

Paul Rulkens

TOOLKIT

How to get everything you can
out of everything you've got



I. THE RAZOR'S EDGE

Some decades ago, while studying race horse performance, a group of scientists stumbled upon a fascinating discovery: In the long run, the number one race horse earned up to ten times more in prize money than the number two race horse. However, the number one race horse was less than three percent faster than number two. They called this strange phenomenon the razor's edge, a small, yet consistent advantage, which can result in a massive, exponential positive effect on performance and success.

What we know now is that the razor's edge is not limited to horse racing, but is equally valid for modern businesses and professionals.

Here is a little truth: wildly successful people do not know much more than you do. They also do not necessarily work longer hours than you do. They only do a few things slightly different, with a few small advantages in certain key areas, which are systematically, consistently and relentlessly leveraged. They have a razor's edge that carves a significant chasm between a business that prospers beyond imagination and a business that struggles to survive.

Take for instance David Beckham, the soccer player. At the time of this writing, David Beckham earns an estimated 100 times more than the average professional soccer player. And yet, he does not score 100 times more goals. Come to think of it: a few years ago he retired from soccer all together and still earns 100 times more. This is an example of the razor's edge in action.

This toolkit is all about how you can get the razor's edge in the easiest, fastest, and most elegant way possible.

II. TOOLS FOR CLARITY

TOOL 1 THE TEN GOAL EXERCISE

The ten goal exercise is the most powerful technique I know to program the subconscious part of your mind to achieve big goals.

This is how it works:

- Take a blank sheet of paper.
- Write down your top 10 goals.
- Starting with 'I.'
- In the present tense, as if you already have achieved the goal
- Positively worded (not: 'I have quit my job,' but 'I have a new job as a...').
- Ending with a deadline (for instance 'per December 2023').
- Visualize having achieved each goal and connect to the feelings associated with this vision.
- Do this every morning and every evening, without referring to your previous goal list.

Once you start writing down your goals, you may notice the following:

- In the first few weeks your goals and wording will change every time you do this exercise. After approximately 30 days you will notice, however, that you are writing down the same goals with the same words over and over. You now have identified the top goals that you feel most passionate about.
- After about 30 days, you will also notice that you miraculously start to make progress on your goals. The reason is that your subconscious mind is being programmed to become aware of people, ideas, and circumstances which can help you to achieve your goals. This inspires you to take action almost without effort.
- If, after a while, you don't make any progress on some of the goals on your ten goal list, it's likely that:
- These goals are not realistic and achievable and are rejected by your subconscious mind out of hand.
- These goals are not your own goals, but are actually goals of someone else. The ten goal exercise is an investment of less than ten minutes a day, yet it has the power to completely change your life.

III. TOOLS FOR FOCUS

TOOL 2 HOW TO SELECT MEANINGFUL GOALS

The worst use of your time is not to be inefficient, but to become excellent at something irrelevant. How do you know you invest your precious time working on meaningful goals? With every goal, you only need to ask yourself six questions:

- Clarity: What's the issue exactly?
- Impact: Why is this issue significant?
- Ownership: What's the solution?
- Practicality: How is the solution attainable?
- Validity: How is the solution effective?
- Sustainability: How are the advantages of the solution bigger than the disadvantages?

Every question is equally important. For example, if your goal is not significant, you probably don't think big enough. On the other hand, if you can't take full ownership of the solution to achieve the goal, it's probably a pipe-dream. In both cases you're wasting your time.

This handy checklist will help you to quickly determine if you're working on the right goals. It's also useful to check the quality of the strategic goals of your organization. If you ask these six questions with every strategic goal and you find any gaps, it's important to either fix the deficiencies, or choose different goals. After all, the second-worst use of your time is to work for an organization which wants to become excellent at something irrelevant...

TOOL 3 ZERO BASED THINKING

Thinking is a high-energy, time-consuming activity. Therefore, humans naturally try to think in the shortest time possible and then return to their usual routines. As a result, you spend over 95 percent of your life operating on autopilot.

The same is true of your daily activities. You are a creature of habit and once a habit has been formed, you seldom think consciously about it again. However, many habits formed in the past might not be relevant today, because they no longer support your new goals, lifestyle or professional performance. Cutting back on these habit-related activities will free up vast amounts of energy that can be reinvested in more valuable activities.

You can actively steer this process of cutting back on non-supportive habits and activities by using the technique of zero-based thinking. In zero-based thinking ask yourself a brutal question:

'Knowing what I know now, which of my current activities would I no longer initiate if I could start from the beginning?'

The answer to this question may be surprising. Next, find ways to reduce or even eliminate these habits and non-supportive activities. The resulting energy boost will be momentous and soon you will be brimming with creative ideas to fill the new space created in your life.

If you're running a strategy session in your company or organization, zero-based thinking can be applied with an activity called "Lights on, now what...?"

Here's how to set up this exercise:

- Imagine you just bought this company. You're part of the new management team and this is your first day in the office.
- Imagine you have no history and not a single constraint and ask yourself the following questions:
- Which activities would I start immediately?
- Which activities would I stop immediately?
- Which activities would I do more of?
- Which activities would I do less of?

Define the most important activities and start moving rapidly toward your goal.

TOOL 4 20 WAYS THINKING TECHNIQUE

The "20 ways thinking technique" is a practical way to continue to get new ideas. It is based on the observation that the act of thinking requires a lot of energy. Therefore, your brain develops automatic thinking patterns when faced with a problem. Getting new and original solutions for problems is therefore difficult.

The 20 ways thinking technique is a quick way to bypass these mental barriers and works as follows:

- Define your problem as a question on a blank sheet of paper (For example, how can I break the service standards in my industry?)
- Write down and number all the possible solutions to this problem.
- If the problem is significant, the first 5 to 10 solutions you write down will be obvious, because they are generated spontaneously by the conscious mind.
- Solutions 10 to 15 will be difficult because they require hard thinking and force you to create new associations. Your initial instinct is to give up and name a solution you already wrote down as the ideal solution. Don't give in to this instinct and continue.
- Solutions 15 to 20 are tough to get. However, force yourself to continue until you have written 20 solutions on paper. Oftentimes, the breakthrough insights and the creative ideas will be found in the last 5 solutions.

If you have used the 20 ways thinking technique, pick your best solution. Criteria could be ease of implementation, risk, cost or impact. Then, reformulate the solution into a new question (how can I...) Perform another 20 ways exercise based on this question and you will be amazed by the quality of the new ideas.

IV. TOOLS FOR EXECUTION

TOOL 5 PLAN EVERY DAY IN ADVANCE

Planning your day in advance is one of the most powerful techniques to rapidly increase personal productivity. There are two reasons why this habit is effective to increase both your efficiency and your effectiveness. First, it forces you to step back each day and focus on activities that will help you most to make progress on your major goals.

Secondly, if you plan your next-day activities the evening before, the subconscious mind (the part of the brain that never sleeps) starts to work on these activities during the night. Often, you wake up with new and bright ideas to make the day really count.

Planning your day in advance is easy, as long as you commit to the following rules:

- Plan your next day the afternoon or evening before to maximize the idea-generation power of the subconscious mind.
- Plan on paper to increase the quality of the planning, checking off activities as you complete them. Each time you complete a task, you will experience a small endorphin rush. Endorphins are the natural wonder drugs of your brain, producing feelings of happiness and well-being.
- Avoid booking your calendar solid with wall-to-wall activities. Because surprises and emergencies occur daily, you want to build in some time to deal with unexpected events.

TOOL 6 THE PRODUCTIVITY TRIDENT

When planning your day in advance, write down and resolve to complete three tasks, regardless of what the day throws at you. This habit alone will give you a sense of accomplishment at the end of each day and will motivate you to hold on to the habit of planning your day in advance.

TOOL 7 EAT YOUR FROG

Embrace the habit of eating your frog first. This idea is that if you hypothetically start each day by eating a live frog, all tasks for the rest of the day will be a breeze.

Here is how to eat your frog:

- Start your working day making progress on your major goals, tackling the difficult, least attractive and often most important tasks first. If you have more than one frog, start with the ugliest one first. After you have eaten your ugly frog, the remainder of your activity list will look easy and will be much more fun to do.
- Do not stare at the frog; staring makes the frog grow bigger and uglier. Instead, move into action without much thought. After completing the first five minutes of your most important task, you will have no problem continuing until you are finished.

TOOL 8 THE TWO-MINUTE RULE

Your inbox is not your action list. In professional life, the ability to manage your inbox will usually give a huge boost to your productivity. Here's a little trick: Apply the two-minute rule to all your incoming email; if you can do it within two minutes, do it now. Otherwise, schedule the action for a later time. Use an egg timer to ensure you stick to this rule. You will be surprised how many emails can suddenly be answered within two minutes.

TOOL 9 BREAK PARKINSON'S LAW

The most important rule for improving time use is to break Parkinson's Law. This law says that work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion. This law implies that you use the total scheduled amount of time to do a task. For instance, if you have scheduled a one-hour meeting, your team meets for one hour, regardless of whether you achieve the objectives of the meeting earlier than the allotted time.

However, breaking Parkinson's law will empower you to save significant amounts of time. Here are two tips for breaking Parkinson's law:

- Schedule all your meetings in half of the usual time. You will notice that the meeting outcomes will be the same or even better. Nothing sharpens the mind more quickly than a pending deadline.
- The default position for planning a new meeting in Microsoft Outlook is one hour. Change the default, scheduling meetings to last only six minutes.

TOOL 10 THE ZONE

When you are interrupted from a task, research has shown it takes at least 10 minutes to refocus and continue. Here are four practical ways of using this knowledge to your advantage to boost personal productivity:

- Single handle every task. Create the habit of sticking with a task until it is finished. There is a huge difference between 95 percent ready and 100 percent ready.
- Dedicate chunks of time in your calendar to work on your most important tasks and projects. Your brain has a certain time span after which it needs a short break to function optimally. This time span is called the zone. While the zone is different for each individual, it usually varies between 1 and 1.5 hours. Find your zone and create your chunks of time accordingly.
- Eliminate distractions while in the zone. Find a technique or tool such as headphones to help you block out external distractions. However, the greatest productivity killers are often internal distractions. To push away unrelated thoughts, have a pen and paper ready to write them down to review later.
- Switch off the email notification icon and commit to checking your email only twice a day at fixed times. There is a case study of a company that programmed its email server to deliver emails only twice a day at 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., achieving a company-wide productivity boost of at least 10 percent by doing so.

V. ABOUT PAUL RULKENS

As an international professional speaker, my magnificent obsession is to help organizations turn their big ideas into massive action. This ensures that my global clients, such as McKinsey, UBER, Siemens, Johnson&Johnson, Novartis, and Nestlé, make most out of their corporate events.

Watch my TED talks and see me in action: Over 6 million people have already done this.

My expertise is high-performance: the ability to consistently achieve big goals with less effort. I especially focus on building high-performance teams, driving innovation, and accelerating execution power. I'm originally trained as a chemical engineer with more than 20 years of corporate experience at the front-lines of global business.

My work is based on deep knowledge and extensive experience in the practical business applications of behavioral psychology, neuroscience and, especially, common sense.

I have also written **two business books**.

Read my blog and **subscribe to my free weekly newsletter** to get more practical ideas for high performance

My clients call **my keynotes** thought-provoking, substantive, and hilarious. The reason may be that I once was trained as a standup comedian, receiving critical acclaim for my Arnold Schwarzenegger impersonation. However, the miserable failure of my ensuing 'pumping iron' muscle development project prevented me from pursuing my true calling in life: a career as a credible Arnold Schwarzenegger body double...

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