



Book The Mid-Career Tune-up

10 New Habits for Keeping Your Edge in Today's Fast-Paced Workplace

William A. Salmon and Rosemary Salmon
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Recommendation

If you're looking for someone to tell you to quit that hum-drum job and go find your true self, look elsewhere. William and Rosemary Salmon have written a book for the moderately alienated masses who have lost their enthusiasm for a job that once sparked their imaginations. Like a tune-up for your car, routine career maintenance can improve your performance. The tools the authors use are communication, relationships and continuous self-improvement. While these habits certainly are worthy, they are not particularly groundbreaking. Readers hoping for a complete career-engine overhaul won't find it here. But if what you need is some routine servicing to get the cylinders firing again, *BooksInShort* recommends this book to you.

Take-Aways

- Understand exactly what your company is paying you to do. Make sure you are doing it.
- Set SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) goals.
- Prioritize your tasks and work on the most important jobs first.
- Strive for open communication with people critical to your success.
- Identify and expand your circle of influence by developing productive relationships.
- A problem-centered approach can minimize the impact of conflict.
- Problem-solving skills can set you apart from your fellow employees.
- Be creative when solving problems.
- You are responsible for your continuous improvement.
- Learn how your contribution to your company is unique and build on the skills you identify.

Summary

Do What You're Paid To Do

Employers today expect their employees to use their time wisely. You must have the self-discipline to step back and make sure you understand your work priorities. Realize how you fit into your company's big picture. Focus on the bottom line and decide which of your activities are critical, urgent and cost-effective. Figure out what your company is paying you to do and how you can best accomplish those goals.

“There is a strong connection between how you solve problems, your personal stress level, how productive you are and how good you feel about the work you do.”

When you understand what your company wants from you, you can begin setting some SMART goals for yourself. SMART goals are:

1. Specific - State your goal with an action verb to make your language specific and clear.
2. Measurable - Make sure your progress and results are measurable, so you can tell when you have reached your objectives.
3. Achievable - Your goals should be challenging. But even more important, they should not be impossible.
4. Relevant - Your goals should support the mission, purpose and strategy of the organization.
5. Time-bound - Your goals should have a deadline date. The dimension of time helps you determine a goal's priority. Once you have a deadline, you can decide how much time you should spend working on a specific goal.

Balance Multiple Demands

To be effective at work, you need to select the correct goals from the many possibilities before you. Then, you need to accomplish them. You only have so much time to work, so you might as well work on the most important activities. Create a time-analysis worksheet to help you determine your most important activities.

“You need to understand what your company is really paying you to do and how you can achieve these priority goals.”

List all of your current projects. Estimate how much time (to the nearest 10 minutes) you spend on each work activity each day. Add up your weekly totals. Circle the activities that are most crucial and look at how much time you spend on them. Is it enough? Review your less crucial activities, and ask yourself if you are spending too much time on them.

Develop Your Communication Skills

To improve your interpersonal effectiveness, examine your relationships with key people - those who have the greatest impact on your ability to achieve your goals. Your goal is to have open, two-way communication with them. Use the following checklist to identify successful and unsuccessful interactions. Look at three areas:

1. Giving information - What information should you give this person? How are you delivering that information now? Regarding your communication, what is working? What should you continue? Are there any areas of problems or concern? Where can you improve?
2. Receiving information - What information do you require from this individual? How are you receiving this information now? What is working about the way you receive information? What should you continue? Are there problems or concerns with how you receive information? What can you improve?
3. Feedback - This is the most important part of the checklist. Outline exactly what you want to tell this person about your communication relationship. Schedule a time to have a meeting with this person to share your views. Use this checklist for the most important person you interact with first. Then, repeat the process for each person who is important to your success.

Build Relationships with the Right People

To achieve your full potential, you need the support of others. Look at the relationships you identified in the previous section. Narrow that group down to the 10 most important people with whom you need to develop productive relationships if you want to succeed. These people make up your circle of influence.

“Remember that you share responsibility with your manager to ensure that the tasks you are working on are the ones most critical to your company’s success.”

Examine your relationships and figure out the key people to whom you should be devoting your time and attention at work. Then, you can determine which people are taking more of your time and energy than you can afford to give them. For example, perhaps you are spending too much time with a complaining customer at the expense of one of your better customers. Spend less time on relationships that will not help you reach your goals.

Use A Problem-Centered Approach

Unfortunately, you cannot avoid conflict. But when you handle conflict badly, the resulting confusion and disagreement can cause people, teams and the organization to become less effective. Take a problem-centered approach. Think about a recent conflict, and follow these steps to understand your perceptions of the incident.

- Step one: Describe the conflict. Be as brief and specific as possible. With whom are you experiencing the conflict? When did it occur? How did it start? Has the situation become worse or better since the conflict first arose?
- Step two: Measure its effect on your work goals? Did the conflict affect the quantity of your work? Would your work quality improve if you cooperated with the person with whom you are in conflict? Are you wasting valuable time on the situation? Identify the specific costs of the conflict, such as unnecessary overtime.
- Step three: Describe the general impact of the conflict. Is the conflict affecting the morale of your workgroup? Is it more difficult to work with other departments because of this conflict? Are customers receiving a lower level of service due to the conflict? Does the conflict have the potential to seriously damage your relationship with the person?
- Step four: Outline the benefits of resolving the conflict. If you were able to resolve the conflict, would it improve productivity, efficiency or effectiveness for you, the other person, your department or the company? What measurable indicators could you use to document improvement? Would resolving the conflict improve the morale of your workgroup? Would resolution allow you to rebuild credibility and trust with the person with whom you are in conflict? What is the best solution to the conflict for you?

“Being receptive to honest feedback and asking for it on a regular basis will let others know that you are serious about maintaining productive communication with them.”

Using the problem-centered approach will give you a thorough understanding of the conflict. It will help you uncover the factual data you need, which will help you decide how to approach resolving the conflict.

Fix Your Own Problems

Your problem-solving skills can set you apart from your fellow employees. Refine your problem-solving abilities by concentrating on the following three steps.

1. Admit that a problem exists - Define the problem by explaining what went wrong and identifying how serious the problem is. State how often the problem occurs and when the problem began. Show how things have changed since the problem arose.
2. Develop a problem statement - This clear, concise statement explains that the problem is new and significant. Your statement may suggest two types of solutions - how to remedy the current problem and how to keep it from happening again. Do not get into possible causes of the problem in your statement. Focus your statement on defining the current problem.
3. Decide which approach you will take to resolve the problem - Your approach will depend on how important the problem is, and its impact on you and others. Consider its negative effects. List the benefits you will receive by attacking the problem (keep this list for later, it will help motivate you). Decide if the issue is important enough to devote your time to over a longer span. Make up your mind whether you will handle the problem completely on your own, or if it would be better to take a leadership role and bring others together to devise a solution.

Be Creative and Flexible

To find new approaches to solving problems, use your creativity and be flexible.

- Have some fun - State the problem, then ask yourself, "How would the Three Stooges handle this one?" Compare that with the approach Laurel and Hardy might take. You might end up with a simple list of things to laugh at as you seek a solution.
- Use visuals to spark imagination - Find an unfamiliar magazine picture or photograph, and look for ways it relates to the problem that you are trying to solve. Take as many different perspectives as you can on what is actually happening in the picture. Now, look at your problem from different perspectives in the same manner.
- Ask "what if" questions - These questions help broaden your perspective. Questions such as, "What if I asked volunteers to give up 10 minutes a day to catch up on our backlog?" and "What if we ignored the backlog until someone complains?" will start you down new paths toward new solutions.
- Reverse thinking - Turn the problem around. For example, cigarette makers spent many hours attempting to discover what they could remove from cigarettes to make them safer. Then someone asked, "What can we add, instead?" The cigarette filter was born.

Stay Current

You own your career. Therefore, you are responsible for your own continuous improvement. Look at your job and make sure it is meeting your needs. You are responsible for keeping up-to-date with technology, customer needs and industry trends that affect your self-development.

“One of the best ways for you to be successful is to build relationships with the right people - key individuals who can help you the most and who depend on you for their success.”

Always seek to upgrade your skill and knowledge to further your own career. Think about the unique contribution you offer your company and develop it. Identify performance attributes that would help you become even more valuable.

Once you identify areas that you want to develop, you must take action. You have many options from which to choose. All can help you develop your performance. The solution that is best for you may be a combination of these options. Consider each of the following options and decide which ones will work best for your individual needs.

- Job enrichment - Change the job itself. Add a new dimension to your work, such as making presentations or writing letters.
- Job rotations - A temporary re-assignment can give you the opportunity to show behaviors or skills you can't use in your current job. Companies that encourage job rotations have greater flexibility among their workers.
- Formal training - This is very effective when it targets your real needs and when coaching in the workplace reinforces it. One drawback is that when you train, you must temporarily leave your workplace.

“The more control you have over your own continuous improvement, your own professional development, and your own job performance, the easier it will be for you to make regular mid-career tune-ups and be successful and satisfied with your job.”

Self-study - Take classes on your own time. Choose courses that will help you achieve your ultimate career goals.

About the Authors

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