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Reclaim Your Life: **A Two-Week Challenge to Help You Regain Time**

By Stuart R. Levine

As you start to regain time, and you will, reinvest it to gain back even more and build an arsenal of work habits that get the right results the first time, fast.

Most people oversimplify the subject of work / life balance. They talk as if it's merely a choice you can make to leave work on time every day and see more of your daughter's soccer games. No one wants to discuss the fact that we can't simply decide to work fewer hours without affecting our productivity and, ultimately, our financial security. So to reclaim our lives while maintaining stability for ourselves and our families, we need to work fewer hours *and* get more done in them. That's the real issue.

The key is effectiveness. Achieving balance will require that you train yourself to develop super-productive behaviors. To get the most out of every day, you can never go on auto-pilot—every minute you're on the job, you need to be fully engaged. It takes discipline, but if you do it, the pay-off is tremendous. You may be exhausted when you leave work, but you will leave on time and free from the nagging sense of things slightly out of control. This leaves you not only time for other parts of your life, but the mental and emotional shelf space to be fully present to them.

Try one a day for two business weeks and observe what happens.

I'm not talking about time management, although that's a piece of it. I'm talking about having purposeful dealings with people that get the best results with the least time, about understanding how you fit into bigger systems so you're focusing your efforts well, and about concentrating deeply every minute of your day. In short—about heightened professional effectiveness.

If you're time-starved already, it's probably hard to see the sense in spending your most precious asset—time—on new systems. You need a manageable process for making change. To this end, I've written a book with 100 rules—each rule focuses on a discrete behavior that could be getting in the way of quality outcomes and gives an actionable strategy to change. Each is deliberately distilled to its essence so that you can quickly grasp the concepts and apply them immediately.

I've included 11 of my rules here to give you a sense of the power and promise this strategy holds. Try one a day for two business weeks (yes, there is one extra to move you forward when you have finished the challenge) and observe what happens. As you start to regain time, and you will, reinvest it to gain back even more and build an arsenal of work habits that get the right results the first time, fast.

The key to this approach is that it carves a seemingly insurmountable journey into specific, achievable steps that taken one at a time can lead to the final destination: the balance you seek combined with stronger financial stability. You can do this. The choice is yours.

MONDAY: *I got it.*

As soon as you understand exactly what someone is explaining, tell them in one way or another, “I got it.” Doing so frees them to move on and cover more ground. Similarly, if someone else says “I got it” to you when you’re explaining a point, stop. Ignoring such feedback is a mistake, one that detail-oriented people are particularly vulnerable to. Because they value the details, they feel that others will, too. Of course, not everyone does.

I witnessed how costly this mistake can be in a recent planning session. The project manager continued answering a question long after the man who had asked it said, “I got it.” Even when he repeated, “I got it,” she calmly and insistently continued. As I watched him get angrier and angrier, I realized she had lost him.

If you’re not sure if someone got your point, listen carefully to the person’s responses. If it’s clear there’s still a misunderstanding, suggest “I’m not sure we’re on the same page. Let’s make sure we understand each other.” If the other person gets it, continue with your next point.

Be cognizant of the nonverbal cues that the other person offers. Is he or she growing impatient—nodding, looking away, shifting from side to side? These signals tell you whether or not you still have the listener’s attention. If you don’t, summarize your point quickly—and move on.

TUESDAY: *You're killing me.*

What do you do if you've said "I got it" to the person addressing you and they keep right on talking? You feel trapped. You know the clock is ticking. This is the third time you've heard the story. Everyone in the room is already in what I call "violent agreement." Instead of getting angry or giving up, look at the other person, laugh, and say, "You're killing me. I've got the point. Let's move on."

By being both direct and funny about it, you do two things: (1) you break the tension that everyone probably feels; and (2) by keeping things light, you move the conversation forward without offending. Odds are that the speaker is so wrapped up in the point being made that he or she has stopped observing what was going on around them. You're offering him or her a graceful way out and helping to keep things moving.

If you're not comfortable saying "You're killing me," try "Time out." Ask a leading question to direct the conversation in a new direction. Or even suggest a brief break. The point is, find a phrase or method that works for you. If you simply put up with needless repetition, everyone in the room suffers.

WEDNESDAY: *Close the loop.*

Have you ever had a test at your physician's office, and the nurse said, "We'll call you if there's a problem"? Two weeks later—and still no call. You begin to wonder, "What if they lost the blood sample? How can I be sure everything's okay?"

When people don't close the loop, they leave the other person hanging. Not only is it distracting, it can subtly erode the relationship.

Anyone can follow up. It's a simple matter of being conscientious and disciplined.

- ☑ When a colleague introduces you to a new contact, tell your colleague when you've reached out to the new person. After you've connected, tell your colleague how it went.
- ☑ Respond to invitations and meeting requests promptly. It's a lot easier for others to plan an event when they know who's coming.
- ☑ When you receive details or specifics, acknowledge them. When you receive a question by phone or e-mail, answer it or forward it to the person who can. Acknowledge your action with the person who raised the question. A simple e-mail reply saying, "Got your message, see you there" will eliminate any confusion or uncertainty over whether you received the e-mail and were able to attend the event.

Never let yourself be known as someone who leaves other people hanging. Once that label gets applied, it's hard to shake. On the other hand, when you consistently close the loop, you build a reputation as a dependable professional.

Make a habit of closing the loop in everything you do. Tell the people you work with to do the same.

THURSDAY: *Don't let your BlackBerry become a CrackBerry.*

It's easy to stay connected these days—thanks to cell phones and pagers, Palm Pilots and BlackBerrys that allow us to communicate and access unprecedented amounts of information, wherever and whenever we want. Unfortunately, the frustration of feeling out of touch has been replaced by the burden of a twenty-four-hour day. We've become obsessed with staying connected at all times. If not used wisely, these tools, instead of helping us cut to the chase, can usher in a relentless stream of interruptions in our professional and personal lives. Do you ever find yourself irritated at a fellow commuter who talks nonstop on his cell phone, sharing private and privileged information, while you are attempting to catch up on industry reading? Have you ever been tempted to strangle someone at a meeting who checks his e-mail while others are speaking or presenting?

These productivity tools should serve us, not the other way around. Turn them off when you're in meetings or working on something that involves others or requires concentration. You can check in and respond to e-mails when the meeting or work session is over.

Set an after-hours limit as well—one that works for you, your family, and friends. Make it known that you won't be checking e-mail or voice mail after a certain hour in the evening or on the weekends. Just because technology allows you to receive e-mails twenty-four hours a day doesn't mean you have to accept them. Remember to respect other people's preferences for after-hours communication.

You wouldn't give a hammer or a wrench the power to decide when it will be used. Don't give that power to your phone or PDA, either.

FRIDAY: *Tell them if the baby is ugly.*

When I asked a colleague to review my initial outline for this book, he agreed under one condition: “I need to know that I can tell you if the baby is ugly.” I told him that not only did I agree, I was counting on him to constructively challenge my thinking.

When someone has a new idea, he or she often loses objectivity. After all, the idea reflects on his or her creativity and quality of thinking. It’s hard to tell someone that you don’t like an idea. But it’s a lot easier to have that discussion before you launch a new product or service than after your company spends countless hours and dollars to develop it. In fact, the sooner you point out that the baby is ugly, the less time everyone wastes developing a flawed idea. A smart innovator counts on your honest feedback. That’s why he or she is asking for it.

If possible, comment on what works about the idea before you offer criticism. It will help the person remain open to your comments and possibly point him or her in a new direction that works. Then, in direct terms, explain what you feel isn’t working. Be specific. If the idea doesn’t work because you don’t see a market for it, say so. If you think he or she is underestimating the cost, don’t keep this to yourself. By showing people the specific flaws in their thinking, you will help them see how they could strengthen the idea or save them from wasting time and energy on something that isn’t going to work. They’ll thank you someday.

MONDAY: *Know your weaknesses, but play to your strengths.*

Most people focus on their weaknesses and try to improve them. But the most successful executives realize that this is a waste of time. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, whether they are a CEO or a management trainee. While it's important to be aware of your weaknesses, devoting time and energy to strengthening them will give you only limited gains. You'll become much more effective by building on the things you already do well.

If numbers make sense to you, concentrate on becoming a great numbers person. Yes, you should be able to write a passable business letter. But if that's not your strength, don't invest a great deal of time improving your writing skills or pursuing positions that require a lot of writing. If spreadsheets intimidate you but you have a terrific visual sense, get enough financial literacy training so you can read a balance sheet and understand financial discussions, but invest the majority of your time in developing your design and visual skills. By investing in your natural abilities, you will achieve far more, faster and easier.

A young woman I know shifted careers from acting to management. After initial progress, her career hit a wall. She spent months improving her computer skills and trying to master financial management, with little improvement. One day, while managing a major project, she was asked to make a presentation to an audience of businesspeople. Up to that point, it had been a torturous meeting. But when she took the podium, the room lit up. She entertained

and energized the audience, easily gaining their commitment to the project. One of the leaders came up to her afterward and said, “You’re great on your feet. You should do more of this.” Until then, it had never occurred to her that something that came so naturally to her could be valuable. With her company’s help, she began to present more and worked at getting better at it. She was so successful that within a year she was made executive director of a key industry-wide initiative.

One added advantage of playing to your strengths is that they are often where your passions lie. Focusing on your passions will help you push through potential barriers and stay energized when things are difficult. And it makes work a lot more fun.

TUESDAY: *Life is a negotiation.*

If you’re breathing, you’re negotiating. Every day you’re trading “this for that”—whether requesting a better compensation package from your employer, negotiating a deal with a client or vendor, or deciding where to dine that evening with your spouse. Make every negotiation a little easier by limiting your wish list to the two or three things that matter most.

Unless you’re negotiating a multiyear contract or a peace treaty, don’t bring a long laundry list to the table. You’re bound to lose something important if you do. I’m not suggesting that you rush negotiations—quite the contrary. Negotiation takes time. Invest it wisely in the important work—knowing exactly what you want, listening to what the other party needs, and envisioning a way to compromise. Don’t get caught up in a swap meet of insignificant issues. At best, it’s a waste of time; at worst, you risk sacrificing the big issues for the small ones.

Living and working with other people requires a constant give-and-take. Don't damage relationships by haggling over insignificant details. Define the two or three points that matter most. Be willing to lose the rest.

WEDNESDAY: *On it. Pending. Done.*

Develop a shorthand with your close colleagues. You're all busy, so give each other permission to dispense with the niceties.

One executive uses the words "On it. Pending. Done." with his team. As soon as he sends a request, he receives a response, "On it." If a team member hits a wall, he or she sends a second e-mail with the update: "Pending." If the executive's help is needed, the team members specifically ask for help in a sentence or two. Otherwise, the executive knows it's being handled. When the task is complete, he receives the message "Done."

Another CEO, when he wants someone to move on, e-mails or says "PAC." It stands for "Point accepted. Continue." His team knows it's nothing personal. After all, they're as interested as he is in keeping things moving. When you're building relationships, you need to clearly communicate your intent and views to ensure they're fully understood. But when you're working with close colleagues, a few words will usually do.

THURSDAY: *Good enough is good enough.*

There's nothing wrong with wanting to do your best. But striving for perfection when "good enough is good enough" is a waste of time. Don't let unhealthy perfectionism keep you from cutting to the chase. Know when to let things go.

Consider the way new technologies come to market. The major software and electronics companies cut down on time and costs by putting products on the market before they've been completely debugged. Not only does this save the consumer money in the long run; consumer feedback teaches these companies more in a month than they'd discover through years of in-house testing. Sure, some users might grumble at flaws in the early models or releases. But by now, most consumers are aware of the practice and know to wait for the updated version.

You should know when your work is "good enough." Before sitting on or delaying a project or document, ask yourself:

- Will anyone but me appreciate my efforts?
- Can I significantly improve this if I keep working?
- Does the possible gain in quality outweigh the lost time?

If you've answered "no" to the above, wrap it up and move on. If you've answered "yes," map out what still needs to be done and do it—but nothing more.

As Alexander Hamilton said, "I never expect to see a perfect work from an imperfect man." Accept your own imperfection. Do great work in spite of it.

FRIDAY: *Take back the weekend.*

It's 4:30 on Friday afternoon. You're ready to go home. After putting out fires all week, you're the one who's burned out. But you've got a pocketful of business cards, a pile of receipts to sort through, and at least three people waiting to hear back on something. You decide to go home anyway and "catch up" over the weekend.

Stop!

Unlike on weeknights—when your goal is to clean up quickly and respond to anything time-sensitive—Friday afternoons are the time to close every open loop and catch up on those easy-to-put-off tasks that clutter your desk and mind.

Before you leave the office, make sure you've delivered on promises, reviewed everything that needs your input, and returned all calls and e-mails. Stay late if you need to. Better yet, set aside time earlier in the day so you don't have to. Then start climbing the mountain one issue, one response at a time. Start with the simple things to build a little momentum. Work your way to the tougher tasks. Not only will you be better able to enjoy your time off, your colleagues will appreciate that you're eliminating bottlenecks that result from holding on to their proposals or e-mails.

Starting the weekend with a clear conscience will liberate you to enjoy two worry-free days and begin the following week with a clean slate. I know that some of you don't want to give up your 4:00 a.m. Sunday e-mail exchanges. That's your choice. This book is for people trying to make a different choice: to take back their time.

BONUS: *Know when to put the book down.*

If you've grown irritable or are snapping at people, if you're exhausted or can't focus, if you can't fall asleep or are waking up in the middle of the night, take a step back. It's time to do more than "turn the page" on a workday. You need to put the book down. Whether it's a long weekend or a true vacation, you need a break. Your fatigue is affecting your work and your relationships. Things aren't going to improve until you take some extended time off to reenergize.

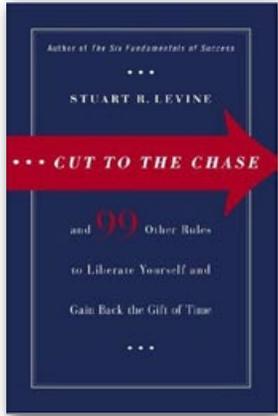
As soon as you confirm your time off, start planning. You're not doing yourself or your colleagues any favors by waiting until the day before you leave. No one wants to hear a person on the elevator complaining about how stressful it is to take a vacation. More important, no one wants to pick up the slack for you because you didn't plan ahead.

As soon as you schedule your time off:

- Alert everyone you work with regularly.
- Make a list of the work you need to wrap up before your break. Determine what to postpone.
- Make a list of your projects or tasks due while you're gone. Select people to cover for you. Meet with them to make sure they have everything they need.
- Update your boss on where things stand. Let him or her know who will be covering for you. (If your boss is comfortable when you walk out the door, you will be, too.)

Then take your time off. Depending on your job, you may need to check in occasionally. But have faith in your colleagues. Let them know how to contact you in an absolute emergency. Ask them to handle everything else on their own. Allow your team to grow.

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For more details or to buy a copy of Stuart R. Levine's, *Cut to the Chase: and 99 Other Rules to Liberate Yourself and Gain Back the Gift of Time*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stuart R. Levine, former CEO of Dale Carnegie & Associates Inc., is Chairman and CEO of Stuart Levine & Associates LLC, an international consulting and leadership development company whose mission is to strengthen leaders and organizations to achieve desired results. He is author of the national bestseller, *The Six Fundamentals of Success* and co-author of the international bestseller, *The Leader in You*. His new book, *Cut to the Chase: and 99 Other Rules to Liberate Yourself and Gain Back the Gift of Time* was released by Doubleday in January 2007. His books have been profiled on NBC's top rated morning show, the *Today* show, as well as *ABC's World News This Morning* and hundreds of local television and radio shows. He is called on frequently to comment on leadership and corporate governance issues. Stuart received the 1995 Entrepreneur of the Year Award in the category of leadership by Ernst & Young and Inc. Magazine for turning Dale Carnegie around. He was the youngest-elected member of the New York State Assembly. Levine serves as Lead Director of Gentiva Health Services and J. D'Addario & Company, Inc. He is Director of North Shore-LIJ Health System, The American College of Physicians Foundation and The Nature Conservancy.

For consulting and speaking engagement information, please call 516-465-0800 (www.stuartlevine.com).

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