



## MANAGING YOURSELF

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*Fulfillment doesn't come from clearing hurdles others set for you; it comes from clearing those you set for yourself.*

# Reaching Your Potential

by Robert S. Kaplan

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# Reaching Your Potential

## The Idea in Brief

Despite racking up impressive accomplishments, you feel frustrated with your career—convinced you should be achieving more. You may even wish you had chosen a different career altogether.

These feelings often stem from a common error: buying into others' definitions of success. To reach your potential, Kaplan suggests taking a deeply personal look at how you define success:

Begin by recognizing that managing your career is *your* responsibility. Then, follow these three steps:

- **Know yourself** by identifying your strengths and weaknesses and the activities you truly enjoy doing.
- **Excel** at the activities critical to success in your desired role.
- **Demonstrate character and leadership** by putting the interests of your company and colleagues ahead of your own.

## The Idea in Practice

Kaplan offers these guidelines for reaching your potential at work:

### KNOW YOURSELF

Write down your 2–3 greatest strengths *and* weaknesses. If (like most people) you struggle with identifying key weaknesses, solicit the views of people (peers, direct reports, trusted friends) who will tell you the brutal truth. Ask for very specific feedback (“How well do I listen?” “What is my leadership style?”). Be receptive to the input you receive.

Then figure out what you truly enjoy doing. What’s your dream job? Resist the lure of a hot field: If you go into it without a strong enthusiasm for the actual work, you may waste a number of years before you admit it’s the wrong job for you. Once you’ve chosen your ideal job, you’ll have to start from scratch. But choosing a field you love gives you strength to weather the inevitable setbacks and long hours needed to reach your full potential in any career.

### EXCEL AT CRITICAL ACTIVITIES

Identify the 3–4 activities essential for success in your desired or current role. Then develop a plan for excelling in these activities.

#### ► Example:

A new division head at a large industrial company was struggling to grow sales and profits. Through interviews with staff and customers, he concluded that success in his business hinged on developing close relationships with top customers’ purchasing managers, putting the right people in critical leadership positions, and staying at the cutting edge of product innovation. He began delegating activities less central to success so he could focus on raising the bar on the three success factors he had identified. Sales and profits improved.

### DEMONSTRATE CHARACTER AND LEADERSHIP

Character and leadership make the difference between good and great performance. To demonstrate **character**:

- Put the interests of your company and colleagues ahead of your own, doing things for others without regard to what’s in it for you.
- Adopt an owner’s mindset, asking yourself what you would do if you were the ultimate decision maker.
- Be willing to make recommendations that will benefit your organization’s overall performance, possibly to the detriment of your own unit. Trust that you’ll eventually be rewarded.

To exhibit **leadership**, speak up—even when you’re expressing an unpopular view. Your superiors desperately want dissenting opinions so they can make better choices. If you play it safe instead of asserting your heartfelt opinions, you may hit a plateau in your career.

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Ambitious professionals often spend a substantial amount of time thinking about strategies that will help them achieve greater levels of success. They strive for a more impressive job title, higher compensation, and responsibility for more sizable revenues, profits, and numbers of employees. Their definitions of success are often heavily influenced by family, friends, and colleagues.

Yet many ultimately find that, despite their efforts and accomplishments, they lack a true sense of professional satisfaction and fulfillment. During my career with Goldman Sachs, as well as over the past few years of teaching and coaching managers and MBA students at Harvard Business School, I have met a surprisingly large number of impressive executives who expressed deep frustration with their careers. They looked back and felt that they should have achieved more or even wished that they had chosen a different career altogether.

Consider a very successful research analyst at a large securities firm who came to see me

because he was discouraged with his career progress. This was particularly ironic because he was well known, highly regarded (ranked number one in his industry sector), and well compensated. He told me that, after 10 years, he was tired of his job, disliked his boss, and felt he had no potential for further upward mobility. Most of all, he had always wanted to be an investment manager, but he had started out as an analyst and never really reassessed his career path. He felt trapped. He feared losing his stature and didn't want to let anyone down, but at the same time he didn't want to keep doing what he was doing.

As we talked, he wondered if he'd been so busy trying to reach specific milestones and impress other people that he'd lost sight of what he really enjoyed doing. The truth was that he loved analyzing stocks and assessing management teams, but he also wanted to have the responsibility for making the actual investment decisions and then be held accountable for the results. I encouraged him to take action and speak to a number of investment

firms (including his current employer) about a career change. After doing this, he ultimately was offered and accepted a portfolio manager position in the asset management division of his current firm. He learned that his firm's leaders wanted to retain him regardless of job description and that they were quite surprised to find out he wanted to be on the investment side of the business. He has since become a superb investment manager, and although he wishes he'd stepped back and reexamined his career years earlier, he's thrilled that he made the switch while there was "still time."

If you are experiencing similar feelings of frustration or even regret about the direction of your career, this article is intended to help you examine the question, "Am I reaching my potential?" This is not the same as asking, "How do I rise to the top?" or "How can I be successful in my career?" Rather, it's about taking a very personal look at how *you* define success in your heart of hearts and then finding *your* path to get there.

To do that, you must step back and reassess your career—starting with the recognition that managing it is your responsibility. Too many people feel like victims in their careers, when in fact they have a substantial degree of control. Seizing control requires you to take a fresh look at your behavior in three main areas: knowing yourself, excelling at critical tasks, and demonstrating character and leadership.

### Knowing Yourself

Taking responsibility for your career starts with an accurate assessment of your current skills and performance. Can you write down your two or three greatest strengths and your two or three most significant weaknesses? While most people can detail their strengths, they often struggle to identify key weaknesses. This exercise involves meaningful reflection and, almost always, requires soliciting the views of people who will tell you the brutal truth. Unfortunately, you often can't count on your boss to accurately assess your strengths or to be willing to confront you with what you're doing wrong. It's up to you to take control of this process by seeking coaching, asking for very specific feedback, and being receptive to input from a wide variety of people at various levels within your organization. This gather-

ing of feedback needs to be an ongoing process because, as your career progresses, you will face new challenges and demands.

Recently I met with a division head of a large professional services firm. Though he'd been a rising star for several years, he felt he'd begun to stagnate. His direct reports and his CEO no longer seemed engaged and enthusiastic in their dealings with him, and he didn't know why. In our discussions, he was able to specifically describe his strengths, but when I asked about his weaknesses, he gave me fairly generic responses, such as "Maybe I'm too impatient" and "I need to raise my profile." When I pressed him about feedback from his boss he still struggled to identify even one specific weakness. I sent him off on an assignment: Interview at least five colleagues and subordinates.

He returned a few weeks later with several "surprises." He'd heard, for example, that while he was detail-oriented and decisive, he micro-managed, had a dictatorial style, and failed to listen. Armed with these insights, he sought coaching, started working on his flaws, and began regularly soliciting feedback from his colleagues and subordinates. A year later he reported that his effectiveness had improved as a result of these ongoing efforts, and he was once again feeling confident and optimistic about his career.

This type of initiative takes time, humility, and a willingness to confront weaknesses, fears, and blind spots that many of us would rather ignore. But I never cease to be impressed by the capacity of people to change and improve once they recognize their shortcomings as well as their strengths.

Of course, getting others to tell you where you're falling short isn't easy—particularly if they're your subordinates. It must be done in one-on-one conversations, and you need to give potential coaches time to learn that you're sincere. When your employees see you actually act on their feedback, they are likely to become more proactive in offering advice, because they know you value their input. Your subordinates and colleagues will also feel they have a stake in your success and that of your unit—which will make them more likely to enjoy working with you.

Once you have a grip on your strengths and weaknesses, your next challenge is to figure out what you truly enjoy doing. What's your

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dream job? How well does it match what you currently do? Many people either don't know what their passions are or are so focused on the views of their peers that they drift into the wrong career. I was recently approached by an MBA student who wanted advice on whether to go work for a hedge fund, a private equity firm, or an investment bank. When asked whether he had an interest in financial markets, he quickly said no. He wasn't even sure about the key tasks that each of those jobs would entail. When asked what he would do if he had \$10 million in the bank, however, his answer was very clear: pursue a career in the music industry. He was a concert-level musician and loved the music business. Once he recognized how much he had been swayed by his fellow students' bias toward the lucrative financial services industry, he realized he needed to rethink his choices.

The conventional wisdom about the attractiveness of various careers changes constantly. Twenty-five years ago the medical and legal professions were considered financially rewarding and socially desirable. Today, a number of doctors and lawyers are frustrated in their jobs and realize that they might have based their career choices excessively on the views of their peers and popular opinion, instead of on whether they would actually love the work. Hedge funds and private equity are

today's hot fields, but people who go into them without a strong enthusiasm for the actual tasks may find themselves starting from scratch a few years down the line. Loving what you do gives you the strength to weather personal setbacks, overcome adversity, face and address your weaknesses, and work the long hours typically needed to reach your full potential.

### Excelling at Critical Tasks

It's very difficult to succeed if you don't excel at the tasks that are central to your chosen enterprise. That sounds painfully simple, but many executives fail to identify the three or four most important activities that lead to success in their job or business. If you're a medical researcher, the three keys are likely to be conducting cutting-edge research, getting published, and fund-raising. If you manage a large sales force, the crucial tasks might be attracting, retaining, and developing outstanding salespeople; customer segmentation; and client relationship management. If you're assessing a potential job move, you need to know what will drive success in the new position and, then, ask yourself whether you enjoy those key tasks. In your current job, identifying critical tasks helps you determine how to spend your time and develop your skills.

Promising leaders sometimes lose sight of this connection. Not long ago, a new division head at a large industrial company told me that he was struggling to grow sales and profits. He complained that he was spending too much time fighting fires and didn't have enough hours in the day. When I asked him to identify the three main drivers of success in his business, he realized that he wasn't sure. He spent the next several weeks interviewing staff and customers, and concluded that success in his business depended on developing close relationships with the purchasing managers at each of his top 25 customers, putting the right people in critical sales and manufacturing leadership positions, and staying at the cutting edge of product innovation. He also realized that his division was performing poorly in all three areas.

He proceeded to clear his calendar, force himself to delegate tasks that were less central to success, and focus on raising the bar in each of these areas. Six months later he reported that he had replaced a number of executives—

## Career Counsel: Follow Your Own Path

Reaching your potential requires introspection and certain proactive behaviors—but it starts with a basic philosophy, or “rules of the road.”

**1. Managing your career is 100% your responsibility, and you need to act accordingly.** Many promising professionals expect their superiors to mentor them, give them thoughtful coaching, provide them with challenging opportunities, and generally steer their development. Such a passive approach is likely to derail you at some point. While your superiors will play a role, your career is your own.

**2. Be wary of conventional wisdom.** It's almost always wrong—for you. Hoping on the bandwagon may feel good

initially but often leads to painful regrets years later. To reach your potential, you must filter out peer pressure and popular opinion; assess your own passions, skills, and convictions; and then be courageous enough to act on them.

**3. Have faith that, although justice may not prevail at any given point in time, it should generally prevail over time.** When you do suffer an injustice, you need to be willing to step back and objectively assess your own role in these events. That mind-set will help you learn from inevitable setbacks and eventually bounce back. It will also help you stay focused on issues you can control as well as bolster your determination to act like the ultimate decision maker.

including the sales manager and head of product development—and created an executive committee that met weekly to discuss critical business issues. He also reported that he'd become much more disciplined in matching his priorities (and those of his leadership team) with the keys to success for the business. Sales and profits began to improve, and he felt confident that he would resume his upward career trajectory.

### **Demonstrating Character and Leadership**

While seemingly amorphous, character and leadership often make the difference between good performance and great performance. One measure of character is the degree to which you put the interests of your company and colleagues ahead of your own. Excellent leaders are willing to do things for others without regard to what's in it for them. They coach and mentor. They have the mindset of an owner and figure out what they would do if they were the ultimate decision maker. They're willing to make a recommendation that would benefit the organization's overall performance, possibly to the detriment of their own unit. They have the courage to trust that they will eventually be rewarded, even if their actions may not be in their own short-term interest.

Being a leader also means being willing to speak up, even when you're expressing an unpopular view. CEOs' proposals often generate head nodding, even from people who secretly harbor serious reservations. In reality, most chief executives desperately want dissenting opinions so they can make better choices. While emerging leaders must use good judgment regarding the tone and timing of their dissent, they also need to be aware that they can hit a plateau by playing it safe when they should be asserting their heartfelt opinions.

One CEO recounted to me his regrets over a recent key hire. His top three reports had each interviewed the various job candidates and expressed no major concerns about the final choice. After the new hire was on board—and had begun to struggle—it came to light that two of the three senior managers had privately held significant reservations but concluded that the CEO's mind was made up and that speaking out was unwise. The CEO was furious. Though he recognized his own role in the

mess (he vowed to more actively encourage dissent), he also lowered his opinion of the two executives who failed to express their views.

Otherwise confident executives sometimes overestimate the career risk of speaking up and meaningfully underestimate the risk of staying silent. I encourage people to develop various approaches to help them overcome this hesitancy: For example, I've counseled emerging executives to save their money to build financial security and to avoid getting too emotionally attached to their jobs. Though it may seem that you'll never find another great job, you have to have faith that there are many attractive opportunities outside your firm.

In some cases, I advise people to become experts in some specific business area in order to build their confidence. I also encourage people to spend more time deciding what they truly believe versus trying to guess what the boss might want to hear. At work, as in competitive sports, you must play with confidence and even a little abandon. I've talked to several executives whose finest moments came when they gathered their courage and confidently expressed disagreement with their boss and peers. To their surprise, they found that they were treated with more respect after these episodes.

Most outstanding CEOs value emerging executives who assert themselves out of genuine concern for what is best for the company. Doing the right thing is a reward in itself—psychologically in the short run and professionally in the longer run. Of course, this approach requires that you have some reasonable level of faith that justice will prevail. I have seldom seen people hurt their careers by speaking up and appropriately articulating a well-thought-out contrary position (even when it was unpopular). However, I have seen many bitter and confused people who stalled their careers by playing it safe.

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Every rewarding career will bring ups and downs, bad days, bad weeks, and bad months. Everyone will face setbacks and discouraging situations. Some people abandon their plans when they hit one of these bumps. They lose their way and ultimately undermine their own performance—and the wound is all the more painful because it is self-inflicted. The advice in this article is intended to help you avoid such self-inflicted wounds. There's nothing

*I have seen many people stall their careers by playing it safe.*

anyone can do to prevent you from reaching your potential; the challenge is for you to identify your dream, develop the skills to get there, and exhibit character and leadership. Then, you need to have the courage to periodically reassess, make adjustments, and pursue a course that reflects who you truly are.

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# Reaching Your Potential

## Further Reading

### ARTICLE

#### [What to Ask the Person in the Mirror](#)

by Robert S. Kaplan  
*Harvard Business Review*  
 January 2007  
 Product no. R0701H

In this earlier article, Kaplan highlights the importance of knowing yourself to reaching your potential as a leader. As you climb the corporate ladder, it becomes harder to get candid feedback on your strengths and weaknesses, so you risk making mistakes that damage your organization and your reputation. To stay on your game, regularly ask yourself questions related to key leadership challenges. For example, “Am I communicating a vision for my business to my employees?” “Am I spending my time in ways that enable me to achieve my priorities?” “Do I give people timely and direct feedback they can act on?” “How do I behave under pressure?”

### COLLECTION

#### [Managing Yourself, 2nd Edition](#)

by Tony Schwartz, Catherine McCarthy, Stewart D. Friedman, Donald N. Sull, Dominic Houlter, and Peter F. Drucker  
 HBR Article Collection  
 April 2008  
 Product no. 10097

This collection offers strategies for changing course if you feel dissatisfied with your life’s direction:

- **If you’re putting in longer hours, only to become less productive and more exhausted,** read the suggestions for reviving four types of personal energy in “Manage Your Energy, Not Your Time,” by Tony Schwartz and Catherine McCarthy. For example, replenish emotional energy by viewing upsetting situations as learning opportunities. Free up physical energy by setting an earlier bedtime and reducing alcohol intake.

- **If you’re making trade-offs between your professional and personal obligations,** consider making small changes that benefit multiple dimensions of your life, as Stewart Friedman recommends in “Be a Better Leader, Have a Richer Life.” For instance, join a club with coworkers. You’ll forge closer friendships with them, strengthening your sense of community and improving on-the-job collaboration.
- **If you’ve lost touch with what matters most to you,** explore “Do Your Commitments Match Your Convictions?” by Donald N. Sull and Dominic Houlter. They recommend a disciplined process for articulating your deepest values, determining which are receiving insufficient time and energy from you, and closing gaps.
- **If you want to know your strengths, weaknesses, and desired work environment better,** read Peter F. Drucker’s “Managing Yourself.” He presents a way to clarify five aspects of your professional identity and recommends seeking job opportunities and environments that fit that identity most closely.

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