PRODUCTIVITY & FOCUS

Managing Oneself

by Peter F. Drucker

Success starts with knowing yourself: your strengths, how you work best, and where you belong.

BEST POINTS FROM THE BOOK

01 **Build your life on your strengths. Performance can only come from what you are already good at.**

It takes far more energy to improve from incompetence to mediocrity than from first-rate performance to excellence. Put your effort into making a strength superb, not patching a weakness.

02 **Feedback analysis is the only reliable way to find your real strengths.**

Before a key decision, write down what you expect to happen. Nine to twelve months later, compare it with what really happened - the pattern shows what you are truly good at.

03 **Know whether you are a reader or a listener.**

Readers take in the world on paper; listeners take it in by ear, and almost nobody is both. Even presidents have failed by being forced to work the wrong way round.

04 **Know how you learn - and learn that way on purpose.**

Beethoven and Churchill learned by writing; others learn by doing, by taking notes, or by hearing themselves talk. Most people know their way but never act on it, so they never reach their best.

05 **Know if you decide best or advise best. They are different jobs.**

Many brilliant advisers fail when promoted to the top spot, because it demands carrying the decision, not just shaping it. The number two who thrives beside a leader may sink as the leader.

06 **Do not try to change yourself. Work hard to improve the way you perform.**

Your strengths and your style are givens, like being right- or left-handed. Accept them, polish how you use them, and refuse work you can only do badly.

07 **Let your values be the final test of any job.**

Ask the mirror question: what kind of person do I want to see in the morning? If an organization's values clash with yours, you end up frustrated and ineffective - Drucker quit a banking career he was good at for exactly this reason.

08 **Use your answers to decide where you belong.**

Knowing your strengths, your style, and your values lets you say no to the wrong fit and yes on your own terms. Successful careers are not planned - they develop when prepared people meet opportunity.

09 **Decide what you should contribute. Nobody will decide it for you.**

Ask what the situation requires, then where your strengths can make the greatest difference. Plan results no more than 18 months out: hard to reach, but reachable - and meaningful, visible, and measurable.

10 **Take responsibility for your relationships at work.**

Other people are individuals too, with their own strengths, styles, and values. Learn how your boss and coworkers work, and tell them plainly how you work. Trust is not liking each other - it is understanding each other.

11 **Plan the second half of your life long before you reach it.**

A knowledge worker's career can run 50 years, and the midlife crisis is mostly boredom. Build a second career, a parallel career, or a cause outside work - starting decades early is the prerequisite.

THE BOOK, IN SHORT

History's great achievers - Napoleon, da Vinci, Mozart - always managed themselves. Drucker argues that ordinary knowledge workers must now do the same: no company will manage your career for you, and you will likely outlive any single organization you join. Success in the knowledge economy comes to those who know themselves - their strengths, their values, and how they best perform.

It starts with strengths, and the only way to discover them is feedback analysis. Whenever you make a key decision, write down what you expect to happen; nine to twelve months later, compare expectation with reality. The method shows where to concentrate, what skills and knowledge to add, which bad habits to remedy - and which areas of low competence to leave alone, since raising incompetence to mediocrity costs far more energy than raising first-rate performance to excellence.

Next, how you perform. Are you a reader or a listener? How do you learn - by writing, by doing, by talking, by taking notes? Do you work best with people or alone, under stress or in a predictable structure? Do you produce results as a decision maker or as an adviser? These traits are givens, Drucker insists: do not try to change yourself, but work hard to improve the way you perform - and never take on work you can only perform poorly.

Then values and belonging. Ethics is the mirror test - what kind of person do you want to see in the mirror in the morning? - but values go further: they are what you and your organization treat as truly important, and where they clash, you will not perform. Knowing your strengths, style, and values together tells you where you belong, and lets you answer the question nobody can answer for you:

what should I contribute? Drucker keeps the plan tight - results within no more than 18 months that are hard but within reach, meaningful, visible, and measurable.

The book closes with relationships and time. Organizations are built on trust, and trust means understanding one another, so take responsibility for learning how the people around you work and for telling them how you work. And because a working life can now stretch to 50 years, plan its second half early - a second career, a parallel career, or a social cause - begun long before boredom or a setback makes it necessary. Managing yourself, Drucker concludes, is a revolution in human affairs.

DO THIS WEEK

Start your feedback analysis this week. Pick one live decision - a project, a hire, a purchase - and write down the result you expect and the date you expect it. Add a calendar reminder nine to twelve months out to compare what really happened. While the page is open, add one line each: whether you are a reader or a listener, how you learn best, and whether you decide or advise better. That single page is the start of truly knowing your strengths.

By Peter F. Drucker, first published in Harvard Business Review in 1999. Read it if you want an honest map of your own strengths and the career built on them.