



You Already Know How to Be Great

A Simple Way to Remove Interference and Unlock Your Greatest Potential

by Alan Fine and Rebecca R. Merrill

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Take-Aways

- Your base of knowledge might be distracting you from achieving greatness.
- Anything that prevents you from exercising your know-how is “interference.”
- Fear causes most interference; reduce fear by focusing and working fluidly.
- Banish interference by applying your belief, passion and concentration to your problems.
- The “inside-out” approach turns the knowledge you already possess into action.
- Use the inside-out technique to help others connect to what they already know.
- To focus well and achieve “flow,” use the “GROW” process: Set “S.M.A.R.T.” goals, check reality, consider all your options and decide on a way forward.
- You probably already apply GROW steps, but in the wrong order.
- When coaching or managing with GROW, avoid offering more technical knowledge.
- See problems through each staffer’s eyes and help each person accept accountability for the problem and the solution.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall
8

Applicability
8

Innovation
7

Style
8

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) What “interference” is, and how it restricts your progress; 2) How an interference adjustment helps you reach your goals faster and more efficiently; 3) Why and how the “GROW” process can help; and 4) How to put GROW into practice.

Recommendation

In his persuasive book, tennis teacher turned executive coach and consultant Alan Fine puts forth compelling arguments for eliminating “interference” from your decision making. With examples ranging from IBM’s mid-’90s turnaround to two-year-olds finding their own pacifiers, Fine shows that his system works. His four-step process helps streamline problem-solving skills. Fine describes the process simply, explaining each step with examples from his own experience. These include real-life conversations with insightful comments throughout, highlighting potential missteps and explaining how to handle them. While Fine’s book might run a bit long, his no-nonsense prose makes you believe that you could slip his tactics seamlessly into your workday. *getAbstract* recommends Fine’s strategies to managers, coaches and anyone who wants to improve their results in any field.

Abstract

The Real Performance Problem: “Interference”

Failing to utilize the information you already know can prevent you from achieving your goals. Most people already are aware about how to play better or work more effectively, but they don’t understand how to put their knowledge into practice. Managers and coaches persist in teaching and offering more information, seldom recognizing that their subordinates already possess enough knowledge. The real obstacle to improvement is failing to implement what you already know. You need to master the tools that turn knowledge into action.

Instead of taking another class, consider trying an “inside-out” approach that focuses on reducing internal distractions so you can work with what you already know. What is inside you must come out – whether it’s knowing how to hit a top-spin backhand or writing the best presentation of your life. To access what’s inside you, you must remove the obstacles. The most prevalent hurdles are feeling afraid, thinking about what should be instinctive and listening to an interior voice that undermines you without you knowing it. These obstacles are “interference.” Interference prevents you from performing what you already know how to do.

Consider this formula: “Performance equals capacity minus interference.” Thinking about or remembering everything you’ve learned while trying to accomplish a task distracts you from doing your job. Your beliefs about your performance limit the potential of your development and the development of the people you coach or manage. Three disparities define these limits: the “awareness gap,” when you aren’t doing what you think you’re doing; the “pressure gap,” when stress impedes performance; and the “expertise gap,” when the person you’re coaching knows more than you. Eliminating interference bridges these gaps.

“When people realize they have choices and they understand the consequences of those choices, it’s easier for them to move beyond the immobilization – to make decisions and move ahead.”

“Performance improvement is...an issue of reducing the interference that’s getting in the way of using the knowledge we already have.”

"The biggest obstacle in performance isn't not knowing what to do; it's not doing what we know."

"Too many 'goals' never get off the ground because they're vague and ill defined."

"While people may comply with what we want, they commit to what they want. And commitment makes all the difference."

"The Faith that seems to improve performance the most is believing 'I can learn'."

The Essentials of Success

Knowledge works together with three vital elements that can ensure success. These three fundamentals support what you already know:

1. **"Faith"** – Faith is what you trust you can do, and what propels your behavior and results. Beliefs that you can improve – but not far-fetched beliefs, such as thinking you can win Wimbledon shortly after first picking up a racket – affect performance most. When you lack faith, you're insecure, fearful, and prone to negativity or self-criticism.
2. **"Fire"** – Fire is your passion and motivation, and it is what compels you to achieve what may seem to be impossible results. When you lack fire, you aren't interested, energized or committed.
3. **"Focus"** – Focus is your concentration. Without it, you're inconsistent, but with it, you attend well to tasks and eliminate interference. Focus fuels your faith, confidence and fire.

When all these elements are present in individuals, teams, coaches or organizations, outstanding results become the norm. These elements exist in everyone from childhood. A lack of any one can ignite the top problem in the modern workplace: lack of commitment. But reducing interference spurs engagement and dedication. Some interference comes from outside, in the form of tough market conditions or intense competition. But most interference derives from your response to external situations or from the stories you tell yourself about your abilities, your past or other issues.

Fear of failure, of rejection or of looking foolish fuels interference. Adjusting your focus and finding "flow" reduces it. Flow springs from focused concentration on something you believe you can do well. As you slice a chore into reasonable, doable sections, you'll find your flow and your focus. As a result, you'll perform better. Change what you pay attention to and how you pay attention.

Learning – and Coaching – How to Focus

Implementing the phases of "GROW" – "Goal, Reality, Options, Way Forward" – creates the focus required for better, faster decision making and outstanding performance. Each of GROW's four steps might already occur in your decision-making process, though seldom in any rational order. A personal review of your health, for example, might start with reality, as you address your poor eating habits and lack of exercise. Next are goals, as you decide to improve your diet and workout regimen. Then, perhaps, you consider options, as you muse upon the exercise gear you could buy. Your thoughts bounce around until you put the whole question off by delaying a way forward. This method produces results, but not efficiently. It defeats your faith and fire.

Instead, focus on GROW steps in order: Think first about what you want to do, then about issues you face today and finally about how you might achieve your goal. That cuts interference, helps you make better choices and improves results. To avoid problems at each step, follow these tips:

- **Define your goal well** – Consider using the "S.M.A.R.T." approach to make sure your goals are "Specific, Meaningful, Actionable, Realistic and Time-phased."
- **Check your reality for accuracy** – Be aware of your own subjectivity. Recognize how you contribute to your problem.
- **Brainstorm without judgment** – Develop all your options, no matter how radical.

"Potential is always blocked by interference. And interference is reduced – or eliminated – by Focus."

"As long as Faith, Fire and Focus are diminished or blocked, no amount of effort – on the part of the coach or the performer – will create anything near top performance."

"Crafting a conversation in advance can help you crystallize your thinking and eliminate much of the interference you would otherwise encounter."

"Feedback...gives us the ability to recognize the gap between what we think we do and what we actually do."

- **Make sure your next step is also S.M.A.R.T.** – To unite your focus, faith and fire, commit to and be excited about the steps you are taking.

GROW Coaching

Use GROW to help others improve their performance. Employing the inside-out method changes traditional coaching by focusing less on providing technical details, such as, for example, how to hit a better forehand. GROW helps a coach or mentor tap into someone's natural faith, fire and focus, while eliminating interference.

Coaches work to bring out an athlete's belief, excitement and concentration. Figuring out what someone else sees and working from that viewpoint becomes the coach's or manager's number-one task. Consider those airplane movies in which the pilot becomes incapacitated and a passenger has to fly the plane. Someone on the ground talks the passenger through the process, asking, "What do you see?" The grounded guide speaks in the passenger's own vernacular – that is, without resorting to technical jargon – to help the passenger land the plane. Coaching this way means helping people own their problems and solutions. Your job involves reducing interference and facilitating GROW, which makes the person you are coaching accountable for his or her actions.

How would you coach someone who knows about a problem and wants to fix it? Take Jim, a tennis player. The coach asks Jim what he wants to accomplish in their time together. Jim wants to improve his backhand. The coach seeks more details: Jim wants to hit a particular backhand at least half the time. Then they establish Jim's reality: Jim now thinks he can hit that shot two or three times out of ten. They test this reality, and reaffirm that Jim believes his goal is reasonable. They discuss what Jim noticed while hitting the ball to test his reality. When they resume hitting, Jim talks about what he sees, which increases his focus. A few minutes later, Jim surpasses his goal, even though his coach offered no technical assistance. Instead, the coach listened empathetically to help Jim engage, own and focus on his actions. Jim's results improved, heightening his self-belief and increasing his faith and fire, which will only fuel his attack on his next goal.

Coaching the Unaware

What about coaching staffers who don't want to fix their problem or who don't even know they have one? This isn't as easy because the goals and agenda belong to you until you get the employee on board, and that's a tough conversation. A manager with a poorly performing employee who justifies or blames away trouble faces tremendous challenges, the foremost being the person's "own interference," which can arise from competing goals or a self-limiting fear.

Coaches and executives must avoid blocking their own faith, fire and focus. Refine your approach by putting yourself through GROW, asking questions and planning the discussion. Remember the gap between your goal and reality, and your subordinate's goal and reality. To cut down on interference, make sure you both "share your goals, show respect, sell your views truthfully, consider new facts and say 'yes' to finding small successes [that] build toward agreement."

Working with Teams and Groups

One of the business world's biggest turnarounds – IBM's growth from an \$8 billion loss in 1993 to a \$2.9 billion profit the next year – was built on inside-out thinking. Then-new CEO Louis Gerstner didn't bring fresh knowledge to IBM employees. Instead, he

“The most critical rule of brainstorming is to ‘suspend judgment and/or evaluation until all ideas are out’.”

“When Faith, Fire and Focus are released, extraordinary things happen.”

“Focused attention can improve performance in any arena of life.”

adjusted their focus away from agonizing over their situation and toward direct action. Fear and distraction had become IBM’s interference, eroding trust and undermining faith, fire and focus.

Working with groups or companies presents more complex challenges, but the concepts are unchanged. Like everyone else, you want to work with people who share their plans, execute those plans and let you know if they can’t. Referred to as “SayDoCo” – for “say” what you’ll do, “do” what you say and “communicate” if you can’t, this tool provides an effective shortcut for high-performing companies who want to stay that way. Efficient organizations rely on SayDoCo because it leads to good results built on effective, fast decision making and reliable follow-up. Interference often prevents these three steps from occurring, because people fear their plans are unrealistic or refuse to admit if they can’t achieve a certain goal.

The inside-out approach establishes an environment wherein people work together to achieve mutual goals over the long haul. Immediate results aren’t the main focus. Begin with individuals, and work toward team and organizational focus. Use GROW to set goals and to unite the group to achieve those goals, while creating long-term top performance.

For example, picture a meandering meeting that’s running too long. With various teams represented, no one person can keep the meeting on track. Each representative has individual goals, perspectives and views about reality. The team leaders probably engage the four GROW steps, but in a random, ineffective order. To avoid this, set up a large chart separated into the four GROW areas. Have leaders organize participants’ comments for each area, in order. Once everyone decides on a goal, they can share their individual realities. Conflicting views will produce multiple viable choices.

As you brainstorm options, remain judgment-free to facilitate creativity and originality. Discuss which actions will most likely achieve the right results. This team-based approach focuses everyone on goals, options and solutions rather than complaints. It shifts the discussion from why some options won’t work to those that will. This tactic’s clarity helps people share their plans, execute them and get in touch if they can’t complete their part of the solution.

Putting It into Practice

Learning the inside-out theory takes time, but once embraced, it can simplify interactions, improve decision making and help performance in any area. A mother applies the GROW tactic to discussions with her eight-year-old son as he tries to learn multiplication. He tells her that the timer they’ve been using – she thought it would motivate him – distracts him. They ditch the timer, and his results improve. Other parents use the process to teach their two-year-old twins to find their own pacifiers. A coach turns a group of critical employees into productive team members, starting by converting the loudest dissenters with GROW questions. From anorexia to Alzheimer’s to school grades or even to choosing whom to date, GROW simplifies finding solutions.

About the Authors

Alan Fine, president of InsideOut Development, helps firms manage performance improvement. **Rebecca R. Merrill** worked with Stephen R. Covey on *First Things First*.