



SMARTER FASTER BETTER

The Transformative Power
of *Real* Productivity

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INTRODUCTION

My introduction to the science of productivity began in the summer of 2011, when I asked a friend of a friend for a favor.

At the time, I was finishing a book about the neurology and psychology of habit formation. I was in the final, frantic stages of the writing process—a flurry of phone calls, panicked rewrites, last-minute edits—and felt like I was falling farther and farther behind. My wife, who worked full-time, had just given birth to our second child. I was an investigative reporter at *The New York Times* and spent my days chasing stories and nights rewriting book pages. My life felt like a treadmill of to-do lists, emails, rushed meetings, and subsequent apologies for being late.

Amid all this hustle—and under the guise of asking for a little publishing advice—I sent a note to an author I admired, a friend of one of my colleagues at the *Times*. The author's name was Atul Gawande, and he appeared to be a paragon of success. He was a

forty-six-year-old staff writer at a prestigious magazine, as well as a renowned surgeon at one of the nation's top hospitals. He was an associate professor at Harvard, an adviser to the World Health Organization, and the founder of a nonprofit that sent surgical supplies to medically underserved parts of the world. He had written three bestsellers and was married with three children. In 2006, he had been awarded a MacArthur "genius" grant—and had promptly given a substantial portion of the \$500,000 prize to charity.

There are some people who pretend at productivity, whose résumés appear impressive until you realize their greatest talent is self-marketing. Then there are others, like Gawande, who seem to exist on a different plane of getting things done. His articles were smart and engaging, and, by all accounts, he was gifted in the operating room, committed to his patients, and a devoted father. Whenever he was interviewed on television, he appeared relaxed. His accomplishments in medicine, writing, and public health were important and real.

I emailed him to ask if he had time to talk. I wanted to know how he managed to be so productive. What was his secret? And, if I learned it, could I change my own life?

"Productivity," of course, means different things in different settings. One person might spend an hour exercising in the morning before dropping the kids at school and consider the day a success. Another might opt to use that time locked in her office, returning emails and calling clients, and feel equally accomplished. A research scientist or artist may see productivity in failed experiments or discarded canvases, since each mistake gets them closer to discovery; while an engineer's measure of productivity might focus on fanatically reducing waste.

Productivity, in other words, 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. It's a process of learning how to succeed with less stress and struggle.

It's about getting things done without sacrificing everything we care about along the way.

By this definition, Atul Gawande seemed to have things pretty well figured out.

A few days later, he responded to my email with his regrets. "I wish I could help," he wrote, "but I'm running flat out with my various commitments." Even he, it seemed, had limits. "I hope you'll understand."

Later that week, I mentioned this exchange to our mutual friend. I made it clear I wasn't offended—that, in fact, I admired Gawande's focus. I imagined his days were consumed with healing patients, teaching medical students, writing articles, and advising the world's largest health organization.

No, my friend told me, I had it wrong. That wasn't it. Gawande was particularly busy that week because he had bought tickets to a rock concert with his kids. And then he was heading on a mini-vacation with his wife.

At that moment, I realized two things:

First, I was clearly doing something wrong. I hadn't taken a day off in nine months; in fact, I was worried that, given a choice between their father and the babysitter, my kids would definitely opt for the sitter.

Second, and more important, there were people out there who knew how to be more productive. I just had to convince them to share their secrets with me.

This book is the result of my investigations into how productivity works, and why some people and companies get so much more done than everyone else.

Since I contacted Gawande four years ago, I've sought out neurologists, businesspeople, government leaders, psychologists, and other productivity experts. I've spoken to the filmmakers behind Disney's *Frozen* and learned how they made one of the most suc-

cessful movies in history under crushing time pressures—and narrowly averted disaster—by fostering a certain kind of creative tension within their ranks. I talked to data scientists at Google and writers from the early seasons of *Saturday Night Live* who said both organizations were successful, in part, because they abided by a set of unwritten rules. I interviewed FBI agents who solved a kidnapping through agile management and a culture influenced by an old auto plant in Fremont, California. I roamed the halls of Cincinnati's public schools and saw how teachers improved students' lives by, paradoxically, making information *more difficult* to absorb.

As I spoke to people—poker players, airline pilots, military generals, executives, and cognitive scientists—a handful of key insights began to emerge. I noticed that people kept mentioning certain ideas over and over. And at the root of these ideas was one big, central insight: Productive people have habits—what psychologists might call ‘contemplative routines’—that push them to *think more deeply* about the choices they make.

The most productive people push themselves to come up with big goals—and then have a system for breaking them into manageable parts. They scrutinize how they spend their time to see if it aligns with their priorities. They pay close attention to how teammates react to different modes of communication. They force themselves to learn about unfamiliar topics and, in the process, inspire new breakthroughs.

Put differently, productivity isn't about working more or sweating harder. It's not about spending longer hours at your desk or making bigger sacrifices. Rather, the difference between being merely busy and genuinely productive is about taking control of how we think and making better choices—instead of simply reacting to life's constant demands.

That's easier said than done, of course. Just declaring our intention to think harder doesn't make it so. In today's world, where

busyness is chronic, it's easy to spend an entire day working frantically—returning emails, attending meetings, catching up on phone calls, rushing to pick up the kids—and, all the while, never stopping to ask ourselves if we're getting important things done or simply checking items off our to-do list. So the most productive people create habits that *force* themselves to think. These include writing to-do lists in certain ways (so it pushes us to think about our most important priorities); making decisions by envisioning the future as multiple possibilities (rather than fixating on what we hope will happen); and seeking out new and uncomfortable ideas (which help us become “innovation brokers”). Such habits push us to think more when thinking is hard. And they reveal choices that other, less productive people never see.

This book explores the habits and routines that put real productivity within closer reach. It seeks to explain the difference between work that is hard and work that is smart. One chapter, for example, examines how the military turns directionless teenagers into marines by forcing them to make choices that are “biased toward action.” Another chapter looks at how we can maintain focus by pushing ourselves to construct mental models—and how one group of pilots told themselves stories that prevented 440 passengers from falling out of the sky.

Today, we exist in a world where we can communicate with coworkers at any hour, access vital documents over smartphones, learn any fact within seconds, and have almost any product delivered to our doorstep. Companies can design gadgets in California, collect orders from customers in Barcelona, email blueprints to Shenzhen, and track deliveries all over the world. Parents can auto-sync the family's calendars, buy dinner by pushing a button, and locate the kids' phones one minute after curfew. We are living through an economic and social revolution that is as profound, in many ways, as the agrarian and industrial revolutions of previous eras.

These advances in communications and technology are sup-

posed to make our lives easier. Instead, they often seem to fill our days with more work and stress.

In part, that's because we've been paying attention to the wrong innovations. We've been staring at the tools of productivity—the gadgets and apps and complicated filing systems—rather than the lessons those technologies are trying to teach us.

There are some people, however, who have figured out how to master this changing world. There are some companies that have discovered how to seize advantages amid these rapid shifts.

This is a book about how to recognize the choices that fuel true productivity. It is a guide to the science, techniques, and opportunities that have changed lives. There are people who have learned how to succeed with less effort. There are companies that create amazing things with less waste. There are leaders who transform the people around them.

This is a book about how to become smarter, faster, and better at everything you do.



MOTIVATION

Reimagining Boot Camp, Nursing Home Rebellions, and the Locus of Control

The trip was intended as a celebration, a twenty-nine-day tour of South America that would take Robert, who had just turned sixty, and his wife, Viola, first to Brazil, then over the Andes into Bolivia and Peru. Their itinerary included tours of Incan ruins, a boat trip on Lake Titicaca, the occasional craft market, and a bit of birding.

That much relaxation, Robert had joked with friends before leaving, seemed unsafe. He was already anticipating the fortune he would spend on calls to his secretary. Over the previous half century Robert Philippe had built a small gas station into an auto parts empire in rural Louisiana and had made himself into a Bayou mogul through hard work, charisma, and hustle. In addition to the auto parts business, he also owned a chemical company, a paper supplier, various swaths of land, and a real estate firm. And now here he was, entering his seventh decade, and his wife had convinced him to spend a month in a bunch of countries where, he suspected, it would be awfully difficult to find a TV showing the LSU–Ole Miss game.