ultraprocessed food. But open the refrigerator? Mason jars of vegan chili line the shelves because, “You know, I don’t have time to cook every day and I want to eat healthy.” And if you wander from room to room, you’ll discover the handwritten Post-it notes Cody has left for himself—on the refrigerator, bathroom mirror, and door to his bedroom—miniature yellow billboards with life lessons and goals. My favorite is the first Post-it Cody sees when he gets up in the morning: *Make Jen a millionaire*. Jen is Coactive’s earliest employee and Cody’s first executive assistant—and that note, he says, reminds him of his responsibility to the women and men who are betting their livelihoods on his leadership.

Cody graduated from Stanford during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, so I got to attend his dissertation defense via Zoom. I can’t say I understood the math. When Cody sent me a copy of his dissertation, I did what I always do. I immediately flipped to the acknowledgments section, which in Cody’s case runs to three single-spaced pages. Cody needs all those inches to give thanks to over *two hundred mentors and teammates*, beginning with the two professors who teamed up to co-advise him. Not terribly unusual, so far. But then Cody singles out thirty-eight

other faculty members. (That’s where I get my cameo role.) He thanks five members of his biological family, including the grandmother who adopted him when his mom was in jail... and fifteen members of his *chosen* family, including Chantel and Norm. Thirty-six collaborators. Twenty-eight friends. Seventeen Stanford administrators who, Cody says gratefully, did so much work “behind the scenes.”

What about culture? Unlike Steve Jobs, who was born and raised in Silicon Valley, Cody grew up in a part of the country where technology startups are as fantastical as science fiction. In fact, an analysis of patents by geographic area puts Cody’s birthplace at the bottom. Rather than returning to where he was born and raised, Cody decided to live and work in San Jose, the region with the very highest concentration of new patents in the country.



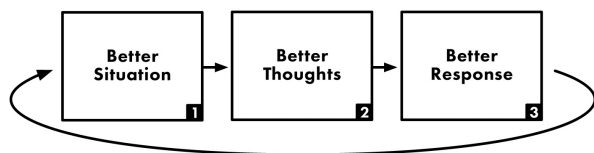
[Description 6](#)

When I asked what was different about the startup culture where he lives now, Cody rattled off a dozen aspects. But then he smiled and summed it all up in one word: *everything*.

Situation Multiplication

How, exactly, does a slight improvement in your situation today lead to massive effects over time?

With one adjustment, the Three Boxes model offers an explanation. Simply add an arrow connecting your (Box Three) response back to the (Box One) situation. Because how you behave can change your *next* situation. Now a better situation leads to better thoughts and responses—which in turn sustains or even enhances the initial situational improvement, and so on. A flywheel like this generates its own momentum. Though subtle at first, improvements accelerate over time because, with every revolution, situational advantages multiply.



Young Cody, for example, had an older brother who improved an otherwise dismal (Box One) situation. The result? More optimistic (Box Two) thoughts, particularly about his intellectual potential, which in turn gave him a rational reason for the (Box Three) response of working hard in school rather than giving up. That effort paid off in the form of small wins, including improved report card grades and an enthusiasm for learning that attracted attention from teachers like Chantel and Norm. Suddenly, Cody was in an even better situation. Now, instead of one supportive and challenging mentor, Cody had three. The classmates in more advanced classes were, like him, preparing to attend college after graduating from his high school. And his newfound mentors made sure that lack of finances would not stand in the way of his dream of attending MIT. And on and on.

Because exponential curves are far less intuitive than straight lines, Cody's accelerating ascent can be difficult to grasp. But the core idea is, simply, that situational advantage begets situational advantage. In this way, a seemingly trivial initial advantage multiplies, growing larger and larger with each revolution of the situation-thoughts-response cycle. Like

money in the bank, the value of a positive situation compounds over time.



I know the flywheel of a successful situation is real because I saw it happen under my own roof.

When our daughter Amanda was in seventh grade, she opted into an accelerated math class—one that put students on track to finish calculus by the end of their junior year. Almost immediately, she was in over her head. That fall, our little house shook with her weeping and wailing as she struggled to keep up.

Here's how Amanda described it in a personal essay she wrote years later:

I was never the smartest or the fastest or even the neatest person in the room. Yes, I was in the “advanced” track—but I failed my first two tests in Algebra 1, scoring 40% on the first and 54% on the second.

Despite my profession as a quantitative social scientist and years of experience teaching math to teenagers, I found myself as stumped as Amanda by most of her homework problems. They were *that* difficult. At night, when Jason and I stayed up debating what to do, I suggested that our stressed-out daughter might fare better in the “regular” advanced math class instead. She seemed stretched to her limit, and I couldn't bear to see her suffer.

When I received that second failing grade, I cried. I felt ashamed: I'm not smart enough, not quick enough, not neat enough. I will never be able to do well in math.

What happened next depends on what you focus on. If you zoom in on this little girl, just twelve years old, sitting alone at the kitchen table at

dawn again and again, long past her bedtime, furiously working through problem after problem after problem, it's a parable of grit:

That week, I studied for hours. I did every problem in the book, and then I did them again. I infuriated my mother, frustrated my father, and miffed my little sister. I drank coffee for the first time.

But if you zoom out, and focus on the *backstory*, you see this is also an ode to situations that bring out your best. For Amanda Duckworth was not alone.

"It's not her grade I care about," Jason said one night when we were up late discussing the dilemma. "It's her confidence. I don't want her to think of herself as a failure. She can do this. But she needs support."

Every day that week—and for the rest of the year—my real estate developer husband hauled home stacks of scrap paper from his office. Then, like an Olympic coach plotting out an athlete's next practice, he directed Amanda to the problems she should tackle next. When she couldn't figure out her own mistakes, he drew her attention to where she'd erred. This meant that all of the crazy hard math Amanda learned that year, her devoted dad learned, too.

And in her corner, Amanda had another caring mentor named Chris Taranta, the seventh-grade math teacher who, despite Amanda's failing grade, steadfastly believed in her potential. Amanda later recalled how Mr. Taranta responded to her two failing grades and dwindling confidence:

My teacher offered me a chance to prove myself wrong. "I know you can do better," he told me. "Retake the test this weekend. Not for a grade, of course. But show me what you know."

At age twelve, Amanda had the precocious intuition to demand that her personal space be a sanctuary. "Amanda Demanda," as we called her at her most imperious, required absolute quiet and zero distractions.

Accordingly, the rest of the family literally tiptoed and whispered, as if we lived in a library or a funeral parlor. Occasionally, I objected that I needed the kitchen to make breakfast, pack lunches, and cook dinner. And each time I complained, Jason reminded me, gently, that there was no other room in our little house where Amanda could spread out her stacks of scrap paper and her math textbook and pencils, and shut the door, and concentrate completely.

Amanda later told me that before she hunkered down for these study sessions, she turned off her cell phone (which I'd had the poor judgment of buying for her the year before), walked over to the hallway coat closet, slid the phone into the pocket of a winter coat, zipped the pocket shut, and closed the closet door. Where had she picked up that trick? Had she remembered the cookies story from Frog and Toad? "It was Dad who gave me the idea," she said. "You know how hard it is for him to concentrate." And indeed, Jason had told all of us that in college he'd studied in an empty classroom late at night and early in the morning, with nothing to distract him.

And so it was that on the back of zoning ordinances and business plans, Amanda worked through the easiest problems first, then tackled the harder ones. In the mornings, Jason would heat up a big mug of milk for her and add a splash of coffee from his own cup. *Coffee milk*, they called it with a wink. The breakfast of champions.

Sometimes I'd peer through the glass door that separated the kitchen from the rest of the house, and instead of Amanda alone, I'd see Amanda and Jason, side by side, brows furrowed, working together.

Finally, the moment of truth arrived. Mr. Taranta had printed out a clean copy of the test Amanda had failed and which he expected her to turn in the following Monday.

On Sunday morning, my dad drove me to church as usual. But instead of going to the service, he sat me down in an empty room and handed me the test. "You have an hour Amanda. Try your best. You got this."

I was off. I must've used twenty pages of my dad's yellow legal pad. I breezed through problems that had paralyzed me just one week earlier. By the end of the hour, my fingers ached and my hands were black with graphite. But my shame was gone. And in its place? Pride.

If the story ended there, you could smile at a happy ending. But it continues. Let's not fade to black just yet.

The surge of pride I felt that Sunday buoyed my motivation. The next few months were challenging, but I worked hard every night to keep up. I finished with an A in the class.

And now fast-forward: Cut to her junior year of high school, when Amanda is doing extra math problems with friends in her spare time—for fun. And then senior year, when to my utter amazement, she wonders aloud whether she might take more math classes when she gets to college. It is around this time that she writes the personal essay I've been quoting—including this last line:

In hindsight it's clear to me that trying, failing, trying again, and succeeding built confidence in a subject that I never thought I'd master. I learned that it is okay to mess up, because your failures do not define you.

The coda of Amanda's story? Well, she's still a young woman, and she has yet to find her calling. But I can tell you that in her most recent chapter—if you will permit a moment of unabashed maternal pride—Amanda graduated from college with honors and a 3.94 GPA. Her school? Harvard. Her major? *Applied Math*.

What Makes You Stronger

When she was sixteen years old, Taylor Swift secretly wrote a song called “The Best Day.” On her laptop, when her mom was looking the other way, she stitched together scenes from home movies to go with it. As a surprise, she played the video for her mother on Christmas.

Have you seen it? In just four minutes, “The Best Day” shatters the myth that what makes you stronger is overcoming, by sheer strength of will, hardships that nearly kill you. And it’d make the perfect soundtrack for this book.

The opening scene is Taylor as a towheaded toddler on an emerald-green lawn, smiling straight into the camera with her adoring mom, also beaming, kneeling by her side. Then, to the gentle strumming of her acoustic guitar, Taylor sings the story of her childhood.

“I grew up in a pretty house,” she croons, “and I had space to run... and I had the best days with you....”

We watch mom and dad taking turns cradling baby Taylor on their shoulders. Taylor and her little brother nestled in bed, sharing a picture book between them. Mom guiding Taylor’s small hand as she hangs a candy cane on the Christmas tree, then pulling both children close as the three of them gaze up in wonder at fireworks painting the summer sky. There’s teenage Taylor singing her heart out for an audience of three in the family living room, then, in cowboy boots under stage lights.

Taylor’s dad is mostly out of shot holding the camera, but we get a few glimpses of what Taylor means when she sings: “I have an excellent father / His strength is making me stronger.”

In word and image, there is laughing and dancing and hugging—*so much hugging*. An ode to a mom Taylor thanks for “watching me shine....”

“I was thinking of everything my mom had done,” Taylor reflected in an interview many years later. “Always making me feel so special... my childhood to touring around with me in the back of a rental car, making

me do my homeschooling work so I could graduate on time.... It was an amazing journey that I had.”

By age sixteen, Taylor had figured out that no journey is taken alone. And what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger when, at every turn, you have the unconditional support of people who love you.



The other day, I called Cody Coleman to catch up. He took the call en route to a meeting with investors, but he knew I was finishing this book and he wanted to be helpful.

“Grit is like a muscle,” he said. “It gets stronger.”

Immediately, I remembered how, earlier in my career, equating striving with strength of will had led me astray. But Cody wasn’t talking about willpower.

“I think of my life in five-year chapters,” he said. “In each one, I developed a little more passion, a little more perseverance. But it wasn’t because every five years, I suffered more adversity. It’s actually the opposite. Each situation was better than the last: new challenges, and at the same time, so much support from so many people.”

Epilogue



What do you get when you take the power of the situation seriously?

Two gifts. First, humility. Second, hope. Not just for yourself but for the people you love, too.

Here's my mother's story.

The oldest of eleven, my mom was born in Nanjing, China, in 1935. China was at war with Japan, and her father—my grandfather—was the army general in charge of the draft. Every time the army moved, my grandfather moved the family with it. My mom attended seven different schools before she finished sixth grade.

“My childhood memories are of packing up and moving,” she told me. “Always moving somewhere new. And bombs falling out of the sky day and night.”

As a little girl, my mom liked reading and painting. My grandmother thought proper young ladies might learn to paint, but if they read too much they'd need glasses, and she worried that wearing glasses would reduce my mom's chances of finding a husband.

So when my grandmother noticed her daughter was becoming a bookworm, she took away the books and replaced them with paintbrushes. Fortunately, Mom's fondness for art grew and grew, and soon, art was all she could think about. She began to dream of growing up to be an artist.

When my mom was thirteen years old, my grandfather found himself on the losing side of the Chinese Communist Revolution, and the family

fled to Taiwan. This time my mom landed at a high school with an art teacher who thought his new student was pretty special. He urged my mom to find her way to a university where she could study art. And so she skipped the last two years of high school and took the entrance exam for a college that trained teachers, including art teachers. And she was admitted.

There my mom had a professor who also thought she was special. You've already met this teacher—the great artist Chu Teh-Chun, who later moved to Paris to pursue his own artistic ambitions.

Chu told my mom she might become a great artist someday. And with that encouragement, when she graduated, instead of becoming an art teacher, she became the first person in her family to immigrate to the United States. She barely spoke English. She had no money or connections. But she had a dream and was willing to work for it. In a word, she had grit.

After much struggle and many setbacks, my gritty mother found an art program in Philadelphia that granted her a full scholarship. She was twenty-four years old.

And it was then that she painted a watercolor that hung in my parents' bedroom, just above their bed. Years later, when Jason and I got married, I asked for it as a wedding gift. And now it hangs in *our* bedroom, just above our bed. It's the first thing I see when I open my eyes in the morning—and when I do, I always search for the little white sailboat all by itself, sailing fearlessly into the distance.



Photo by Matthew Dodd

Not long ago, I asked my mom about this painting.

Here's what she said: "I was a student at the academy in Philadelphia. Every week, we'd get feedback on what we'd produced. One day, after a few weeks of trying to paint the way my American classmates were painting, my professor looked at my painting and said, 'Theresa, you need to find your own style. Don't worry how other students are painting. Paint like yourself.' I went home to my little apartment. I knew my professor was right.

"The next day, I decided to paint a mountain island. The mountain is Taiwan, where my family was. Around it is the ocean I crossed to come to this country—this place where I knew no one. This place where I could hardly speak the language or make myself understood. This place where I was so homesick. This place where I was going to make my dream of becoming an artist come true.

"And I painted the way I'd learned growing up—which was very different from what my American classmates were doing.

"The next week, my professor looked at the painting. Then, after a long silence, he said, 'Theresa, this painting is *your* style. Paint like this.'

"And I walked home so happy. Again, I knew he was right. *And I knew I could do it.*"

This story made me wonder. In our childhood home, there was this beautiful painting—but so few others. If my mom had wanted so badly to become an artist that she'd crossed an ocean, learned a new language, and left her entire family and all her friends behind, then why had I never seen her with a paintbrush? What had happened to her dream? What had happened to her grit?



At this point in her story, my mom was twenty-five years old. Mutual friends set her up with this skinny guy who was also from China, a very intense young man who knew a lot about organic chemistry and nothing about art.

Bang! Immediate attraction. The young lovers went driving in my dad's convertible. They danced the jitterbug. My mom found my dad clever and funny and handsome. My dad thought my mom was a swan.

Weeks later, they got married, and soon after came three children: first my brother, then my sister, and finally me.

In my mom's words, here's what happened next.

To make money, I started painting needlepoint canvases for a shop on Madison Avenue [in New York City]. That was the heyday of needlepoint.

My husband got the idea in his head that I should turn the part-time needlepoint work into a full-time business. I wanted to pursue my own painting, but I felt guilty. My husband reminded me that our family needed money, and I had a second motivation: I wanted to send money back to my family in Taiwan, and I knew there was no guarantee I'd regularly sell my paintings. So that's how we started a wholesale needlepoint business.

I ran that business for almost four decades—long after we really needed the money.

I thought about art a lot but painted very little. Somehow, I'd become a small business owner dealing with orders and bills, hiring and managing employees, traveling to trade shows.... The business was successful, but I felt I wasn't doing the right thing. I felt like the artist in me was stifled. My training, my talent, my creative energies had no outlet. For years, I asked my husband for one gift at Christmas: to sell the business. Year after year, he bought me a new mink coat instead.

Sometimes, I'd hang a painting on the wall in our kitchen, and months would go by before he'd notice.

When my mom told me this part of her story, it dawned on me that I'd been witness to all of it. And yet, because I was oblivious to her circumstances, I had no sense of the tragedy that was unfolding.

Maybe the very first time I even paused to consider my mom's predicament was in my senior year of high school, when my English teacher assigned Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

A good idea, Woolf said, is like a fish. It catches on the line of your thought and, if you're lucky and have patience, you stay with it as it darts and sinks and flashes "hither and thither" in your mind. But what often happens before you can reel in this idea of yours is an interruption. You're asked to make breakfast or dinner or to answer the doorbell—or, in my mother's case, to scratch my father's back (literally). When you return, the fish is gone. And no matter how hard you try to find it, it's now hiding and does not return.

And that's why, Woolf argued, every writer needs a room of her own. Ideally, a room with "a lock on the door."

In other words, grit isn't enough. Your situation must be your ally. Personal space where you can work without interruption. Caring mentors and like-minded peers. A culture of excellence for the craft that is your calling.



Finally, when my dad retired, he allowed my mom—that’s the most accurate way to put it—he *allowed* her to sell the business. Other than taking care of him (her “fourth child,” she often said), she was free. “Around that time, my children were having their own children. And they were so beautiful. I wanted to paint them. That’s how I began painting again. Soon, I was painting for hours every morning and afternoon.”

In the last years of my dad’s life, as his body and mind declined, my mom was as devoted to his care as any wife could be. She brushed his teeth, shaved his beard, cut his nails, washed his face, and made sure he never missed his medications. But because he slept much of the day, she had time she hadn’t had before.

During that chapter of her life, my mom wrote this in her journal: “When do I do my art? Every moment that I’m not taking care of my husband. I don’t do anything else. I do it because I love to do it. I have an urge—feelings that I need to put down on the paper. I want to catch up. I care about every painting I produce.”

Three years ago, only a few months after nearly drowning in that snorkeling accident off the coast of Miami, my mom turned eighty-seven. That was the year she walked down to the office of the senior living community where she has an apartment. She asked if she might rent an extra room. The size didn’t matter, she said, but there should be natural light, the more the better. Confused, the manager asked what was wrong with her room, which had plenty of light.

My mom explained that she wanted to paint, and that while she could do so in her own apartment, really, she needed more space. She needed a room where she could “mess things up and not worry about the mess.” A room where she wouldn’t be interrupted by friendly neighbors dropping in for a visit. A room with a lock on the door.

And here, finally, is the happy ending.

After surviving war and hardship, after moving an ocean away from her parents and brothers and sister, after making so many sacrifices to pursue her dream of becoming an artist, and struggling unsuccessfully to

hold on to that dream for so many years, my eighty-seven-year-old mother finally got a room of her own.

Mom recently celebrated her ninety-first birthday. And it's in that room—that room of her own—that she's *still* painting today.



One day, around the time I was writing this book, I snapped a photo of the painting above my bed and texted it to her: “Do you love it? I still love it.”

And she texted back: “I still do and it brings back memories. I had no money. I wasn’t sure what my future life will be. My only thought was that I may become an artist some day....”

Later, I asked if this story—her story—was accurate as I’d written it.

“You got it right. You also reminded me why I came to this land and how the road detoured, which led me to where I am. I don’t know what life I would have if I made some different decisions.”

I wrote back: “You’re going to live a long time, and your best art is in front of you, not behind you.”

And she texted back a photo of her latest painting—a four-panel abstract acrylic in shades of gray—finished that very afternoon.



Photo by Matthew Dodd

Moments later, she wrote again: “When I paint, I forget that I am old. I want to learn, and I want to grow as an artist. I don’t know if I will ever reach my goal, but I will try.”



For my entire life, I’ve been looking at that painting of the mountain island jutting up from the aqua sea surrounded by white sailboats.

I now see it differently.

These days when I wake up in the morning, I still look for that little sailboat venturing off into the distance. But now, taking in the full scene, I think: *My mother is that brave little boat. You cannot see the tailwinds, but the sails are full, so they must be there. And she’s not alone—there is a flotilla of sailboats behind her, supporting her. Mom’s always been gritty. Now, at long last, she’s also situated.*

My mother’s story has taught me humility: anyone’s situation is as powerful as the tide, and unless we draw it into focus, just as easy to overlook. In my childhood home, nobody—including me—did anything to support my mother’s dreams. We didn’t talk to her about her art. We never piled into the car on weekends to visit an art museum. We didn’t clear out a spare room, or even a corner of a room, to set up her paints and her canvases. Heck, we didn’t even clear our own dishes from the kitchen table and say, “Mom, we’ll clean up. You take this time to paint.”

And her story has taught me hope: it’s never too late to reimagine, and then reshape, your situation. These days, my ninety-one-year-old mother wakes up and makes herself a cup of tea. She walks down the hall to the apartment she turned into an art studio. She closes the door. She picks up the paintbrush. And then, she says, the hours fly by.

SITUATED SCORECARD

Here's a 10-item quiz. I've grouped items according to the four essential elements of situational agency.

SPACE

- ☐ I keep temptations (like junk food and my phone) out of sight and out of reach.
- ☐ I've arranged my personal space to make wise choices (like exercising, reading, and going to bed on time) obvious, easy, and rewarding.

PEERS

- ☐ I have peers who keep me accountable to my goals—and vice versa.
- ☐ My peers know things I don't, and together we are smarter than we are alone.
- ☐ I have peers who depend on me.

MENTORS

- ☐ When I don't know what to do, there are at least two people I can turn to for advice.
- ☐ I'm working on a project with someone more experienced and skilled than myself.
- ☐ I have a mentor with whom I intend to stay in touch for the indefinite future.

CULTURE

- ☐ I would describe the culture of where I work as both challenging and supportive.
- ☐ I live somewhere I can pursue my interests and goals.

How situated are you? Give yourself a point for every statement that's true for you now. A zero means that at every turn, your situation is your

enemy. A perfect 10 means that in every way, your situation is your ally. What can you change? It's never too late—or too early—to get *situated*.

Three Boxes Blueprint



One day, while I was working on this book, my younger daughter Lucy sent me a text: “Mom, was thinking about your book and I got this website blocker that blocks all distracting websites!!”

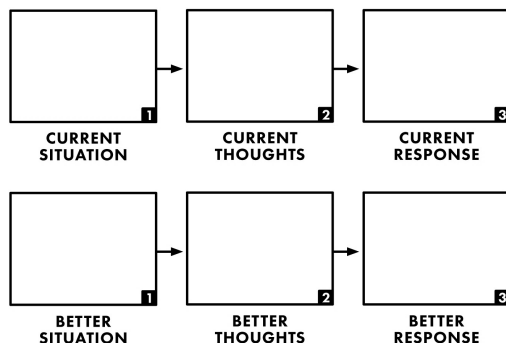
I texted back: “Yay yes see???”

And she replied: “#situated!”

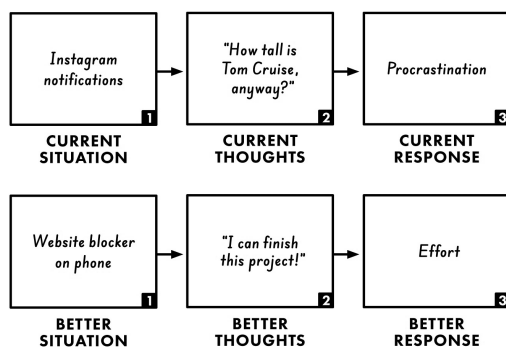
Once you know about the Three Boxes, you, too, will see ways your situation can make doing hard things easier. Here’s a tool that my *No Stupid Questions* cohost Stephen Dubner introduced when we discussed this framework on our *Freakonomics* podcast.

First, get out a piece of paper and draw three boxes connected by two arrows. And another row of three boxes right below it. Now fill in these boxes in reverse—from right to left. Starting with the top row, in Box Three, identify a behavior you want to change. Next fill in Box Two. What thoughts typically precede this behavior? And finally Box One: What situation tends to make you think this way?

Now move on to the second row. Fill in Box Three with how you’d *like* to behave. Then Box Two: What thoughts would make you want to act that way? And finally, fill in Box One: What change in your situation would get your thoughts on track?



For example, Lucy wanted to do a great job with her summer internship. Even though she cared about it a lot, she'd been procrastinating on her final presentation. It was hard to stay focused on work when TikTok and Instagram were competing for her attention. So she decided to block those websites. Here are Lucy's Three Boxes:



Ready? Go for it! Change your situation! See what happens! If your first idea is a flop, try another. And take heart. In my experience coaching students and executives, about half of well-conceived plans fail. Why? We're not very good at predicting how a certain nudge will play out until we try it.

So keep looking until you find the sweet-spot situation that turns your flywheel! Over time, not only will you be your best self more often, your best self will get better.

Situation Change Playbook



SET UP YOUR SPACE

Use your situation—not willpower—to change your behavior for the better. When you repeat an obvious, easy, and rewarding action in response to the same situational cue, your brain eventually stops deliberating and starts automating—transforming intentional decisions into effortless habits.

Install cues. Place visible reminders where you'll encounter them daily.

EXAMPLE: *Restaurateur Will Guidara keeps a pewter paperweight on his desk engraved with his father's question: "What would you attempt to do if you knew you could not fail?" As CEO of Cleveland Clinic, Dr. Toby Cosgrove kept a placard that reads: "What can be conceived can be created." Jews mount mezuzahs at eye level on doorframes; Christians wear crosses. Whatever their form, position reminders where they'll catch your attention and redirect your thoughts toward who you want to be.*

Friction up temptations. Identify what pulls you off track, then put it out of sight and out of reach.

EXAMPLE: *If you want to go to sleep earlier, charge your phone anywhere but on your nightstand. If you want to eat healthier, avoid buying snacks in bulk. If you're trying to save, unsubscribe from promotional emails. And if you get distracted in meetings, leave your laptop in a different room.*

Friction down goals. Think about what you're trying to achieve, and then remove unnecessary obstacles.

EXAMPLE: *If you're trying to exercise more, follow the lead of triathlete legend Alistair Brownlee and lay out your workout clothes and sneakers the night before. If you want to write more thank-you notes, take a tip from my husband, Jason, and carry stationery and stamps in a Ziploc bag. And if, like me, you want to read more, keep a Kindle or a stack of books on your nightstand.*

Bundle reward. Combine your “wants” with your “shoulds.” Immediate reward builds habits.

EXAMPLE: *Blast your favorite music while doing the dishes. Listen to your favorite podcast while working out. Or, like Steve Jobs, Charles Darwin, and Aristotle, get up and go for a walk when you need to think through a tough mental problem.*

PICK YOUR PEERS

Homo sapiens is a social species, and yet research shows that the time we spend interacting with other people is plummeting. Buck the trend and harness the power of peers.

Join a group. Rather than pursuing goals alone, find a group organized around your passion—ideally one with rituals designed to facilitate peer accountability, peer learning, and peer solidarity.

EXAMPLES: *Running clubs, study groups, Toastmasters, Entrepreneurs' Organization, Vistage peer advisory groups, Rotary clubs, Y Combinator, Alcoholics Anonymous*

Start a group. Gather for dinner every three or four months a few people who share your values and professional interests. Focus each gathering on

a question you're all wrestling with (e.g., What do I want the next three to five years of my career to look like? How do I balance work and personal life?). Start a group text thread. Establish ground rules. Give your group a name. Read books together. Plan annual retreats.

EXAMPLE: *A group of surgeons I know started this exact tradition. They call themselves the Middle Way Brothers—a reminder to balance a “family first” philosophy with the drive to contribute to their field. One Middle Way Brother told me: “I found four peers of similar age and values, and we have supported each other through big life decisions, good times and tragedy, legacy building, everything. It’s hard to describe how valuable this small, consistent, connected peer group has been.”*

ATTRACT MENTORS

Anyone can become a mentor magnet—someone who attracts mentors into their orbit and keeps them there.

Seek out mentors for a reason. Reach out to someone you could learn from and ask for a curiosity conversation. Arrive early, with thoughtful questions you’ve prepared in advance. Within twenty-four hours, send a note expressing your appreciation—reference something specific you learned and volunteer your own time and expertise in return.

EXAMPLE: *A young man who now works closely with my husband, Jason, called him out of the blue one day, years ago, asking for a curiosity conversation. That conversation led to a summer internship, which led to part-time employment and then a full-time job.*

Cultivate mentors for a season. Look for projects where you can be useful to a mentor for at least three months. Honor your mentor by putting their advice into action.

EXAMPLE: *After an initial curiosity conversation with the cognitive psychologist Anders Ericsson, I proposed doing a study together. That project created the opportunity for conversations every few days and in-person visits every few months—an apprenticeship that built my confidence and skill in equal measure.*

Thank your mentors for life. Stay in touch. At least once a year, sit down and write a gratitude letter to someone you haven't properly thanked. With even greater frequency, visit, call, or text your most important mentors just to let them know how you're doing. Most important, pay it forward by mentoring others.

EXAMPLE: *When he graduated, my student Dele Akosile asked if he could stay in touch. I said yes. It's now been more than a decade, and Dele still drops me a line every Sunday. This little ritual, supplemented by the occasional call or visit, has made me not just a mentor for a reason or a season but a mentor for life.*

CHOOSE YOUR CULTURE

If you yearn for change but cling to the familiar, remember that status quo bias can be overcome.

Make a visit before making a commitment. A zero-risk strategy for trying out a new place of work is spending a week, a day, or even a single afternoon visiting in person.

EXAMPLE: *Melissa Ko was working in IT consulting, a job that paid the bills but left her uninspired, before she switched to a fabulously successful career in investing. What gave her the confidence to make that pivot? "I called up my friends and asked them about their job, I'd go and visit them where they worked," she told me. "One friend traded commodities on the floor of the New York Mercantile Exchange. It was a totally crazy environment.*

Everyone yelling out their bids at the top of their lungs, so fast-paced, so much adrenaline, so much money being exchanged. I loved it.”

Find a seat—*any* seat—on a rocket ship. When you find a great place to work, don’t be afraid to start at the bottom. It’s far better to take the worst job in the best culture—and work your way up—than to take the best job in the worst culture, where there’s nowhere to go but down.

EXAMPLE: *In 2001, Sheryl Sandberg almost turned down Google because the role she was offered wasn’t ideal. CEO Eric Schmidt told her, “You love the mission, and this is a rocket ship. When you’re offered a seat on a rocket ship, you don’t ask what seat.” She joined—later saying both of her first positions at Google and Facebook were more junior than other offers, but far bigger opportunities.*

Consider moving. Look up your address on Opportunity Atlas (opportunityatlas.org) to compare nearby neighborhoods on job growth and household income, and check Walk Score (walkscore.com) for pedestrian-friendliness. Moving even a few miles can make a world of difference.

EXAMPLE: *When my mother-in-law moved to a walkable neighborhood a few blocks from our home, she quadrupled her daily step count. She also doubled the frequency of dinners with Jason and me. Why? Because now, instead of getting into the car and driving thirty minutes to see her, we simply walk out the front door.*

Acknowledgments



My name is on the cover of this book, but no journey is taken alone. Here is an incomplete and inadequate gratitude letter to the many companions who helped carry the load, assured me we'd eventually get where we wanted to go, and got me back on track when I got lost.

This book was more than five years in the making, and from beginning to end, my beloved agent Richard Pine was my guide, sage, and protector. It's said that the only certainties in life are death and taxes. Not true. There is also Richard. Thank you, Richard, for your steadfast faith in this project and its author. You once told me that all the very best books are books about hope. I could say the same about people. Richard, you see what's possible and help others do the same.

Three years into the journey of this book—when I thought I was nearly finished but, apparently, was sorely mistaken—Richard introduced me to Rick Kot. Rick, from the moment we met, you've been my endlessly curious interlocutor, co-cogitator, and coach. When I was a little girl, I'd complain to my parents that I didn't have grandparents. They pointed out that of course I did, even if I never got to know them. Now in my mid-fifties, I finally got the grandfather I always wished for. Rick, you've loved both this book and its author into being. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

I've lost count of how many times my editorial consultant Heather Graci made this book better. Thank you, Heather, for caring as much about these pages as I did. You have a sharp eye, a quick mind, and a huge heart. I couldn't have done this without you.

For laying the theoretical foundations of the Three Boxes model, I am eternally indebted to James Gross. For helping me conceptualize this book, before I even had an outline, my thanks go to Aaron Kahane. And for showing me I was further along than I thought, thank you, Grace Rubenstein.

I'm deeply grateful to the tireless team at Scribner. Special thanks to Rick Horgan and Sophie Guimaraes, who faithfully shepherded this manuscript through countless, ever-improving drafts, and to Marysue Rucci, whose vision and leadership as publisher truly enabled me to be my best self. A loud and enthusiastic shout-out to Maya Rutherford and Kassandra Engel for making sure this book reaches the widest audience possible. Thank you to Jason Snyder for his masterful illustrations. And because people absolutely judge a book by its cover, very special thanks to Jaya Miceli and Jason Kernevlch.

In a world that gets busier and louder by the day, I'm grateful to both Whitney Peeling and Bill McGowan for helping me cut through the noise, so that the message of this book comes through loud and clear.

There is no "I" in team, and there is no "I" in research, either. Anything worthwhile I've accomplished as a scientist, I did (and thought and wrote) shoulder to shoulder with my amazing students, colleagues, and mentors. To all my brilliant collaborators, including those who coauthored the research cited in this book, thank you. A special shout-out to Katy Milkman, Dena Gromet, and the scientists and staff of Behavior Change for Good—you make me think, you make me laugh, and you make it a joy to come to work every day. Thank you to lab members both past and present, and in particular to Paolo Terni—your loyalty and good judgment are boundless.

Many dear friends read drafts of this book. You know who you are. For your tracked-changed edits, your margin comments, and your endless patience, thank you!

Mentors love you into being. I wouldn't be who I am without Marty Seligman, Anders Ericsson, Danny Kahneman, Walter Mischel, Jim

Heckman, Bob Cialdini, Kay Merseeth, Robin Gottlieb, and Matthew Carr.

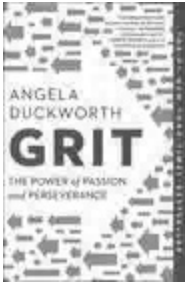
To David Lavin and the whole Lavin Agency family, including Ken Calway and Aleksandra Bakun, thank you for putting me in the spotlight. All the world's a stage—but my stage is bigger and brighter because of you.

To Deborah O'Neill, you've been my harbor through every storm. You once assured me that it's impossible to forget what you've really learned. Thank you for helping me learn so much—about context, about relationships, and about myself. This book would not exist without you.

In many ways, writing this book has been like running a family business—everyone lending a hand. Thank you, Amanda and Lucy. Your stories, suggestions, and sense of style made this book soooo much better! Mah, thank you for nourishing me with weekly dinners and unconditional affection. Annette, thank you for sisterly encouragement and on-call medical advice. Jessica, you may not recall the day I was so stressed out about this book, so in need of comfort and companionship that I asked to follow you around while you ran errands. “Of course,” was your answer, then and always—thank you. Jason, you make me the luckiest girl in the world. I love you more than you could know. Smooches.

And finally, Mom: you crossed an ocean to make your dreams come true, never once complaining that, for the sake of your family, those dreams were deferred for so long. Truly, you are the most generous person I know—and also the wisest—and that is why, when I am my best self, I am my mother's daughter. Mom, this book is for you.

More from the Author



[Grit](#)

About the Author



© ANGELA DUCKWORTH

ANGELA DUCKWORTH, PhD, is a psychologist, a MacArthur Fellow, and the Rosa Lee and Egbert Chang Professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Duckworth's TED Talk is among the most viewed of all time. Her first book, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, was a #1 *New York Times* bestseller and has sold more than 5 million copies worldwide.

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Notes



Prologue

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2. Does your family worry about losing their home? (reverse-coded)
3. If you get sick, does someone take you to the doctor?
4. Do you live in a neighborhood where it’s safe to take a walk after dark?
5. Do you have your own quiet space at home to relax or do homework?
6. Do you have access to fruit and vegetables every day?
7. If you had trouble with schoolwork, is there someone who could help?
8. If you wanted to do a sport, musical instrument, or hobby, could your family pay for the equipment and fees?
9. Is there an adult you can go to when you are upset or have a problem?
10. Is there an adult in your life who believes you can reach your goals, if you try?

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Image Descriptions



[Description 1:](#) The chart is a two-axis matrix. The horizontal axis represents Support, labeled Low Support on the left and High Support on the right. The vertical axis represents Challenge, labeled Low Challenge at the bottom and High Challenge at the top. The matrix is divided into four equal quadrants. The top left quadrant, representing High Challenge and Low Support, is labeled Burnout. The top right quadrant, representing High Challenge and High Support, is labeled Growth. The bottom left quadrant, representing Low Challenge and Low Support, is labeled Apathy. The bottom right quadrant, representing Low Challenge and High Support, is labeled Complacency. [BACK.](#)

[Description 2:](#) The diagram is a 2 by 2 matrix divided into four quadrants, labeled across the top and sides. The top axis reads “UNCONTROLLABLE” on the left and “CONTROLLABLE” on the right. The side axis reads “OUTSIDE” at the top row and “INSIDE” at the bottom row. In the top left quadrant (OUTSIDE, UNCONTROLLABLE), the text lists: “The modern world,” “Your siblings and parents,” and “The culture of your birthplace.” In the top right quadrant (OUTSIDE, CONTROLLABLE), the text lists: “Your personal space,” “Your peers and mentors,” and “The culture of where you work and live now.” In the bottom left quadrant (INSIDE, UNCONTROLLABLE), the text lists: “Your genes” and “Your past.” In the bottom right quadrant (INSIDE,

CONTROLLABLE), the text lists: “Your mindset” and “Your goals.” [BACK](#).

[Description 3:](#) The bar chart is titled GPA. The vertical-axis, labeled GPA, ranges from 78 to 86, with major tick marks at increments of 2. The horizontal-axis is labeled Phone Position and presents five categories from left to right: Next to me (screen up, sound on), Next to me (screen down, sound off), Near me (out of sight), In my room (out of reach and sight), and In another room. The data points are as follows: for Next to me (screen up, sound on), the GPA is approximately 82.5. For Next to me (screen down, sound off), the GPA is approximately 84. For Near me (out of sight), the GPA is approximately 85. For In my room (out of reach and sight), the GPA is approximately 85.2. For In another room, the GPA is approximately 85.7. The GPA values show an increasing trend as the phone position moves further from the person. [BACK](#).

[Description 4:](#) The handwritten commitment card, on lined paper, reads as follows. At the top, in larger script: Commitment Card - Jim Markey. Below that: Game Goal: Take a positive first step (8 inches) on all run plays. Below that: Practice Goal: Win 80 percent of my one-on-one's Wednesday. Below that: Conditioning Goal: Pull 4 sets of tires after practice Tues. At the bottom: I commit to: Derik Wiley. [BACK](#).

[Description 5:](#) The poster presents Wegmans' core values and mission in a structured layout. At the top, the text reads who we are. Below this, the poster is divided into three columns. The left column begins with “we believe”, followed by text describing Wegmans' commitment to customers and community, including the tagline Every Day You Get Our Best, dated est. 1983. This column continues with “we measure”, followed by a list: Sales, Contribution, Retention, Diversity, and Development, dated est. 1990. The middle column begins with “we are merchants”, followed by a short paragraph, dated est. 1967. Below this, “we live our values” introduces a numbered list of five values: 1, We care about the well-being and

success of every person; 2, High standards are a way of life, we pursue excellence in everything we do; 3, We make a difference in every community we serve; 4, We respect and listen to our people; and 5, We empower our people to make decisions that improve their work and benefit our customers and our company, dated est. 2001. This section concludes with a quote: “Our values create a culture of belonging where all are treated with respect and where each person’s uniqueness is valued,” attributed to Danny Wegman, dated est. 2000. The right column begins with “we are passionate”, followed by a paragraph describing a mission to help people make great meals easy and live healthier lives, and a paragraph describing target customers. This column includes a section titled “Why customers choose us: our commitment to Health, Help, Value and Doing The Right Thing”, with a list: Incredible service, The best ingredients, Great-tasting, healthy meals and help preparing them, Great-tasting restaurant foods, and Consistent low prices. A final section, “We accomplish this through”, presents a list of strategies including caring employees, global suppliers, culinary expertise, business process simplification, innovative stores, positive leaders, and a long-range company view, dated est. 1999. At the bottom of the poster, a handwritten-style quote reads: “Always help others,” attributed to Robert B. Wegman. The Wegmans logo is positioned in the bottom right corner. [BACK](#).

[Description 6:](#) The chart is titled Concentration of Patent Filings by Urban Area. It is a horizontal bar chart with urban areas listed along the vertical axis, ordered from highest to lowest, and a horizontal axis labeled Share of patents, 1990 to 2015, ranging from 2 to 12 in increments of 2. The bars and approximate values are as follows: San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, California, 12.0; San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward, California, 8.8; New York-Newark-Jersey City, New York-New Jersey-Pennsylvania, 6.4; Boston-Cambridge-Newton, Massachusetts-New Hampshire, 3.6; Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim, California, 3.7; Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, Washington, 3.2; San Diego-Carlsbad, California, 2.8; Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, Illinois-Indiana-Wisconsin, 2.4; Austin-Round Rock,

Texas, 2.2; and Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington, Pennsylvania-New Jersey-Delaware-Maryland, 2.0. An arrow and handwritten-style label pointing to the top bar reads: where Cody lives now. A second arrow and label pointing to the bottom bar reads: where Cody was born. [BACK.](#)



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An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, LLC
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York NY 10020

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First Scribner hardcover edition September 2026

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Interior design by Jason Snyder
Jacket design by The Heads of State

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 978-1-6680-0594-1
ISBN 978-1-6682-6415-7 (int exp)

ISBN 978-1-6680-0596-5 (ebook)
