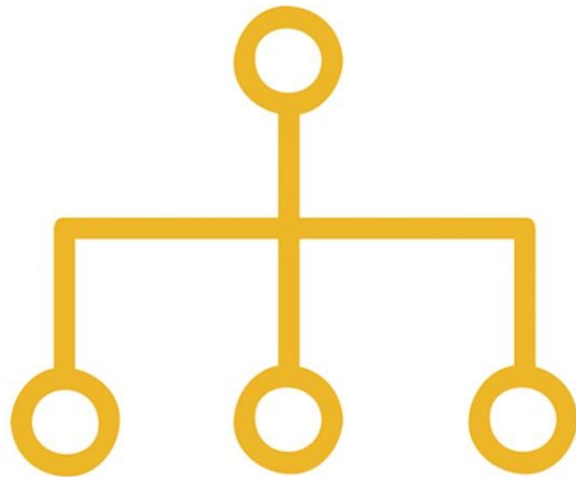


Decision Making:

A Brief Guide on
How to Think Better



James Clear

10 Things This Guide Will Teach You

1. How intelligent people think (and how you can replicate their approach).
2. How to identify common mental errors.
3. How to reduce the risk of making poor decisions.
4. How willpower and decision making are linked.
5. How to ruthlessly eliminate bad ideas.
6. How to focus on your best ideas and be a more productive thinker.
7. How to get more results from old strategies.
8. How to achieve success while staying true to your values.
9. How to measure the impact of your decisions.
10. How to make good decision making a daily habit.

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Mental Models: How Intelligent People Solve Unsolvable Problems

Richard Feynman won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1965. He is widely regarded as one of the greatest physicists of all-time. (He was a pretty solid bongo player as well). [1]

Feynman received his undergraduate degree from MIT and his Ph.D. from Princeton. During those years, he became known for waltzing into the math department at each school and solving problems that the brilliant math Ph.D. students couldn't solve.

Feynman describes why he was able to do this in his fantastic book, Surely You're Joking Mr. Feynman! (one of my favorite books that I read last year).

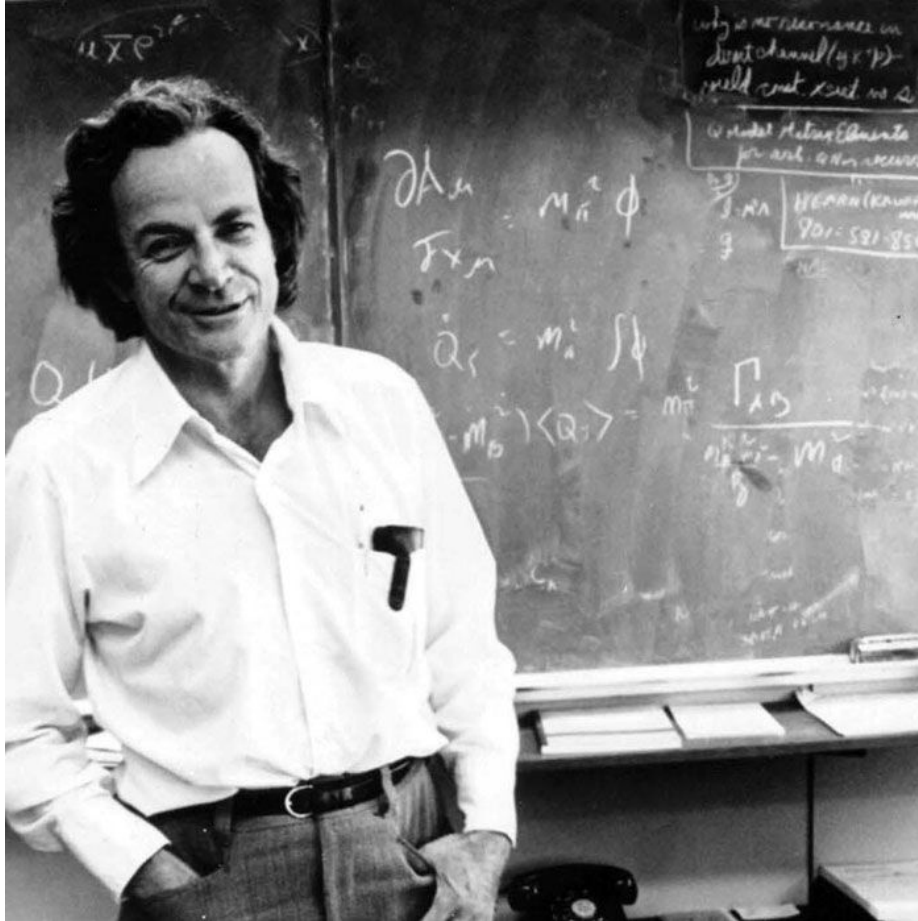
“One day [my high school physics teacher, Mr. Bader,] told me to stay after class. ‘Feynman,’ he said, ‘you talk too much and you make too much noise. I know why. You’re bored. So I’m going to give you a book. You go up there in the back, in the corner, and study this book, and when you know everything that’s in this book, you can talk again.’

So every physics class, I paid no attention to what was going on with Pascal’s Law, or whatever they were doing. I was up in the back with this book: Advanced Calculus, by Woods. Bader knew I had studied Calculus for the Practical Man a little bit, so he gave me the real works—it was for a junior or senior course in college. It had Fourier series, Bessel functions, determinants, elliptic functions—all kinds of wonderful stuff that I didn’t know anything about.

That book also showed how to differentiate parameters under the integral sign—it's a certain operation. It turns out that's not taught very much in the universities; they don't emphasize it. But I caught on how to use that method, and I used that one damn tool again and again. So because I was self-taught using that book, I had peculiar methods of doing integrals.

The result was, when the guys at MIT or Princeton had trouble doing a certain integral, it was because they couldn't do it with the standard methods they had learned in school. If it was a contour integration, they would have found it; if it was a simple series expansion, they would have found it. Then I come along and try differentiating under the integral sign, and often it worked. So I got a great reputation for doing integrals, only because my box of tools was different from everybody else's, and they had tried all their tools on it before giving the problem to me.

—Richard Feynman, [Surely You're Joking Mr. Feynman!](#) [2]



Richard Feynman (Image Source: California Institute of Technology)

Mental Models

"Point of View is worth 80 IQ points."

-Alan Kay

A mental model is a way of looking at the world.

Put simply, mental models are the set of tools that you use to think. Each mental model offers a different framework that you can use to look at life (or at an individual problem). Feynman's strategy of differentiating under the integral sign was a unique mental model that he could pull out of his intellectual toolbox and use to solve difficult problems that eluded his peers. Feynman wasn't necessarily smarter than the math Ph.D. students, he just saw the problem from a different perspective.

I have written about mental models before. For example, you can use [the Inversion Technique](#) to view situations in a different way and solve difficult problems.

Where mental models really shine, however, is when you develop multiple ways of looking at the same problem. For example, let's say that you'd like to avoid procrastination and have a productive day. If you understand [the 2-Minute Rule](#), [the Eisenhower Box](#), and [Warren Buffett's 25-5 Rule](#), then you have a range of options for determining your priorities and getting something important done.

There is no one best way to manage your schedule and get something done. When you have a variety of mental models at your disposal, you can pick the one that works best for your current situation.

The Law of the Instrument

In Abraham Kaplan's book, [The Conduct of Inquiry](#), he explains a concept called The Law of the Instrument.

Kaplan says, "I call it the law of the instrument, and it may be formulated as follows: Give a small boy a hammer, and he will find that everything he encounters needs pounding." [3]

Kaplan's law is similar to a common proverb you have likely heard before: "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." If you only have one framework for thinking about the world, then you'll try to fit every problem you face into that framework. When your set of mental models is limited, so is your potential for finding a solution.

Interestingly, this problem can become more pronounced as your expertise in a particular area grows. If you're quite smart and talented in one area, you have a tendency to believe that your skill set is the answer to most problems you face. The more you master a single mental model, the more likely it becomes that this mental model will be your downfall because you'll start applying it indiscriminately to every problem. Smart people can easily develop a confirmation bias that leaves them stumped in difficult situations.

However, if you develop a bigger toolbox of mental models, you'll improve your ability to solve problems because you'll have more options for getting to the right answer. This is one of the primary ways that truly brilliant people separate themselves from the masses of smart individuals out there. Brilliant people like Richard Feynman have more mental models at their disposal.

This is why having a wide range of mental models is important. You can only choose the best tool for the situation if you have a full toolbox.

How to Develop New Mental Models

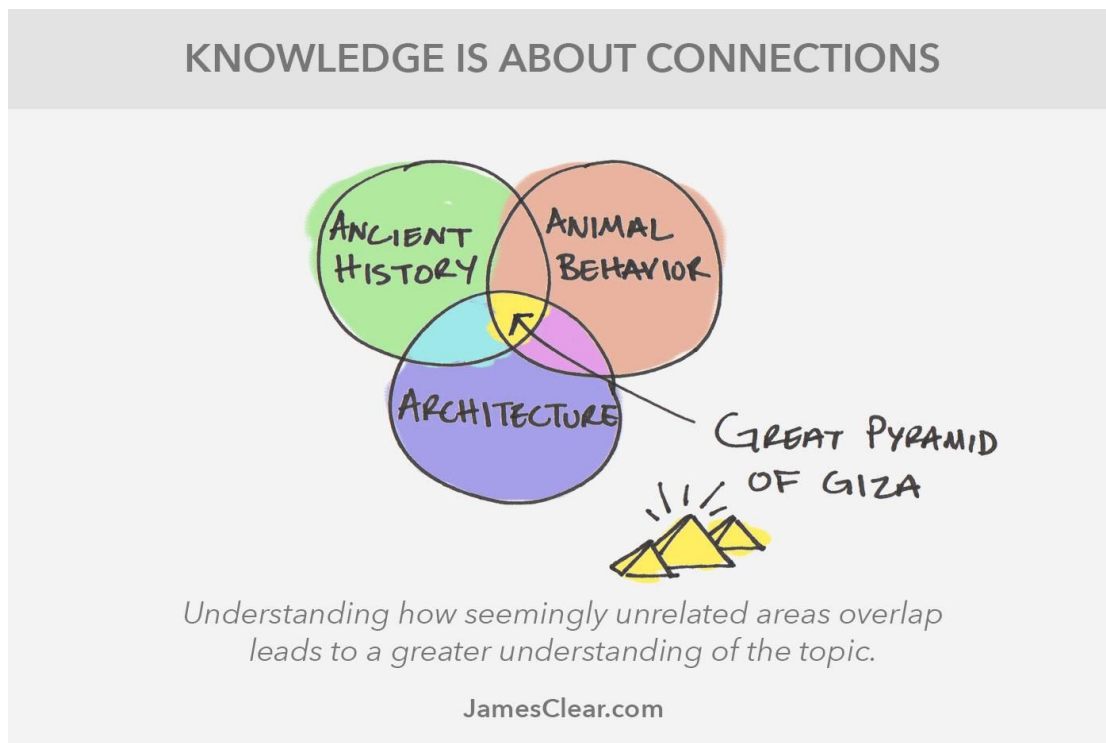
In my experience, there are two good ways to build new mental models.

- 1. Read books outside the norm.** If you read the same material as everyone else, then you'll think in the same way as everyone else. You can't expect to see problems in a new way if you're reading all the same things as your classmates, co-workers, or peers. So, either read books that are seldom read by the rest of your group (like Feynman did with his Calculus book) or read

books that are outside your area of interest, but can overlap with it in some way. In other words, look for answers in unexpected places. [4]

2. Create a web of ideas that shows how seemingly unrelated ideas

connect. Whenever you are reading a new book or listening to someone lecture, write down the various ways that this new information connects to information you already understand. We tend to view knowledge as separated into different silos. We think that a certain set of ideas have to do with economics and another set have to do with medicine and a third set have to do with art history. This is mostly a product of how schools teach subjects, but in the real world information is not separated like this.



For example, I was watching a documentary the other day that connected the design of the Great Pyramids in Egypt with the fighting rituals of animals. According to the historians on the show, when animals are battling one another they will often rise up on their back feet to increase their height and show their dominance. Similarly, when a new Pharaoh took power in Egypt, he

wanted to assert his dominance over the culture and so he built very tall structures as a symbol of power. This explanation links seemingly unrelated areas (architecture, ancient history, and animal behavior) in a way that results in a deeper understanding of the topic.

In a similar way, mental models from outside areas can reveal a deeper level of understanding about issues in your primary field of interest.

Don't try to tighten a screw with a hammer. The problems of life and work are much easier to solve when you have the right tools.

Thanks to Shane Parrish for sending me down the rabbit hole of mental models.

How to Solve Difficult Problems by Using the Inversion Technique

Here's a new framework for thinking about how you solve difficult problems (like losing weight and getting fit, creating more innovation in your company, learning a new skill, or otherwise changing your behavior).

I call this strategy the Inversion Technique and author Josh Kaufman covers it in his book, [The First 20 Hours](#).

Here's how it works.

The Inversion Technique

The way to use the Inversion Technique is to look at a particular problem from the opposite direction. [5]

For example, if you want to be a better manager, then you would ask, "What would someone do each day if they were a terrible manager?" This line of questioning will often reveal some surprising insights.

Here's an in-depth example from Kaufman's book...

“By studying the opposite of what you want, you can identify important elements that aren’t immediately obvious. Take white-water kayaking. What would I need to know if I wanted to be able to kayak in a large, fast-moving, rock-strewn river?”

Here’s the inversion: What would it look like if everything went wrong?

- *I’d flip upside down underwater, and not be able to get back up.*
- *I’d flood my kayak, causing it to sink or swamp, resulting in a total loss of the kayak.*
- *I’d hit my head on a rock.*
- *I’d lose my paddle, eliminating my maneuverability.*
- *I’d eject from my kayak, get stuck in a hydraulic (a point in the river where the river flows back on itself, creating a loop like a washing machine) and not be able to get out.*

If I managed to do all of these things at once in the middle of a raging river, I’d probably die – the worst-case scenario. This depressing line of thought is useful because it points to a few white-water kayaking skills that are probably very important:

- *Learning to roll the kayak right side up if it flips, without ejecting.*
- *Learning how to prevent swamping the kayak if ejecting is necessary.*
- *Learning how to avoid losing my paddle in rough water.*
- *Learning and using safety precautions when rafting around large rocks.*
- *Scouting the river before the run to avoid dangerous river features entirely.*

This mental simulation also gives me a shopping list: I’d need to invest in a flotation vest, helmet, and other safety gear.

Now ... I have concrete list of subskills to practice and actions to take to ensure that I actually have fun, keep my gear, and survive the trip.”

— Josh Kaufman, *The First 20 Hours*

Using the Inversion Technique will often reveal daily errors that you may not realize you are already making. Or, as shown in the kayak example, it will showcase potential problems that could arise. Inverting the problem provides a different perspective by forcing you to think through the hidden barriers that could prevent your progress.

Becoming Smart vs. Avoiding Stupid

“Say you want to create more innovation at your organization. Thinking forward, you’d think about all of the things you could do to foster innovation. If you look at the problem backwards, you’d think about all the things you could do to create less innovation. Ideally, you’d avoid those things. Sounds simple right? I bet your organization does some of those ‘stupid’ things today.”

—Shane Parrish [6]

It is far easier to avoid stupidity than it is to create genius.

Eliminating the errors and mistakes that are preventing your success can be just as powerful as building new skills or habits. This was part of the success story of football player Jerry Rice. Rather than trying to build skills he didn’t have (like speed), Rice focused on eliminating mistakes that he made by running the most precise routes. As a result, when his opponents did make mistakes, Rice was able to take advantage.

Reducing Risk

There is an additional benefit to this strategy as well: While there may be adverse side effects from seeking success, there is very little risk from preventing failure.

For example, say you want to increase your focus and productivity. You could take a drug or mental stimulant that increases your ability to focus, but you run the risk of possible side effects.

On the other hand, using the Inversion Technique you could ask, “What if I wanted to decrease my focus? What are ways I could distract myself?” The answer to that question may help you discover distractions you can eliminate, which should also increase your level of productivity. It’s the same problem, but the Inversion Technique allows you to attack it from another angle and with less risk. [7]

Give the Inversion Technique a try and turn your problems inside-out.

Thanks to [Josh Kaufman](#) and [Shane Parrish](#) for inspiring this article.

How Willpower Works: The Science of Decision Fatigue and How to Avoid Bad Decisions

Why do we make unhealthy and unproductive choices — even when we know we should do better?

If you ask most people, they will say that poor choices are a result of a “lack of willpower.”

But research from Columbia University is beginning to reveal that willpower doesn't quite work that way.

In fact, you may be surprised just how much small daily decisions impact the willpower you have for important choices. And most importantly, it turns out there are simple choices you can make that will help you master your willpower and make better decisions on a more consistent basis.

Here's the deal...

Why Some Criminals Don't Get a Fair Hearing

In a [research study](#) published by the National Academy of Sciences, psychologists examined the factors that impact whether or not a judge approves a criminal for parole.

The researchers examined 1,112 judicial rulings over a 10-month period. All of the rulings were made by a parole board judge, who was determining whether or not to allow the criminal to be released from prison on parole. (In some cases, the criminal was asking not for a release, but rather for a change in parole terms.)

Now, you might assume that the judges were influenced by factors like the type of crime committed or the particular laws that were broken.

But the researchers found exactly the opposite. The choices made by judges are impacted by all types of things that shouldn't have an effect in the courtroom. Most notably, the time of day.

What the researchers found was that at the beginning of the day, a judge was likely to give a favorable ruling about 65 percent of the time. However, as the morning wore on and the judge became drained from making more and more decisions, the likelihood of a criminal getting a favorable ruling steadily dropped to zero.

After taking a lunch break, however, the judge would return to the courtroom refreshed and the likelihood of a favorable ruling would immediately jump back up to 65 percent. And then, as the hours moved on, the percentage of favorable rulings would fall back down to zero by the end of the day.

This trend held true for more than 1,100 cases. It didn't matter what the crime was — murder, rape, theft, embezzlement — a criminal was much more likely to get a favorable response if their parole hearing was scheduled in the morning (or immediately after a food break) than if it was scheduled near the end of a long session.

The figure below depicts the odds that a judge will make a favorable ruling based on the time of the day. The dotted lines signify food breaks taken throughout the day.

How Decision Fatigue Impacts the Rulings Made by Parole Judges

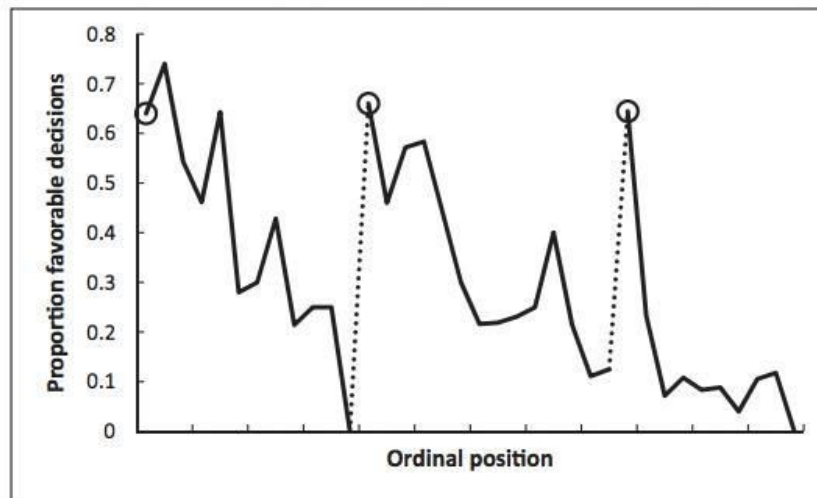


Fig. 1. Proportion of rulings in favor of the prisoners by ordinal position. Circled points indicate the first decision in each of the three decision sessions; tick marks on x axis denote every third case; dotted line denotes food break. Because unequal session lengths resulted in a low number of cases for some of the later ordinal positions, the graph is based on the first 95% of the data from each session.

Source: Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, vol. 108 no. 17

This graph displays the odds that a criminal will receive a favorable response from the judge based on the time of day when the hearing occurs. Notice that as time goes on, the odds of receiving a favorable response decrease. (Graphic by James Clear.)

What's Going on Here?

As it turns out, your willpower is like a muscle. And similar to the muscles in your body, willpower can get fatigued when you use it over and over again. Every time you make a decision, it's like doing another rep in the gym. And similar to how your muscles get tired at the end of a workout, the strength of your willpower fades as you make more decisions.

Researchers often refer to this phenomenon as decision fatigue. When the judge on a parole board experiences decision fatigue, they deny more parole requests.

This makes sense. When your willpower is fading and your brain is tired of making decisions, it's easier just to say no and keep everyone locked up than it is to debate whether or not someone is trustworthy enough to leave prison. At the beginning of the day, a judge will give each case a fair shot. But as their energy starts to fade? Deny, deny, deny.

Here's why this is important for you...

Do You Suffer From Decision Fatigue?

Decision fatigue happens every day in your life as well. If you have a particularly decision-heavy day at work, then you come home feeling drained. You might *want* to go to the gym and workout, but your brain would rather default to the easy decision: sit on the couch. That's decision fatigue.

The same thing is true if you find it hard to muster up the willpower to work on your side business at night or to cook a healthy meal for dinner.

And while decision fatigue is something that we all deal with, there are a few ways that you can organize your life and design your day to master your willpower.

5 Ways to Overcome Decision Fatigue

1. Plan daily decisions the night before.

There will always be decisions that pop up each day that you can't plan for. That's fine. It's just part of life.

But for most of us, the decisions that drain us are the ones that we make over and over and over again. Wasting precious willpower these decisions — which could be automated or planned in advance — is one reason why many people feel so drained at the end of the day.

For example, decisions like...

What am I going to wear to work? What should I eat for breakfast? Should I go to the dry cleaner before or after work? And so on.

All of those examples above, can be decided in 3 minutes or less the night before, which means you won't be wasting your willpower on those choices the next day. Taking time to plan out, simplify, and design the repeated daily decisions will give you more mental space to make the important choices each day.

2. Do the most important thing first.

If there was the most important court case in the world, when would you want the judge to hear it?

Based on the research above, first thing in the morning. You'd want their best attention, energy, and focus to go toward the decisions that were most important.

The same thing goes for your work and life. What's the most important thing for you right now?

Is it getting in shape? Is it building your business? Is it writing that book you have inside of you? Is it learning to eliminate stress and relax?

Whatever it is for you, put your best energy toward it. If you have to wake up 30 minutes earlier, then do that. Start your day by working on the most important thing in your life.

I've written previously about the importance of morning routines and time management, this research on willpower is just another reason to work on the most important things first.

3. Stop making decisions. Start making commitments.

I think advice like, "you just need to decide to do it" gets dished around too much.

Yes, of course you need to decide to do the things that are important to you, but more than that you need to schedule them into your life.

We all have things that we say are important to us.

"I really want to scale my business."

"I really want to lose 40 pounds."

“I really want to get started on XYZ.”

Unfortunately, most of us simply hope that we’ll have the willpower and motivation to make the right decisions each day.

Rather than hoping that I’ll make the right choice each day, I’ve found much more success by scheduling the things that are important to me.

For example, my schedule for writing is Monday and Thursday. My schedule for weightlifting is Monday, Wednesday, Friday. On any given Monday, I don’t have to decide whether I’m going to write. It’s already on the schedule. And I’m not hoping that I’ll have enough willpower to make it to the gym. It’s just where I go on Mondays at 6pm.

If you sit back and hope that you’ll be able to make the right decisions each day, then you will certainly fall victim to decision fatigue and a lack of willpower.

4. If you have to make good decisions later in the day, then eat something first.

It’s no coincidence that the judges became better decision makers after eating. Now, if you cram french fries into your veins every day, then I doubt that you’ll enjoy the same results. But taking a break to feed your brain is a wonderful way to boost willpower.

This is especially important because although it’s great to do the most important thing first, it’s not always possible to organize your day like that.

When you want to get better decisions from your mind, put better food into your body.

5. Simplify.

Whether you are trying to reach the highest level of performance or just want to start eating a healthy diet, the biggest frustration for most people is the feeling that you need to use willpower on an hourly basis.

Find ways to simplify your life. If something isn't important to you, eliminate it. Making decisions about unimportant things, even if you have the time to do so, isn't a benign task. It's pulling precious energy and willpower from the things that matter.

Willpower is one area of life where you can most certainly improve your output by reducing the number of inputs.

The Bottom Line

Willpower isn't something you have or something you lack. It rises and falls. And while it's impossible to maximize your willpower for every moment of every day, it is possible to make a few changes to your day and your routine so that you can get the most of your decisions and make consistent progress on the things that are important to you.

Hat tip to John Tierney and [his article](#) for the New York Times, where I originally learned about decision fatigue.

How to Declutter Your Mind and Unleash Your Willpower by Using “Bright-Line” Rules

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say or do can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed to you. Do you understand these rights as they have been read to you?”

—The Miranda Warning

In the spring of 1966, a man named Ernesto Miranda was arrested in Phoenix. The police had very little to go on, but they suspected Miranda of kidnapping and raping an 18-year-old woman ten days earlier. The officers interrogated Miranda for two hours and were rewarded for their effort: Miranda admitted to the rape charge and signed a confession paper.

There was just one problem. During the interrogation, Miranda had been alone and at no point was he informed that he had the right to legal counsel.

When the case went to trial, Miranda’s written confession was used as evidence. He was quickly convicted, but his lawyer appealed because Miranda had never been informed of his rights and thus, according to his lawyer, the confession was not voluntary. The Arizona Supreme Court upheld the decision, but eventually the case made it to the United States Supreme Court.

The United States Supreme Court overturned the Miranda ruling by a vote of 5 to 4 because

“The person in custody must, prior to interrogation, be clearly informed that he has the right to remain silent, and that anything he says will be used against him in court; he must be clearly informed that he has the right to consult with a lawyer and to have the lawyer with him during interrogation, and that, if he is indigent, a lawyer will be appointed to represent him.” [8]

The Supreme Court had just created a bright-line rule.

The Power of Bright-Line Rules

A bright-line rule refers to a clearly defined rule or standard. It is a rule with clear interpretation and very little wiggle room. It establishes a bright line for what the rule is saying and what it is not saying.

The Miranda ruling is one example. If a police officer fails to inform a defendant in custody of their rights, then the suspect’s statements are not admissible in court. Plain and simple. Clear and bright.

Most of us, myself included, could benefit from setting brighter lines in our personal and professional lives. Consider some common examples:

- We might say that we want to check email less frequently.
- We might say that we want to drink moderately.
- We might say that we want to save more for retirement.
- We might say that we want to eat healthier.

But what do these statements really mean?

- What does it mean to check email less frequently? Are you going to “try to be better about it” and hope that works? Will you set specific days or certain times when you will

be unavailable? Will you check email on weekends? Will you process email only on your computer?

- What, exactly, is moderate drinking? Is it one drink per week? Five drinks per week? Ten drinks per week? We haven't defined it, so how will we know if we are making progress? [9]
- What does it mean to save more? More is not a number. How much is more? When will you save? Every month? Every paycheck?
- What does eating healthier look like on a daily basis? Does that mean you eat more servings of vegetables? If so, how many more? Do you want to start by eating a healthy meal once per day? Twice per day? Every meal?

It can be easy to make promises like this to yourself, but they do not create bright lines. Fuzzy statements make progress hard to measure, and the things we measure are the things we improve.

Now, do we need to measure every area of our lives? Of course not. But if something is important to you, then you should establish a bright line for it. Consider the following alternatives:

- I only process email between 11AM and 6PM.
- I enjoy a maximum of 2 drinks per night.
- I save \$500 per month for retirement.
- I eat at least two types of vegetables per day.

These statements establish bright lines. These statements make action steps precise and obvious. Vague promises will never lead to clear results.

Using Bright Lines to Break Bad Habits

The examples I outlined above focused primarily on building new behaviors, but bright-line rules can be used just as effectively to break bad habits or eliminate old behaviors.

My friend Nir Eyal proposes a similar strategy that he calls “Progressive Extremism.” To explain the concept, Nir uses the example of being a vegetarian. If you were interested in becoming a vegetarian, you might start by saying, “I don’t eat red meat.” The goal is not to change everything at once, but to take a very clear and extreme stand in one small area. You are establishing a bright line on that topic.

Over time, you can progressively move your bright line forward and add other behaviors to the mix. (i.e. “I don’t eat red meat or fish.” And so on.)

How Bright Lines Unleash Your Hidden Willpower

Establishing bright lines in your life can provide a huge boost in daily willpower.

Here are two reasons why:

First, bright lines shift the conversation in your head from one of sacrifice to one of empowerment. When you don’t have a bright line established and you choose not to do something, the tendency is to say, “Oh, I can’t do it this time.” Conversely, when you do have a bright line clearly set, your response can simply be, “No thanks, I don’t do that.” Bright lines help you avoid making just-this-once exceptions. Instead, you are following a new identity that you have created for yourself. [10]

Second, by establishing clear decisions in your life, you conserve willpower for other important choices. Here’s the problem with trying to make daily decisions in muddy water: Without bright lines, you must decide whether a situation fits your standards every time. With bright lines, the decision is made ahead of time. Because of this, you are less likely to suffer

from decision fatigue and more likely to have willpower left over for work, relationships, and other health habits.

What to Do When You Have Too Many Ideas (And Not Enough Time)

What do you do when you have too many ideas and not enough time? Or similarly, what about when you have too many tasks and not enough energy?

As an entrepreneur, I feel like I've been battling this issue for awhile. There is always another opportunity to chase or a new product idea that sounds exciting. For a long time, I felt guilty about ignoring good ideas that came my way and so I kept adding more to my to-do list.

However, during a recent conversation with Travis Dommert, I learned about a new strategy for dealing with the issue of having too many ideas and projects.

It all comes down to treating your life like a rose bush.

Let me explain what Travis taught me...

Ideas are Like Rose Buds

As a rose bush grows it creates more buds than it can sustain. If you talk to an experienced gardener, they will tell you that rose bushes need to be pruned to bring out the best in both their appearance and their performance.

You see, a rose bush isn't like a tree. It can't grow wider and taller each year. And that means if you never trim away some of the buds, then the bush will eventually exhaust itself and die. There are only so many resources to go around. And if you really want a rose bush to flourish, then it needs to be trimmed down not just once, but each year. [11]

Ideas are like rose bushes: they need to be consistently pruned and trimmed down. And just like a rose bush, pruning away ideas — even if they have potential — allows the remaining ideas to fully blossom.

Just like the rose bush, we face constraints in our lives. We have a limited amount of energy and willpower to apply each day. It's natural for new ideas and projects to come into our life — just like it's natural for a rose bush to add new buds — but we have to prune things away before we exhaust ourselves.

In other words: new growth is natural and it's normal for tasks and ideas to creep into your life, but full growth and optimal living requires pruning.

We All Need to Cut Good Branches

I like the rose bush analogy because it brings up something that is often lost in most conversations about productivity and simplicity: if you want to reach your full potential, you have to cut out ideas and tasks that are good, but not great.

In my experience, this is really hard to do.

1. **If you're building a business**, maybe you have 3 product lines that are profitable. Your business might grow by 5x if you focus on all three, but which product line will grow by 500x if you put all of your energy into it?
2. **If you're training in the gym**, there are all sorts of exercises that could make you stronger. But which two or three exercises will build a foundation of strength better than anything else?
3. **If you're thinking about the relationships in your life**, there are dozens of people that you are connected to in some way. But which people bring energy into your life and which ones suck energy out of it?

Most rose buds could grow if they are given the chance. In other words, most buds are like a good idea: they have potential. But in order for the entire bush to flourish and live a healthy life, you have to choose the ones with the most potential and cut the rest.

The Bottom Line

Gardener and writer Elizabeth Roth says, "Roses that are left unpruned can become a tangled mess of old and new canes all competing for air and light." [12]

We can say the same thing about our lives. A life left unpruned can become a twisted knot of ideas, tasks, and projects competing for your limited time and resources. If you don't prune some of the branches from your life, the important ones will never flourish.

Thanks again to [Travis Dommert](#) for sharing the rose bud analogy with me.

How to be More Productive and Eliminate Time Wasting Activities by Using the “Eisenhower Box”

Dwight Eisenhower lived one of the most productive lives you can imagine.

Eisenhower was the 34th President of the United States, serving two terms from 1953 to 1961. During his time in office, he launched programs that directly led to the development of the Interstate Highway System in the United States, the launch of the internet (DARPA), the exploration of space (NASA), and the peaceful use of alternative energy sources (Atomic Energy Act).

Before becoming president, Eisenhower was a five-star general in the United States Army, served as the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during World War II, and was responsible for planning and executing invasions of North Africa, France, and Germany.

At other points along the way, he served as President of Columbia University, became the first Supreme Commander of NATO, and somehow found time to pursue hobbies like golfing and oil painting.

Eisenhower had an incredible ability to sustain his productivity not just for weeks or months, but for decades. And for that reason, it is no surprise that his methods for time management, task management, and productivity have been studied by many people.

His most famous productivity strategy is known as the Eisenhower Box and it's a simple decision-making tool that you can use right now. Let's talk about how to be more productive and how Eisenhower's strategy works.

The Eisenhower Box: How to be More Productive

Eisenhower's strategy for taking action and organizing your tasks is simple. Using the decision matrix below, you will separate your actions based on four possibilities.

1. Urgent and important (tasks you will do immediately).
2. Important, but not urgent (tasks you will schedule to do later).
3. Urgent, but not important (tasks you will delegate to someone else).
4. Neither urgent nor important (tasks that you will eliminate).

The great thing about this matrix is that it can be used for broad productivity plans ("How should I spend my time each week?") and for smaller, daily plans ("What should I do today?").

Here is an example of what my Eisenhower Box looks like for today.

THE EISENHOWER BOX

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	DO <i>Do it now.</i> Write article for today.	DECIDE <i>Schedule a time to do it.</i> Exercising. Calling family and friends. Researching articles. Long-term biz strategy.
NOT IMPORTANT	DELEGATE <i>Who can do it for you?</i> Scheduling interviews. Booking flights. Approving comments. Answering certain emails. Sharing articles.	DELETE <i>Eliminate it.</i> Watching television. Checking social media. Sorting through junk mail.

*"What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important."
-Dwight Eisenhower, 34th President of the United States*

The Difference Between Urgent and Important

"What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important."

-Dwight Eisenhower

Urgent tasks are things that you feel like you need to react to: emails, phone calls, texts, news stories. Meanwhile, in the words of Brett McKay, “Important tasks are things that contribute to our long-term mission, values, and goals.” [13]

Separating these differences is simple enough to do once, but doing so continually can be tough. The reason I like the Eisenhower Method is that it provides a clear framework for making the decisions over and over again. And like anything in life, consistency is the hard part.

Here are some other observations I’ve made from using this method.

Elimination Before Optimization

A few years ago, I was reading about computer programming when I came across an interesting quote:

“There is no code faster than no code.”

–Kevlin Henney

In other words, the fastest way to get something done — whether it is having a computer read a line of code or crossing a task off your to-do list — is to eliminate that task entirely. There is no faster way to do something than not doing it at all. That’s not a reason to be lazy, but rather a suggestion to force yourself to make hard decisions and delete any task that does not lead you toward your mission, your values, and your goals.

Too often, we use productivity, time management, and optimization as an excuse to avoid the really difficult question: “Do I actually need to be doing this?” It is much easier to remain busy and tell yourself that you just need to be a little more efficient or to “work a little later tonight” than to endure the pain of eliminating a task that you are comfortable with doing, but that isn’t the highest and best use of your time. [14]

As Tim Ferriss says, “Being busy is a form of laziness — lazy thinking and indiscriminate action.”

I find that the Eisenhower Method is particularly useful because it pushes me to question whether an action is really necessary, which means I’m more likely to move tasks to the “Delete” quadrant rather than mindlessly repeating them. And to be honest, if you simply eliminated all of the things you waste time on each day then you probably wouldn’t need any tips on how to be more productive at the things that matter.

Does This Help Me Accomplish My Goal?

One final note: it can be hard to eliminate time wasting activities if you aren’t sure what you are working toward. In my experience, there are two questions that can help clarify the entire process behind the Eisenhower Method.

Those two questions are...

1. What am I working toward?
2. What are the core values that drive my life?

These are questions that I have asked myself in my [Annual Review](#) and my [Integrity Report](#). Answering these questions has helped me clarify the categories for certain tasks in my life. Deciding which tasks to do and which tasks to delete becomes much easier when you are clear about what is important to you.

The Eisenhower Method isn't a perfect strategy, but I have found it to be a useful decision-making tool for increasing my productivity and eliminating the behaviors that take up mental energy, waste time, and rarely move me toward my goals. I hope you'll find it useful too.

[15]

Do More of What Already Works

In 2004, nine hospitals in Michigan began implementing a new procedure in their intensive care units (I.C.U.). Almost overnight, healthcare professionals were stunned with its success.

Three months after it began, the procedure had cut the infection rate of I.C.U. patients by sixty-six percent. Within 18 months, this one method had saved 75 million dollars in healthcare expenses. Best of all, this single intervention saved the lives of more than 1,500 people in just a year and a half. The strategy was immediately published in a blockbuster paper for the New England Journal of Medicine.

This medical miracle was also simpler than you could ever imagine. It was a checklist.

The Power of Never Skipping Steps

The checklist strategy implemented at Michigan hospitals was named the Keystone ICU Project. It was led by a physician named Peter Pronovost and later popularized by writer Atul Gawande. [16]

In Gawande's best-selling book, The Checklist Manifesto (audiobook), he describes how Pronovost's simple checklist could drive such dramatic results. In the following quote, Gawande explains one of the checklists that was used to reduce the risk of infection when installing a central line in a patient (a relatively common procedure).

On a sheet of plain paper, [Pronovost] plotted out the steps to take in order to avoid infections when putting a line in. Doctors are supposed to (1) wash their hands with soap, (2) clean the patient's skin with chlorhexidine antiseptic, (3) put sterile drapes over the entire patient, (4) wear a sterile mask, hat, gown, and gloves, and (5) put a sterile dressing over the catheter site once the line is in. Check, check, check, check, check.

These steps are no-brainers; they have been known and taught for years. So it seemed silly to make a checklist just for them. Still, Pronovost asked the nurses in his I.C.U. to observe the doctors for a month as they put lines into patients, and record how often they completed each step. In more than a third of patients, they skipped at least one.

This five-step checklist was the simple solution that Michigan hospitals used to save 1,500 lives. Think about that for a moment. There were no technical innovations. There were no pharmaceutical discoveries or cutting-edge procedures. The physicians just stopped skipping steps. They implemented the answers they already had on a more consistent basis.

New Solutions vs. Old Solutions

We have a tendency to undervalue answers that we have already discovered. We underutilize old solutions—even if they are best practices—because they seem like something we have already considered.

Here's the problem: *"Everybody already knows that"* is very different from *"Everybody already does that."* Just because a solution is known doesn't mean it is utilized.

Even more critical, just because a solution is implemented occasionally, doesn't mean it is implemented consistently. Every physician knew the five steps on Peter Pronovost's checklist, but very few did all five steps flawlessly each time.

We assume that new solutions are needed if we want to make real progress, but that isn't always the case.

Use What You Already Have

This pattern is just as present in our personal lives as it is in corporations and governments. We waste the resources and ideas at our fingertips because they don't seem new and exciting.

There are many examples of behaviors, big and small, that have the opportunity to drive progress in our lives if we just did them with more consistency. Flossing every day. Never missing workouts. Performing fundamental business tasks each day, not just when you have time. Apologizing more often. Writing Thank You notes each week.

Of course, these answers are boring. Mastering the fundamentals isn't sexy, but it works. No matter what task you are working on, there is a simple checklist of steps that you can follow right now—basic fundamentals that you have known about for years—that can immediately yield results if you just practice them more consistently.

Progress often hides behind boring solutions and underused insights. You don't need more information. You don't need a better strategy. You just need to do more of what already works.

What Are You Measuring In Your Life?

Imagine this...

Someone walks into the gym, warms up, does a little bit of this exercise, does a little bit of that exercise, bounces around to a few machines, maybe hops on the treadmill, finishes their workout, and leaves the gym.

This isn't a critique of their workout. In fact, it's quite possible that they got a nice workout in. So, what is notable about this situation?

They didn't measure anything. They didn't track their workout. They didn't count reps or weight or time or speed or any other metric. And so, they have no basis for knowing if they are making progress or not. Not tracking your progress is one of the six major mistakes I see people make in the gym.

But here's the thing: We all have areas of life that we say are important to us, but that we aren't measuring.

What We Measure, We Improve

“Count something. Regardless of what one ultimately does in medicine—or outside of medicine, for that matter—one should be a scientist in this world. In the simplest terms, this means one should count something. ... It doesn't really matter what you count. You don't need a research grant. The only requirement is that what you count should be interesting to you.”

—Atul Gawande, Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance

The things we measure are the things we improve. It is only through numbers and clear tracking that we have any idea if we are getting better or worse.

- When I measured how many pushups I did, I got stronger.
- When I tracked my reading habit of 20 pages per day, I read more books.
- When I recorded my values, I began living with more integrity.

Our lives are shaped by how we choose to spend our time and energy each day. Measuring can help us spend that time in better ways, more consistently.

It's Not About the Result, It's About Awareness

The trick is to realize that counting, measuring, and tracking is not about the result. It's about the system, not the goal.

Measure from a place of curiosity. Measure to discover, to find out, to understand.

Measure from a place of self-awareness. Measure to get to know yourself better.

Measure to see if you are showing up. Measure to see if you're actually spending time on the things that are important to you.

You Can't Measure Everything

Critics will be quick to point out that you can't measure everything. This is true.

- Love is important, but how do you measure it?

- Morality is important, but can it be quantified accurately?
- Finding meaning in our lives is essential, but how do you calculate it?

Furthermore, there are some things in life that don't need to be measured. Some people just love working out for the sake of working out. Measuring every repetition might reduce the satisfaction and make it seem more like a job. There is nothing wrong with that. (As always, take the main idea and use it in a way that is best for you.)

Measurement won't solve everything. It is not an ultimate answer to life. However, it is a way to track something critical: are you showing up in the areas that you say are important to you?

The Idea in Practice

But even for things that can't be quantified, measuring can be helpful. And it doesn't have to be complicated or time-consuming.

You can't measure love, but you can track different ways that you are showing up with love in your life:

- Send a digital love note to your partner each day (text, email, voicemail, tweet, etc.) and use [the Seinfeld Strategy](#) to keep track of your streak.
- Schedule one "Surprise Appreciation" each week where you write to a friend and thank them for something unexpected.

You can't measure morality, but you can track if you're thinking about it:

- Write down three values that are dear to you each morning.

- Keep a decision journal to track which decisions you make and whether or not they align with your ethics.

The things we measure are the things we improve. What are you measuring in your life?

Measure Backward, Not Forward

We often measure our progress by looking forward. We set goals. We plan milestones for our progress. Basically, we try to predict the future to some degree.

We do this in business, in health, and in life at large.

- Can we increase our quarterly earnings by 20 percent?
- Can I lose 20 pounds in the next 3 months?
- Will I be married by 30?

These are all measurements that face forward. We look into the future and try to guess when we will get somewhere.

There is an opposite and, I think, more useful approach: measure backward, not forward.

Here's what I mean...

Measuring Backward vs. Measuring Forward

Each week, I sit down at my computer and fill out a little spreadsheet to track the essential metrics in my business. Traffic, email subscribers, revenue, expenses, and so on. I have the process down pretty well by now, so it only takes about 15 minutes.

In those 15 minutes, however, I get very clear feedback on whether or not I'm making progress in the areas that matter to me. I can tell which direction things are moving. And, if the numbers in one area are moving the wrong way, I can make adjustments the following week.

Basically, I measure backward (*What happened in my business this week?*) and use that backward measurement as a way to guide my actions for the next week.

I use a similar strategy in the gym. I lift every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. When I show up at the gym, I open my notebook and look at the weights I lifted during my last workout or two. Then, I plan my workout by slightly increasing the sets, reps, or weight from where they were last week. I go for tiny increases, of course. I'm interested in one percent gains.

In the gym, just like in my business, I measure backward and use that measurement to determine my next move. I am constantly looking to improve, but I base my choices on what has recently happened, not on what I hope will happen in the future.

The Chains of Habit

“The chains of habit are too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken.”

—Samuel Johnson

When it comes to building good habits and breaking bad habits, one of our greatest struggles is maintaining awareness of what we are actually doing. The more automatic a behavior becomes, the less likely we are to notice it. This helps to explain how the consequences of bad habits can sneak up on us. By the time the repercussions of our actions are noticeable, we have already become hooked on a new pattern of behavior.

However, measuring backward can call attention to these invisible patterns by making you aware of what you are actually doing. Measuring backward forces you to take notice of your recent actions. You can't live in a fairy tale world of hopes and dreams. You have to look at the feedback of what has recently happened in your life and then base your decisions and improvements on those pieces of data.

The good news is that you can now base your decisions off of what you're actually doing, not off of what you project your future self to be doing.

The Importance of Short-Term Feedback

“The best way to change long-term behavior is with short-term feedback.”

—Seth Godin [17]

There is one caveat to this strategy: when you measure backward, your data needs to come from the recent past.

If I used data from two years ago to make business decisions, my choices would be off. The same is true for lifting weights or other areas of improvement. I don't want to base my actions on what I achieved a long time ago, but on what I have achieved recently. In other words, I want short-term feedback, not long-term feedback. The shorter, the better.

Measuring for Happiness

There is an additional benefit to this strategy as well. When you measure backward, you get to enjoy the progress you are making right now rather than yearn for a different life in the future.

You don't have to put happiness off until you reach a future milestone or goal. Happiness is no longer a finish line out there in the future. Focusing on how you can immediately improve over your past self is more satisfying than comparing your current state to where you hope you'll be some day.

The Idea in Practice

Nearly every improvement we wish to make in our lives requires some type of behavior change. If you want different results, you have to do something differently.

The tough question to answer is *what* should we do differently to get the results we want?

We often respond by focusing on an outcome and setting a goal for ourselves. Goals are good and having a sense of direction for where you want to go is critical. But when it comes to determining the improvements we can make right now, measuring backward is the way to go. Let recent results drive your future actions.

Weight Loss: Measure your calorie intake. Did you eat 3,500 calories per day last week? Focus on averaging 3,400 per day this week.

Strength Training: Oh, you squatted 250 pounds for 5 sets of 5 reps last week? Give 255 pounds a try this week.

Relationships: How many new people did you meet last week? Zero? Focus on introducing yourself to one new person this week.

Entrepreneurship: You only landed two clients last week while your average is five? It sounds like you should be focused on making more sales calls this week.

Measure backward and then get a little bit better. What did you do last week? How can you improve by just a little bit this week?

Let Your Values Drive Your Choices

Nearly every problem you face is temporary.

But these temporary problems cause immediate pain. And we often let this pain drive our choices and actions.

For example...

- An employee suffering from the pain of not feeling important enough or powerful enough might take a terrible job with a fancy title.
- An individual suffering from the pain of feeling unloved or unappreciated or misunderstood might try to resolve that pain by cheating on their spouse.
- An entrepreneur suffering from the pain of a faltering small business might resort to using questionable marketing tactics to try to drive more sales.

...and so on.

This is how you make choices you wouldn't normally make. When you let the problem drive your decisions, you make exceptions and "just this once" choices to resolve the pain, annoyance, or uncertainty that you're feeling in the moment.

How can we avoid this pitfall and make better long-term choices while still resolving short-term pain?

Here's an approach I've been trying recently. See if it works for you...

Let Your Values Drive Your Choices

One of the solutions I've been trying out is to let my values drive my choices. That doesn't mean I ignore other aspects of my decision making process. I simply add my values into the mix.

For example, if I'm working on a problem in my business, rather than just asking, "Will this make money?"

I can ask, "Is this in alignment with my values?" And then, "Will this make money?"

If I say no to either, then I look for another option.

The idea behind this method is that if we live and work in alignment with our values, then we're more likely to live a life we are proud of rather than one we regret.

The Power of a Constraint You Believe In

Every decision is made within some type of constraint. Maybe it's how much knowledge you have. Maybe it's how much money you have. Maybe it's how many resources you have. Why not what values you have?

Making better choices is often a matter of choosing better constraints. By limiting your options to those that fit your values, you are taking an important step to ensuring that your behavior matches your beliefs. (Plus, constraints will boost your creativity.)

Know your principles and you can choose your methods.

How to Put This Into Practice

Most people never take the time to think about their values, write them down, and clarify them. Maybe it sounds too simple or unnecessary.

For what it's worth, my [2014 Integrity Report](#) was the first time that I sat down to clarify my values and tie them directly to my work.

You are welcome to use that report as a template for discovering your own values and aligning them with your work and life.

The Bottom Line

“He that always gives way to others will end in having no principles of his own.”

—Aesop

If you never sit down to think about your values, then you'll be more likely to make decisions based on whatever information is in front of you at the time. That can be a recipe for regret down the road.

Life is complex and we are all faced with moments in our personal and professional lives that require us to make a choice without as much information as we need. The default assumption is that we need more knowledge or research in these situations, but often we just need a clear understanding of our values.

If you don't know what you stand for and where you're headed, then it's far too easy to get off course, to waste your time doing something you don't need to be doing, or to make an exception (“just this once”) that leads you down a dangerous path. There are brilliant men and women with decent hearts and families they care dearly about spending a long time in jail right now because they made business decisions that were based on the pain they felt and not the values they believed in.

Let your values drive your decisions.

Sources

1. Feynman was famously eccentric and varied in his hobbies. Among other things, he played the bongos, spent years as an artist drawing nude models, and cracked a safe with top secret information about the atomic bomb inside.
2. [Surely You're Joking Mr. Feynman!](#) by Richard Feynman. Pages 86-87.
3. [The Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science](#) by Abraham Kaplan. Page 28.
4. This isn't to say that you should avoid reading the books your peers are reading. You should probably read those too, so that you have the same baseline of knowledge.
5. This is different than working backward or "beginning with the end in mind," where you start with the same result and approach it from a different direction. Instead, the Inversion Technique asks you to consider the exact opposite of your desired result.
6. [Mental Model – Inversion and The Power of Avoiding Stupidity](#) by Shane Parrish.
7. Here's a personal example of how I decrease distractions: I often leave my phone in another room while I write. Answering calls completely breaks the flow of my work. Simple, but effective.
8. Ernesto Miranda didn't escape prison for long. He was soon sentenced to 20 to 25 years in prison for a robbery he committed during a separate crime.
9. I want to give credit to [Brian Johnson](#) for originally developing this drinking example and for sparking my research on bright-line rules, which led to this article. Thanks Brian!
10. Related reading: [How to Say No, Resist Temptation, and Stick to Your Health Goals](#)

11. Travis first read about the rose bud analogy in the book Necessary Endings by Henry Cloud. I haven't read the book, but I added this note to make sure Dr. Cloud gets credit for originally developing the idea.
12. Pruning by Elizabeth Roth, Rose Magazine.
13. Thanks to Brett McKay at The Art of Manliness for his post on the Eisenhower Box.
14. The term "highest and best use" is a real estate concept for finding the most valuable use of a piece of property. My friend Mark Heckmann is a fan of using the phrase for personal time management and I like it too. Thanks Mark!
15. For other useful productivity tips, check out this article summarizing Scott Hansleman's work.
16. Although he is one of my favorite authors, calling Gawande a writer is a bit of a misnomer. He writes best-selling books in his spare time. His day job is working as a surgeon at a large hospital in Boston, Massachusetts.
17. Short term, long term by Seth Godin