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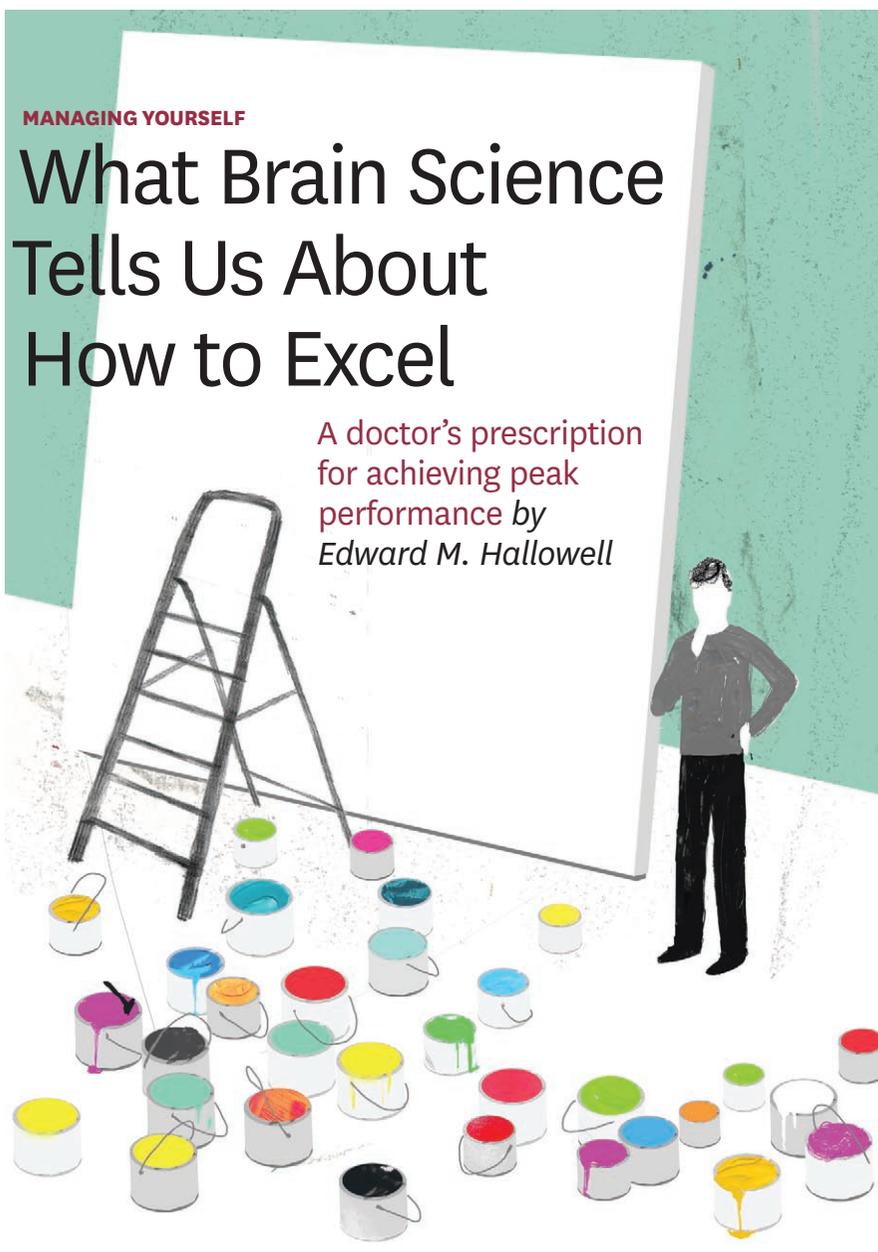
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MANAGING YOURSELF

What Brain Science Tells Us About How to Excel

A doctor's prescription for achieving peak performance by Edward M. Hallowell

ILLUSTRATION: JON HAN

As a child psychiatrist, I'm asked every day to help a struggling young person do better. For example, I recently saw a boy I'll call Tommy, who was floundering in sixth grade in spite of increasingly vehement exhortations from his teachers and parents to try harder. I could see how downcast he was, so I immediately turned to a process I've developed for kids like him. It began with figuring out what he liked to do (build things and play guitar) and what he was good at (math, science, music, and hands-on projects) and urging him to do those things more often. I also arranged for him to be switched out of a class where there was a clear conflict with the teacher and into one where he felt more at ease, and I advised the adults in his life to make sure he was imaginatively engaged in the classroom, not just sitting there, bored. I told them to challenge Tommy but not in a punishing way; the message should be "I'm asking more from you because I know you have it in you." Within weeks, he was working harder and was even eager to go to school. He started to receive positive feedback, which fueled his desire to work harder still.

You may be asking how this story applies to you, an adult working in—perhaps running—a complex business organization. Many people at work feel exactly the way Tommy did at school. Consider these three executives: Megan, a marketer with superlative skills and work habits, has to drag herself to the office because the culture at her company



Working on a connected team galvanizes people in ways nothing else can. But positive connection in business is slipping away, and disengagement is on the rise.

is full of backbiting, favoritism, and cliques. Alex, a graduate of Harvard Law School, is on track to become a partner in a prestigious New York law firm but hates his job. Each day he has to force himself into a suit and tie and paste on a smile as he exits the elevator. Luke is a senior manager at a successful pet food company that was recently acquired by a large corporation. He is amazed by how quickly the magic of the small business has been destroyed.

My diagnosis in each case is a “disease” called disconnection. It can spread like a virus. It saps companies of their vital juices. And given the rapidly changing world of work—where new is soon old, fast is slow, private is public, focus is fragmenting, loyalty is decreasing, debate has devolved into sound bites, and policies have become platitudes—it is now rampant in organizations. How do you perform at your best under those circumstances?

The question of how people can achieve peak performance has been my focus for 30 years, as a specialist in child development and learning differences such as ADHD and dyslexia, and as a counselor to people of all ages. The process I’ve developed to help kids like Tommy and adults like the three executives I just described is the Cycle of Excellence. It consists of five steps: select the right tasks, connect with colleagues, play with

problems, grapple with and grow from challenges, and shine in the acknowledgment of your achievements.

Select

Millions of workers toil fecklessly in the wrong jobs. They don’t want to cause problems—or risk losing their positions—by complaining, so they simply do what they are told. I have counseled hundreds of adults looking for tips on how to make their work life better. And, time and again, I have told them that they must first find the right job. In a 2004 review of the research on person-organization fit and person-job fit, Tomoki Sekiguchi concluded that a good fit increases job satisfaction, reduces stress, and improves attendance and performance. From my work with patients, I have seen that job fit ranks with choice of mate in predicting success and well-being.

In work, your goal should be to spend most of your time at the intersection of three spheres: what you like to do, what you do best, and what adds value to the organization. There are various psychological tests that aim to assess job fit. But it can also be done through a set of questions I’ve developed (see the sidebar “Is Your Job a Good Fit?”). If your answers indicate that you aren’t well matched to your job, you should consider talking to your manager about shifting some of your responsibilities. At the extreme, you

might consider changing positions or even careers.

I recently met with a woman who felt stuck in her customer service job. She was supervising employees who did most of their work on the telephone, and she disliked dealing with the constant conflict that arose from customers’ complaints. I suggested she speak to her boss to discuss fit. Her boss appreciated the initiative and reassigned her to a marketing research role, which she vastly prefers. This simple reassignment may have avoided years of therapy and antidepressants.

Connect

Connection is the bond an individual experiences with another person, a group, or anything else that stirs feelings of attachment, loyalty, excitement, inspiration, comfort, and a willingness to make sacrifices. Working on a connected team galvanizes people in ways nothing else can. But positive connection in business is slipping away. Colleagues often work in different cities, countries, and continents, and, thanks to technology, even those working in the same building may not speak face-to-face for months or years. At the same time, the recent economic crisis has created a climate of fear, anxiety, and mistrust. As a result, disengagement, one of the chief causes of underachievement and depression, is on the rise, and that can have big personal implications.

For example, a study of about 20,000 employees working in a wide range of jobs in Sweden, Finland, Germany, Poland, and Italy recently found that people who felt disconnected from their managers were more likely to get sick, miss work, or even suffer a heart attack. By contrast, data released by Gallup in 2007 show that people who have a best friend at work are seven times as likely as others to be positively engaged with their jobs.

Engagement, research has shown, boosts performance, and a sense of connection in the workplace leads to engagement. So, establishing robust

Is Your Job a Good Fit?

Your answers to the following questions can help determine if you're in a job that combines what you like to do, what you do best, and what adds value to the organization. If you aren't, consider shifting some of your responsibilities or even finding a different position or career.

1 What are you best at doing?

It is amazing how many people spend years trying to get good at what they're bad at instead of getting better at what they're good at.

2 What do you like to do the most?

This is not always the same as the answer to question 1. Unless it is illegal or bad for you, do what you like. If it is also productive and useful, it ought to be your career.

3 What do you wish you were better at?

Your answer may guide you to a course you should take or a mentor you should work with. It may also indicate a task you should delegate.

4 What talents do you have that you haven't developed?

Don't say none.

5 Which of your skills are you most proud of?

This often reflects obstacles you've overcome.

6 What do others most often say are your greatest strengths?

This question helps you identify skills you may not value because they seem easy to you.

7 What have you gotten better at?

This gives you an idea of where putting in additional effort can pay off.

8 What can you just not get better at no matter how hard you try?

This tells you where not to waste any more time.

9 What do you most dislike doing?

Your answer here suggests what tasks you might want to delegate or hire out.

10 Which skills do you need to develop in order to perform your job?

Your answer to this question might lead you to take a course, read a book, or work with a mentor or coach.

11 What sort of people do you work best/worst with?

Do you love to work with highly organized, analytic types? Do creative types drive you crazy? Make up your own categories.

12 What sort of organizational culture brings out the best in you?

It is amazing how many people won't leave a culture for which they are hideously unsuited.

13 What were you doing when you were happiest in your work life?

Could you find a way to be doing that now?

14 What are your most cherished hopes for your future work life?

What could keep you from realizing those hopes?

15 How could your time be better used in your current job to add value to the organization?

Your answer here gives your manager valuable input he or she may never have thought to ask for.

relationships at work should be a top priority. Small talk seems trivial, but it pays big dividends, building affinity and trust. Reach out to colleagues. Pay attention to everyone. Appreciate the maintenance people and the cafeteria staff. Notice personal details, like a new dress or a sad look. Most of all, be real. Bring your full self into every interaction.

Executives often spend enormous effort, time, and resources trying to get people to know and buy in to an organization's mission. But positive human relationships are much more important. If you look forward to coming to work, it doesn't matter what cause you're working toward. Soldiers in the trenches aren't in that moment fighting for freedom or country; they're fighting for one another.

When people say they just don't have time for connecting at this level, I tell them about my friend Joe Loscalzo. Joe is a professor at Harvard Medical School, chief of medicine at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, a research scientist, editor in chief of the cardiology journal *Circulation*, and a doctor with a busy practice. It is hard to imagine how anyone's days could be fuller, yet the shortest appointments he makes with the people who work for him are a half hour. "People just assume that you are too busy to talk to them," Joe says. "I don't think that is the best way to operate." When someone needs less than 15 minutes, he's happy. "Then we get to talk about what's really going on," he explains. Joe does this not only for employees but also for himself. He loves his work in part because he knows his people so well. The value of genuine connection always goes two ways.

Play

If you've selected the right job and are working in a connected environment, you naturally move to the next step: imaginative engagement with the task, a state I call play. Play is the activity of the mind that allows you to develop ideas, approaches, and plans. When you're at

The Cycle of Excellence

SELECT

Find the right job.

CONNECT

Tap into the power of other people.

PLAY

Imaginatively engage with work.

GRAPPLE AND GROW

Conquer difficult challenges.

SHINE

Ensure that you are recognized.

play, an fMRI scan will show activity in the right hemisphere of your brain—where your spontaneous, intuitive thinking occurs—as opposed to the left side, which is responsible for your grounded, detail-oriented, analytical thoughts. But you can enter into play even when doing routine work like accounting.

Your goal should be what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow,” the state in which a person is so caught up in what he’s doing that he loses self-consciousness. That is when people perform at their best. As Southwest Airlines says in its corporate credo: “People rarely succeed at anything unless they are having fun doing it.”

We know from neuroscience that play builds your brain. It stimulates the secretion of brain-derived neurotrophic factor, or BDNF, a recently discovered molecule that promotes nerve growth. Play engages the amygdala, a clump of neurons that helps regulate emotions. In addition, it has a beneficial effect on the prefrontal cortex, which regulates executive functions such as planning, organizing, prioritizing, deciding, scheduling, anticipating, delegating, analyzing—in short, most of the skills you need to excel in business.

Play at work may sound like an oxymoron. After all, you’re paid to do your job—to follow a plan and get results. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t bring imagination into all that you do. Instead of mindlessly completing a task, allow yourself to think, to change course according to necessity or curiosity. The end product will be better as a result.

In fact, people perform best when they are at play. They are exerting effort—one definition of work—but they are doing so in a state of excitement, not drudgery. A surgeon in the operating room, a defense attorney delivering a summation, an executive elucidating a new strategy, a trader zeroing in on a new stock, and a manager running a complex meeting are all hard at work but also at play.

Once had a patient who hated his job because his manager insisted that he

rigidly adhere to rules and procedures. As he put it: “I am asked to do stupid things all day long.” In essence, he felt he was being barred from play, from creative thought, from taking initiative. I coached him on how to ask his manager for more freedom. If you approach them the right way, superiors are often willing to change their own practices; after all, peak performance is their goal, too.

Grapple and Grow

If you’ve come to a point where you are imaginatively engaging with your job, you will naturally want to work harder at it. The notion that some people have a better work ethic than others, owing to moral superiority or a stronger character, is misguided. The real reason people work hard is because they want to, usually because they have, deliberately or not, followed the first three steps in the Cycle of Excellence.

The fourth step involves working hard to achieve a difficult goal. This may include some drudgery, but you’ll be willing to endure it if you feel connected and have helped create the assignment.

Pain abounds on the way to excellence. But this is good stress, as demonstrated by the work of Eric Kandel, who shared the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 2000 with two other scientists for discovering the phenomenon synaptic plasticity. Let’s say you’re trying to memorize a telephone number. At first, you need to write it down. The nerve cells involved in learning that number fire a neurotransmitter, glutamate, to get the process started. If you never dial the number again, nothing changes. But if you work to memorize it, the synapses enlarge and the connections between the nerve cells involved become more securely established. They are, to use the scientific term, plastic. As you stress your brain in this way, what was difficult becomes easier, owing to those strengthening neural pathways. As the brain geeks say, neurons that fire together wire together. That is why practice—which in neurological terms means the repeated firing of neurons—leads to improved performance.

Hard work may make you want to pound your desk or jettison the task. But after it is over, your brain will be the stronger for it, and you will be glad you endured it. James Loehr, one of the leading thinkers on peak performance, puts it this way: “Stress is not the enemy in our lives. Paradoxically, it is the key to growth.”

Bad stress, by contrast, can’t be endured without damage. It is unplanned, uncontrolled, exceeds the capacity of the system to adjust to it, and allows no time for rest and recovery. It also reduces brainpower. Adam Galinsky of the Kellogg School and researchers from the Netherlands have shown that when a person feels a diminished sense of power and control, his or her executive functioning is significantly impaired.

Toxic stress usually comes from without—for example, in nature from the weather, in human physiology from disease, and in business from the economy or a bad boss. But sometimes, in an effort



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to excel, you can drive yourself to it. You must avoid this because toxic stress kills. It kills good work, brain cells, heart cells, and, eventually, people. A 2010 study in the Netherlands found that high levels of urinary cortisol, a so-called stress hormone, increased the risk of death from cardiovascular causes fivefold in the study sample of more than 800 subjects.

To manage yourself properly, it is important to court the good stress, in the form of surmountable challenges, while avoiding the bad. I have a patient who was working with a team of programmers to develop new software by a certain date. As the deadline approached, toxic stress began to spread. Team members were worried and frustrated, working later and harder but less effectively, until my patient blew the whistle, literally, by putting two fingers in his mouth and emitting a piercing sound. “C’mon guys,” he said. “Let’s regroup and get this done.” They had

an on-the-spot meeting, determined their next steps, and completed the project before deadline. They reduced toxic stress first by connecting (one of my basic rules is never worry alone) and then by formulating a plan, thus restoring a sense of power and control.

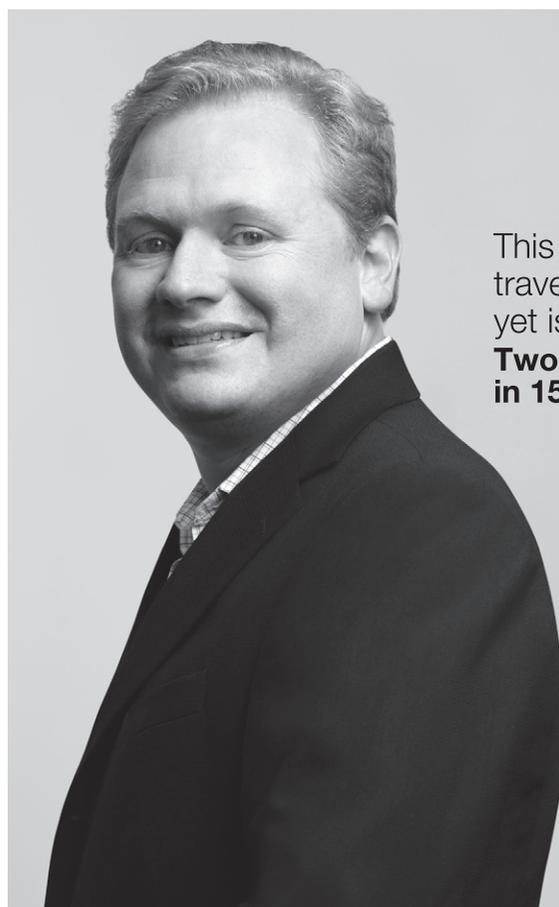
Shine

After you grapple, you progress, and the final step should be acknowledgment of your achievements. We have known for a long time that the need for recognition is fundamental to optimal human performance. On a neurochemical level, praise is usually accompanied by the release of dopamine, a transmitter associated with pleasure and well-being. That is why it feels good physically. On a social level, it fills the uniquely human need to serve, to be of value, to matter. These facts are well established; what’s new is our increasing disconnection, which makes

recognition both less available and more necessary. Work tasks happen so quickly and involve so many virtual hands that it can be difficult for managers to single out people for praise even when they most need it. Remember that in your dealings with colleagues. But, more important, if you’re grappling and growing but not receiving acknowledgment from your organization, speak up. Lay claim to what is yours. If the culture of your group chronically withholds praise, consider finding another place to work. Recognition completes the Cycle of Excellence, encouraging you to work even harder to achieve your best. ♥

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