



## Reaching Your Potential

Key ideas from the [Harvard Business Review](#) article By Robert S. Kaplan

### The Idea in Brief

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Despite racking up impressive accomplishments, you feel frustrated with your career--convinced you should be achieving more. You may even wish you had chosen a different career altogether.

These feelings often stem from a common error: buying into others' definitions of success. To reach your potential, Kaplan suggests taking a deeply personal look at how *you* define success:

Begin by recognizing that managing your career is *your* responsibility. Then, follow these three steps:

**Know yourself** by identifying your strengths and weaknesses and the activities you truly enjoy doing.

**Excel** at the activities critical to success in your desired role.

**Demonstrate character and leadership** by putting the interests of your company and colleagues ahead of your own.

### The Idea in Practice

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Kaplan offers these guidelines for reaching your potential at work:

#### Know Yourself

Write down your 2-3 greatest strengths *and* weaknesses. If (like most people) you struggle with identifying key weaknesses, solicit the views of people (peers, direct reports, trusted friends) who will tell you the brutal truth. Ask for very specific feedback ("How well do I listen?" "What is my leadership style?"). Be receptive to the input you receive.

Then figure out what you truly enjoy doing. What's your dream job? Resist the lure of a hot field: If you go into it without a strong enthusiasm for the actual work, you may waste a number of years before you admit it's the wrong job for you. Once you've chosen your ideal job, you'll have to start from scratch. But choosing a field you love gives you strength to weather the inevitable setbacks and long hours needed to reach your full potential in any career.

#### Excel at Critical Activities

Identify the 3-4 activities essential for success in your desired or current role. Then develop a plan for excelling in these activities.

A new division head at a large industrial company was struggling to grow sales and profits. Through interviews with staff and customers, he concluded that success in his business hinged on developing close relationships with top customers' purchasing managers, putting the right people in critical leadership positions, and staying at the cutting edge of product innovation. He began delegating activities less central to success so he could focus on raising the bar on the three success factors he had identified. Sales and profits improved.

## Demonstrate Character and Leadership

Character and leadership make the difference between good and great performance. To demonstrate **character**:

- Put the interests of your company and colleagues ahead of your own, doing things for others without regard to what's in it for you.
- Adopt an owner's mindset, asking yourself what you would do if you were the ultimate decision maker.
- Be willing to make recommendations that will benefit your organization's overall performance, possibly to the detriment of your own unit. Trust that you'll eventually be rewarded.

To exhibit **leadership**, speak up--even when you're expressing an unpopular view. Your superiors desperately want dissenting opinions so they can make better choices. If you play it safe instead of asserting your heartfelt opinions, you may hit a plateau in your career.

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## Further Reading

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### Article

#### **What to Ask the Person in the Mirror**

*Harvard Business Review*

January 2007

by Robert S. Kaplan

In this earlier article, Kaplan highlights the importance of knowing yourself to reaching your potential as a leader. As you climb the corporate ladder, it becomes harder to get candid feedback on your strengths and weaknesses, so you risk making mistakes that damage your organization and your reputation. To stay on your game, regularly ask yourself questions related to key leadership challenges. For example, "Am I communicating a vision for my business to my employees?" "Am

I spending my time in ways that enable me to achieve my priorities?" "Do I give people timely and direct feedback they can act on?" "How do I behave under pressure?"

## Collection

### Managing Yourself, 2nd Edition

HBR Article Collection

April 2008

by Tony Schwartz, Catherine McCarthy, Stewart D. Friedman, Donald N. Sull, Dominic Houlder, and Peter F. Drucker

This collection offers strategies for changing course if you feel dissatisfied with your life's direction:

**If you're putting in longer hours, only to become less productive and more exhausted,** read the suggestions for reviving four types of personal energy in "Manage Your Energy, Not Your Time," by Tony Schwartz and Catherine McCarthy. For example, replenish emotional energy by viewing upsetting situations as learning opportunities. Free up physical energy by setting an earlier bedtime and reducing alcohol intake.

**If you're making trade-offs between your professional and personal obligations,** consider making small changes that benefit multiple dimensions of your life, as Stewart Friedman recommends in "Be a Better Leader, Have a Richer Life." For instance, join a club with coworkers. You'll forge closer friendships with them, strengthening your sense of community and improving on-the-job collaboration.

**If you've lost touch with what matters most to you,** explore "Do Your Commitments Match Your Convictions?" by Donald N. Sull and Dominic Houlder. They recommend a disciplined process for articulating your deepest values, determining which are receiving insufficient time and energy from you, and closing gaps.

**If you want to know your strengths, weaknesses, and desired work environment better,** read Peter F. Drucker's "Managing Yourself." He presents a way to clarify five aspects of your professional identity and recommends seeking job opportunities and environments that fit that identity most closely.

## About the Author

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**Robert S. Kaplan** is the acting president and CEO of Harvard Management Company and a professor of management practice at Harvard Business School in Boston. He is also a former vice chairman of the Goldman Sachs Group.

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