

Smarter Faster Better Summary

By Charles Duhigg

Churchill famously said, 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.' Anything worth doing isn't easy, but does the road to success necessarily need to be filled with blood, toil, tears, and sweat?

Smarter, Faster, Better, explores the science behind productivity, and shows us how we can be more efficient and achieve more, but with a lot less stress.

Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, Charles Duhigg, gives us the "how-to" of working smarter, not harder. Productivity, according to Duhigg, is 'learning how to succeed with less stress and struggle. It's about getting things done without sacrificing everything we care about along the way.'

To write this book, Duhigg embarked on a quest to interview professionals around the world who've managed to master the art of productivity. Not only have they managed to be productivity gurus, but they've done so without breaking too much of a sweat.

When it comes to productivity, the biggest takeaway is that managing mindset is more important than writing out to-do lists. Through interesting anecdotes, Duhigg challenges us to think about why we do what we do, and how to do it better. Although much of this book is mainly about productivity, Duhigg also dips into effective management, teamwork, and how to spark innovation. So if you're trying to manage and motivate a team, or striving towards a serious long-term goal, then this book is a must.

This Briefer summary will unpack what it means to be productive and why autonomy and meaning are crucial to staying motivated. We'll also examine why, when it comes to success, goal setting matters. We'll look at the key to setting goals, managing big and small goals, and using "mental models" to improve focus. Finally, we'll look at how building high-performing teams, is one of the best ways to up performance.

What Does It Mean To Be Productive?

There are some people who pretend and play at productivity. Their résumés may appear impressive, until we realize that their most extraordinary talent is self-marketing. Then, others, such as Atul Gawande, seem to exist on a different plane of getting things done.

We've come across Atul Gawande from the brilliant productivity book, *The Checklist Manifesto*. Gawande is a writer for the *Times* and a world-renowned surgeon. His impressive cv doesn't end here; he was an associate professor at Harvard, and has been an adviser to the World Health Organization. He's a philanthropist too – he founded a nonprofit organization that sends medical supplies to developing countries. In 2006, he was awarded the MacArthur "genius" grant and gave a

significant portion to charity.

Duhigg wanted to know how someone with so little time, and so much on the go, managed to be so extraordinarily productive. When Duhigg emailed Gawande for an interview, Gawande politely declined because he had too many other commitments. Duhigg was disappointed, but unsurprised. Later Duhigg mentioned his disappointment to a mutual friend, and the friend informed him that Gawande's responsibilities weren't work-related; he was spending time with his family.

Most of us mistake productivity for something that is work-focused. However, productivity is about managing our stresses and strains of daily life. This is what allows us to get things done without sacrificing what's important to us.

What's important to us is at the heart of productivity. We need to know what our priorities are so that we can gauge our productivity. For some, it means exercising every day; for others it means spending time with family, closing a deal, or completing a project.

For Duhigg, productivity is 'the name we give our attempts to figure out the best uses of our energy, intellect, and time as we try to seize the most meaningful rewards with the least wasted effort.' *Smarter, Faster, Better* teaches us how to recognize the choices we have. By weighing up our options, we're able to evaluate which ones are positive and which are negative, and in so doing, we're a step closer to making the most out of each day.

Motivation Is About Making Choices

How do you feel when you're given a choice to do something, as opposed to being told to do something? Choice improves our motivation, so to improve motivation, we need to embrace the power of choice, and acknowledge the big picture.

For Duhigg, the key drivers of motivation are personal autonomy and meaning. To be motivated, we need to feel like we're in control and that we're not merely robots that are being told what to do. So the fundamental aspect of working smarter, faster, and better, is to focus on our motivation through control and meaning.

Everything we're faced with is a choice, as opposed to a chore. Duhigg points towards a study on the striatum, which is the area of the brain responsible for motivation. Participants were put in an MRI machine, and asked to guess whether the number they were about to be shown was above or below five. In this first phase of the experiment, where participants chose "higher" or "lower," their excitement and motivation were relatively high. However, when the experiment changed to a computer making half of the guesses, the participants' enthusiasm dropped. The reason was that the act of choosing is a crucial element because it allows us to take action and be productive.

If you're battling with motivation or procrastination, a good exercise is to simply write down, "WHY?" Then come up with three reasons why the task you're doing is important and meaningful. Think about why what you're doing is challenging, why it's a stepping stone to something else, why it's important and can help others, and so forth. Doing this exercise will remind you that what you're doing isn't a chore.

And speaking of chores, nobody likes completing chores or doing

housework. So what if you do them to an audiobook, podcast, or fantastic piece of music? Perhaps set up a workspace in a coffee shop where you can enjoy a treat while you work? So often we overlook the fact that everything we do is a choice, and how we frame choice is imperative. We need to rethink how we look at tasks, and push ourselves to enjoy productivity and living as richly as possible. Duhigg says, 'if you think you can do something to improve your situation, you're going to get more motivated.'

Once we are cognizant that we have autonomy, we can begin thinking about how we find meaning and connection. Duhigg says that we should 'Make a chore into a meaningful decision, and self-motivation will emerge.'

When do you feel most motivated? For many of us, we are at our most productive when we feel connected to what we're doing, and when we can recognize the value in our work. We feel like we're playing a part in the world when what we do impacts something more important. As Duhigg explains, '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 needs doing.'

How To Set The Right Goals

When it comes to setting goals, we need to distinguish between "stretch goals," which are big ambitious goals that aim to stretch us, and smaller objectives. The core idea is that our goals should help to keep us motivated and not cause us to lose momentum. According to Duhigg, the right way to set the right goals is by having big goals, and smaller core objectives.

Numerous studies reveal that goals equate to higher levels of creativity. Stretch goals allow us to maximize our output in extraordinary ways. A 1997 study on Motorola showed that the incorporation of stretch goals across a range of departments led to product development increasing tenfold. And it's not just about big companies. Personally, a lot of us lack the motivation and drive to reach our goals. Losing weight, learning a new instrument, studying, or writing a large document can be incredibly daunting.

So how do we set goals? We write to-do lists, right?

Well, sort of. Lists are great, but we need to write the right kind of lists. To begin, we should write down our three biggest goals. These are stretch goals, because they're not easy. It's likely that when you face these three goals, you'll feel slightly overwhelmed and unsure of how you'll tackle them. This is where we add what we call "smart goals." For each stretch goal, we need five smart questions to answer it. And the acronym SMART will help with this.

Specificity allows us to ascertain what we want to get done. Measure looks at how we gauge the success of our endeavors. Achievable is assessing the timeline in relation to goals, and whether the goals need to be scaled down. Realistic is whether our goals are practical in terms of

resources available to us. Finally, there's Time. Every goal needs a definitive deadline.

If we apply stretch goals and SMART goals, we can break down daunting goals into smaller, more manageable parts. As we know, reaching our goals, however minor, increases motivation. So, the key to progress is making small and significant steps. Doing this has a domino effect where each small goal forms part of the larger goal.

Using Positive Mental Models To Improve Focus

Setting and achieving goals is essential to being more efficient and productive, but we need to go a step further.

What makes productive people stand out from the crowd is their ability to stick to a task because they build "mental models." Studies show that the most successful executives achieve great things because they have a strong sense of visualization. All of us need to build mental models of how we want to approach our days.

For example, we should set out what we want to get done throughout the day and schedule specific targets. At various points in the day, we should also scrutinize what our goals are. Every day should be viewed as a story; that way, we can make allowances for how it unfolds.

Another thing we need to do is realize that speed and appearing busy is often a trick. We often mistake the person who moves around the most as the most productive. The truth is that productivity arises from slowing down, creating a mental model of the day, and executing this model. Productivity is about accomplishing the important things, and being

methodical and in control.

Remaining in control means that when unexpected things happen, we can take them in our stride. With a mental model, we're distraction-proof because we have a story that we want to stick to. Distractions are inevitable, and they cause us to behave impulsively. If we are aware of distractions, but can stick to our daily narratives that we've plotted out, then we're a step closer to reaching our goals.

We can use positive mental models in a range of ways. For example, in meetings, we can set "if then" intentions. These intentions allow us to focus our energy and plan ahead. The idea is to think about reactions to specific situations, and then prepare for them. So "if someone doesn't turn up for work because they're sick, then this is how we will move forward with the day." It also works for more minor decisions that we make throughout the day, that can impact our overall wellbeing. If we need to drink more water, we can be more intentional and commit to drinking a glass of water every hour, or using the stairs every time we are faced with them.

If we're more in tune with the world around us, we are more mindful and can act with a greater sense of purpose.

A Productive Team is a Psychologically Safe Team

What is the perfect team, and how do you build it?

Many people look to Google for inspiration when it comes to dynamic teamwork. In fact, Duhigg was invited to Google to help with a two-year big data study on teamwork called "Project Aristotle." Project Aristotle

was based on Aristotle's famous quote, 'The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.'

We may believe that the best teams comprise of people who get along, and are a mixture of friends, introverts, and extroverts. However, the data disagrees. Personalities and the "whos" in a team don't matter. In fact, there is no correlation between who is in a team, and success.

So what comes next? Next, they looked at interactions. This is where things became more evident. Even if you don't like your team members, the team succeeds as long as there is a positive team culture.

We've learned about the importance of culture in *The Culture Code*, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, and *Dare to Lead*. According to Duhigg, psychological safety is at the heart of creating a successful team. Psychological safety relies on two things – equality in conversation, and ostentatious listening. Everyone on a team should speak for roughly the same amount of time, and when it comes to listening, we all need to listen more. According to experts, if you nail these two aspects, you'll have the 'single greatest correlate to a group's success.'

In Conclusion

You may remember Cal Newport's distinction between "real work" and "pseudo work" in his insightful book, *How To Become A Straight-A Student?* Many of us are under the impression that productivity is about putting in longer hours and working harder. On the contrary, productive people aren't those who spend hours in the office or sacrifice their free time.

Productivity is about making strategic choices. And how do we

strategize? Well, we tell ourselves stories, create narratives, and work out ways to plot out our time to be effective. While we may think that planning takes up valuable time, spending time doing this increases focus, eliminates time-wasting activities, and allows us to be prepared for unforeseen events. Creating positive mental models also allows us to set better goals and be more intentional about our days. And, for those of us who work in teams, instilling a culture where people feel psychologically safe, makes all the difference to success.

We should all be scrutinizing the things that separate us from looking busy, to being genuinely productive. So often we waste time because we don't plan and strategize, and as a result, we end up eating into our much-needed free time. We can all make the choice to be more productive. What are your audacious goals, and how can you break them down into achievable SMART steps? Once you've done this, how can you refocus and allow yourself to see opportunities instead of problems?

We learn faster when we slow down, pause, and forecast. By understanding how things might play out, we can be more prepared and intentional about our approach to work. So sit back and decide what your story is for today.