SMARTER FASTER BETTER BY CHARLES DUHIGG

Smarter Faster Better by Charles Duhigg explores 8 different concepts and how they can make a difference to your life. Outlining the 'secrets' to being more productive by starting with motivation, focus, teamwork, goal setting, managing others, making decisions, innovation and finally, absorbing information. This book is a really good read for anyone looking to kickstart their productivity and improve their choices and actions in business and in life.

MOTIVATION

In recent decades, as the economy has shifted and large companies promising lifelong employment have given way to freelance jobs, understanding motivation has become increasingly important.

The workers who have succeeded in this new economy are those who know how to decide for themselves how to spend their time and allocate their energy. They understand how to set goals, prioritize tasks, and make choices about which projects to pursue. These people know how to self-motivate.

Motivation is a skill

Self-help books and leadership manuals often portray self-motivation as a static feature of our personality or the outcome of a neurological calculus in which we subconsciously compare efforts versus rewards.

But scientists say motivation is more complicated than that. Motivation is more like a skill, akin to reading or writing that can be learned and honed. Scientists have found that people can get better at self-motivation if they practice the right way.

Control

The trick, researchers say, is realizing that a prerequisite to motivation is believing we have authority over our actions and surroundings. To motivate ourselves, we must feel like we are in control.

The need for control is a biological imperative. When people believe they are in control, they tend to work harder and push themselves more. They are, on average, more confident and overcome setbacks faster.

One way to prove to ourselves that we are in control is by making decisions. Each choice—no matter how small—reinforces the perception of control and self-efficacy.

From these insights, a theory of motivation has emerged: The first step in creating drive is giving people opportunities to make choices that provide them with a sense of autonomy and self-determination.

Make choices

Motivation is triggered by making choices that demonstrate to ourselves that we are in control. The specific choice we make matters less than the assertion of control. It's this feeling of self-determination that gets us going.

Moreover, to teach ourselves to self-motivate more easily, we need to learn to see our choices not just as expressions of control but also as affirmations of our values and goals.

The choices that are most powerful in generating motivation, in other words, are decisions that do two things: They convince us we're in control and they endow our actions with larger meaning.

An internal locus of control emerges when we develop a mental habit of transforming chores into meaningful choices, when we assert that we have authority over our lives.

Emotional numbness

Neurologists have suggested that emotional numbness is why some people feel no motivation. Motivation goes dormant because someone has forgotten how good it feels to make a choice. In other situations, it's that people have never learned what it feels like to be self-determined, because they have grown up in a neighborhood that seems to offer so few choices.

This theory suggests how we can help ourselves and others strengthen our internal locus of control. We should reward initiative, congratulate people for self-motivation, celebrate when an infant wants to feed herself. We should applaud a child who shows defiant, self-righteous stubbornness and reward a student who finds a way to get things done by working around the rules.

Unless we practice self-determination and give ourselves emotional rewards for subversive assertiveness, our capacity for self-motivation can fade.

Why?

What's more, we need to prove to ourselves that our choices are meaningful. When we start a new task, or confront an unpleasant chore, we should take a moment to ask ourselves "why."

Once we start asking why, those small tasks become pieces of a larger constellation of meaningful projects, goals, and values. We start to recognize how small chores can have outsized emotional rewards, because they prove to ourselves that we are making meaningful choices, that we are genuinely in control of our own lives.

That's when self-motivation flourishes: when we realize that replying to an email or helping a coworker, on its own, might be relatively unimportant. But it is part of a bigger project that we believe in, that we want to achieve, that we have chosen to do. Self-motivation, in other words, is a choice we make because it is part of something bigger and more emotionally rewarding than the immediate task that presents itself.

TEAMS

The biggest thing you should take away from this is that how teams work matters, in a lot of ways, more than who is on them.

There's a myth we all carry inside our head, we think we need superstars. But that's not what the People Operations and Google's research found. You can take a team of average performers, and if you teach them to interact the right way, they'll do things no superstar could ever accomplish.

And there's other myths, like sales teams should be run differently than engineering teams, or the best teams need to achieve consensus around everything, or high-performing teams need a high volume of work to stay engaged, or teams need to be physically located together.

The data shows there's a universality to how good teams succeed. It's important that everyone on a team feels like they have a voice, but whether

they actually get to vote on things or make decisions turns out not to matter much. Neither does the volume of work or physical co-location. What matters is having a voice and social sensitivity.

5 key norms

What matters are five key norms:

1. Teams need to believe that their work is important.
2. They need to feel their work is personally meaningful.
3. Teams need clear goals and defined roles.
4. Members need to know they can depend on one another.
5. But, most important, teams need psychological safety.

Psychological Safety

To create psychological safety, team leaders needed to model the right behaviors. There are Google-designed checklists they could use:

- Leaders should not interrupt teammates during conversations, because that will establish an interrupting norm.
- They should demonstrate they are listening by summarizing what people say after they said it.
- Leaders should admit what they don't know.
- They shouldn't end a meeting until all team members have spoken at least once.
- Leaders should encourage people who are upset to express their frustrations, and encourage teammates to respond in nonjudgmental ways.
- They should call out intergroup conflicts and resolve them through open discussion.

All of the behaviours, however, came back to two general principles: Teams succeed when everyone feels like they can speak up and when members show they are sensitive to how one another feels.

You need the right norms to make arguments productive rather than destructive. Otherwise, a team never becomes stronger.

It all begins with the leader

Teams are important. Within companies and conglomerates, government agencies and schools, teams are now the fundamental unit of self-organization.

They will succeed because teammates feel they can trust each other, and that honest discussion can occur without fear of retribution. Their members will have roughly equal voices. Teammates will show they are sensitive to one another’s emotions and needs.

In general, the route to establishing psychological safety begins with the team's leader. So if you are leading a team—be it a group of coworkers or a sports team, a church gathering, or your family dinner table—think about what message your choices send.

Motivation in a team

If motivation comes from giving individuals a greater sense of control, then psychological safety is the caveat we must remember when individuals come together in a group. Establishing control requires more than just seizing self-determination. Being a subversive works, unless you're leading a team.

When people come together in a group, sometimes we need to give control to others. That's ultimately what team norms are: individuals willingly giving a measure of control to their teammates. But that works only when people feel like they can trust one another. It only succeeds when we feel psychologically safe. As a team leader, it's important to give team members control.

FOCUS

Automation has today penetrated nearly every aspect of our lives. Even without technology's help, all humans rely on cognitive automations, known as "heuristics," that allow us to multitask. Mental automation lets us choose, almost subconsciously, what to pay attention to and what to ignore.

As automation becomes more common, the risks that our attention spans will fail have risen. In the age of automation, knowing how to manage your focus is more critical than ever before.

Cognitive tunneling

You can think about your brain's attention span like a spotlight that can go wide and diffused, or tight and focused. Our attention span is guided by our intentions. We choose, in most situations, whether to focus the spotlight or let it be relaxed.

But when we allow automated systems, such as computers or autopilots, to pay attention for us, our brains dim that spotlight and allow it to swing wherever it wants. This is, in part, an effort by our brains to conserve energy.

But then, bam!, some kind of emergency happens—or you get an unexpected email, or someone asks you an important question in a meeting—and suddenly the spotlight in your head has to ramp up all of a sudden. So the brain's instinct is to force it as bright as possible on the most obvious stimuli, whatever's right in front of you, even if that's not the best choice. That's when cognitive tunneling happens.

"Cognitive tunneling can cause people to become overly focused on whatever is directly in front of their eyes or become preoccupied with immediate tasks. Once in a cognitive tunnel, we lose our ability to direct our focus. Instead, we latch on to the easiest and most obvious stimulus, often at the cost of common sense.

Reactive thinking

Reactive thinking is at the core of how we allocate our attention, and in many settings, it's a tremendous asset. Reactive thinking is how we build habits, and it's why to-do lists and calendar alerts are so helpful: Rather than needing to decide what to do next, we can take advantage of our reactive instincts and automatically proceed. Reactive thinking, in a sense, outsources the choices and control that, in other settings, create motivation.

The downside of reactive thinking is that habits and reactions can become so automatic they overpower our judgment. Once our motivation is outsourced, we simply react.

Tactics

If you want to make yourself more sensitive to the small details in your work, cultivate a habit of imagining, as specifically as possible, what you expect to see and do when you get to your desk. Then you'll be prone to notice the tiny ways in which real life deviates from the narrative inside your head.

Narrate your life, as you are living it, and you'll encode those experiences deeper in your brain. If you need to improve your focus and learn to avoid distractions, take a moment to visualize, with as much detail as possible, what you are about to do. It is easier to know what's ahead when there's a well-rounded script inside your head.

Visualisation

To become genuinely productive, we must take control of our attention; we must build mental models that put us firmly in charge. When you're driving to work, force yourself to envision your day. While you're sitting in a meeting or at lunch, describe to yourself what you're seeing and what it means. Find other people to hear your theories and challenge them. Get in a pattern of forcing yourself to anticipate what's next.

GOAL SETTING

We need stretch and SMART goals. It doesn't matter if you call them by those names. It's not important if your proximal goals fulfill every SMART criterion. What matters is having a large ambition and a system for figuring out how to make it into a concrete and realistic plan. Then, as you check the little things off your to-do list, you'll move ever closer to what really matters. You'll keep your eyes on what's both wise and SMART

Todo lists vs. goals

To-do lists are great if you use them correctly. But when people say things like 'I sometimes write down easy items I can cross off right away, because it makes me feel good,' that's exactly the wrong way to create a to-do list. That signals you're using it for mood repair, rather than to become productive.

The problem with many to-do lists is that when we write down a series of short-term objectives, we are, in effect, allowing our brains to seize on the sense of satisfaction that each task will deliver. We are encouraging our need for closure and our tendency to freeze on a goal without asking if it's the right aim. The result is that we spend hours answering unimportant emails instead of writing a big, thoughtful memo—because it feels so satisfying to clean out our in-box.

Combat the todo list

At first glance, it might seem like the solution is creating to-do lists filled solely with stretch goals. But we all know that merely writing down grand aspirations doesn't guarantee we will achieve them. In fact, studies show

that if you're confronted with a list of only far-reaching objectives, you're more likely to get discouraged and turn away.

So one solution is writing to-do lists that pair stretch goals and SMART goals. Come up with a menu of your biggest ambitions. Dream big and stretch. Describe the goals that, at first glance, seem impossible, such as starting a company or running a marathon.

Then choose one aim and start breaking it into short-term, concrete steps. Ask yourself: What realistic progress can you make in the next day, week, month? How many miles can you realistically run tomorrow and over the next three weeks? What are the specific, short-term steps along the path to bigger success? What timeline makes sense? Will you open your store in six months or a year? How will you measure your progress? Within psychology, these smaller ambitions are known as "proximal goals," and repeated studies have shown that breaking a big ambition into proximal goals makes the large

A goal flow chart

1. What is your stretch goal? To run a marathon
2. What is a specific sub-goal? Run seven miles without stopping
3. How will you measure success? Twice around the park, no walking.
4. Is this achievable? Yes, if I run 3 times a week.
5. Is this realistic? Yes, if I wake up early Monday, Wednesday & Fridays.
6. What is your timeline? Run 3 miles this week, 4 next week, 5 the next....

MANAGING OTHERS

In 1994, Stanford professors Baron and Hannan studied 4 different types of workplace culture: 1. Engineering culture 2. Bureaucratic culture 3. Autocratic culture 4. Commitment culture

They found the only culture that was a consistent winner were the commitment firms.

"Commitment CEOs believe that getting the culture right is more important at first than designing the best product."

Hands down, a commitment culture outperformed every other type of management style in almost every meaningful way. “Not one of the commitment firms we studied failed. But they were also the fastest companies to go public, had the highest profitability ratios, and tended to be leaner, with fewer middle managers, because when you choose employees slowly, you have time to find people who excel at self-direction.

The commitment culture

One of the reasons commitment cultures were successful, was because a sense of trust emerged among workers, managers, and customers that enticed everyone to work harder and stick together through the setbacks that are inevitable in any industry. Most commitment companies avoided layoffs unless there was no other alternative. They invested heavily in training. There were higher levels of teamwork and psychological safety.

Commitment companies might not have had lavish cafeterias, but they offered generous maternity leaves, daycare programs, and work-from-home options. These initiatives were not immediately cost-effective, but commitment firms valued making employees happy over quick profits—and as a result, workers tended to turn down higher-paying jobs at rival firms.

Customers stayed loyal because they had relationships that stretched over years. Commitment firms dodged one of the business world’s biggest hidden costs: the profits that are lost when an employee takes clients or insights to a competitor.

Good employees are always the hardest asset to find, when everyone wants to stick around, you’ve got a pretty strong advantage.

DECISION MAKING

Many of our most important decisions are, in fact, attempts to forecast the future. When we send a child to private school, it is, in part, a bet that money spent today on schooling will yield happiness and opportunities in the future. Good decision making is contingent on a basic ability to envision what happens next.

Making good decisions relies on forecasting the future, but forecasting is an imprecise, often terrifying, science because it forces us to confront how much we don't know. The paradox of learning how to make better decisions is that it requires developing a comfort with doubt.

Learning to deal with uncertainty

There are ways, however, of learning to grapple with uncertainty. There are methods for making a vague future more foreseeable by calculating, with some precision, what you do and don't know.

Probability

Learning to think probabilistically requires us to question our assumptions and live with uncertainty. To become better at predicting the future—at making good decisions—we need to know the difference between what we hope will happen and what is more and less likely to occur.

Probabilities are the closest thing to fortune-telling. But you have to be strong enough to live with what they tell you might occur.

Patterns

Even if we have very little data, we can still forecast the future by making assumptions and then skewing them based on what we observe about the world. For instance, suppose your brother said he's meeting a friend for dinner. You might forecast there's a 60 percent chance he's going to meet a man, since most of your brother's friends are male.

Humans can make these kinds of calculations without having to think about them very hard, and we tend to be surprisingly accurate. Most of us have never studied actuarial tables of life spans, but we know, based on experience, that it is relatively uncommon for toddlers to die and more typical for ninety-year-olds to pass away.

Assumptions

It's incredible that we're so good at making predictions with such little information and then adjusting them as we absorb data from life. But it only works if you start with the right assumptions.

So how do we get the right assumptions? By making sure we are exposed to a full spectrum of experiences. Our assumptions are based on what we've encountered in life, but our experiences often draw on biased samples. In particular, we are much more likely to pay attention to or remember successes and forget about failures.

Many successful people, in contrast, spend an enormous amount of time seeking out information on failures. We all have a natural proclivity to be optimistic, to ignore our mistakes and forget others' tiny errors. But making good predictions relies on realistic assumptions, and those are based on our experiences. If we pay attention only to good news, we're handicapping ourselves.

Future telling

Regardless of our methods, the goals are the same: to see the future as multiple possibilities rather than one predetermined outcome; to identify what you do and don't know; to ask yourself, which choice gets you the best odds? Fortune-telling isn't real. No one can predict tomorrow with absolute confidence. But the mistake some people make is trying to avoid making any predictions because their thirst for certainty is so strong and their fear of doubt too overwhelming.

INNOVATION

Every day, students, executives, artists, policy makers, and millions of other people confront problems that require inventive answers delivered as quickly as possible. As the economy changes, and our capacity to achieve creative insights becomes more important than ever, the need for fast originality is even more urgent. For many people, in fact, figuring out how to accelerate innovation is among their most important jobs.

Combinations

One method for jump-starting the creative process—taking proven, conventional ideas from other settings and combining them in new ways—is remarkably effective, it turns out.

It’s a tactic all kinds of people have used to spark creative successes. Combinations of existing material are centerpieces in theories of creativity, whether in the arts, the sciences, or commercial innovation. And yet most original ideas grow out of old concepts, and the building blocks of new ideas are often embodied in existing knowledge.

Draw on your own experiences

The very successful Frozen team focused on the relationship between Anna and Elsa, the movie’s sisters. In particular, the filmmakers drew on their own experiences to figure out how the siblings related. “We can always find the right story when we start asking ourselves what feels true."

The Disney system forces people to use their own emotions to write dialogue for cartoon characters, to infuse real feelings into situations that, by definition, are unreal and fantastical.

This method is worth studying because it suggests a way that anyone can become an idea broker: by drawing on their own lives as creative fodder. We all have a natural instinct to overlook our emotions as creative material. We all carry the creative process inside us; we just need to be pushed to use it sometimes.

A disruption

When filmmakers get stuck at Disney, it’s referred to as spinning. “Spinning occurs because you’re in a rut and can’t see your project from different perspectives anymore.

Disney found themselves in a rut when creating Frozen, so they changed their second director. Disney executives hoped, disrupting the team’s dynamics just slightly might be enough to stop everyone from spinning in place.

When strong ideas take root, they can sometimes crowd out competitors so thoroughly that alternatives can’t prosper. So sometimes the best way to spark creativity is by disturbing things just enough to let some light through.

The creative process

Creativity can’t be reduced to a formula. At its core, it needs novelty, surprise, and other elements that cannot be planned in advance to seem fresh and new. There is no checklist that, if followed, delivers innovation on demand.

But the creative process is different. We can create the conditions that help creativity to flourish. We know, for example, that innovation becomes more likely when old ideas are mixed in new ways. We know that, sometimes, a little disturbance can help jolt us out of the ruts that even the most creative thinkers fall into, as long as those shake-ups are the right size.

If you want to increase the productivity of your own creative process, there are three things that can help:

1. First, be sensitive to your own experiences.
2. Second, recognize that the panic and stress you feel as you try to create isn’t a sign that everything is falling apart. Rather, it’s the condition that helps make us flexible enough to seize something new.
3. Finally, remember that the relief accompanying a creative breakthrough, while sweet, can also blind us to seeing alternatives.

ABSORBING DATA

With Google and the Internet and all the information we have now, you can find answers to almost anything in seconds,” said Macon. But there’s a difference between finding an answer and understanding what it means.

Information saturation

In the past two decades the amount of information embedded in our daily lives has skyrocketed. There are smartphones that count our steps, websites that track our spending, digital maps to plot our commutes, software that watches our Web browsing, and apps to manage our schedules.

If harnessed correctly, data can make our days more productive, our diets healthier, our schools more effective, and our lives less stressful.

Unfortunately, however, our ability to learn from information hasn’t necessarily kept pace with its proliferation.

In theory, the ongoing explosion in information should make the right answers more obvious. In practice, though, being surrounded by data often makes it harder to decide.

Information blindness

This inability to take advantage of data as it becomes more plentiful is called information blindness.

Information blindness occurs because of the way our brain's capacity for learning has evolved. Humans are exceptionally good at absorbing information—as long as we can break data into a series of smaller and smaller pieces.

This ability to digest large amounts of information by breaking it into smaller pieces is how our brains turn information into knowledge. We learn which facts or lessons to apply in a given situation by learning which folders to consult.

So when we are presented with information on sixty different 401(k) plans and no obvious way to start analyzing them, our brains pivot to a more binary decision: Do I try to make sense of all this information, or just stick everything in my drawer and ignore it?

How to overcome information blindness

One way to overcome information blindness is to force ourselves to grapple with the data in front of us, to manipulate information by transforming it into a sequence of questions to be answered or choices to be made. This is sometimes referred to as "creating disfluency" because it relies on doing a little bit of work. Instead of sticking all the 401(k) brochures into a drawer, you have to contrast the plans' various benefits and make a choice. It might seem like a small effort at the time, but those tiny bits of labor are critical to avoiding information blindness.

We are taking a mass of information and forcing it through a procedure that makes it easier to digest.

Information gets absorbed almost without our noticing because we're so engrossed with it. We have to interact with the information in order to learn. Ask questions, make comparisons, hypothesise about potential outcomes.

Reframing choices

People struggle to adopt an opposing viewpoint once they have established an initial frame for making a decision. Once you decide that you like Chardonnay, it can be hard to consider ordering a Sauvignon Blanc.

Once a frame is established, that context is hard to dislodge. Frames can be uprooted, however, if we force ourselves to seek fresh vantage points. Our brain wants to find a simple frame and stick with it, the same way it wants to make a binary decision.

But when we teach people a process for reframing choices, when we give them a series of steps that causes a decision to seem a little bit different than before, it helps them take more control of what's going on inside their heads.

One of the best ways to help people cast experiences in a new light is to provide a formal decision-making system—such as a flowchart, a prescribed series of questions, or the engineering design process—that denies our brains the easy options we crave. Systems teach us how to force ourselves to make questions look unfamiliar. It's a way to see alternatives.

Be successful at learning

The people who are most successful at learning—those who are able to digest the data surrounding them, who absorb insights embedded in their experiences and take advantage of information flowing past—are the ones who know how to use disfluency to their advantage. They transform what life throws at them, rather than just taking it as it comes. Knowing that the best lessons are those that force us to do something and to manipulate information. They take data and transform it into experiments whenever they can.

Every choice we make in life is an experiment. Every day offers fresh opportunities to find better decision-making frames. We live in a time when data is more plentiful, cheaper to analyze, and easier to translate into action than ever before. Smartphones, websites, digital databases, and apps put information at our fingertips. But it only becomes useful if we know how to make sense of it.