



PEAK PERFORMANCE

T O M H E U E R M A N

"I long to accomplish great and noble tasks, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble. The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker."

—Helen Keller

Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft, wrote many years ago that we will see more change in the next 10 years than in the last 100. Gates's prophesy is proving true, and the rate of change may exceed even his bold prediction. We live in the midst of explosive, unprecedented, and continuous change in our world led by accelerating development in:

- information technology
- robotics
- genetics
- nanotechnology and
- all the offshoots that come from those technologies

We could add the explosion of our knowledge about organizations and human behavior to this list, but few seem to do much with this knowledge; therefore it is, unfortunately, not leading to the kind of rapid change in our social development that the technologies are in our technical advancements.

These technologies may seem far away from our daily lives, but this evolution already impacts us and will impact each of us in ever increasing ways. They will provide astounding tools that will enhance our performance capabilities along with lead to serious ethical issues that we as citizens need to be aware of. We live in times that challenge our capacity for awareness, our ethical maturity, and our judgment to take right actions. To be a peak performer in such times, we must be mindful, flexible,

courageous, and tenacious.

You and I get to choose whether we will thrive in these creative times or whether we will fall by the wayside, victims of our own lack of foresight, imagination, and courage. We are each responsible for our own lives.

I believe we have vast untapped potential available to each of us. Somehow we created a dumbed-down world (except our technology), where human mediocrity thrives and mindless conformity is rewarded. Personal comfort seems the goal. Where did we get the idea that we are entitled to feel good all of the time? We need to break out of our self-indulgent world if we are to renew our nation, our organizations, and ourselves. Life has things worth pursuing beyond comfort.

We can each discover and develop our unique talents in ways that serve ourselves, our families, and our communities so much better than we are doing. In the process we can live well and have a meaningful life.

What is Peak Performance?

Marcus Buckingham in his book, *The One Thing You Need to Know*, wrote: "Peak performance means making the greatest possible impact over the longest period of time."

Perhaps Lance Armstrong, cancer survivor and seven-time Tour de France winner, is the greatest example of a peak performer in the public eye. There can only be one Lance Armstrong. But there can only be one of each of us too, and we can each choose to be the best we can be whatever our station in life and whatever our age. My dad was a peak performer right up to his death at age 90. Peak performance is not about riches or celebrity; it is about living authentically and doing what you can every day with your gifts to make this a better world.

Last week a man contacted me. He said, "I went into business for myself a few years ago. I am doing okay, but not as well as I feel I should be doing. How can I become a higher-level performer?" Here are the kinds of things I shared with him. They are not rocket science, but they are difficult. All of these ideas are based on research. And, not surprisingly, the things that make us peak performers also work to help us cope and thrive in a time of chaos and crisis.

• **Think About Who You Are.** Peak performance comes from within.

—*What is your purpose in life? Why do you exist?* We each have a purpose for our existence, a fundamental reason for living. Most of us have not thought consciously about what our purpose is. Our purpose has two elements: Our personal quest and how we will serve others with what we learn. By illuminating our purpose, we can live more consciously and with more authenticity.

—*What are your four to six core values?* Our values are those principles that guide our decisions and our actions. Again, all of us have values; however, we may be out of touch with them. To achieve peak performance, you must explore your values, identify them, write your own definition of them, take a personal inventory of how well you are living them, and adapt your behavior accordingly.

We can be unethical and achieve great results temporarily. However, peak performance is about feeling energized and alive, and most people cannot feel those emotions when they are dishonest and feel guilt, shame, and self-hatred. Philosopher Tom Morris defined ethics as, "spiritually healthy people in socially harmonious relationships." Peak performers are

ethical, and peak performance is ethics in action.

—*What is your vision for your life?*

Vision is simply a picture of the future you want to create. You may have a vision for different aspects of your life: family, career, health, hobbies, etc. or you may have an overarching and all-encompassing vision—whatever works for you. Vision, values, and purpose give us courage, direction, and meaning. Without knowing why we are here, what we believe in, and what we want for our lives, we cannot be a peak performer.

—*What is your passion?* We are passionate when we are doing things we are talented at. In our search for our talents we might ask:

What do I love to do?

When do I feel most alive?

What am I doing when time flies?

What do I learn easily?

Once you identify your talents, you then figure out how to use them a greater percentage of your time.

- **Pay Attention to What You Do.**

Buckingham found that highly effective people constantly ask: “What am I doing that I need to stop doing?” Peak performers listen to and are honest with themselves. They spend more and more time doing what they love to do.

- **Be a Learner.** In this world, we must continually upgrade our skills to stay current and to move ahead in our development. Continuous learning keeps our brains flexible and in shape, and fit and flexible brains make change easier for us. Most important, brain exercise fights senility.

Whether you read a book, take a class, engage in self-study, or talk to someone who knows more than you—whatever way you prefer to learn—you must be a learner if you want to be a peak performer.

You must also know what is going on in the world: read Tom Friedman’s, *The World Is Flat*, Joe Garreau’s, *Radical Evolution*, and Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz’s, *The Power of Full Engagement*. If you want to read about a peak performer in action, read Lance Armstrong’s autobiography.

Peak performance is learning plus performance. Therefore, you must take what you learn and try new things. We try new things to find what works in a chaotic and creative world. Too often, I see people and organizations get stuck in talking about change and never doing things to change.

You must risk failure every day if you want to be a peak performer. Kinji Akagawa is a sculptor. He says if you want to live creatively, you must be willing to suffer the humiliations of the novice. New learning involves some loss, fear, and insecurity along with the exhilaration of learning something new.

Additional Steps

Once you have clarity around your vision, values, and purpose; know what you are passionate about; are beginning to eliminate non-essential activities from your life; and are actively engaged in learning, I would ask you to do some more things:

- **Write a plan to develop your skills and knowledge around your talents.**

Set big mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual goals for yourself. Be clear, concise, concrete, and specific, and make your goals about 70 percent achievable. Move toward your goals in small steps and celebrate successes. Big goals focus our energy and let us see and feel progress. Happiness is a byproduct of pursuing noble goals, not necessarily achieving them. Your greatness will come from development of your strengths not improving your weaknesses, so don’t spend a lot of time trying to get better at your weaknesses; instead, compensate for them.

- **Take 15 minutes a day to think.** We move way too fast. We think way too little. We need to take time to catch up with ourselves. Try taking 15 minutes a day of solitude. Think about anything you want to think about. Do this activity for 30 days and then decide if it was worth the time. Many of you will decide that you need even more time of solitude each day.

- **Plan, do, reflect, and adapt.** Build this simple mental model into every-

thing you do. The pioneers who forged the Lewis and Clark trail had not taken that journey before. They planned what they could, took bold action, reflected on what happened and what they could learn from each day, and adapted for the next day. They learned and achieved in real time.

Peak performers adapt continually, learn from mistakes, and continually move forward toward their vision. Stubbornness and rigidity are not virtues in a creative world. Peak performers learn and adjust as they proceed. They are flexible.

- **Nurture your team of supporters.**

You are the captain of your team. Seek out information and advice from others. Hang out with smart, ethical people whom you can learn from. Ask for ideas and feedback. Build a team of experts around you. Let them help you avoid deluding yourself. Eliminate dysfunctional relationships from your life. You can still love the dysfunctional people; you just don’t have to hang out with them or play their games.

If you are on teams at work, your loyalty is to the team’s purpose and values. If team members do not live the values and support the overall purpose, then leave the team. Hopefully, you will be on great teams, as nothing is more beautiful in an organization than connected people who create together. Great teams are made up of great people, so your responsibility to the team is to be a great as you can be.

- **Manage your energy.** We develop our mental, physical, emotional, and intellectual capabilities by expending energy and then taking time for renewal. I think most of us need a good long rest. Organizations need to rest between massive efforts. It is the job of leaders to manage organizational energy. The book *The Power of Full Engagement* is about the holistic management of energy and links nicely to the book *Younger Next Year* by Chris Crowley and Henry Lodge. Of course, we have more energy when we use our talents and do what we love.

Change Is Difficult

Let's be honest: change is difficult. *Fast Company* magazine had an article on research that showed that 90 percent of open-heart surgery patients cannot change their habits to sustain a healthy lifestyle. Imagine having your chest popped open, your heart stopped, and arteries taken from your legs to fix up your heart's plumbing. Then imagine a long recovery and the fear and anxiety that go with recuperation. And imagine being back to cigarettes, junk food, and excessive stress three months later.

Are these people weak or stupid? No, they are not. They are us: our family members, our neighbors, our colleagues, and maybe even ourselves. They are not weak. They are not stupid. They are human, and we humans are not good at change, especially in a world that values conformity and compliance and where so much discourages good health.

The statistics on change in organizations are equally depressing. I encourage you to read the work of William Bridges on managing change and transition. We need to understand the emotional aspects of transition and learn to feel, talk about emotions,

and manage our personal and group emotions. As the rate of change increases, we need to learn how to manage transitions better or they will overwhelm us.

I am a believer in change and in life's journey. I believe in making big changes personally and organizationally. I've taken on a lot of change throughout my life, in both my corporate career and my personal life.

I now reinvent my work routinely as a normal part of my life. I've had to face my own fears and insecurities, and I've had to overcome the negative reactions of others. Sometimes I think we fear our own potential more than failure itself.

I made the changes in my life that I did because I wanted to feel differently. I wanted to experience life differently. I wanted deeper intimacy. I wanted to explore my potential, whatever it is. I wanted to feel alive—energized, enthused, stimulated—and I wanted to feel the fear and loss, too, as they are part of being alive. I wanted to live more authentically and experience all life has to offer and to be fully human. I wanted to create a life with more and more moments of nobility

and as much of life's richness as I could find.

For what it's worth: In my experience for sustainable change, the core identity elements of vision, values, and purpose are essential; then a support system; and then you need grit—drive, determination, and stick-to-it-ness, along with a willingness to suffer to learn new habits and make your vision real.

Peak performance is a process, not an event. It is spiritual, not material, and a journey, not a destination. We make hundreds of choices each day. Make the choice to learn and grow always. Make the courageous and responsible choices. Go toward what attracts you in life and toward what makes you feel most alive. Resist the fear choices. And then, like Lance Armstrong, you too can be a peak performer and enjoy more and more peak experiences—the best moments of being alive. ■

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