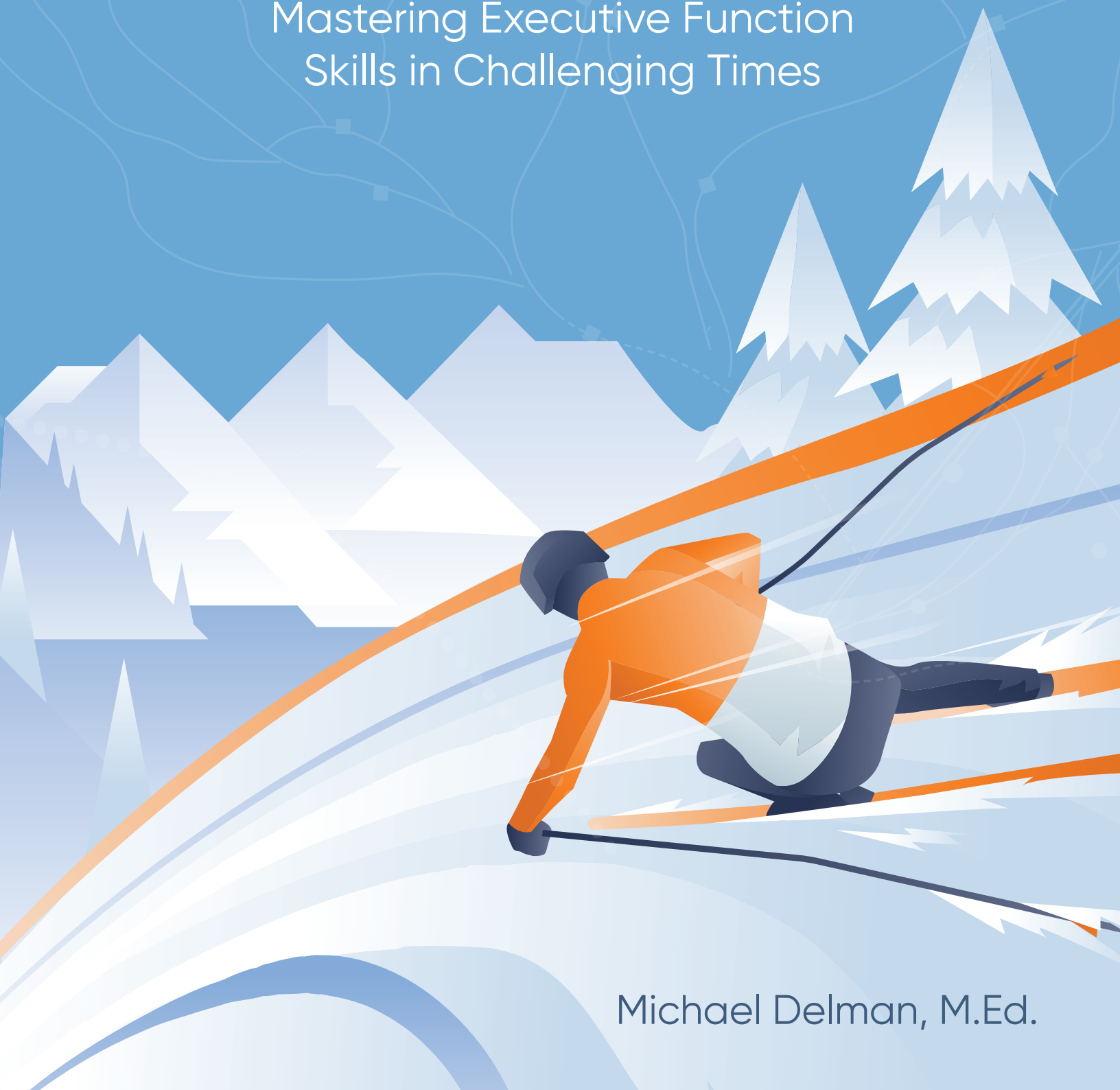


# YOUR TRAIL MAP FOR SUCCESS

Mastering Executive Function  
Skills in Challenging Times



Michael Delman, M.Ed.

## Introduction

The times we are in reminds me of a couple of other times in my life: the time I got lost, alone, in a cave in Thailand and my flashlight began to die; the time I fell through the ice up to my chest in freezing water while hiking alone as the sun began to set. Unlike my numerous public humiliations, such as the time I lost in an eating contest to my older cousin by vomiting in front of the entire extended family, these other selected moments were intensely private and nearly fatal. With hundreds of thousands of people dying just in the United States and with various degrees of isolation being necessary whether imposed by the government or by ourselves, it is understandable that anxiety has skyrocketed.

**Many, many people are feeling intensely alone and overmatched by the circumstances. Even when we are feeling anxious for our future, there are ways we dig down to help ourselves and others.**

My father's first time skiing is family lore, partly because it was harrowing and, of course, partly because we have heard the story well over 100 times. The short version<sup>1</sup> is that he forgot to or somehow couldn't let go of the rope tow where the beginners' class was assembled and instead, went to the top of the mountain. Far below, the ant-like class was practicing basic maneuvers under the watchful eye of the instructor. A kind and outstanding skier saw my father looking completely out of his element and gave him some basic tips, so he could make his way down. Over the next several hours, my father conquered that mountain, one fall at a time. His friends enjoyed teasing him for weeks, often giving him jabs on his bruises to add injury to insult. Interestingly, his entire experience, rather than ending his pursuit of the sport, made him wonder how something so difficult and even physically painful could make so many people happy. Over the years he practiced and eventually found out.

The purpose of this piece is to help you find your way down your own mountain, at whatever level of challenge you want on the slopes - and to enjoy the ride. The challenging times we find

<sup>1</sup> We NEVER got the short version as kids, not the first time we heard it, not the 70th time we heard it.



ourselves in today means that we are all skiing harder slopes than we previously were. While hard work and a good attitude help, the secret is a constellation of well-studied skills known as Executive Function skills, that build your capacity, get results, and, thereby, develop your confidence. My premise is that our potential is, by and large, almost unlimited and definitely unknowable until we actually achieve it. This insight is not mine to claim but the well-documented work of experts in neuroscience and psychology who have found that our brains remain capable of enormous changes throughout our lives. The term “neuroplasticity” is used to describe the malleable nature of the neurons (nerve cells) in our brains even as adults. As a result, our talents, achievements, and even core identities can change. Perhaps we have limits, but it’s tough to know what they are until we have arrived at them. Even then, new circumstances and strategies may make it possible for those limits to be overcome. Whether it’s nailing Tuckerman’s Ravine as a skier, starting your own business, or enjoying relationships with your family and friends, you have an excellent shot at getting where you want to go and enjoying and finding meaning along the way if you develop effective habits, strong Executive Function skills, and a growth mindset.

## Mastering the Slopes: The Executive Function Underpinnings of Success

It is possible, of course, to be happy-go-lucky in life, to be rather disorganized and unfocused, and to simply enjoy oneself. If you have no real goals, you’re never particularly disappointed. This works particularly well for those who happen to be independently wealthy. However, for most of us, achievement of one sort or another is an integral part of our personal sense of happiness, and helping others is another. To make the greatest impact in our own lives and in the lives of others, we need good Executive Function skills and/or compensatory strategies.

Executive Function skills are the skills of self-management, such as the ability to direct attention toward priorities that may be difficult in the moment but have high future value. Using Executive

Function skills mindfully and flexibly in order to achieve goals is a hallmark of successful people.

Executive Function skills are based on a combination of your genetics and the environment in which you are raised. Some of these initial skills, such as processing speed and working memory<sup>2</sup>, are relatively hard-wired and difficult to change. Over time, additional factors come into play and allow us to compensate for deficits and even to improve our skills. We acquire new skills, learn to focus our effort,

<sup>2</sup> Processing speed is like the running speed of your computer, and working memory is like juggling in your mind.

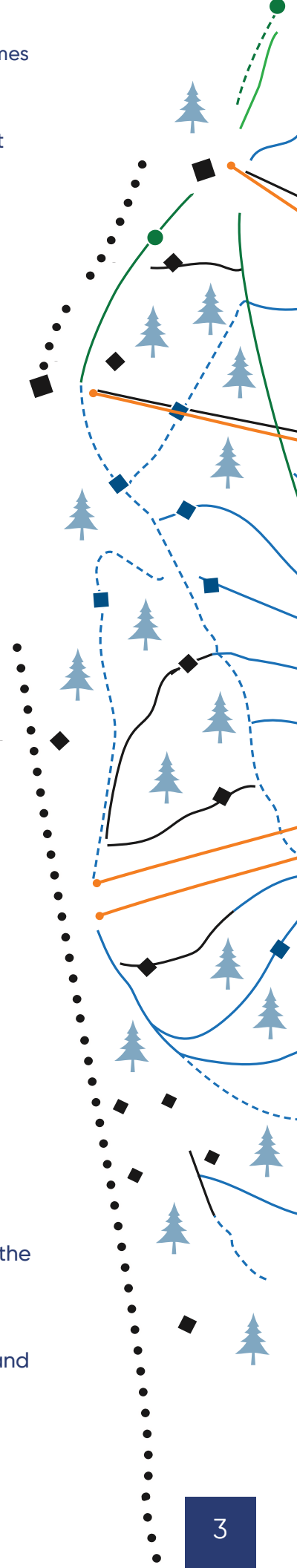


determine our values, and have the experience to know which life choices benefit us, all of which play an increasingly important role in determining how capable we are of achieving our goals. Our success, self-confidence, and even identity can change over time. Developing great habits along the way and enhancing our Executive Function skills can make a significant difference. Performance in most aspects of Executive Functioning, just as performance in sports, can be enhanced. We know that improvement can come from medications, such as steroids for sports or ADHD medications for academic performance, albeit with side effects. Another route to change is with coaches and mentors who can teach us more effective approaches. We can also try our own experiments and learn what works and what doesn't aka the School of Hard Knocks. By putting into practice the right tips and advice, all of us can develop skills that would otherwise lie dormant. Apps on our phones and various products we can buy can also prop us up or steer us in the right direction. Our performance, therefore, is something over which we have some, if not total, control. For that reason, we do better to focus on Executive Function performance, rather than just on innate Executive Function skills.

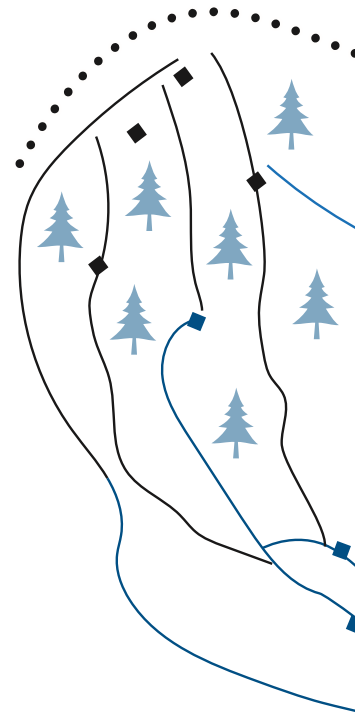
## **Green Circle: Impulse Control and Self-regulation**

Imagine that your feet are tightly bound to waxed boards that are designed to accelerate you down a mountain, a terrifying thought if you do not know how to stop. The first task all of us have, even as adults, is learning how to stop. That is why all of us but the very unlucky, such as my father, learn how to ski on the very slow, Green Circle slopes. These slopes allow you to fall without getting hurt and to manage the anxiety you naturally feel when you are learning a sport that could be dangerous if the demand on you was any higher.

Off the slopes, how do we manage to slow down a racing mind, to stop bad impulses, to overcome a sense of hopelessness? How do we do it when we are in the midst of the most challenging of times as we have been this year? The beginning place is to take care of the basics, such as having good sleep hygiene, diet, and exercise. Doing so contributes to the ability to self-regulate, to manage our ups and downs and stay steady and focused. Good self-care prevents unnecessary problems from arising.



In terms of sleep, while the exact number of hours that you need and the best hours for sleeping varies based on the particular circumstances of your life at any given time (age, activity level, and so forth), chronic sleep deprivation is something that many people incorrectly believe they have learned to live with and adjust to. Taken to extremes, driving while deprived of sleep (often called driving while drowsy) can be as bad or worse than driving under the influence of alcohol. Lack of sleep can lead to poor focus generally, depression, and irritability, which in turn, can impact relationships and job performance. The cascading effects of these problems reinforce each other. Failure leads to anxiety and worse sleep, and worse sleep leads to bad performance and more anxiety. If you have to choose between a good night's sleep or reading a book about self-improvement, close your eyes. Yep, put this down if it's after your bedtime.



The benefits of exercise go beyond pride-for-suffering. Stretching prevents injuries, basic weight bearing exercises allow us to perform important daily tasks, and aerobic exercise is particularly important as it strengthens our hearts, keeps our immune systems strong, and produces mind altering substances known as endorphins that boost our moods. Exercise tends to make us more energized and less vulnerable to stress. My mother-in-law is not a young woman anymore, but she still does pool aerobics multiple days a week, and she gets the added benefit of socializing with friends and making new ones. I have what is probably a healthy addiction to Ultimate Frisbee. That break I take from work to go play Ultimate makes my whole day better and allows me to feel greater energy than I had, not less.

---

**Establishing these foundational habits - sleep, diet, and exercise - is critical to having optimal performance and the energy to make other changes.**

---

While everyone knows that healthy eating is critical, we not only don't want to do it<sup>3</sup>, the vexing question of *how* to do it makes it even more difficult to turn into a habit. What defines healthy? Paleo, keto, vegan, eat right for your blood type? Of the three biggies - sleep, exercise, and food - our diets can border on controversial. Huge financial interests try to influence what we believe on this front, so I recommend experimenting so that you find out what gives you energy, what affects you negatively with headaches or mood swings, and what seems to leave you feeling healthy. I've been a vegetarian for almost 35 years, and I could give you my reasons, but as with sleep and

<sup>3</sup> Come on - kale or cheesecake? (I actually know how to make kale be really good, but it's still not as tasty as my 2500 calorie Cheesecake Factory - not sponsored for this mention - Tuxedo Mousse Chocolate Cheesecake! And sorry if I've just sent you spiraling by cuing you with the name of it. Maybe go meditate if you're triggered 😊)

exercise, the most important thing is for you to find what works for you. Coming back to skier's terms, it's tough to learn to ski well if the bindings that hold your boots to the skis are loose, and you forgot your helmet and poles. Establishing these foundational habits - sleep, diet, and exercise - is critical to having optimal performance and the energy to make other changes.

While our day to day maneuverings require us to keep our emotions on an even keel, dealing with particularly difficult stressors requires not only good daily habits but well-practiced responses. When we are feeling the strain of our circumstance - whether we are stuck in a pandemic, witnessing divisive national politics, or holding on in an erratic economy - being able to slow reactions is a critical skill. As someone not blessed with an even temper or a calm disposition (enthusiastic is the nice way to put it) I have found that the well-studied, ancient tradition of meditation and yoga, when practiced regularly over time, can equip even someone like me with the tools needed to manage considerable stress.

During particularly stressful times such as these, people tend to go one of two ways - toward distractions such as drugs and media, or toward self-improvement as can be done through meditation, yoga, and therapy. While the former is obviously risky and potentially something that will do far more harm than good, the latter is tough to overdo. Mindfulness meditation, yoga, and other tools along those lines can allow us to observe our thoughts and emotions instead of identifying with them and automatically acting on them when things don't go the way we'd hoped. Often, the frustration, anxiety, or sense of hopelessness we're experiencing don't actually require a response. The feeling may not even mean very much and will pass if we let it. While we don't need to be perfect in our habits, it helps to orient ourselves to an overall commitment to taking care of ourselves in healthy ways.

One elegant technique I've learned and use frequently to slow down is five finger breathing. You simply open up the fingers of one hand and trace each one with a finger from the other hand, going up and then down each finger as you breathe in and out at a natural pace. Within a cycle or two you'll notice your breath getting calmer, which, in turn, slows down our heart. When the heart calms, our mind does, too. This stuff sounds a bit weird and New Agey to some, but it's neurofeedback and scientifically backed (albeit with a groovy and New Agey touch.) Of course, I also strongly recommend meditating, and using the support of an app which can make it easier (Headspace, Calm.com, Insight Timer). Whatever you decide to try, do your best to follow through with it as these skills become far more natural the more you practice.



## Start Right: Routines

Starting the day right typically means some degree of ritual or routine. Personally, I begin the day by announcing out loud that I am up and awake because, otherwise, I'm tempted to roll back over for another 20 minutes. Stating out loud that I am awake defines my situation for me and makes me feel more committed to it. I then meditate for 10 to 20 minutes, usually using one of the apps, review my list of key goals for the day, and then have a healthy smoothie. Typically, I schedule some of my hardest work, such as writing or leading a complex meeting, in the 9-11:00 a.m. range when my brain is sharpest, and I don't feel that I need breaks and rewards.

I take this approach because I am very clear on how *not* to start the day. Before we get wrapped up in reacting to social media, people's emails, and whatever else is going on in the world, it is better to get started on our own priorities. We want to be grounded and focused, not reactive, in the morning as it sets the tone for the remainder of the day. Mood mastery is the first step in success and is more important than ever today.



## Blue Square: Task Initiation and Sustained Attention

In life as in skiing, once you're confident that you're more in control of yourself, you can take on somewhat more interesting challenges, the equivalent of Blue Square/intermediate trails in skiing. If Green Circle trails are like a kid staying in a classroom without getting thrown out, Blue Squares are the equivalent of that kid taking notes in class and getting the typical homework load completed on time. For us adults, managing the Green Circles keeps us in relationships, out of jail, and off of serious drugs. Our Blue Square level is holding down a steady job, having decent relationships with friends, family, and colleagues, and finding some enjoyment in our lives. Taking things to this next level requires some initiative and the ability to persist when things get tough.

## Limiting Decisions

To get to the Blue Circle or intermediate level in skiing the slopes of life, you need to use your effort wisely. At this point, you have some solid skills so that you don't need to focus on every aspect of your form. In fact, you have energy to seek ways to improve. One place where Steve Jobs famously conserved energy was his wardrobe. He clearly could afford to wear whatever he wanted, literally a new and expensive outfit every 5 minutes if he so desired. However, putting on a new outfit

twelve times an hour would have taken too much of his time and his focus, and he essentially wore the same outfit every day. Mental energy, like physical energy, is limited, so spending a great deal of it pondering unimportant things leaves less energy for the things that really matter, a concept known as 'decision fatigue'. Removing choices over relatively small matters frees us up to more thoughtfully consider those questions that have greater consequences, such as how to improve a relationship or solve a problem at work.

My daily rock for limiting decisions is an app called Habit List. This app is not my To Do list for the once-and-done activities. Instead, it is my To Be list for getting the basics right each and every day. When I began using it, I focused on one key habit I wanted to develop, meditating for 10-15 minutes each day. Just as you don't get yourself in great shape by going to the gym just once and then announcing "Look how fit I am! I'm done working out," you don't become a more courteous driver, or become less addicted to sugar, or get twelve-pack abs in one single day. These habits are a way of life. At this time, I have 26 habits, which might seem rather much, but, for the most part, they keep me on track and empower me to do the things I want to do but can't when I'm less disciplined. The app helps keep the things I need to do to be the way I want to be top of mind throughout the day. It's helpful to me to remember such commitments as being on time, to driving safely, to meditating early in the day, and to not having dessert after 8:00 p.m.

I don't mean to downplay the fact that the many privileges and obstacles that we inherit and grow up with dramatically influence how easily we can obtain the things we want, particularly access to money, fame, and fortune. However, the many choices we make every day also profoundly affect the degree to which we accomplish our goals - whether those are measured in dollars, pesos, or euros, or in non-material currency such as joy or meaning.

---

**Mental energy, like physical energy, is limited, so spending a great deal of it pondering unimportant things leaves less energy for the things that really matter, a concept known as 'decision fatigue'. Removing choices over relatively small matters frees us up to more thoughtfully consider those questions that have greater consequences, such as how to improve a relationship or solve a problem at work.**

---



Among the many choices we make – what gift to get someone for the holidays, what to eat for lunch, and the hundreds of others we make throughout the day – the first and most important category is the choice to do what is necessary before doing what is wanted. That meta-choice opens the door to greater freedom and more choice itself. These choices are always the most important but never more so than in the extremely tricky circumstances we find ourselves in today.

## The Focus of Starting

The heart of being good at initiating tasks is a degree of maturity. It means accepting that, other than in the dictionary, work comes before play. If you have kids, you know their default resistance to this principle and, if we're being honest, we know it can be a struggle for us, too. Even as adults, we have to have techniques to subdue our tendency to pursue what is immediately rewarding. Our procrastination techniques – for example, calling what is merely a difficult task “impossible” – can justify not starting it or shifting our focus elsewhere to avoid it. (“My closet truly needs to be Marie Kondo'd and get tidied up right now!”) These avoidance techniques are well-practiced and difficult to overcome. It takes a jumpstart, and without a method, we will probably avoid the work.

The method we use for students at Beyond BookSmart and for adults at WorkSmart Coaching is a series of 5-Minute Goals to calm anxiety and manage the perfectionism that can prevent us from even starting a dreaded task. Instead of trying to get everything right or even get everything done, we shift to doing the task for just a few minutes. We tell our clients that the goal is not to accomplish something big, but simply *to gather information about it*. We start a stopwatch, move it out of view, and ask our clients to do what they can for five minutes. After they've started, we generally wait for them to ask us if it's been five minutes and then take a look. Invariably, they've gone far longer than five minutes, and the stopwatch shows them their success at starting and staying with something that had practically paralyzed them just moments ago. You can imagine the boost of confidence this provides in tackling anxiety-provoking tasks.

Conversely, with our clients who are easily bored, we ask them to challenge themselves by setting a specific goal for what they could get done in those five minutes. We set a countdown timer, which allows them to see the time ticking away. This approach is deliberate so that



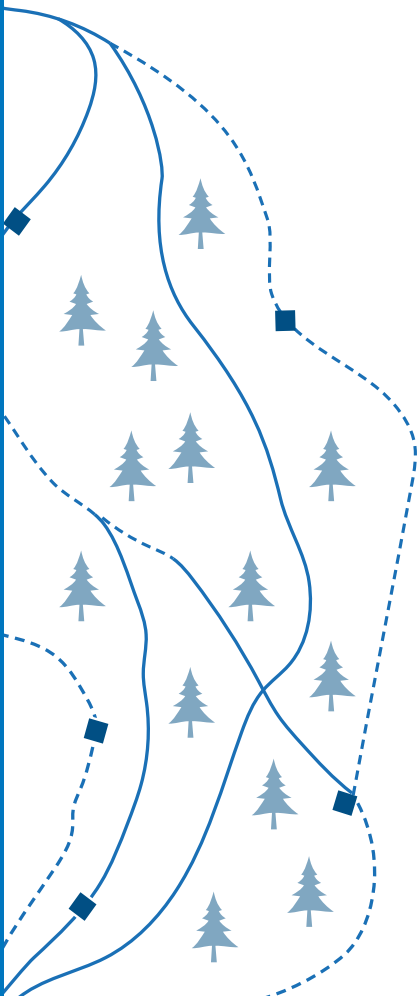
someone who feels sluggish gets injected with a small amount of motivating adrenaline – a positive stress that is enough to push performance to a higher level. After that, we revisit and reset the timer for another five minutes. Given this sort of person often has a competitive streak, they are likely to want an even longer amount of time. Thus, the method for overcoming inertia depends on the temperament of the person and their orientation toward the task.

In setting short goals or objectives for yourself, it can be helpful to say aloud what you are planning to do as it instills a feeling of investment. Having someone hold you accountable, whether it is a colleague or a personal connection, reminds you that other people care about you living up to your own personal goals and dreams or, in my case, will remind me of what an irresponsible slouch I am if I do not put in the effort I promised.

## The Focus of Why

Simon Sinek said to put your why before your what; in other words, knowing 'why' you are doing something matters far more than just knowing 'what' you need to do. Said a bit differently, if we don't have a sense of the value behind what we are doing – and if we feel that someone else is controlling us – we will lose motivation and find our attention wandering elsewhere. Having a clear motive, a strong sense of purpose, helps us to initiate tasks and also to stay focused. It aligns with our sense of who we are, and that sense of identity is a powerful activator.

While our 'why' can be as straightforward as needing to earn a living and provide for ourselves and our families, it is far more motivating if we can find a way to do what inspires us. In starting my charter school, the number of regulations I had to consider and aggravating chores I had to do was truly staggering, something I've never done before or since. At times I thought, "I don't see how anyone could have the energy to do this," but my cofounder and I had spent tremendous time creating our mission statement, and that clear purpose gave me continued focus when I otherwise would have felt hopeless or perhaps even quit. As a result, I had the honor of hiring and working closely with a handful of top-notch educators, helping build an amazing curriculum that included outdoor education, adventure, and peace studies, and getting to know several hundred kids and families. I found that the experience gave me as much energy or even more than it took from me. Why precedes what.



## The Focus of Blocking

Another critical Executive Function skill is the ability to resist distractions. Unfortunately, it's another of my weaknesses<sup>4</sup>, so I have to compensate by not even looking at distractions until I am prepared to take a break and am comfortable with losing 20 or 30 minutes to a game of Fortnite, online chess, or a link sent by a friend. I don't resist temptations, I remove them. When I am committed to crushing my work, especially the harder work that I have a love-hate relationship with, I begin by setting up the right environment. I clear away as many distractions as needed so my workplace feels like a workplace. Our desk downstairs is good as it doesn't have the mess of the kitchen table, which is shared by everyone. If I need an even more intensively focused space, I will go to the office. And when I'm writing professionally, I have learned to go away from everyone and everything and hunker down like Stephen King in a hotel for a few days.

Getting up too frequently slows me down, so I like to keep a glass of water and a box of tissues nearby in case I'm thirsty, need to blow my nose in the winter, or cry in despair. By contrast, it's not a wise bet for me to have a box of cookies, an iPad, or a favorite book nearby as I will be tempted and likely end up with a domino effect. I might begin just by eating mindlessly, but as my discipline breaks down around food, my mind will repeatedly wander to watching a show or playing a game, and before I know it, I'll have lost track of the time. An ounce of prevention is truly worth a pound of cure. To that end, I also turn off notifications on my laptop and either set my phone to airplane mode or use an app called Forest that blocks my access to it. I know myself rather well and have learned that I cannot trust myself to summon the willpower to focus when I'm tired, bored, or anxious. Thus, the better me, the one who is well-rested, enthusiastic, and confident, makes those decisions ahead of time. I'm making the kinds of decisions that make this level of challenge manageable, which includes taking scheduled breaks.

---

**The simplest reward to provide yourself and the least expensive is acknowledging that you've done something well.**

---

## The Focus of Breaks and Rewards

Coming up with rewards for and taking scheduled breaks while achieving your goals can help you focus. Perhaps you think it's something only done for children and, therefore, childish to do this for yourself. Perhaps you think the work itself should be the only reward. On the contrary, giving ourselves rewards and breaks is somewhere between a great idea with proven benefits and an

<sup>4</sup>I have now shared that the author isn't naturally skilled at either impulse control or sustained attention, two of the most imperative Executive Function skills. Whatever success I have achieved is due to hard work, reflection, and adaptation, so if you, too, struggle, consider that you may have enough ability and just need the tools and the practice.

absolute necessity. With something to look forward to, we have a reason to persist when the work is challenging. Our growing ability to persevere transforms over time from an action to a character trait as we shift from “I’ll probably quit” to “Here comes part one. I’ll nail that and then take a nice break.”

The simplest reward to provide yourself and the least expensive is acknowledging that you’ve done something well. Moreover, if your work will benefit others, imagine the impact as that satisfaction will continue to inspire you. Ironically, this simple, cash-free system can be hard to do as many of us downplay whatever we’ve accomplished as soon as we are done. Our orientation toward disciplined work strengthens if we take time to honor our accomplishments not just at the end but with smaller benchmarks along the way.

Breaks can serve as another kind of reward. Of course, we need breaks and will eventually be forced to take them, but the timing of breaks matters. The concept of diminishing returns applies here. If your next 20 minutes of work is going to be significantly less productive than your norm, take a break. Doing so will refresh you so you can continue to do your best work, and it will also make you happier, which, don’t forget, also matters! It’s not just that our moods improve; research from the Harvard Business Review and other top researchers supports what meditators have known for centuries. Deliberate non-doing, simply taking time to either close your eyes and relax or to stretch mindfully for ten minutes, restores cognitive functioning, as well as mood. Now, with more of us working independently away from the eyes of managers, you may have the opportunity to try out breaks and rewards for yourself and see that taking a little time to refresh and relax doesn’t just help your aching back but also soothes your aching prefrontal cortex. For me, an hour break at lunch for a game of Ultimate Frisbee gives me more energy and clarity than plowing through emails, and a little stretching and mini-meditations keeps me focused.

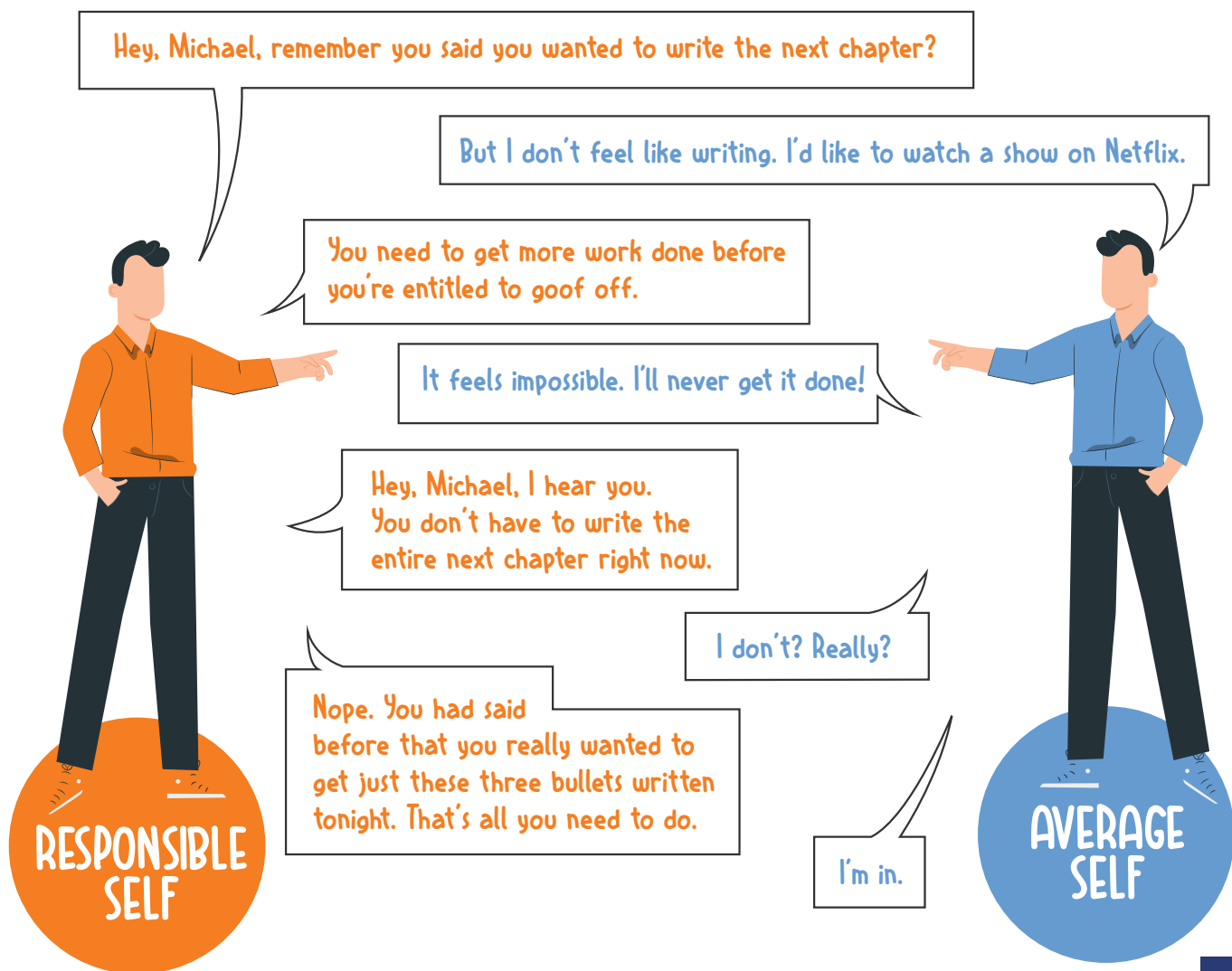
Finally, it is not at all unreasonable to provide yourself with material rewards for accomplishments. A common problem in setting up such a system is that many people make it an all-or-nothing venture. As a result, there is tremendous pressure to do an outstanding job the first time with no room for error and often with an unrealistic timeline. We start off with great intentions, see that we cannot achieve our goal, and either fudge our achievement (“That’s good enough”) which leads to guilt or lower standards, or deny ourselves the reward, which leads to resentment and loss of



motivation. A better system is to reward oneself on a scale, and I don't mean to eat chocolate while weighing yourself. Rather, when you've planned out those big tasks, it's better to provide small rewards along the way than one big one at the end that may feel further and further away with every passing hour. Did you get all the data you need to begin your analysis of a project? Enjoy a walk with the dog and stop for a muffin at your favorite coffee shop.

## The Focus of Chunking

Another way to stay focused is by doing what we call 'chunking' your work, or dividing a bigger task into smaller parts that are far easier to tackle. Combined with a strong sense of purpose, chunking is one of the greatest tools you have. When you chunk, it means that you are less focused on time than volume. You commit to completing something specific as quickly as you can. This conscious choice to limit yourself to that one piece motivates you to actually complete it because you feel like you're asking a reasonable amount of yourself.



By excluding everything else from your mind, you can relentlessly focus on achieving this one particular objective. Furthermore, by working on small but significant pieces, you work long enough to get it right and see results. When we see results, we feel a healthy high on a brain-based level, and the positive association of work to success makes us more likely to want to do it again. Having an appropriate-sized chunk of work allows us to achieve a level of quality not possible otherwise. Obviously, 720 five-second 'chunks' won't be as effective as two, half-hour chunks.

Working for five seconds, for example, then deciding you deserve a break and taking five seconds off before returning to work for another five-second-shift isn't going to get you anywhere. What's the ideal ratio? It depends. Is this for you or your child? During "normal" times or exceptional ones? Do you have ADHD and the type in which the "H" (for hyperactive) is prominent? Try this standard: The right length chunk is one long enough for you to overcome some natural degree of boredom and anxiety and to get something tangible accomplished while short enough that you don't resent it. It is important to feel good about your accomplishment and discipline but not to feel depleted from the effort. When you push yourself to a degree that is satisfying but not punishing, you increase the odds that you will want to do the work again in the near future.

## Location, Location, Location

Finally, it is also important to have what you need near you. If you are going on a health kick, have the zinc and apples in your face, right where you sit down and work. Either remove the Oreos from the house or have them in a place that is difficult to access. In my home, we talk about primary real estate and secondary real estate. The things we need often get the best spots in the house where they are most accessible. The big three – keys, wallet, and phone – go together on the kitchen table (or in a special drawer in the bedroom when guests come over ... well, when guests used to come over, that is.)



## **Black Diamond: Planning, Prioritizing, Organization, and Time Management**

Black Diamond expert slopes are notably harder than the Blue Squares. Most everyone can get to Blue Squares with some practice and a bit of advice from a ski instructor. In life, good habits and effort alone will get you what you need. But Black Diamond trails require commitment. You simply



can't do well on these slopes unless you study the sport, take some spills, and enjoy challenging yourself. Plenty of people enjoy skiing without ever going on the Black Diamonds. If you do want to take on bigger challenges, however, and try for big accomplishments, the Executive Function skills of prioritizing, organizing, planning, and managing time effectively are not optional. They are necessary for navigating high-stakes situations.

## Trust Your Proactive Self, Not Your Reactive Self

At its most basic, structuring time is all about knowing what matters most and planning your day to honor these priorities. 'Planning the work' must precede 'working the plan.' No matter how hard you work, if it's on the wrong things - sacrificing your important relationships for a job, deferring your passions to impress others, or simply investing too much energy in inconsequential projects - you'll never feel fulfilled. The question to ask day after day may be tough to answer but it's simple to ask: "What is the best use of my time right now?"

When you make these key decisions about priorities, it is important to do so when you are calm and have time to weigh your options. Later, when you are busy implementing your plan and acting on your priorities, you will undoubtedly have second thoughts, self-doubt, and plenty of distractions. You need to know who to trust. The answer is your better self, the one who is more like a doctor or coach making decisions under the best of circumstances using excellent judgment. You do not want to trust the self who is tired and frustrated and just wants a glass of something to stop the thinking. At that point, we are more like the patient who just wants the most convenient approach, not the most effective.

## Prioritizing

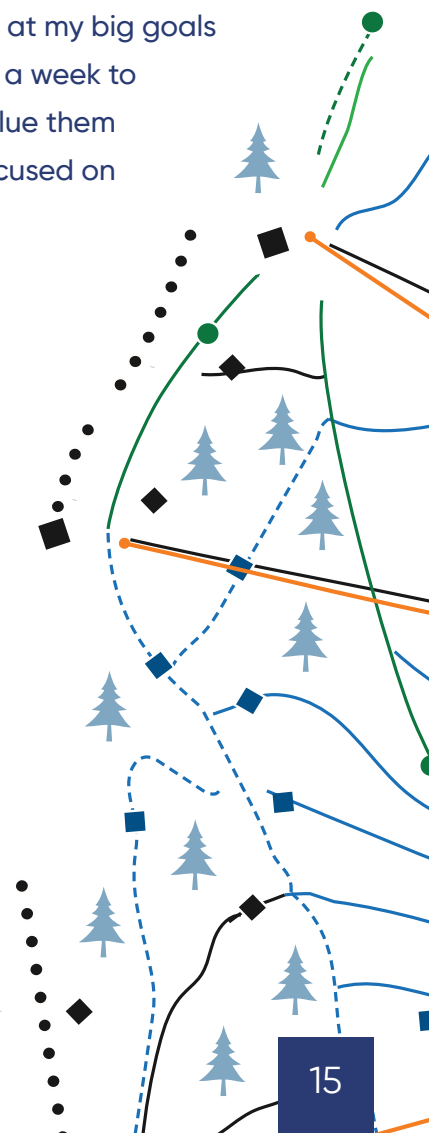
Knowing your priorities - the best use of your time - is *the* prerequisite for goal-directed behavior. There is a lovely saying that goes, 'You aren't lost if you don't care where you're going.' There are times, such as being on vacation, when this philosophy works well. Most of the time, though, we do need to be clear about our priorities for two reasons: first, we have demands on our time, and certain things simply need to get done or we pay a price; and, second, we have things we *want* to do and, with limited time, we need to be deliberate in order to have time for them. We need to say a whole lot of "no's" in order to have time and energy for the more important "yes."

For adults, whether we like it or not (and we usually don't) our must-do's come first. These are the things that if we delay or ignore, the consequences will be immediate and significant, and at their worst, affect others we care about. Paying bills so the lights stay on? That's a priority, probably ahead of starting a new exercise routine, even if shredded abs are really important to us. Essentially, priority one is the thing that either causes the most pain if it is not addressed or the activity that offers the greatest potential upside.

Once our basics are covered, we can focus on whatever brings us joy and purpose. While it seems obvious that it is critical to devote time to what matters most early on and regularly, we often don't because those activities are often *not* urgent. For example, being in touch with our good friends is something that is easy to neglect because we know they are there for us, but there's a cost not just to the friendship but to our own wellbeing when we go too long just occupied with our work. It's the same thing with exercise, working on a novel or business plan, or any other endeavor that cannot be accomplished quickly. Priorities get deprioritized because they usually take time and effort, and eventually we can convince ourselves that other, more immediately pleasurable activities are actually our priorities!<sup>5</sup> It's easy to get super-involved with social media, gaming, and online shopping and to neglect attending to our aspirations. Naming what the priorities are - what truly gives us a sense of purpose and meaning - makes our goals more visible. I look at my big goals for the year, a 5-10 bullets list I keep in my notes section, at least four mornings a week to keep me on track. These annual priorities, such as being sure my kids know I value them and investing at least 5 hours a week addressing the climate crisis, keep me focused on what truly matters to me.

Attending to priorities does come with some down sides. Writing or any other intensive work always leaves me with a massive number of emails I am neglecting and can mean taking time away from my family. It means trying to create something I cannot fully see and overcoming self-doubt and tendencies toward perfectionism. However, I prioritize this deep, focused work as much as possible because I value the longer-term, bigger payoffs. As someone who likes to help others, it's hard for me to be significantly less available, but those who truly need me can text or call, and I have others in my company who can cover me for virtually everything in my absence. Sometimes, we don't delegate and attend to priorities because we worry that we or others will see that they can carry on without us, and solving others' problems makes us feel more important.

<sup>5</sup> To give an embarrassing personal example, years ago I was pulled over by the police for rushing home to see the new episode of Friends. Not missing the show was a higher priority than driving safely which, even pre-Hulu, is not a choice I would make rationally.





**However, being distracted by other people's chaos and/or priorities dims our own light a little. We can still be supportive and helpful while remaining clear about what we value and are responsible for so that we don't let helping others become an excuse for not tackling what we and only we can do.**

There are three things to do to get focused on your priorities. First, find a place to record your top daily priority. I use an app that highlights my top task using nearly half the screen with smaller tasks below it. That visual matching of priority level to allocated space works really well for me. For yourself, whether it's a traditional written daily planner or an app that you like, be sure that your top priority stands out from everything else. Bold it, use all caps, circle it, or put a flashing arrow next to it. Your brain will respond to those cues. Having one big thing top of mind makes it a lot more likely that you'll get it done than if it's buried without special billing at #17 in a list of twenty items. And, to reiterate, make sure your task list itself is in a place where you naturally go e.g. your phone or a planner that you actually use.

Second, block off deep work time in your calendar. For me, I will put project work in large blocks on my company calendar, which has the dual purpose of keeping my staff informed about when I'm getting something done that they care about ... and showing that it's a Do Not Disturb time. Third, you might, both through the calendar share and at meetings, try announcing your focus and the deadline you are trying to hit. Our team members share our areas of focus and timelines to hold ourselves accountable to the team. That extra pressure works ... as long as our time estimates are reasonably accurate and no unexpected crises occur. Using this method protects us from minor distractions, poor habits, boredom, and impulsive behavior. We also prevent ourselves from having too many, so-called priorities. One member of my Leadership Team called me out for telling her that I thought something should be her top priority when I had recently named something else as her top priority. That sort of vigilance leads to high performance in both individuals and teams.

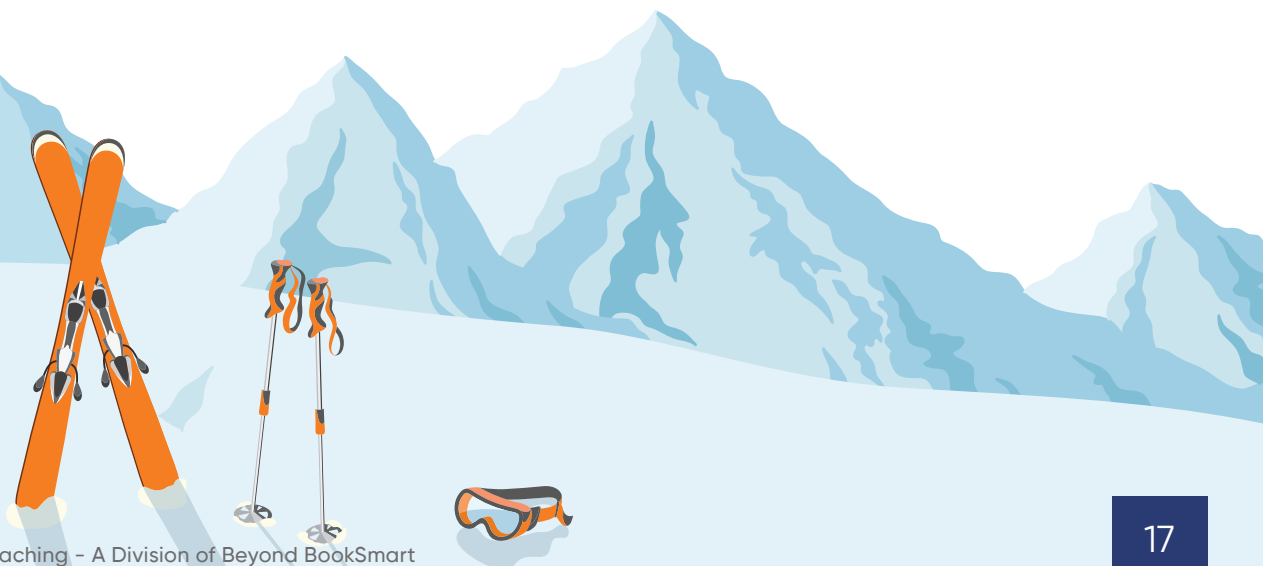
## Planning the Work

Planning work for your priority requires you to break it down into component parts, sequence those parts, estimate times for completion, and map it out on some version of a calendar. There are

many ways to do this planning, from company-level Gantt charts that assign roles to multiple people to simply estimating on a scratch pad and inserting your commitments into your calendar. This phase of the work is important because, much like the Black Diamond slopes, just cruising along without any forethought doesn't work when the challenge is hard. In skiing you need to 'pick your line' and know your first few moves based on the obstacles coming your way while also being flexible for unexpected challenges that invariably arise. It's the same process when tackling big projects, such as applying for a job, developing code, or, yep, writing something substantial.

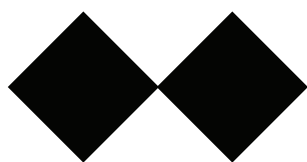
One of the more comprehensive tasks I have every year as CEO of Beyond BookSmart and WorkSmart Coaching is developing a budget for the Board to approve. As early as April and May for a budget due in December, I am already beginning to think about it, particularly when my staff brings up great ideas that aren't urgent or accounted for in the current budget but may be worthy of consideration for next year. These ideas typically go into a 'parking lot' document that we can all access and comment on and revisit when the timing is right. June through August are generally a bit less busy for us, so we use that time to delve more deeply into the ideas we find most promising. We conduct a SWOT analysis - a review of our Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats - to see what we believe are the most important issues and ideas, and out of those, some rise to the top and become topics that we will explore further in September and October.

Once we have our areas of focus, such as a new product to offer or an improvement in quality control, we conduct something known as a 'pre-mortem,' a consideration in advance of how things might go terribly wrong. It's something like a cost-benefit analysis and a risk-assessment rolled up into something a true pessimist would enjoy. If an idea has run this sort of gauntlet, we then break down all of the tasks by department and work in smaller groups to anticipate every possible issue that might arise, from complications in tracking the billing to legal questions to the operations and sales to the value given to the customer and how to communicate the program. Making big



changes requires a sense of process and the ability to take things in stages. No significant undertaking is done in one effort. As Robert Graves is credited with saying, “There is no such thing as good writing, only good rewriting.” The planning process requires this humility, knowing that whether it’s a book or a budget, there will need to be many iterations. To think otherwise, to paraphrase a proverb attributed to Benjamin Franklin and Winston Churchill among others, will only prove that failing to plan means planning to fail.

Once the tasks are listed, you can sequence them, make reasonable guesstimates as to how long each part will take, and then map the steps out wherever you will be certain to look, such as your Google calendar or your written planner. Having this structure provides armor against the inevitable onslaught of competing priorities and distractions that will come your way.



## **Double Black Diamond: Metacognition And The Art Of Self-Improvement**

In skiing, Double Black Diamond trails are not necessarily real. Some mountains might use this rating for legal reasons for all I know, just to scare away those who are wavering and should not risk life and limb on trails beyond their level. I’d bet that they are doing so, in part, to give those who tackle these trails some bragging rights. In skiing, if you’re on double blacks, it’s basically the mountain’s way of acknowledging that it’s got nothing out of your range, and it tried. In work and in life, getting to double black means having tackled enough challenges that you have two major assets going forward. First, you have confidence in yourself because you have seen that with the right effort, right mindset, and right supports, you can, over a period of time, get better and better at whatever you attempt. Second, you have learned how to accelerate change by learning quickly from your mistakes. Metacognition, the act of thinking about your own thinking and learning from experience, is the uberskill that gives you the greatest opportunity for improvement and, thus, achievement. It is the Double Black Diamond skill of Executive Functioning.

While there is no one best way to get better at getting better, my favorite is keeping notes. When actors rehearse, they get notes from the director. When athletes play a game, they review the tapes and get notes from the coaches. When I used to teach, I gave myself notes at the



end of the day on every lesson. Notes can dramatically improve our ability to learn from experience. You can also hire a professional. Whether it's a therapist, a supervisor, or a business coach, improvement comes from seeing our patterns and evaluating them in terms of our goals. Are our patterns getting us what we want? While there is a massive chasm between simply noticing that our behaviors are ineffective and changing them to become effective, observation is the first step. Recognizing what works and what holds us back allows us to make changes.

On my phone's *Notes* app, I keep a number of lists: books and movies that friends recommend, what I am grateful for each day, the high priorities for the year that I referenced earlier, and so forth. While the app clearly buttresses my organizational skills since it has a place for everything and everything goes in its place, a new feature allows me to prioritize notes by pinning them permanently at the top of the list. In total, I have more than 250 different notes in the app and some are more essential than others. I could try to remember which notes to check each day, but the pinning feature helps me reflect daily on the things that matter most to me. This process of putting what you want to pay attention to in a place where you can't help but do so is one of the less obvious but more powerful catalysts of change.

When you keep your priorities in sight, they stay top of mind, paving the way for insights. By prioritizing what matters, we give ourselves the best possible odds of staying on track and making new and valuable connections. We create serendipity, a variant of the 'Luck favors the ready' paradigm. It's not just wishful thinking; it's mindful behavior.

Finding methods such as these to reflect regularly on your direction and your methods is a key part of achieving stability and making growth, so you are capable of any level of challenge. As with any endeavor of value, the opportunity for growth is accessible every day.

## Finding Balance in Wobbly Times

Even when times feel relatively sane in the greater world, we always face personal stressors. However, when those stressors are elevated, we need to do things that are unappealing but keep us both calm and focused on our priorities. Whether it's the preliminary moves we make on the Green Circle slopes where we practice how to manage stress and impulses that come with it,

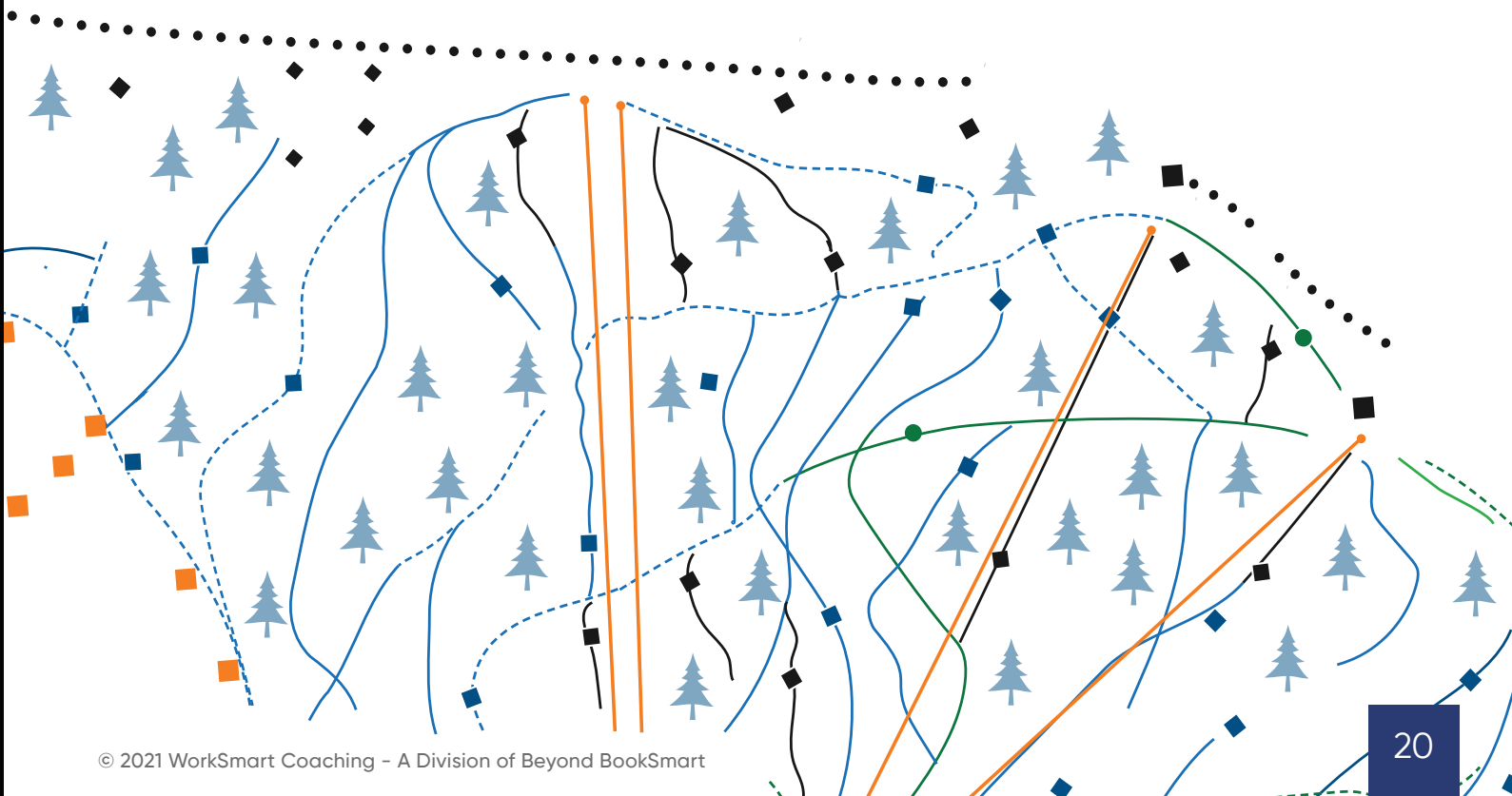
---

**By prioritizing what matters, we give ourselves the best possible odds of staying on track and making new and valuable connections.**

---

cruising along functionally on the Blue Square intermediate slopes learning how to start and stay focused on tasks that are annoying but are necessary, or we are pushing ourselves to tackle the Black Diamonds and learning how to organize, prioritize, plan, and manage our time, or whether we are going for the challenge of consistently improving through self-monitoring, Executive Functioning skills are the key to success.

I wavered on whether or not I would write this book since I know many people whose skills in each of these areas are so much better than mine. In the end, I ran with the enlightened words of Kurt Hahn, the educator and founder of Outward Bound, who said, "Your disability is your opportunity." For every year of my life for as long as I can remember, I have tried to improve in the domains of Executive Function. While I have plenty of room for continued growth, the personal experiments I conduct, my professional conversations with experts, my work in various institutions, the research of my own company, and my practice as a coach and father have helped me find ways to incrementally but consistently improve these skills of self-management. I've also seen it with our clients and colleagues, and the results are there for anyone who puts in the effort. Reading about neuroplasticity and the ability of the brain to rewire itself is phenomenal even in the abstract, but doing the work and seeing the benefits of literally changing the way our brains work - changing our minds - can inspire us to ever greater aspirations and give us a certain joy at the amazing opportunity life gives us. Even with our many flaws and tendencies to just do what we've always done, we still have the capacity to change. May you find appreciation of yourself and of the value of the struggle itself.



## About the Author

Michael Delman, M.Ed.



Michael Delman is an award-winning educator, author, and entrepreneur. In 2006 he founded Beyond BookSmart, which he has grown into the world's largest Executive Function coaching company, as its CEO. Prior to that, Michael co-founded and was principal of McAuliffe Charter School in Framingham, Massachusetts. In 2018, he published his critically acclaimed first book, *Your Kid's Gonna Be Okay: Building the Executive Function Skills Your Child Needs in the Age of Attention*, and toured the country speaking with parents about how to help their children be productive and confident. A popular speaker at

conferences, Michael has also been featured in The Times of London, CBS Boston affiliate WBZ TV, and dozens of media outlets across the country. Michael brings his unique combination of business acumen and an educator's perspective to his visionary work. His passion is helping people discover their strengths, develop their confidence, and become more effective at whatever challenges they face.

**WorkSmart**  
**COACHING**

A DIVISION OF BEYOND BOOKSMART