

# YOUR BEST JUST GOT BETTER

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**Y**ou look at the clock on top of your mobile phone as you're about to start your car to drive home. It's 6:47 P.M., another day almost finished. "Never enough time," you say aloud, realizing that once again there's more to do than you can possibly get done before you get home. It's right then, in that very moment, you must ask yourself, "Am I working at my best?" To leaders like you, work is made up of more than attending meetings, replying to voice and e-mail messages, and setting the strategy for the next 18, 36, or even 60 months. To be as productive as possible, you need to get better—a little bit better—each and every day. The kind of professional development that I'm speaking of transcends the basics; it's more than soft skills like effective delegation or efficient presentation, or tech skills you could get from another spreadsheet or e-mail course.

I write, coach, and speak on the kind of professional improvement that sets the direction of your actions based on your commitment to the goals you have set for your organization and the momentum of the markets you serve. In addition to growing your organization,

working effectively has another benefit: You have the time and energy you need to do more of what it is that nourishes your soul. Great leaders recognize the level of responsibility they hold to make the organization they direct even better. By definition, *to better* (as a verb) means to improve on or surpass—and in an era of increased accountability and the potential for making things better, leaders are well positioned to do just that.

The questions are obvious: What do great leaders do? Is it something they've learned and practiced over time that earns them the top spot in an organization? Or is it a natural way of being they are born with that affords them the position they step into and hold over time? From teaching high school starting over 15 years ago to founding my own advising firm 5 years ago to publishing my book, *Your Best Just Got Better*, I've searched for the common elements to effective and efficient leadership. I've interviewed hundreds of professionals and continue to serve as an executive coach to senior managers across finance, aerospace, education, and retail companies. Over the years of reading, speaking, writing, and coaching, I've found

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more productive tomorrow. What would you see, who would you talk to, where would you go, what would you do? Then, early in the morning for just the next five days, spend a few seconds reviewing that inventory to ask, “Is there anything I can do to set up myself up for a more successful today?”

### CHECKLIST:

- Sit down to draft a new ideal day. Script it out, from morning till nighttime.
- Review and update your “I’m at my best when . . .” reminder system.
- Open your calendar to 180 days from now and write three to five paragraphs of what you expect to have seen and done by then.

## The Secret? Do Less— Accomplish More

Not too fast, not too slow. . . . Is the pace you’re working at sustainable while at the same time making the impact over time that you’re planning to make? A common leadership trait I observe in the senior managers I meet with is their ability to stay on point, on message, and on task for the long term. When markets are up, or down, they hold on to constant movement toward long-term goals and midterm objectives. How do they do it?

### Slow Down to Speed Up

Think about the last thing you rushed. Maybe you were running late when you left your house for an event. Perhaps a deadline crept up on you. Whatever it was, consider your overall performance. How would you rate how you did? Did you leave something undone? Did you not get as much done as you’d like? This approach started when I taught high school, and I still use the philosophy today. I called it, “The Magic Five Minutes.” I told my students that whenever they finished a project—an in-class exam or an at-home assignment—to stop and spend 300 more seconds on it. Look for anything they missed, left out, or forgot to include. Find a place to add an idea or a little more

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*Imagine what an ideal day  
could look like.*

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information so that the project could be as complete as possible.

Over the next week, look for places to add an extra five minutes. Maybe it’s in giving feedback to a senior leader on your team, or reviewing an outbound memo to the organization. Whatever it is, set a timer for that short interval and see what happens; you may be surprised by what you add or take away!

### Reset Your Pace

Your normal—from what time you get going in the morning to the routines and habits you’ve put into action—is years, if not decades, in the making. Tracking what you do is one way to make objective improvement in how you manage three limited resources: your time, energy, and focus. When you know what you’re already doing, you can change where appropriate to be the slightest bit more effective and efficient. Start with your morning routine. Consider keeping a record of the things that, by 10:30 A.M. every day, you spend valuable time, energy, and focus doing. After just two or three days of this kind of personal assessment, you’ll have great information about where you spend extra time, where too many interruptions pull you off-track, or where you could combine actions and activities to be more efficient through the day.

Another area you can track, and I encourage my clients to update this once per month, is to create an inventory of things they can do to reinvent, reengage, and reinspire themselves to do more of their great work. The question I ask is, “What can you do, about once a month, to reset your pace?” Think about where you

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## Doing more of what nourishes your soul.

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there is a mind-set that effective leaders subscribe to; they make it OK to get better every day.

Following are four things to consider as you review the past year of your own leadership experience. At the end of each is a short checklist to review each quarter next year. Perhaps this tool will serve as a guide for you to improve on not just what you're doing for your organization, but how you're leading your own professional development experience along the way.

### Getting Better? It Starts With You . . .

What is personal productivity? is the question at the core of countless business management books and leadership programs organized by business schools worldwide. Recently I saw a promotion for an executive education program showing students traveling from as far away as 10,000 miles to learn negotiation skills and how to lead high-performing teams. These kinds of topics demand the leader work as effectively and efficiently as possible. Peter Drucker wrote, in 1959, "Productive work in today's society and economy is work that applies vision, knowledge and concepts—work that is based on the mind rather than the hand." So, the natural question that leads to is, Where does the work that is based in the mind begin? I propose it is based on how you think about how you engage in your work.

#### What Would It Look Like?

Years ago, when I was a graduate student in the department of education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, I was in a meeting with my adviser, Ron

Kok. At the end of a particularly difficult day, I must have been ranting about the challenges, difficulties, and insurmountable scope of work I was aiming to take on. I remember that at some point during the conversation my adviser lifted his hand to stop my monologue and asked, "Would you know your ideal day of teaching if you saw it?" That one question changed everything. Coupled with coaching exercises I've borrowed from my mentors Marshall Goldsmith and Frances Hesselbein, I regularly flip-forward and actually imagine—or what I call *image-in*—what an ideal day could look like. Call it a blend of intuitive and innovative personal goal setting, the process is a simple if not unchallenging one. It requires you sit down and really focus on where you're going in the near to midterm future. As a leader you're focused on making things better; in fact, over the years you've doubtlessly honed the skill I call *discrepancy identification*. Noticing what is wrong or missing, this talent can sometimes detract from the positive focus you could apply toward the future. As a monthly exercise, schedule just 15 minutes to sit down and write out a potential future ideal day.

#### When Are You at Your Best?

At the buzz of the alarm clock to start another day, your body and psyche both seek normal—or, what I call in the book, *homeostasis*. That delicate balance of "what I always do" with "what I need to do today" is always in competition. So, what do you do about it? Focus on when you're at your best. This goes beyond merely saying you "work better in the morning" or find it easier to focus "when you get a full night's rest." There are many things that go into your working at or near your 100 percent. To get you started, think about the most recent Olympic Games, in London. The athletes there had been training for years—some, an entire lifetime—for their few seconds or minutes of the event. What would you imagine the 24 hours before that single event were like? My guess: They were doing everything and anything they could so they could perform at their best the next day. Today, make a short list, maybe just 8 or 12 items, of the things you know you could do today to set yourself up for a

would go, who you would spend time with, and what you would do if you had that hour or that day once a month to tap back into the well of enthusiasm.

### CHECKLIST:

- ❑ Pick something you've finished and add a few minutes to think about it; is there anything to add?
- ❑ Track something . . . start with something easy: Night-time lights out to day-time lights on, or the number of steps you walk, or the number of interruptions you experience during the day.
- ❑ Add some valuable content to your daily input. Watch an 18-minute TED Talk. Find some other source of daily inspiration to add to your routine.

## The (Negative or Positive) Influence of Your Social Network

Long before you could send a mass e-mail or update your LinkedIn profile, you were building your social network. Your friends, colleagues, mentors, and old bosses are all represented on your professional community, which in a quick glance gives you a picture of how you got from where you were to where you are. So what is it that great leaders do about and with their network? As you reflect on the past year, consider the "Who" on your own team.

### The Fab Five

Your social circle starts with the five people you spend the most mind-share with through the week. At work, at home, and anywhere in between, the five people you spend time talking to, thinking about, and connecting with will influence you beyond measure.

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## *The Magic Five Minutes...*

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In fact, I believe that the next 60 months of your experience—what restaurants you eat in, what books you read, what vacations you take—will come down to the conversations you have with the five people closest to you. If they can be so influential as to change where you eat, what you think, and where you go, what might they be able to do for your leadership ability and experience? Here's a great activity you can do right now. On a note card or in a notebook, write down the five people you spent the most time with last week. Think about the things you talked about, the ideas you had, and the possibilities you created with each person over the past few days. If you see topics you need to know more (or less) about represented there, it makes it easy to decide who to spend more time (or less time) with in the coming weeks.

### The Fourth Question

There is an absolute opportunity embedded in getting out and spending time with like-minded groups of individual leaders. Where can you go in the next month to enhance your network of people and ideas influencing you? I've found that there are four questions people ask in these kinds of events. In fact, for most of us, we're really only trying to get to the fourth question, as it has the most meaning for what we're interested in and why we're at the networking or conference event in the first place. Before identifying that question, let's take a look at the first three:

- What's your name?
- Where are you from?
- What do you do?

In fact, I've noticed over the past several years more and more conferences are creating name tags—whether paper-based, clip-on ones, or more high-tech, digital devices—to handle those first three questions. The point: to get to the fourth question. Now, of course, the next question you ask is going to be a highly subjective one. It will depend on the venue, the focus of the event, even the population of attendees. But one bit of advice I can give is to begin formulating the kinds of questions you'd like to have ready so that once you do

meet someone and fall into an interesting conversation, you can move it in a direction of increased interest.

Some sample fourth questions:

Have you always been interested in . . . ? (Fill in the blank with what they're talking about.)

Where—besides here—are you learning more about? (Fill in what you're interested in.)

What's the latest book you've read and how did you hear about it?

In addition to expanding your network, deepen the relationships you already have. One way to practice this is to set up a series of five meetings with someone in your network. I've done this with mentors, colleagues, and friends as far away as Europe (yes, it has taken up to a year for us to get in our five meetings!) as a way to continue moving the conversation forward.

### CHECKLIST:

- List five influencers you would like to be spending more time with one-on-one over the next six months.
- Find a networking event or conference you can speak at. Arrive early and stay late to meet other people who share common interests. Follow up with those people whose business cards you received.
- Meet with one peer or colleague weekly for coffee or lunch for five weeks and follow a topic or a theme.

## Focus: A Most Precious Natural Resource

Every month, I spend two to five days in the offices of executives around the world. While there, we talk about workflow management; that is, the way individuals manage their own goals and objectives alongside the changing priorities that come from outside market forces. Two topics of discussion are gaining in prominence: the workplace and workplace of the future. Where do you go when it's time to think?

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## Where are you when you do your deepest thinking?

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After the board meeting, between phone conferences, and before it's time to decide on a new product or direction, (where are you, when you do your deepest thinking)? Look around that physical space the next time you're there and take note. If you clearly identify what's there (and not there), you may be able to replicate aspects of that environment in other spaces.

I once worked with an executive who realized that some of the best thinking she did was actually *not* in her office, but in her study at home. We identified what was true about that space: It had good lighting. All her supplies (paper, pens, books) were easily available. Her computer and computer software were up-to-date, and so on. Then, we used that checklist to set up two other spaces where she might be able to do that level of deeper thinking: her office, and a hotel room. She was planning for about 12–18 months of serious travel, and we knew that she was going to need to be able to drop in “almost anywhere” and do deep thinking.

### CHECKLIST:

- Study your workplace ecosystem; make it a place where it's easier to get more of the right things done.
- Schedule regular deep-dive sessions where you stop doing day-to-day work and focus on longer-term projects and goals without interruption; start with four of these a week, about 30 minutes each.

## Conclusion

In a world where it's more important than ever to get more of the right things done—on time and under

budget—it's easy to stay focused on the never-ending to-do list. In addition to leading your organization and maximizing the most limited resources you have, it is vital that you build and sustain the productive habits of getting better and better. At levels both explicit and implicit, it is important that continuous improvement not just be words you say but actions you practice.

There *is* too much to do. Your mission (should you choose to accept it) is to make room—mental and physical space—to acknowledge the accomplishments you and your colleagues do experience regularly. Use the tips and ideas in this article to create more productive days. Get done what you have to get done and check it off your list so that you have the time, energy, and focus to get to what you've wanted to have time to do!



*Jason W. Womack, MEd, MA, advises business leaders worldwide on the topics of productivity and workplace performance. His book, "Your Best Just Got Better: Work Smarter, Think Bigger, Make More," is available in hardback and several electronic versions. Visit his website at [www.womackcompany.com](http://www.womackcompany.com) and share your questions and comments via Twitter: [www.twitter.com/jasonwomack](http://www.twitter.com/jasonwomack).*