'A Smörgåsbord of practical tips for getting your life under control'
John Williams, author of *Screw Work Let's Play*

Get Things Done

What stops smart people achieving more and how you can change

Robert Kelsey
Author of the bestselling

'There are many books about motivation and they tend to rely on pop psychology or the author's intuition, which makes them as inaccurate as ineffective. With *Get Things Done*, Robert Kelsey has managed to bridge the gap between the science and practice of willpower, discussing key psychological theories in an elegant, accessible style, and translating them into effective actionable suggestions. This book is a must-read for anybody wishing to understand the difference between potential and achievement, and wanting to bridge that gap to fulfil their meaningful goals.'

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Richard Newton, co-author of *Stop Talking, Start Doing*

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Roman Krznaric, bestselling author of *How to Find Fulfilling Work*

Get Things Done

What Stops Smart People Achieving More and How You Can Change

Robert Kelsey

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John Wiley and Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978–0-857–08308–1 (paperback) ISBN 978–0-857–08322–7 (ebk)

ISBN 978–0-857–08321–0 (ebk)

Cover design by Simon Dovar

Set in 10/13.5 pt Sabon LT Std by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited

Printed in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall, UK

To my mother

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

MY OWN PERSONAL CHAOS

In my mid-twenties I started learning German. Not sure why. I just fancied it – perhaps feeling that, having earned a university degree (late), I could plug another 'life gap' and learn a language. I went to the *Goethe-Institut* in Manchester and borrowed some tapes. And I made good progress. Soon I felt well on my way – building up vocabulary, understanding verb construction and dealing with grammar.

But then I just stopped. One day I missed a lesson and that was that. Of course, 20 years have passed, so if I'd kept it up I'd be fluent by now.

In my early thirties I took up sailing. I was living in New York at the time and had some great lessons in the harbour using Liberty and Ellis Island as tacking points. And I was good at it – my instructor thought me a 'natural'. But, again, I just stopped – meaning my strong nautical progress came to nothing.

Then there was golf – that was in my early twenties. French – early thirties. Five-a-side football, squash, tennis – all sometime between university and now. And what about all those business plans? Town-based restaurant guides, for instance. We produced three but not a fourth despite their popularity. A highly-focused financial magazine: didn't happen, despite two near-identical magazines since succeeding. A lifestyle magazine for the City of London: yep, there's one of those now. But it's nothing to do with me.

And the books I've half written. There was *The War Hero*, a Second World War tale of a discharged soldier lying about the circumstances of his injury; an unnamed spy novel based in a fictional country; a romantic drama called *Sanctuary* involving a Manchester student and a young Asian girl running away from a forced marriage; and even a lad-lit comedy called *Mind The Gap* on finding love in London. In each case I made strong progress – writing reams and reams. And then I simply stopped.

Yet such frivolities seem insignificant compared to my wayward career path. Enough to raise eyebrows in any HR department, my serious 'careers' have included training as a building surveyor (four years, plus a year at poly), work as an advertising sales executive (one year), a newspaper production editor/journo (one year), a magazine sub-editor (six months), a financial journalist (five years), an investment banker (five years), a dotcom entrepreneur (two years) and a financial PR company director (ten years). In fact, anyone trying to make sense of my CV would assume they'd picked up a page or two from the pile below.

Process isn't a talent – it's taught

Just about everything in my life has followed the same wayward trajectory: bright ideas, followed by enthusiasm, followed by an active frenzy that fizzles out once the going gets tough or I become bored or something else attracts my attention. Despite looking and acting well-organized – and possessing plenty of early determination – my mental chaos ultimately wins: halting progress and destroying both my productivity and my credibility. The only alternative to this pattern has been when fear has overwhelmed even this pathetic process – stopping me from even starting.

That said, I'm far from alone. Millions of people are stymied by their inability to get things done. They cannot get beyond the idea or initial thought – or perhaps the half-page of scribbled

lines. Even if they take action they can fall at the first fence, or the minute another – seemingly better – idea takes its place. Many eventually surrender – assuming it takes skills beyond them; or that those that can get things done have innate gifts they'll never acquire.

Of course, they don't. They've simply learnt the art (and science) of process. Indeed, process is a key word. As described within, there are conditions aplenty to explain our inability to deal with process. Yet there's also the fact that process is a skill we need to acquire, like learning to read a book from the beginning to the end (i.e. in that order). That said, millions of people enter adulthood without learning the basics of process. For me, the concept of thinking before acting – and then acting with thought given to sequence (and consequence) – was alien.

The problem wasn't just impulsivity. Sure, I'd often jump in without thought, although I'd just as often not jump at all (perhaps when facing authority or bureaucracy or when feeling fearful or lazy). My problem was being clueless with respect to time and task management, which meant my actions had no direction or purpose, while instructions felt like an imposition: hence my knee-jerk resistance.

As we shall see, such cluelessness starts young and is almost certainly the result of poor conditioning: whether from influencers (such as parents and teachers) who were themselves poorly conditioned (thus merely passing on the malaise), or who we – for whatever reason – ignored or even rejected.

And it's not long before we become resigned to our fate: developing low expectations regarding what's achievable, or assuming that – somehow – strong goal-oriented productivity is for other people. We may even find a condition that suits our symptoms, perhaps excusing us from the fray (see Part One).

Yet there's nothing innate about strong personal productivity. In virtually all circumstances it's a mere facet of learning. It's something we have to be taught, or something we have to teach ourselves if no one bothered (or we didn't listen). Blaming others or our

circumstances, or assuming others have privileges and entitlements not available to us, is both disabling and self-fulfilling.

Of course, we're right: other people *are* (probably) to blame for our situation; and others *do* have it easier. And we may even have been diagnosed with one of the long list of conditions to explain our productive deficiencies. But using this as an excuse to languish at the bottom – to not even start the journey towards becoming a well-organized, goal-oriented and productive human being – is an appalling and wilful act of self-sabotage.

Someone, somewhere has to tell us this news. And (more importantly) we have to hear it. Otherwise, like millions of unproductive people everywhere, we'll remain stuck in the wrong place – facing the wrong way – although with some cast-iron excuses for our lack of progress.

Someone capable of achieving something

No mentor appeared for me – at least not one I was willing to listen to. Instead, I remained utterly ineffective until my late thirties. Of course, I did make *some* headway. But it was poor progress compared to what I thought possible, and usually dismissed by me as 'too little, too late'. Somewhere in there, I reasoned, was a person able to achieve great things. I just needed someone to spot it, give me a chance, and point me in the right direction.

But that moment never came. In fact, even by thinking this, I'd handed over my future to somebody I'd never met and who possibly did not exist – hence my starry-eyed 'gis-a-job' look of longing and desperation every time I met somebody that clearly did have a future, and did know where they were going.

How pathetic: inwardly pleading 'save me' to total strangers, asking them (even if unstated, the intent was plain) to rescue me by organizing my future. It was the directionless graduate's equivalent of sitting passively outside the train station with a sign saying 'homeless and hungry'.

Yet the biggest problem with this 'future-outsourcing' approach isn't that it doesn't work. It's that it does. Occasionally, we do get rescued – normally by someone looking for recruits to their cause. We end up pursuing *their* goals for *their* ends. Indeed, why not? We've failed to forge our own path, so we may as well hand over our fate to someone more capable. That said, we'll quickly blame them when our unrealistic expectations turn out to be, well, unrealistic.

Ever-decreasing circles

On several occasions I've outsourced the direction of my career in this way: pleading for a chance (covertly if not overtly) and 'as luck would have it' being recruited by an organized, goal-oriented, skipper looking for a crew. Eventually I'd work this out and become disillusioned and even resentful. And then I'd start the same flirty-eyed process all over again, with a new bunch of productive strangers.

As is the way with these things, this was a process that repeated itself in ever-decreasing circles until – depressed and not a little fearful for the future – the unrelenting reality of my situation came crashing in. Floored, I found the self-help section of the bookshop – a zone that opened up an Aladdin's cave of potential solutions for my malaise. Books, DVDs, courses, even homeopathic remedies: rather typically I jumped in with the zeal of those desperate to be converted.

But, again, I'd outsourced my future – this time to a series of grinning Californians promising me dream-fulfilment via their seemingly irrefutable methodologies. Not for the first time, my wide-eyed enthusiasm became eroded by small slips and minor setbacks. My passion burnt away – replaced by a deep cynicism at the cheesy grins, the hyper-titling (*Maximum Achievement*, *Unlimited Power* etc.) and the over-promising.

That said, the pattern of behaviour felt uniquely mine. Hope, enthusiasm, sketched plans, erratic execution, small setbacks, arrested progress, despondent reactions, procrastination, surrender, cynicism, denial, even depression – and then, almost without pause, the next twinkling light on the horizon rekindling the hope.

Lost in a fantasy world

In fact, mine is a simple tale of low self-esteem and childhood alienation: a strained relationship with my father; a school that only noticed my misbehaviour; an older sister that I seemed to continually irritate; and a mother who tried to make up for all these deficits while busy fighting her own battles. Small wonder that formalized pursuits couldn't hold my attention and, instead, I lost myself in a fantasy world that, after a while, consumed my sense of purpose.

I opted out of the real, emotionally painful world at the age of ten – instead occupying a parallel, more comforting universe of my own making. Literally, I became someone else – a made-up person in a made-up country – keen to escape the reality of an upbringing that was both barren and hurtful.

I was brought up in what Americans call exurbia – a once-quaint Essex village expanded to the size of a small town to house the post-war east London diaspora in soulless but comfortable estates. This changed the pace of life along with the accents. Yet neither the rural natives, with their fruity vowels, nor the London incomers, with their sharp expressions, offered me a sense of direction worth emulating. Instead, I left the local comprehensive with one O level (in geography) and pursued a series of careers I didn't want. Or, with those I did want, eventually rebelled against – perhaps after an episode in which I felt exploited or undervalued.

A crucial point here is that unproductive people are rarely lazy – at least not initially. They can be highly motivated and work extremely hard, although they're busy going nowhere. Add stress,

anxiety and convictions of exploitation to those patent feelings of frustration and alienation and this is a destructive state of mind. It's also one unlikely to produce a positive response from others.

Most back away: inwardly rolling their eyes or quietly bitching to a confidant. Instead, they focus on their own productive pursuits, and view us as no more than a highly-volatile obstacle to navigate.

The painful truth

Certainly this cycle continued for me until I went into business with a successful friend – yet again, hitching myself to someone else's endeavours in the hope that some of his magic would rub off. Inevitably, we fell out. But, rather than back away, my partner attacked – telling me some home truths I'd been waiting to hear all my life.

'Yes, you're talented', he said (after prompting). 'But it's wasted. You'll never cash it in because it's directionless. You only know what you don't want, which means you're so busy fighting everybody – including yourself – you become someone others avoid. There's so much noise going on inside your head – so many battles being fought – that you cannot hear or see anything else.'

'In the end, people will give up on you', he said. 'Or you'll spend your entire life running away from things – meaning you'll have nothing to show for it but a series of lost battles and great excuses.'

Finally, someone worth listening to had said something I needed to hear. I had to change, and change fundamentally, which led me back to those discarded self-help books and even into the hands of a professional psychologist.

Yet to change I needed to understand what had happened. Why was I so directionless – destructively so? Adopting productive behaviours simply because some self-help guru told me to – or because a colleague had finally pierced my emotional armour – felt equally unsustainable: another pursuit that would disappear at the

first sign of boredom, or after the first setback, or due to some invented dispute.

If I was to change fundamentally – sustainably – I first had to unravel the chaotic mind that made me so ineffectual. Only then could I adopt the strong habits – as recommended by the gurus – with any sense of understanding, or with any optimism that the road ahead would be more rewarding than the twisting and rutted path that had taken me to this sorry point.

Get Things Done: *Whatever the cause, many people spend their lives in a cycle of hope, enthusiasm and endeavour followed by setbacks, defeat and cynicism. The result is procrastination, low attainment and frustrated ambitions. To break this cycle we need to unravel our chaotic minds.*

PART ONE

The Unproductive Mind

1

ORGANIZATIONAL INCOMPETENCE

Nestled in the gentle hills of California's Silicon Valley sits Stanford University: the breeding ground for the area's innovators since a horse-stud farm was converted into the original campus in 1891. Yet this university is renowned for more than being the intellectual hub of the most innovative community in the world's leading technological nation. In the 1960s and early 1970s Stanford University became known as a major centre for psychology – and particularly for a series of ground-breaking experiments on children that were to shape thinking on motivation, drive and success.

And while many of the experiments have been forgotten by all but a select group of professionals, one has entered the realms of folklore: the 1972 marshmallow tests on impulse control.

Brought into a room and given a single marshmallow, a succession of four-year-old children were then offered a choice: eat the marshmallow now, or resist for 15 minutes and receive a second marshmallow as a reward. Unbeknown to them, this simple choice – dividing the children into those that managed to wait for the additional marshmallow and those that didn't – revealed a fissure that would potentially run right through their lives, according to the psychologists at Stanford (led by Walter Mischel). This was between those able to *defer gratification* – and therefore develop productive, future-oriented organizational competence – and those preferring impulse-driven *instant gratification*, who were thus condemned to organizational incompetence and underachievement.

These were not stupid kids. They were mostly the offspring of campus professionals or graduates, so were likely to be destined for strong educational attainment. Yet, when tracked down and interviewed in adolescence, they again fell into two camps that corresponded closely with the results of the earlier experiments. Those capable of resisting the single marshmallow at four were more likely to be optimistic, competent, self-reliant and trustworthy. They were confident teenagers with strong initiative and clear goals. Yet those who'd been unable to resist the marshmallow were more troubled: revealing traits such as pessimism, impulsiveness, envy, mistrust, anger, resentment and indecision.

Basically, one group – the marshmallow resisters – expected and were organized for success; while the other group – the marshmallow eaters – were not.

'There is perhaps no psychological skill more fundamental than resisting impulse', writes Daniel Goleman in *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), one of the many books to cite these famous experiments. 'It is the root of all self-control, since all emotions, by their very nature, lead to one or another impulse to act.'

Delayed or deferred gratification is, therefore, a key trait in productive competence. Those lacking willpower or self-control will seek instant gratification, states Goleman, whether through sought pleasure or avoided pain. While those with self-control will ignore short-term inconveniences and temptations in order to focus on future potential rewards.

Early-life conditioning

Of course, everyone who's ever read about the marshmallow test immediately wonders how they'd have reacted to such temptation as a four-year-old child. The truth is, we cannot know; although I had that uneasy feeling of recognition – suspecting I'd have been incapable of delayed gratification.

Yet my feelings of unease extended to the marshmallow test itself. As a four-year-old, my guess is I'd have misunderstood the terms of the offer. So focused would I have been on the treat in front of me, I'd have filtered out any other information, including the potential for reward if I waited for the adult to return. Did this, therefore, condemn me at four as innately incapable of deferring gratification? Or did it simply suggest it was something I'd yet to learn?

This left me wondering whether there was anything hardwired (or even genetic) being measured by the marshmallow test, as some of those commenting on the Stanford experiments suggest. Or could early-life conditioning be dictating the result – encouraging the obvious follow-on that, unless this conditioning is reversed or amended at some point on our route towards adulthood, we'll reveal the same traits throughout our lives?

So, while I was convinced I'd have failed the marshmallow test at four – and probably even at eight – I was far from convinced this meant I was innately disposed (potentially genetically) towards unproductive, impulse-driven behaviour. It was simply poor, yet reversible, conditioning.

Testing the marshmallow test

To test this I did my own, totally unscientific, experiment on four children I knew well: my own and those of a friend and neighbour. Left together (although the Stanford children were alone I wanted to observe the impact of influence on the children) – each with a single marshmallow – I secretly watched the reactions of boys aged three, four and six and a girl who'd turned seven that day.

Despite the distractions of the occasion, the seven-year-old immediately understood my promise to return with an additional marshmallow if the original remained uneaten. She held on the required 15 minutes, which was no more than I expected from this emotionally aware young girl.

And her good behaviour influenced the six-year-old boy. That said, he seemed able to wait only by creating a game that mimicked the movements of the girl: with them alternating between sitting on their hands and clasping their hands over their mouths. I suspect he'd have found it a lot harder without her good example – especially as he talked constantly about the reward, as well as how long my return was taking.

The younger two had a far tougher time, however. The three-year-old lasted less than a minute, although I became convinced he only understood the premise after realizing the cost of his action: as excitedly reminded by his elders. This distressed him to the point he had to be removed from the room to avoid disrupting the experiment entirely.

Meanwhile, the four-year-old hung on, although was constantly asking his sister for an explanation and was clearly troubled by the challenge. Only the verbal intervention of the older boy (a strong influencer of the younger boy's behaviour) prevented him gobbling the marshmallow at around the five-minute mark and then repeatedly from around minute eight. Again, I worried throughout that he'd misunderstood the proposition.

Delayed gratification is developmental

Of course, my own version of the experiment proves nothing, although I thought the exact matching of the children's age to their ability to resist was surely no coincidence – meaning that delayed gratification is as likely developmental as it is innate. It's something we learn. As for the Stanford marshmallow failures and their negative traits in young adulthood, could the same poor conditioning that prevented them developing strong productive behaviour at four last right into young adulthood?

In fact, it could last a lifetime. A 2011 follow-up study – conducted by Dr B.J. Casey of Weill Cornell Medical College in New York – noticed that those adept at delayed gratification in the