Executive Summary

Smarter Faster Better

Provided by Chad Wotherspoon

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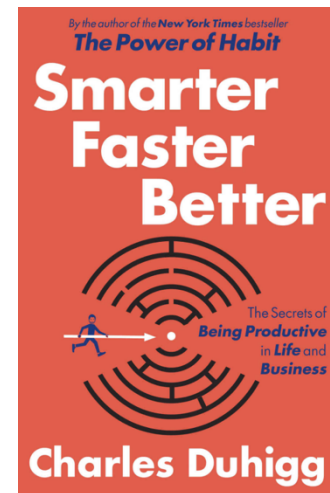

Figure 1. Adapted from *Smarter Faster Better*, (cover), by Duhigg, C., 2016, Canada. Doubleday Canada.

At the core of *Smarter Faster Better* are eight key concepts—from motivation and goal setting to focus and decision making—that explain why some people and companies get so much done. Drawing on the latest findings in neuroscience, psychology, and behavioral economics—as well as the experiences of CEOs, educational reformers, four-star generals, FBI agents, airplane pilots, and Broadway songwriters—this painstakingly researched book explains that the most productive people, companies, and organizations don't merely act differently. They view the world, and their choices, in profoundly different ways (Duhigg, 2019, Smarter Faster Better section, para. 7).

Chapter 1: Motivation

Outcome: How do you get yourself to take action on the things that matter when you really don't want to?

Chapter Summary:

- Motivation is a skill. With practice, anyone can become a self-starter. Discipline and following orders is one thing, making self-directed decisions is another.

- Motivation is related to one's locus of control. There are two beliefs related to locus of control. A person with an internal locus of control believes that they have control over their destinies; those with external locus of control believe that they are controlled by external circumstances.

- The more one asserts herself, the more one feels in control of her own destiny; this leads to the belief that one has the ability to shape their lives through action and effort.

- This concept is related to Stanford psychologist, Carol Dweck's research. Dweck asserts that the growth mindset is the perception that intelligence and ability are malleable and can be grown and improved through effort and effective strategies. The fixed mindset is based on the perception that intelligence and abilities are fixed and immovable.

- People more oriented towards having growth mindsets tend to set goals based on learning and growing; they often believe that challenges, mistakes, and failures are opportunities to improve.

- People with fixed mindsets tend to avoid unfamiliar situations or materials out of fear that they may appear unintelligent or deficient in ability.

- Motivated people tend to focus on proving to themselves that they are in control.

- People with internal loci of control and growth mindsets tend to break certain limiting rules or beliefs in order to achieve their goals.

"Motivation becomes easier when we transform a chore into a choice. Doing so gives us a sense of control."
(Duhigg, 2016, p. 270).
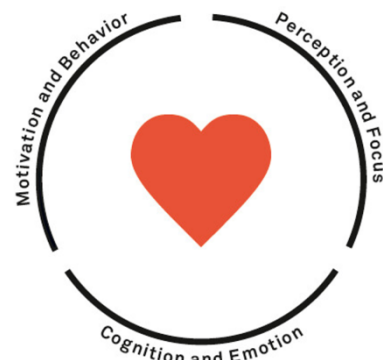
from *Intersection* by Milan Guenther, www.intersectionbook.com

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Questions to consider for putting theory into action:

1. How might your next mundane or unexciting task be viewed as a small step towards one of your meaningful future goals or vision for yourself?

2. Next time you are feeling unmotivated, how could you demonstrate to yourself that you are able to assert yourself and take action?

3. If you are tempted to procrastinate you might ask yourself: What might be one small choice I can make that is easy to commit to so that I will get started? For example, if you are trying to write a paper, tell yourself you are just going to start writing for 15 minutes; if you need to respond to multiple emails, start with one email and put on your favourite song.

Chapter 2: Teams

Outcome: How can you create a productive team where members feel safe but are also willing to have honest, confrontational discussions with each other?

Chapter Summary:

- Norms are the traditions, behavioral standards, and unwritten rules that govern how a group of people functions.

- Group norms determine whether people feel safe, excited, nervous, enthusiastic, encouraged, or discouraged within the team or group setting.

- In order to create productive and cohesive teams, it is essential to focus on creating the types of norms that will allow each person's voice to be shared equally (aggregately, not minute-by-minute) while promoting sensitivity towards each person's needs (being able to read and respond to each other's tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language).

- Researchers from Carnegie Mellon and MIT found that such norms allowed groups of less intelligent people to mesh particularly well and to intellectually outperform groups consisting of members of higher intelligence.

  Empowering norms might include:
  - Encouraging everyone to express their ideas equally and honestly while listening attentively to one another: "You know that saying, 'There's no '*I*' in team?' My goal was the opposite of that. All I wanted were a bunch of '*I*'s.' I wanted everyone to hear each other, but no one to disappear into the group."

  "Psychological safety is a shared belief that the group is a safe place for taking risks; a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up." **(Duhigg, 2016, p. 50).**

- Showing initial support for one another's ideas while withholding preliminary judgments.
- Appreciating and rewarding members when they take risks and share vulnerabilities.
- Discouraging harsh criticisms.
- Checking in on members who appear upset or emotionally low.
- Using team-building activities and routines to support members in feeling free to be themselves and to share their uniqueness with the team.
- Leaders asking questions such as: 'I haven't heard from you in a while, do you have anything to add?' or 'I might miss something, can you please watch for my mistakes?'

Additional norms from Laszlo Bock, Head of People Operations at Google:
- "Teams need to believe their work is important
- Teams need to feel their work is personally meaningful.
- Teams need clear goals and defined roles
- Team members need to know they can depend on one another.
- Teams need psychological safety" (Duhigg, 2016, p. 66).

Figure 2. Adapted from *Smarter Faster Better*, (p. 67), by Duhigg, C., 2016, Canada. Doubleday Canada.

Questions to consider for putting theory into action:

1. When leading a team, how might you encourage each person to share equally while allowing the discussion to unfold and progress naturally and spontaneously?

2. How will you show team members that you have listened intently, heard, and valued what they had to say?

3. What are some ways that you might show and model sensitivity towards the needs of those who seem upset or confused in order to lead others to do the same?

Chapter 3: Focus

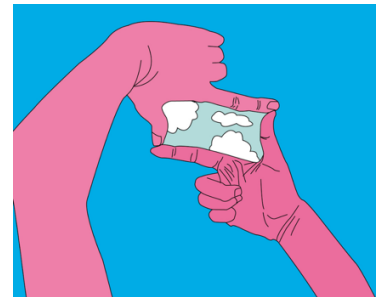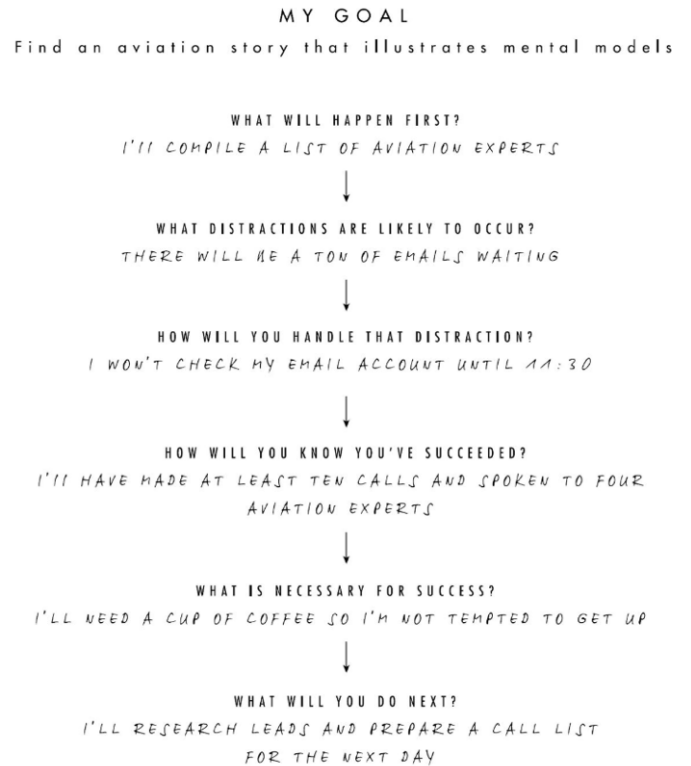**Outcome:** When you are surrounded by distractions, how can you stay focused on the important tasks?

Chapter Summary:

- Modern technology has led to the automation of more and more tasks; this has led to an increasing risk that peoples' attention spans will fail them. In an age of automation, people must learn to manage their focus.

- When people are forced to switch from relaxed automated activities to those requiring proactive focus, they often find it difficult to access their common sense in order to direct their focus on what is important. This is a failure of attention known as, 'cognitive tunneling.'

- Cognitive psychologists have found that people who are able to accurately choose what is important to focus on and what can be safely ignored tend to be in a state of consistently forecasting their lives by creating mental models or pictures of how they expect situations to unfold. For example, these people tend to visualize their days with more specificity than those less skilled at managing their attention.

"We aid our focus by building mental models – telling ourselves stories - about what we expect to see" **(Duhigg, 2016, p. 278).**

Figure 3. Adapted from *Smarter Faster Better*, (p. 276), by Duhigg, C., 2016, Canada. Doubleday Canada.

MY GOAL
Find an aviation story that illustrates mental models

WHAT WILL HAPPEN FIRST?
I'll COMPILE A LIST OF AVIATION EXPERTS

WHAT DISTRACTIONS ARE LIKELY TO OCCUR?
THERE WILL BE A TON OF EMAILS WAITING

HOW WILL YOU HANDLE THAT DISTRACTION?
I WON'T CHECK MY EMAIL ACCOUNT UNTIL 11:30

HOW WILL YOU KNOW YOU'VE SUCCEEDED?
I'LL HAVE MADE AT LEAST TEN CALLS AND SPOKEN TO FOUR AVIATION EXPERTS

WHAT IS NECESSARY FOR SUCCESS?
I'LL NEED A CUP OF COFFEE SO I'M NOT TEMPTED TO GET UP

WHAT WILL YOU DO NEXT?
I'LL RESEARCH LEADS AND PREPARE A CALL LIST FOR THE NEXT DAY

Questions to consider for putting theory into action:

1. Once you have set your priorities for the day, what distractions or obstacles might you expect to potentially prevent you from 'sticking' with your plan?

2. How might you prepare yourself to handle these obstacles or distractions in order to stay focused on your priorities? Are these strategies likely to work?

3. Are there any other barriers that might get in your way?

4. What else will you need to ensure you accomplish your tasks?

Chapter 4: Goal Setting

Outcome: How can you set goals that will spark your big ambitions while also forming concrete plans?

Chapter Summary:

- Multiple academic studies have shown that stretch (seemingly over-ambitious but inspiring) goals play an important role in catalyzing innovation and productivity. For example, stretch goals led 3M to produce Scotch tape and Thinsulate.

- Stretch goals serve to encourage people to overcome complacency and to think in new ways. Stretch goals often lead to the discoveries of more effective systems and challenge people to approach problems from different angles.

- Stretch goals alone may cause paralysis, panic, or lower morale. For stretch goals to remain inspiring, they often should be paired with specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely (SMART) goals that lead to concrete plans and action. Stretch goals paired with SMART goals can help turn dreams into reality. For instance, in a study at Duke University, runners were challenged to run 200 metres within ten seconds. Feeling like this was a hopeless goal, the runners ran, on average, 59.6 metres. When challenged to run the more realistic goal of 100 metres in ten seconds, the runners ran, on average, 63.1 metres. The researchers believe that the runners were able to run further because they were able to break this goal into practical steps such as, start strong by keeping pace with the other runners and sprint at the end.

- In order to receive the benefits of stretch goals and short-term aims, it might be helpful to make daily to-do lists that list audacious stretch goals paired with concrete SMART goals.

Figure 4. Adapted from *Smarter Faster Better*, (p. 130), by Duhigg, C., 2016, Canada. Doubleday Canada.

THE GOAL-SETTING FLOWCHART
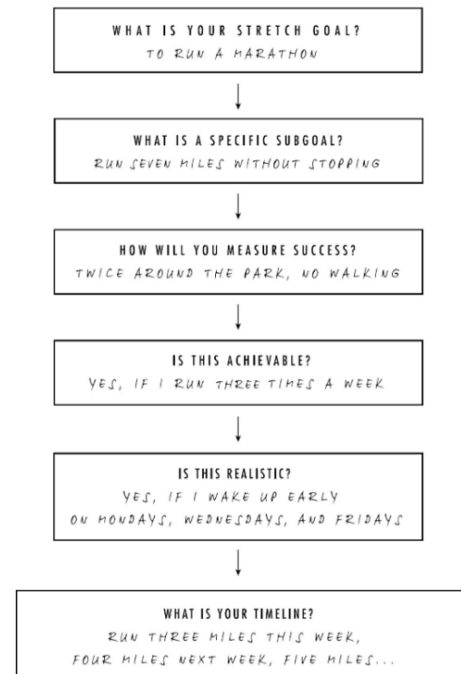
"Going forward, in addition to delivering specific and achievable and timely objectives, [everyone] would also have to identify a stretch goal – an aim so ambitious that managers couldn't describe how they would achieve it" **(Duhigg, 2016, p. 125).**

Questions to consider for putting theory into action:

1. What is an inspiring over-arching vision or long-term stretch goal that sparks feelings Of enthusiasm, passion, determination, and ambition within you? Is this goal 'big' enough that you have 'no idea' how you would achieve it or if it is even possible?

2. What are one or two SMART goals that you can focus on today in order to help you move towards your larger stretch goal? (Are these goals specific enough? Measurable Attainable?
   Are these goals actually realistic? How do you know? When will you have these goals completed?)

3. Have you referred back to the questions in chapter three to help you make sure you are able to stay focused on your tasks despite the likely distractions and obstacles that may arise?

Chapter 5: Managing Others

Outcome: How can you manage other people in ways that promote innovation and productivity?

Chapter Summary:

- In order to manage others to be more productive and more intellectually engaged, it is important to let people know that they have autonomy and the authority to make decisions. For example, assembly line workers in Toyota factories are given the most authority to make decisions about automobile assembly because they are the ones closest to the problems and are also considered to have the most expertise in that area.

- In order for employees' autonomy to lead to insights and solutions, it is important for the workers to know that their suggestions are heard and that their mistakes will not be held against them. It is also important for employees to know that their colleagues and superiors are committed to their success.

  The only rules were that everyone had to make suggestions, anyone could declare a time-out if they thought a project was moving in the wrong direction, and the person closest to a problem had primary responsibility for figuring out how to solve it (Duhigg, 2016, p. 158).

- Stanford researchers (1994) studied various start-ups in Silicon Valley in hopes to discover the impact that company culture has on productivity. Based on the data, the researchers categorized company cultures according to the following: 'star hirers' (companies who recruited from elite universities and provided employees with much autonomy), engineering cultures (with a collective focus on solving technical problems), bureaucracies (cultures defined by middle managers who provided extensive job descriptions, employee handbooks, weekly rituals, and meetings to communicate company values to employees), and commitment companies (focused on slow and steady growth, long-term employee retention, and getting the culture and values 'right').

- "Hands down, a commitment culture outperformed every other type of management style in almost every meaningful way because a sense of trust emerged among workers, managers, and customers that enticed everyone to work harder and stick together" (Duhigg, 2016, pp. 149-150). In addition, most commitment firms avoided layoffs, invested heavily in training, offered work-from-home options, daycare programs, generous maternity leaves, and showed higher levels of team work and psychological safety.

Questions to consider for putting theory into action:

1. In your workplace, how much autonomy do employees have; how often are their opinions sought out and implemented; and how much freedom are they given to solve meaningful problems?

2. How might your organization do a better job to engage employees based on the ideas presented in this chapter summary?

3. What type of the following cultural models would you say that your organization is most similar to: star, engineering, bureaucracy, or commitment?

Chapter 6: Decision Making

**Outcome:**   How can people learn to make better decisions in order to improve their lives?

Chapter Summary:

- In order to make better decisions, it can be helpful to imagine multiple potential outcomes of each decision. This may allow a person to choose the best option or to influence how future decisions might unfold. For example, a person deciding if she should marry her fiancée might gather information to assess whether their values, goals, and non-negotiable desires will bring them closer together or move them further apart ten years later.

- Researchers from the University of Pennsylvania and the University of California-Berkeley conducted research to see if they could train regular people to become better at forecasting the future. They found that teaching people how to use basic statistical, probabilistic, and research techniques helped increase their abilities to accurately predict future events. By learning to envision the future as a series of possibilities that may unfold and by learning to evaluate the likelihood of each, people were able to improve their abilities to make estimations.

"Making good choices relies on forecasting the future. Accurate forecasting requires exposing ourselves to as many successes and disappointments as possible" **(Duhigg, 2016, p.196).**

- When it comes to making decisions that seem too complex to break down into potential outcomes, talking to people who have more experience or knowledge in that particular area can allow one to more accurately determine the likelihood of each possible situation. Being patient, consulting with others, seeking different experiences, and spending time imagining each possibility might better equip a person to make a wise decision.

Figure 5. Adapted from *Smarter Faster Better*, (p. 178), by Duhigg, C., 2016, Canada. Doubleday Canada.
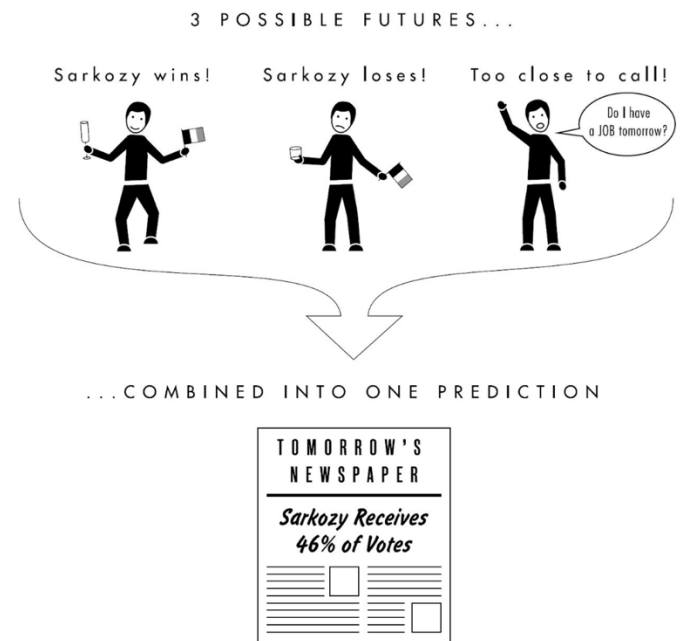
## Questions to consider for putting theory into action:

1. Do you agree with Duhigg's statement that many people fail or make 'bad' decisions because they are more aware of 'success stories' and less informed about cases of failure? What is one example that backs up your perspective?

2. Think of the last time you accurately 'guessed' or predicted how a future event would unfold - what information did you have that might have enabled you to make that prediction? What were your thought processes?

Chapter 7: Innovation

Outcome: What are some strategies to become more creative or innovative?

Chapter Summary:

- Innovation often results from combining conventional, often seemingly unrelated ideas in new ways. For example, the script for the musical, *West Side Story*, consists of a mixture of macho gang members who sing, dance, and fight with each other. Creative people are able to synthesize new ideas by combining old ideas in new settings.
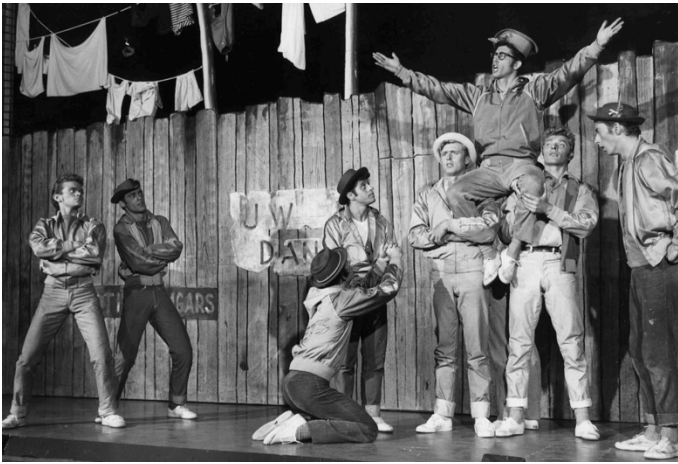

- Innovators are often people who are connected with various groups; they have experienced alternative ways of thinking and behaving and are more likely to come up with ideas that are considered to be valuable because they have often seen ideas work elsewhere. Many innovators are attentive to the way various experiences make them react and feel. Innovative people have often had a wider range of experiences or have thought more deeply about their experiences than others.

"As the economy changes, and our capacity to achieve creative insights becomes more important than ever, the need for fast originality is even more urgent."
(Duhigg, 2016, p. 208).

- If managed properly, urgent deadlines, stress, anxiety, and desperation can facilitate creativity and innovation. For example, baby formula was created by a weary father who suspended vegetable nutrients in powder as a quick way to feed his child in the middle of the night. In order to facilitate innovation and creativity, it can be helpful to consistently critique one's own work, to welcome new perspectives, and to give power to someone who had not experienced having authority before.
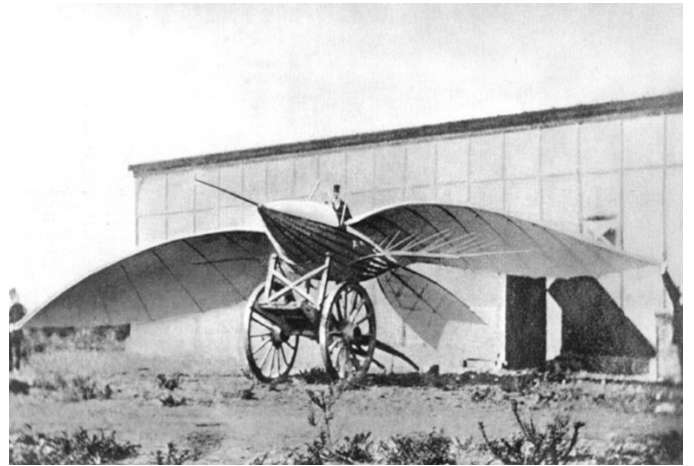
Questions to consider for putting theory into action:

1. When you think of innovators, who are the first three people who come to mind?

2. How have you seen people creatively solve problems by using one idea in a new or different setting?

Chapter 8: Absorbing Data

Outcome: How have teachers used data to transform their students' performance?

Chapter Summary:

- There are many tools available that make collecting data convenient, constant, and often automatic. In order to make such data useful, case studies such as the Elementary Initiative (EI), indicate that it is important for people to learn how to interact with data and to use it in ways that will inform plans or change behaviours. For example, for six years the teachers of South Avondale School in Cincinatti had been receiving data-filled reports and memos about their students' progress, but few teachers utilized this information and 63% of third grade students failed to meet State educational benchmarks. The EI required that the teachers manually interact with the data in order to inform decisions. Two years after the EI had begun, 80% of third grade students at South Avondale School were reading at grade level and 84% of the third-grade students passed the state math exam. The EI demonstrates the need for people to exert effort in order to find out why information and data is important and what it actually means, as opposed to simply having access to answers through internet searches or externally-generated reports.

"The Elementary Initiative had worked because instead of passively absorbing data, teachers made it harder to process at first, but stickier once it was really understood. From those index cards and hand-drawn graphs, better classrooms emerged"
(Duhigg, 2016, p. 241).

- Having too much information and too much data can also lead to what has been referred to as 'information blindness.' Researchers have shown that when people are given too many options they will often refuse to choose even if all the choices would benefit them. For example, in one study employees were offered 'free money' through employer matched contributions to their 401K plans. When only offered two choices for investing their money, 75% of employees invested compared to only 53% of employees who were given 60 different options.
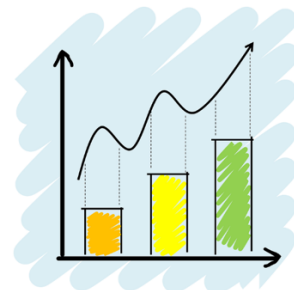
Questions to consider for putting theory into action:

1. Your boss has told you that must start collecting and interacting with your own data to inform you workplace decisions. You are expected to use a pencil and paper to make charts and graphs by hand. Like the Elementary Initiative, your workplace will not be given any extra money and you will not receive any training. What would you first decide to collect data on? How might this data inform your next decision?

2. After you have collected and interacted with your data, what have you learned and what plans or decisions will you make based on this information? What do these results actually mean and why might this information be important?

Critical Evaluation

Outcome: How useful is the information in this book?

Is *Smarter Faster Better* worth reading?

Smarter Faster Better: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAgVi_dL5zY

Duhigg (2016) expounds that the most productive people, teams, companies, organizations and schools are able to outperform others because they think and act in profoundly different ways. Duhigg (2016) clearly develops his argument and supports his points using compelling case studies and other types of research to illustrate how these principles have been effectively applied to real-life situations. I have been using Duhigg's (2016) suggestions for setting daily goals and have found them to be applicable in overcoming procrastination and for developing grit and perseverance. For example, over the summer, I took four university classes in two months which required me to attend courses full-time for five weeks in addition to writing a total of 104 pages through various papers. Using Duhigg's (2016) 'to-do list' strategy, when I felt lazy; reluctantly, obligated to work; or unmotivated, I would think about my over-arching 'why' and the compelling emotional ways that my daily, academic and professional SMART goals might be perceived as stepping stones towards my inspired, stretch goals. When I had been stuck avoiding my daily tasks and feeling unmotivated, I found that this tool empowered me to 'get to work' with more passion while also helping me to perceive these daily tasks as meaningful, autonomous choices.

> *"I feel like a failure. I don't know what I'm doing wrong. [My editor] pointed out [that] I needed to take what I was learning from the experts and apply it. I had to live by the principles described in this book"*
> **(Duhigg, 2016, p. 267).**

One might critique Duhigg's (2016) book as not being relevant to any particular workplace in that he describes 'what works' in an array of vastly different industries including education, film, automobiles, and various other contexts. For example, Wiliam (2014) argues that, "In education, 'What works?' is rarely the right question, because everything works somewhere, and nothing works everywhere, which is why in education, the right question is, 'Under what conditions does this work?'" (p.4). While there may be truth to this claim, I believe that Duhigg (2016) does an excellent job of extracting the basic principles that can be universally and successfully applied to a number of different contexts in order to help people become more productive. For instance, Duhigg (2016) uses case studies from Google, Toyota, Stanford University, and other organizations to illustrate the importance of creating teams based on psychological safety in order to provide environments conducive to creativity, innovation, and productivity. I have seen the benefits of creating a psychologically safe high school classroom environment in order to empower students to take risks, collaborate, share their voices, and participate in lively controversial discussions and other group activities. I believe that Duhigg's (2016) breadth of examples give readers the confidence necessary to experiment with and to implement his suggestions in a wide range of fields.

About the Author

Outcome: Who is Charles Duhigg and what inspired him to write this book?

Who is Charles Duhigg?

"Charles Duhigg is a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter for the New York Times and the author of the Power of Habit. A graduate of Harvard Business School and Yale College, he lives in Brooklyn with his wife and two children" (Duhigg, 2016, p. 383).

My introduction to the science of productivity began in the summer of 2011, when I asked a friend of a friend for a favor. At the time, I was finishing a book about the neurology and psychology of habit formation. I was in the final, frantic stages of the writing process—a flurry of phone calls, panicked rewrites, last-minute edits—and felt like I was falling further and further behind. My wife, who worked full-time, had just given birth to our second child. I was an investigative reporter at The New York Times and spent my days chasing stories and my nights rewriting book pages. My life felt like a treadmill of to-do lists, emails requiring immediate replies, rushed meetings, and subsequent apologies for being late.

Amid all this hustle and scurry—and under the guise of asking for a little publishing advice—I sent a note to an author I admired, a friend of one of my colleagues at the Times. The author's name was Atul Gawande, and he appeared to be a paragon of success. He was a forty-six-year-old staff writer at a prestigious magazine, as well as a renowned surgeon at one of the nation's top hospitals. He was an associate professor at Harvard, an adviser to the World Health Organization, and the founder of a nonprofit that sent surgical supplies to medically underserved parts of the world. He had written three books—all bestsellers—and was married with three children.
There are some people who pretend at productivity, whose résumés appear impressive until you realize their greatest talent is self marketing. Then there are others, like Gawande, who seem to exist on a different plane of getting things done

[Talking with Gawande] I realized two things: First, I was clearly doing something wrong because I hadn't taken a day off in nine months; in fact, I was growing worried that, given a choice between their father and the babysitter, my kids would pick the sitter.

Second, and more important, there were people out there who knew how to be more productive. I just had to convince them to share their secrets with me (Duhigg, 2019, About section, paragraphs 5-8, 17-18).