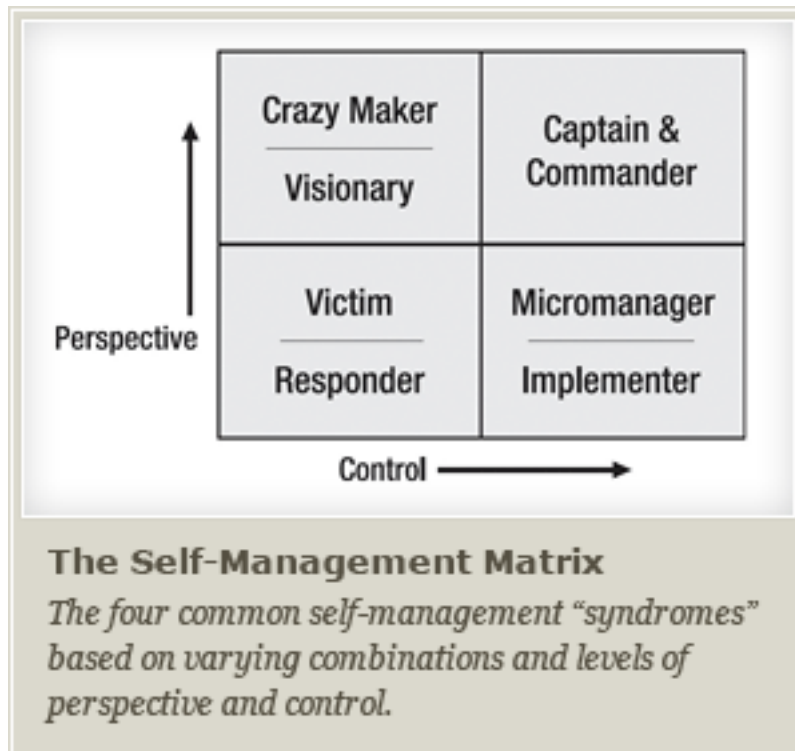


The Captain and Commander

By David Allen

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The ideal model I’m proposing here incorporates a balance of perspective and structure, where an internal rather than an external source directs your energy and focus. This is the state of flow, of being in your zone, of being “on.” You are guiding your ship through the waves, wind, and water with a light touch on the helm and a keen eye on the horizon. You are committed to a course and prepared to make the slightest corrections that may be required.

When you achieve this state, there is no sense of overwhelm, no distinction between personal and professional, no dilemma of a life/work balance. It is possible to have this experience while building a garden shed, playing with your cat, just sitting and thinking, or working through a challenging meeting with your boss or your board. This state isn’t dependent on the content or substance of what you are doing, nor even if you particularly *like* doing it. That doesn’t mean you can gain access to this positive experience by just doing *anything* (wouldn’t that be nice?); if you could, you would never fall out of this quadrant. The secret lies not so much in what you’re doing, but in how you are *engaged* with what you’re doing. And the optimal way to be engaged is to learn to walk the thin line between function and form, vision and implementation, stretch and structure.

Many Visionary/Crazy Maker types are deathly afraid of and resistant to any form of “getting organized” because they equate it with their opposite quadrant — the Micromanager. They are averse (and rightly so) to the “anally retentive” constraints that can stifle risk taking and momentum.

Implementer/Micromanager types are likewise repelled by any invitation to “make it up” and create their ideal scenarios, without sufficient evidence to support the possibility of actually achieving it. They’re afraid they’ll be thrown into the maelstrom of the Crazy Maker, endangering the stability of everything and everyone around them.

This is not, however, an either-or situation, though many people act as if it is. There is no freedom without discipline, no vision without a form, no structure without a function. If there were no lines painted on the road, you wouldn’t be free to let your mind wander and be creative while you drive. You’d be too busy hoping no one hits you. But if there were too many lanes and restrictions and rules, you’d have traffic moving much slower than it should, as everyone tried to pay attention to the right place to be. As precarious as walking the critical line might be, there is an optimal relationship of control and perspective. And when that is achieved, all is very well, indeed.

On the Negative Side

It would appear that there’s no downside to being in this quadrant, for there’s nowhere further to go in terms of managing yourself. That would be true if this were a simple, one-dimensional model. But it’s not, for as you’ll see, these quadrants can be highly situation-dependent as well as multilayered. Being on “cruise control” is great, until the road takes a sharp and unexpected turn, or traffic suddenly screeches to a halt because of an accident. In other words, you can get into a rhythm and pattern that’s working, and potentially ignore something you should be doing to keep it going that way. What future crisis do you need to be preventing? What new vision should you be developing and evaluating to keep you fresh? What new structures and processes might you be researching now to handle the increased flow that will result from your success?

Theoretically, if you are Captain and Commander, you’ll also be paying attention to those preventive maintenance and development responsibilities . . . and on at least a subtle level you can’t really be fully in your zone if some part of you is aware of those needs and they’re not being addressed. But the point is, we can often *seem* to be in a state of fully integrated flow, let ourselves get lax, and quickly lose control. The relief and contentment of having your current situation in proper control and perspective can easily seduce you into believing that you don’t need to be thinking about the future.

Adapted from “Making It All Work” by David Allen, by arrangement with Viking, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.