



Book Work the System

The Simple Mechanics of Making More and Working Less

Sam Carpenter
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Recommendation

Author and project engineer Sam Carpenter owns Centratel, a now-profitable telephone-answering company that spent 15 years barely surviving. When Carpenter was working 80-hour weeks struggling to make payroll, he was a basket case – nervous, tense and depressed. He got by on a lot of coffee and very little sleep. Then, he had a eureka moment. He suddenly grasped that many different systems directed his life and work. He saw that if he could control and perfect these systems, he could solve many complex issues. This realization changed his life. Now, Carpenter enjoys himself and works only a couple of hours weekly. He has time for everything he wants to do, and his business hums along. The refreshing thing about this book is Carpenter’s personal perspective as a business owner who figured things out for himself. It’s not just another volume reflecting the theoretical ideas of a management consultant or professor. Carpenter explains his systems-management approach so well that you can use his accessible methods to improve your operations and your personal life. *BooksInShort* recommends this logical book to small-business owners and all those who want to improve the way they run their lives. The caveat: You have to get to work.

Take-Aways

- If you work long hours and your firm is too dependent on you, you are mismanaging the individual systems that direct your business and your personal lives.
- To manage both realms, realize that your life is a “logical collection of linear systems that you can control.” Apply the “Work the System method.”
- Scrutinize your systems, and diagnose in minute detail what you need to do to improve them. Create three sets of documentation:
- The first, “Strategic Objectives,” states your goals.
- The second, “General Operating Principles,” outlines your governing beliefs and values.
- The third document, “Working Procedures,” sets out step-by-step processes detailing how your systems and subsystems should work at their best.
- It thoroughly explains every process for your employees.
- After you enhance your practices, tweak them continually to keep them sharp.
- Adopting the Work the System model takes time and effort. Do not strive for perfection, but be determined to make the model succeed.
- This methodical approach gives you maximum control over your business and your life.

Summary

The Systems Approach

Do you put in long hours but feel you achieve nothing? When you leave the office for a day, does your firm fall apart? Do hundreds of messages demanding your attention await your return? If so, you have become a “slave” to your work, a clear sign that you are mismanaging your systems, the “threads of the fabric of your life.”

It is time to learn that your life, at work and at home, is a “logical collection of linear systems that you can control.” You can immediately simplify and improve all that you do by uncovering, analyzing and optimizing the practices that you use to run your life and your business. Many gurus recommend taking a holistic approach to self-improvement, but the systems-analysis method is based on the opposite tactic. Break down your individual systems. Uncover their subsystems. Make every process as effective as you can.

“Is there a major problem you are coping with right now? Can you break it down into segments? Can you modify the segments one at a time?”

To make these changes and achieve great results, adopt a fresh, new perspective based on a single fundamental concept: “Sequential” logical systems are at the heart of everything. One step leads to another, which leads to another. Complex, interdependent subsystems and sub-subsystems form your sequential systems, and they all work according to protocols you establish. For instance, consider the typical components (subsystems) of an average day (system): Get up, brush your teeth, shower, put on clothes, eat breakfast, go to work, take care of business, eat lunch, take care of more business, go home, eat dinner, watch TV, brush teeth, go to sleep. To make your life better, focus on one subsystem (perhaps lunch) and improve it (eat a salad, not a cheeseburger). Then, refine another subsystem (read a book in the evening instead of watching TV).

Nearly Everything Is Mechanical and, Thus, Quickly Fixable

Adopt a systems-analysis and systems-management method for controlling the details of your business and your life by making simple mechanical adjustments to your systems, subsystems and sub-subsystems. Once you see your work and your life as “self-contained mechanical device[s] you can control,” you are ready to initiate the “Work the System method.” Take these predictable, straightforward, but transformative, steps:

- **Record everything** – Start a decision-making workbook by writing down your tactical goals, routine processes and guiding principles. This documentation parallels the way that engineers list how equipment operates and how to use it. Essentially, you are creating an owner’s manual so you don’t revert to your old, flawed practices.
- **Scrutinize and fix all your systems** – Most routines recur in a “predictable, one-two-three, step-by-step progression.” Define and analyze your current business and life systems to see how they operate. Adopt a viewpoint that places you outside of, and elevated above, your business and life routines, so you see your systems objectively and dispassionately as entities you can manipulate and repair. Fix each procedure, one by one, by dissecting it and optimizing its subsystems. Keep it simple, since “the simplest solution is invariably the correct solution.” When you repair your practices, you will experience immediate improvement. If you don’t mend them, nothing will change. Business systems include client and customer services, quality control, purchasing, staffing, bill paying, and so on. Subsystems may include maintenance schedules or protocols for resolving complaints. Your firm may need new systems and subsystems.
- **Maintain your systems** – If you carefully analyze and repair all your systems, subsystems and sub-subsystems, a little continual tweaking should keep everything running smoothly. Maintain them so they always perform at optimum levels.

Documentation

Most systems are remarkably efficient. You should be able to spot problems without difficulty. Once you know which life and business systems are causing trouble, you will be in the ideal position to repair and maintain them. However, that is just part of the process; you need documentation.

“The mantra of the Work the System method is to isolate-fix-maintain. It is not enough to know what to do. One must take action.”

Complex machines come with thorough instructions so people can use them without breaking them. Similarly, you must take the time to write the details of your company’s precepts and processes. This documentation will remind you how your systems work best and help you make decisions. Your employees will need these records of your vital procedures to keep your systems performing well. Documentation is the “heavy lifting” part of the Work the System method, but it is absolutely critical. It clarifies that your business and your life are “systems of systems” with specific goals and methods. Your documentation should have three components:

1. “Strategic Objectives”

Prepare a one-page document listing your primary personal and business goals. Catalog the general steps you or your employees will take to realize these objectives. Make them as realistic as possible, because this list will set your direction. Do not indulge in impractical thinking. Spend at least six to eight hours developing this essential document. Then share it with the people whose opinions about it will be the most helpful, such as your spouse or, at work, your employees or partner. One sample goal from Centratel: “Our fundamental strategy is to relentlessly ‘work’ the systems of the business to perfection.”

2. “General Operating Principles”

Once you complete your goals, record your core principles based on your values and experiences. These principles will become a crucial decision-making guide and will represent your basic beliefs and priorities. They help supply the focus you and your staff members need. Developing and polishing this two- or three-page document should take 10 to 20 hours.

“What if you could reengineer your life piece by piece to make it exactly what you want it to be without having to count on luck, providence, blind faith or someone else’s largesse?”

Centratel has 30 general operating principles, including this one: “We are not fire-killers. We are fire-prevention specialists. We don’t manage problems; we work on system improvements and system maintenance in order to prevent problems from happening in the first place.” Another principle says, “Sequence and priority are critical. We work on the most important tasks first.”

3. “Working Procedures”

Your staff can help prepare documentation that describes the basic fundamental protocols of your operations. Explain on paper the right way to carry out each

procedure, going so far as to show an idealized, step-by-step version of each system. Depict all the information in a straightforward litany. Begin with the most troublesome systems first. Just going through the process of detailing your working routines helps ensure your systems' smooth continuity.

"The Work the System methodology relies on the personal habit of consistency, the child of character and self-discipline."

At Centratel, managers and employees analyze each system individually, document it completely, identify the reasons behind any problem or inefficiency, develop plans to mend those concerns and write prototypes of revised working procedures. Then, they test the new protocols rigorously to ensure that they address the problem and operate effectively. Once a working procedure meets these criteria, Centratel releases it to its workforce and instructs all employees to follow it exactly. Currently, Centratel relies on some 300 working procedures. Many are only a few lines of text. Others cover as much as six pages.

"Do some organizing every day, even if it's for just 15 minutes each time."

Make certain your working procedures always provide the best solution for any difficulty, but don't confine your procedures only to problem areas. In fact, you should create a working procedure for every important function. Generating high-quality work process documentation takes a great deal of time and effort, but you will recover this time whenever you train new employees. Detailed, written notes on how to perform every action enable any new hire to know precisely what to do, quickly and effectively, in any work situation. Plus, written processes help make your business as professional as possible, so it becomes more difficult for your competitors to match your direction, focus and consistency.

"Out of clutter, find simplicity. From discord, find harmony." (Albert Einstein)

Centratel's *Procedure for Procedures* manual lists precise instructions for creating a working procedure. These directions say, "For narrative procedures: Add as much information as possible, but do it in a way so that information is easily found. Use alphabetical listings, logical subheadings, numbering and bullet formats, simple and concise sentence structure, etc."

"It's not mysterious bad luck that takes people down; it's serial inefficiency."

Of course, you do not need to write working procedures for your private life. But you do need to carry out whatever tasks are necessary to fix the systems and subsystems in your personal realm so you can change your life in a positive way. The results you want won't happen unless you act.

These three essential documents enable you to gain control. They detail what you want to achieve, how you believe things should function in your world and, specifically, how you and your people must operate to perform at your best and reach your goals. With such documentation in hand, you and your employees have an invaluable roadmap that will keep you on the right path. Your documentation will help you maintain focus.

Take Control

This systematic method relies on a few other considerations, including:

- **Your work procedures don't need to be perfect** – No business is flawless. Striving to attain perfection through the system-analysis and systems-management approach is counterproductive. When you develop your work procedures, do not make them too complicated in the quest to perfect them. On the other hand, make your strategic objectives and general operating procedures as perfect as you can.
- **Don't make bad decisions by default** – "Not taking action is a choice," so act on your own behalf. Don't resolve not to pay your bills, exercise, eat right or clean your house. The choices people fail to make often result in bad outcomes. Even this orderly approach cannot prevent the negative fallout that results from failing to make important decisions.
- **Be disciplined** – Any change program requires dedication, determination and effort.
- **Shun procrastination and laziness** – The avoidance of timely action is your worst enemy and it can hurt your company. Start today, not tomorrow, to institute the steps to repair your systems. "Procrastination – that is, the lack of quiet courage – will ruin your life."
- **Don't look for employees who are perfect** – They do not exist. Instead, provide as perfect a working environment for your staff as you can. This is your most effective recruiting tool. Hire open-minded people who can adapt to this method.
- **Communicate, communicate and then communicate some more** – The more information you provide to your employees, the better. Never force them to spend time guessing what is going on or trying to figure out what really matters in your operation. Instead, tell them exactly what processes you use and why.
- **Use your time wisely** – Learn when your "biological prime time" occurs. Handle your most challenging work during those hours, which vary from individual to individual.

A Simple yet Powerful Change Mechanism

The Work the System methodology is simple and direct: Determine your basic systems and then adjust their subsystems so they always work as well as they can. That's it. This strategy hinges on paying close attention to the mechanistic aspects of your business and personal systems, and then altering these systems so they work for you, not against you. Adjusting your systems and keeping them polished will radically improve your life. You will become happier, and more resourceful and consistent in everything you do. This approach is the ultimate confidence builder for one simple reason: It puts you in control of your work and your life.

About the Author

Sam Carpenter is the president and CEO of Centratel. He founded and oversees Kashmir Family Aid, a nonprofit organization that assists children who survived the 2005 Northern Pakistan and Azad Kashmir earthquake.
