

70 Ways to Thrive at Work

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Before we begin

What's in it for me?

You'll find practical ideas you can use every day at work. They will help you be more productive, achieve more goals, build better relationships and stay motivated through challenges and setbacks.

Treat them as bite-size chunks you can return to. It won't matter if you read the sections out of order.

Almost all the ideas come from peer-reviewed research over the last few decades. The rest are from the author's 25 years of experience leading a company and training adults.

You can use all the ideas at work and many of them at home.

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Choices successful people make

1. Choose to take charge of your life

Taking charge of our own lives means accepting our success or failure is up to us. It means believing that we can always choose our attitude – even if we can't change the events. It means not seeing ourselves as victims, not assuming that our success depends on others, or luck.

It really is liberating. Once you've made the choice and keep to it, you can make other choices that liberate you to thrive.

Even making liberating choices doesn't change lives instantly, or make us feel better right away, but it does give us a new focus.

Even if you believe that your success is largely up to you, can you make more of that idea? The other ideas in this ebook will help you do that.

2. Choose to be courageous

Courage is a vital choice, even with everyday events.

Courage can be as dramatic as a soldier rescuing another under fire, or as moving as the Pakistani teenager, Nobel laureate and activist, Malala Yousafzai choosing not to give in to the Taliban.

Courage can be as low-key as failing today and saying, 'I'll try again tomorrow'. That is courage because we risk disappointment, maybe even humiliation, and choose to do it anyway.

3. Choose to be unembarrassable

Think about the last time you were embarrassed and ask yourself what you achieved by feeling that way. Even more important: does fear of embarrassment make you less inclined to speak up at a meeting, sing a song you enjoy, or be outgoing at parties?

What would it do for your life if you were to choose to be unembarrassable?

'So what do I do?'

Choose to ignore the physical symptoms of embarrassment. They'll pass.

Something really embarrassing happens? Move on. It hasn't happened. Fuss will only make it memorable.

It's only slightly embarrassing, but obvious? Don't take yourself too seriously. We're all human. Maybe smile, but move on.

Try decentering

Therapists encourage patients who have a high fear of embarrassment to try 'decentering' – which involves questioning whether other people really are evaluating them. Mostly, they're not - and if they are, should we be worried what they think of our clothes, hairstyle, body shape, accent or abilities?

We can choose not to need everyone's acceptance or approval. We can choose not to be concerned if we don't perform to the satisfaction of those who would criticise us. After all, we're in control of our lives, not them.

It's a choice to give into the fear of embarrassment. Choose not to. Avoiding potentially embarrassing situations might ease your fears, but it's a cop-out. That fear will, at the very least, cost you opportunities to thrive.

4. Choose to think independently

People who thrive choose to think and act independently when it liberates them to do more with their lives.

They refuse to be controlled by what other people might think when it stops them achieving their goals and living their values.

They can distinguish between conventional thinking and what they believe to be right.

Boost your happiness quotient

5. Choose to be happy now

It's very human to think, 'I'll be happy when I've bought my own house, I've found my soul mate, got my promotion, made my first million, the kids are settled or I have a Ferrari. It's not what the world's happy people do. Happy people know they can choose to be happy at any time, which suggests they also know it's their responsibility.

Focus on being happy now. Give yourself permission to be happy, even if life is not going as well as you would like. Think of the things that make you happy, focus on them. Find ways to enjoy them more.

6. Savour pleasant experiences

It's a Buddhist idea and researchers have found it effective too.

It may be as simple as focusing on the taste of your coffee, the crunch of gravel under your feet, the pleasure of good company, the warmth of a fire or the view from a window. Whatever gives you even momentary pleasure.

It's the habit that counts. Savouring might mean sharing your enjoyment with your co-worker, writing about it (perhaps on Facebook) creating opportunities for more of it, sharing a picture of it, or simply stopping to experience it fully.

7. Make gratitude a way of life

Choosing to be grateful may seem superficial, but it's surprisingly powerful. Researchers have found that people who write 'gratitude diaries' are significantly happier than people who just record events. Writing a letter or visiting someone to express your gratitude can make the receiver and you happier for up to three months.

How about ending the day by asking your partner and your children, 'What was the best thing about today?' Vary the words, but make it a habit - even on the most difficult days.

Gratitude is a choice. We can make it a way of life.

8. Separate your self-esteem and your goals

Let's feel good about ourselves because we live by our values - and because of what we have achieved so far.

If we decide that we will feel good about ourselves when we have been promoted, passed our exam or won 'Employee of the Year', we can become more fearful of failure.

In studies, students who linked their sense of self-worth to passing their exams did work harder, but they didn't succeed any more than students who didn't make that link. They were more anxious and more likely to be in conflict with the academic staff.

9. Invest in healthy relationships

People in healthy relationships live longer, healthier lives. Being isolated from others is about as hazardous as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Strong relationships take commitment. See your commitment as an investment to help you thrive at work and at home.

Build successful relationships

Our best researched evidence on the success of relationships comes from studies of intimate relationships. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, let's assume that we can apply at least some of what the researchers have found to our relationships at work.

10. Contribute to the reservoir of goodwill

One characteristic of successful relationships stands out – and it's not simply 'good communication' or 'tolerance'.

Researchers have found that the real issue for most couples is 'emotional warmth'. And yes, you can use the idea at work too.

Communicating well and tolerance are ways of expressing that warmth, but we can express warmth in many ways. Doing the dishes, hugs, really listening, treating our partner with respect even when we disagree, all contribute to a reservoir of goodwill. When things don't go so well, there should be plenty in the reservoir to handle it.

Let's extend the idea of the reservoir of goodwill to our relationships with our colleagues. Maybe not the hugs if that's not your kind of workplace - and certainly not if you are not sure they would be welcome. But surely we can assume that helping out without expecting anything in return, really listening, treating our colleagues with respect even when we disagree would provide a useful focus.

11. Start conversations

The principles are easy: find something you have in common, share information equally and keep away from differences until the relationship is underway.

Start with an open question.

'How do you know Kate?'

'Was the meeting useful for you?'

Give away a bit of information about you.

Then ask a question based on what the other person told you.

'Kate told me she liked the pace of life in London. How did you feel about it?'

'Do you think you could achieve more if the next meeting was smaller – say just the the senior people in the project team?'

Listen and nod gently as you focus on what the other person is saying. Look for connections you can follow-up with a question.

'We have a girl about the same age as your son and she's at a Montessori pre-school too. What are your impressions so far?'

'I'm new in my team too. How's it working out for you?'

12. Take the long-term view

People in thriving relationships see a colleague's bad behaviour in context. It's a way of taking a long-term view.

They don't judge the whole relationship on the moodiness or ill-chosen words that have upset them today. They'll see their colleague's occasional lapse as temporary and remind themselves that the relationship, overall, is strong.

Taking the long-term view of a relationship doesn't stop you insisting on better behaviour next time.

13. Forgive

Forgiveness is a health issue.

It may seem less satisfying than holding a grudge and proclaiming our moral high ground, but the evidence in favour of forgiveness is clear. It's an investment in our relationships, with rewards for both the forgiver and forgiven.

Stronger relationships make us resilient because we recover quickly from conflicts. The result: less stress and better health.

14. Build your relationships with those you lead

Two issues stand out. Help your team members feel safe at work and give them autonomy. There are many benefits and loyalty to you (and your organisation) is one of them.

Helping people feel safe at work ranges from taking an interest in your team members' progress, making them feel valued, through to protecting them from bullies and ensuring their physical safety. It includes welcoming their contributions in meetings, even when we disagree.

Autonomy is universal motivator. Your relationships will be stronger if you allow your team members to make decisions they are ready for. Seem a bit risky? Micro-managing employees doesn't just weaken relationships, it destroys their motivation and engagement. They will leave you.

The Gallup organisation has spent 30 years researching more than 17 million employees' engagement at work. It has produced 12 questions that stand out as predictors of engagement. Of those top 12 questions, five test how valued employees feel, indicate their autonomy or reflect their relationships with those who lead.

Tools for your persuasion toolkit

In a sense, we are all in sales. We sell ideas such as, cooperating with us makes sense, the recommendations in our reports are convincing, or this year's staff party will be better than last year.

Some traditional ideas of selling check out well in research. Others don't. Unsurprisingly, matching the other person's perspective comes though strongly, but reciting features and advantages and benefits doesn't.

15. First: establish your credibility

Okay, so you've collected your facts and prepared PowerPoint slides. You're sure your evidence is overwhelming and you've quoted authorities to support your arguments. You are ready to present your proposal to your colleagues.

What could possibly go wrong?

Let's imagine that your audience doesn't know you well. Or, maybe that you do have a relationship with them, but the last time you spoke, it did not go well. You have a credibility problem.

Jay Conger is a leading authority on leadership. Years ago, he reported that the most persuasive senior business leaders he studied established their credibility first.

Conger found that those influencers had two kinds of credibility: expertise credibility and relationship credibility. Facts, figures and your own experience or quoting experts will help you achieve expertise credibility.

Relationship credibility might take more time, but you are not ready to persuade without it.

How do we build relationship credibility? Try genuine consultation.

Resist the temptation to suggest solutions as you ask questions. Consult your colleagues or clients on the problems and opportunities they mention as you ask about their current situation and how they see the future. Probe to discover the size or significance of the problems or opportunities, as they see them.

Next, explore some possible solutions.

Keep an open mind and ask how they feel about a range of possible solutions.

With your team you might say something like, 'I'm looking at various possibilities. One would be to sell the existing cars and lease replacements. Or we could pay the running costs for those who want to use their own cars. Maybe we could have some combination. Any thoughts - suggestions?'

When you present your proposal you could enhance your relationship credibility by recalling what people told you.

Consultation won't work?

Maybe you've already decided or your chief executive has given you the decision and it's your job to make things happen.

You can still consult to enhance your relationship credibility. Ask about *how* you might implement the decision - perhaps the timing, who should be involved, or which steps to take first.

16. Shoot down those objections – in advance

It sounds aggressive, but it's really an open, honourable way to persuade. It's also a great way to test your case before you present it.

Draw a large 'T' down the centre of a blank page with room for your recommendation or proposal at the top. On the left, list all your audience's likely objections. Make the objections so simple and direct they qualify for an exclamation mark - like, 'It'll cost too much!' or 'It's not worth the hassle of changing!' (You won't be showing them your notes.)

On the right, address each of those objections in turn. What can you say to show that the objection is not true or how you might reduce its impact?

If the objection is true, concede openly, but argue that it's still the best way to go. Maybe, 'It is the most expensive option, but it will save us money within a few months'.

Any important objections you can't answer? Maybe you need to re-think your proposal.

Focus on one objection at a time. Decide whether you will raise the objection before destroying it.

You don't need to raise every objection directly. You don't have to say to a potential client, 'You may be wondering whether you can trust us'. Just show through good listening, focusing on their needs and support from your existing clients that any doubts they may have are unjustified.

17. Use the Likeability principle

(My thanks to Emeritus Professor Robert Cialdini for this one.)

If they like you, you'll be more persuasive.

Being more likeable in writing

Write in a pleasant, informal way and your readers will be more likely to accept your recommendation or proposal.

Write like a bureaucrat, a robot, or a lofty academic and they'll probably just skim through and ignore your argument.

Being more likeable as a speaker

It's the same when you are on a platform. Speak in informal (but usually not casual) language.

Don't talk to the masses, but as if in a conversation with one person. Don't address the crowd:

'Some in the audience today might be worried that it will cost too much.'

'Please turn your cellphones off now.' (Plural)

Here's a more conversational way of saying the same things:

'You might be worried that it will cost too much'.

'Please turn your cellphone off now.' (Singular)

Connect with your audience

Lighten up. Your relationship with your audience is usually more valuable than your PowerPoint slides.

18. Put your audience in others' shoes

We don't really persuade people. They persuade themselves. But here's a way to influence their thinking.

Let's say you want to persuade your colleagues that they could improve their customer service.

You could invite everyone to consider the question, 'What it's like being a customer of ours?'

Most of us are so subjective that we would probably just think of something superficial: 'A customer of ours? Mmm generally okay', 'We'd be reasonably happy'.

Go deeper.

Ask them to imagine being a specific client who comes into the office for the first time. 'What would your first impressions be? Would you feel welcome? Could you think we looked disorganised or unprofessional? What would give you that impression?'

Ask them to imagine being someone who needs action today, say a colleague from Accounts who needs a copy of an invoice. Imagine she sends you an email, then calls, but you've taken a leave day to go fishing. What would happen next? Could anyone else provide the invoice? Could anyone else contact you? How would you feel if you were her?

Why it works

Wearing another's shoes is challenging, but it disrupts our natural tendency to overestimate our success and abilities. It shakes us out of complacency and our habit of seeing the world from our own perspective.

Keep probing and be specific. 'How would you feel, in this situation...?', 'What if...?'

'How would you react if someone sent you that email?', 'How about this one?'

19. Use the power of questions

The Huthwaite Research Corporation observed 10,000 salespeople in 23 countries and found that the top persuaders are far more interested in asking than telling. It's what they ask that's vital.

Here's the most important question line: 'You've mentioned that you have a problem with X - how big a problem is it?' and 'What effect is it having?' or 'What would happen if you did nothing about it?'

When you and the other person really know the size of the problem, you can work together to find a solution to match. Very few people do that - even for themselves when they make decisions.

Never suggest a solution until you know the size or the implications of a problem or opportunity.

If your customers or colleagues realise that it really is a big issue, they'll be happy to invest more money or time. If it's minor, look for a simple solution. Maybe it's not worth the dollars, time or hassle it would take to fix it. That's okay too. At least you know it's not worth preparing a proposal.

Genuine enquiry, looking for what's right for the other person, will help you build your relationship on trust and help you and your colleagues make a better decision.

20. Use the consistency principle

(It's another of Robert Cialdini's principles of influence.)

Once we humans have taken a small step, we are more willing to take more steps in the same direction.

Need to build a cooperative relationship with suppliers, clients, ratepayers or colleagues? Thank them for their cooperation, helpfulness or interest. Then stand by for more of it.

Need volunteers to get things done? Ask for those who'd be interested to sign up (preferably literally) in a meeting. Thank them at the next opportunity for making a commitment to getting things done.

Want your clients or colleagues to complete a survey? Ask them first if they would be interested. (Include a benefit.)

Fed up with 'no-shows'? When taking appointments, ask, 'If your plans change, will you call and let us know?' (That particular question has been well tested with great results.)

Need to exercise more? Begin with short, regular jogs near your home.

Want the kids home before you start worrying? Don't just tell them. Agree on a deadline and get them to make a commitment to it.

21. Use the power of the negative argument

Should we always stress the benefits to be more persuasive?

Ask most people and you'll get the same response. They'll favour positive arguments, stressing the benefits, over negative every time. Surely it's always best to be positive?

Not so fast.

Negative arguments can be highly effective.

It is good to point out the benefits, but negative arguments should be in your toolkit too. Just be a bit more careful with them.

Pointing out the risks of doing nothing, or doing the wrong thing may arrest your audience's attention.

Want to persuade your senior management team to buy new software? Try, 'the cost of the do-nothing option is likely to be \$X within a year.' Then provide your evidence. That's a good service.

The cost may not be dollars and you may not be able to provide hard evidence, but you could suggest problems ahead, say inefficiencies, higher staff turn-over, possible loss of market share, or compromised customer service. You might point out the opportunity cost of spending the budget on one thing and missing out on another.

Even if you can't provide hard evidence, provide what you can, upfront, before they ask for it. Make sure your solution overcomes at least the major risks.

Why emphasise the negative?

Decades of research shows that we fear a loss more than we value a gain. An example: Researchers at the University of California found that 300 per cent more homeowners agreed to improve their energy efficiency if they were told it would stop them losing 50 cents a day, rather than saving 50 cents.

Your audience or readers may not mention their fears of loss, but those fears will be running through their minds.

Why take care with negative arguments?

Lay on the negative consequences of not adopting your recommendation too thickly or without justification and your audience will see it as manipulation or pressure.

You need their trust. Easy does it.

22. Inoculate your audience

It works the same way as inoculation delivered in a syringe.

You give your audience a small dose of the opposition's argument to stimulate their defences.

Let's take it step-by-step.

1. Present your case.
2. Warn them of an attack - preferably with a weak example. Maybe: 'You'll hear some people say that the world must be flat because thousands of people disappear each year. They must be falling off the edge. You may hear more examples of people jumping to unjustified conclusions later tonight.'
3. Encourage them to reject the attack. It's especially effective if they come up with the ideas. You can ask them how they would reply.

23. Change behaviours with examples

Imagine this: You're a team leader and frustrated because the office kitchen is a mess, and not for the first time.

Do you say, 'Too many people are leaving the kitchen in a mess. Please tidy up before you leave ' or 'Thanks to those who tidy up after using the kitchen'?

The results of many studies suggest that highlighting those who are doing the right thing is likely to be more effective.

Media campaigns that highlighted littering or how people don't turn up for their hospital appointments, or fail to vote, have only made things worse.

Accentuate positive examples instead. 'Thanks to all those who've put their reports in on time.' 'Thanks to all those who have already completed the survey.'

Achieve your goals

There are plenty of myths around achieving goals. Let's rely on what researchers have discovered.

24. Make sure the goals are your goals

Most of our goals are influenced by other people. It's almost inevitable that the people who raised us, the people we admire or with whom we have shared experiences will have had some bearing on the goals we set for ourselves. It can sometimes be difficult to separate our goals from goals that others have, or might have for us.

Researchers talk about 'concordant goals'. Concordant goals are those that match our own long-term interests and values and which give us a sense of satisfaction as we make progress towards them.

25. Plan your goals

The acronym SMART provides a useful prompt when we are planning our goals. You'll find various interpretations. Here's one.

Specific (Choose a goal that has a definite outcome, not just 'improve my skills in...')

Measureable (Sometimes it will be a *tick in a box*, like 'climb Mount Fuji')

Achievable (A stretch, but not a fantasy)

Rewarding (It should be something *you* really want to achieve)

Time-based (Decide deadlines for each step to your goal, not just the ultimate goal)

Once you have your goal, break it down into mini-goals – your steps along the way. Spell out the actions you will need to take. Make sure your mini-goals are specific, measureable, achievable and time-based.

Write your goals and mini-goals and keep them accessible.

26. Take care with the size of your goals

Are ambitious goals a good idea?

Yes and no. Yes, if they come with mini-goals and an action-based plan to achieve them.

No, if the ambitious goal is really just a dream or fantasy.

We need to achieve a balance between wishful thinking and a genuine challenge.

A goal should, at least, stretch us. Ambitious goals can lead to radical thinking – like entirely different and creative ways of running a business, or building a car, or thinking about telephones.

27. Use this powerful idea to keep you on track, healthy and happy

Know your purpose.

It's not enough to know what we want to achieve or even how to go about it. Knowing *why* a goal is important helps us to carry on through the setbacks.

Why are you studying? Maybe so that you can get a higher qualification, so that you can be promoted and earn a higher income, so that you can give your family more security and your children more opportunities.

Why are you developing your team's customer service skills? Maybe so that your customers will enjoy dealing with them, so they will get more positive feedback and be more productive and enjoy coming to work.

Why are you going to the gym four times a week? Maybe, so that when you are fit you can enjoy family life more and be healthier and more productive at work. Maybe so that you can live longer.

Why does your organisation exist? Maybe, to provide a service or product that improves the lives of the families around the world.

Remind yourself of your purpose regularly - especially when you have a setback or sense your motivation flagging.

28. Don't miss out on eudaimonia

Ideally, your purpose should be something that would help you feel you are contributing to others. That feeling is Eudaimonia [yew di monia].

When Aristotle used eudaimonia he meant living a virtuous life. Psychologists want to avoid value judgements like 'virtuous', and for many of them, eudaimonia means 'thriving'. One of my long-ago psychology lecturers described it as 'death-bed satisfaction'. I've liked it ever since, partly because it suggests a long-term focus for our lives.

Eudaimonia is a key to happiness or, more accurately, subjective well-being.

However you want to define it, and whatever you want to call it, think of a purpose that benefits others first as a guiding light to your goals. Think of it too as a source of mental health over a lifetime, because it is.

29. Make a plan to handle the obstacles and setbacks

What might go wrong as you strive for your goal?

List the likely setbacks. Then, (Here's the vital bit.) develop a strategy to get yourself back on track.

Let's say you plan to go to the gym four times a week so that you'll be fit for the company marathon. Maybe you'll realise that going after work might stop you reading a story to the kids before they go to bed. Perhaps after a couple of weeks you've missed seeing them several times. No matter, you can change to your back-up plan. You'll go to the gym in the mornings.

If it's all going well, keep anticipating possible setbacks ahead and developing plans to get back on track.

If it's not going well? Forgive yourself any lapses. Attribute your setbacks to things you can change, like more effort or learning, not lack of natural talent.

30. Ease up on the optimism

Surely optimism is useful?

Yes, if it's a general sense that we'll get there in the end if we do the right things.

No, if forcing ourselves or our team to 'stay positive', or be a 'team player' (another guise for unquestioning positivity) stops us facing reality.

No, if it's just wishful thinking.

There will almost certainly be setbacks along the way. Researchers have found that the most optimistic goal-seekers don't expect setbacks and find them crushing. Those goal-seekers are the least likely to succeed.

31. Follow the advice of someone who's been to the top

Years ago, Sir Edmund Hillary, conqueror of Everest and all-round New Zealand hero, was explaining in a documentary that the key to climbing mountains was to focus on putting 'one foot in front of the other'.

I remember my reaction.

'Ed, that's really obvious.'

Now I realise that his advice was profound and we can use it whenever we are striving for a goal.

Here's why.

Sir Edmund's advice was to put the focus on action, not the goal.

He certainly had his goal of standing at the top of Everest in mind, but unlike the advice from pop psychology, he wasn't suggesting that being hungry for success, or vividly imagining the view and the elation, was the key to reaching the top.

Instead, his focus was on what we should do to get there - a steady, relentless rhythm of steps towards the goal.

We can do that.

32. Monitor your progress

More than 130 studies have confirmed the power of monitoring our progress. On a mountain, we'd take regular rest breaks, look down - and up to see how far we have to go. Looking down and up is just as important for goals at work and at home.

Each time you achieve a mini-goal take a break to note how far you've come and how far to the next mini-goal.

33. Avoid being obsessed with your goal

Let's say you are on Mount Everest and obsessed with reaching the summit. Now the weather closes in. Do you keep going and risk almost certain death, or abandon the attempt and try again next season? Obsession with a goal can impair our judgement and blind us to changing circumstances.

Being obsessed with a goal can also blind us to other vital issues. In our business lives, obsession with goals can lead to pressuring customers so we can reach sales targets, poor customer service or compromising our professional reputation and relationships at home.

34. Take care with your determination

Surely determination is essential to achieve a goal?

It depends.

Yes, if we mean motivated and focused.

No, if the determination is obsessional. We may miss out on alternative goals that may become more relevant (like the manufacturer determined to be the best typewriter company in the world as the market switched to personal computers).

No, if our determination undermines or destroys our relationships because we are so focused on striving for the goal.

We admire people with ambitious goals, determination and positivity. Before imitating them, let's think in more depth about those qualities.

35. Monitor your behaviours

Monitor your behaviours as you continue your steady, relentless rhythm of steps towards your goals. It's behaviours (plural) because there could be a combination that accounts for your progress. If they are working well for you, you might be able to make more of them.

Maybe you'll discover behaviours that are holding you back. How much time did you spend on irrelevant activities? Maybe you'll realise that you didn't spend enough time on focused study, practice or consulting others.

If your goal is to lose weight, monitor, not only what the scales reveal, but the number of times you resisted the biscuits and cheesecake.

If getting fit is your goal, monitor that with some objective measures, such as your heart rate. Also monitor your behaviours, say the number of times you went for a run, climbed stairs or walked more than 3,000 steps a day.

Manage your stress

Our bodies generally cope well with single stressful events. The greater danger is more likely to be unrelenting possibly low-level sources of stress. One American study showed that police officers were more stressed by the on-going paper work than the possibility of a shoot-out.

Take stress seriously. The effects of long-term stress include headaches, high blood pressure, anxiety and depression.

36. Turn medical advice into action

Health agencies still recommend conventional ways of managing stress including:

- Exercising more
- Getting more sleep
- Finding ways to relax
- Listening to music
- Talking to someone supportive (to share your thoughts and feelings, not to ruminate)
- Getting a pet

Choose the most appropriate strategies from the list and turn them into action. Make them a habit.

Develop your resilience

Resilience is about managing stress and recovering your motivation after setbacks.

Think of developing your resilience as a life-long project. It's like a muscle that becomes stronger as you exercise it.

Those who sail through life without ever having to face major challenges are amongst the least resilient.

37. Be wary of stress tests

Which would stress you more, changing jobs, or moving house?

Would most people be more stressed by a son or daughter leaving home, or retirement?

Are you thinking, 'It depends'?

It does.

Those events are listed in the *life events scale* developed by two psychiatrists, Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe, in the late 1960s.

The Holmes and Rahe scale is a stress test and easy to access on the internet.

According to the scale, *death of a spouse in the last year* rates 100, retirement rates 45 and taking a holiday rates 12. A score of more than 300 suggests there's an 80 per cent chance we will develop a stress-related illness.

Seem plausible? If you want to predict how people generally react when going through life-events, fair enough.

Even so, you'd have to ask what the particular event means to them.

Is it a relief to change to a new job, despite the stress of learning a new one? Are the parents pleased to see their sons and daughters moving out, or grieving because moving out means moving to Saudi Arabia? Does your retiree see retirement as a new freedom, or the end of feeling useful?

Here's the main problem for us

We could start to believe that events dictate our health. They don't. It's our reaction that does.

A high score on stress scales doesn't make a stress-related disease inevitable. Resilient people take action instead of dwelling on the event. They develop plans. They draw on their relationships for support. They see setbacks as a challenge.

38. Forget 'My glass is always half-full'

The glass analogy is not helpful. A half-full glass might even threaten your life.

Talk about optimism and most people will think of the glass analogy. But what does having a half-full glass really mean? Is it really optimism - or denial?

For some, it means never facing reality. They won't go to their doctor to check out a lump, because 'everything will be okay'. Other avoiders believe that going for a health check would suggest they are not optimistic (and they know that successful people are always optimistic).

One irrational optimist once told me he doesn't take out insurance because that would suggest he was expecting to claim, 'and that's a really pessimistic way to look at life'.

For rational optimists, having a glass half-full suggests they believe that, generally speaking, life will work out okay. That general sense of optimism is healthy.

Rational optimists do focus on the positive, but it doesn't stop them facing reality. It doesn't stop them being pessimistic from time-to-time.

39. Consider reframing

Is life looking grim at the moment? Reframing is a technique counsellors encourage. It's like looking at your situation as if you were a sceptical friend. It may help you find a healthy place between catastrophizing and denial.

Ask yourself for the evidence that the worst may happen. Is there another way of interpreting the evidence? How might the situation change if you were to take action? Could you see the cause of your worries as a challenge, rather than impending doom?

Reframing and action

If there's a possibility that you may lose your job, you may be able to find out how strong that possibility is. If the evidence suggests your job will go, you could decide that it's a chance to show how well you cope with change. You could decide that it's an opportunity for an exciting new phase in your life.

Now for the action. You could come up with a plan such as updating your CV, networking and contacting the employment agencies.

Resist the temptation to allow your mind to send you into a downward spiral of catastrophising such as: 'Other firms will be shedding jobs too, so I won't get another. We won't be able to pay the mortgage and the bank will force us to sell the house, then we'll lose all our savings and end up on the street.'

Time to reframe. Then make a plan and turn it into action.

40. Help the 'everyday magic' do its job

Stressful situations can help you thrive. It's in the way you think about the event.

Researchers at the University of Michigan and others have confirmed the 'everyday magic' of positive emotions. They mean that resilience in humans is natural for everyday setbacks.

We can play a part in our recovery, even if it doesn't seem natural at first.

Resilience is not about denying that there's anything wrong, but focusing on healthy ways of interpreting a situation we find stressful.

The Michigan researchers studied the way students reacted to the attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001 and found that amongst those who were not overwhelmed were some who thrived and became even more resilient.

Those students who thrived focused on positive thoughts and emotions like how grateful they were to be alive and their love for their families.

Even when there's no crisis to practise on, actively looking for what's good about life seems to provide us with a protective shield to use when something challenging does come along.

41. Make healthy comparisons

I was once late to catch a flight from Paris to London, with on-going connections to the other side of the world. A missed flight would have been very disruptive. The flight from Paris had already closed, but there was a delay, so the counter staff relented. I dashed through the various checks, along the travelator, panting, and came to a halt at the end of a long queue of passengers.

After a few minutes I heard an American businessman complain about having to wait. 'Ah well,' grinned his companion, looking totally relaxed, 'It sure beats being an ant in a sand hill.' It sure beats missing your flight too. It's all a matter of perspective.

That kind of positive thinking is a key to resilience and a tool we can sharpen.

We can focus on making healthy comparisons to come up with a more healthy ways of looking at distressing events.

If you are distressed because your team didn't win an important tender, try comparing your setback with those who have no work coming in. If you own the business and it's worrying you, try comparing yourself with someone who is bankrupt.

42. Use the Three Cs of Resilience

We are drawing on the work of Salvatore Maddi, Suzanne Kobasa and colleagues. They have observed people going through challenging times, even humanitarian disasters. The

Three Cs of Resilience provide a strategy.

Control

Take control of what you can control. Resilient teams and families develop a plan. In a crisis, yours might only be a plan for the day, but make it and put it into action.

Develop a medium-term recovery plan. Be specific, even if you have to update the plan and the target dates later. Do something immediately to get your recovery plan underway.

Commitment

Resilient people stay committed to the plan. They may change it as they go along, but they are always putting their plan into action.

They're committed to their relationships too. They happily call on others for support and offer help to those who need it. Staying committed to your relationships is vital. Give friends and family, even people you've never met, a gift - the opportunity to help.

Challenge

It's easy to say, but the hardest to do. See recovery as a challenge. See yourself as a survivor, not a victim. Work on that idea. Develop a *swan act* - serene on the surface, even if you are paddling madly underneath. In an emergency who cares? We can do more for ourselves by faking calm than venting our worries.

43. Don't let a fixed mindset hold you back

Do you believe that the best leaders are born, not made? What about musicians, artists, mathematicians?

Do you believe that there are only talented people and people with no potential to be stars? That's a fixed mindset.

If we think of ability as fixed, we discourage learning, practice and resilience. Could you be doing the same to yourself?

A fixed mindset is an obstacle to resilience, learning and thriving

Believing we are not naturally suited to a particular skill becomes a permanent handicap to our performance and our resilience. We start to believe there's not much point in pushing ourselves to learn or perform better.

The person who's convinced that achievers are born and that he is one of them can struggle with failure too. He has to prove he has the gift, so he has to do it naturally - without much practice. He's also likely to believe that anything less than a perfect performance is a failure, so he gets to experience failure often. For a fixed mindsetter, a setback can be devastating – a threat to his identity as a talented person.

44. Choose a growth mindset

The research shows that people with a growth mindset are significantly more resilient.

A growth mindsetter doesn't see talent or intelligence as fixed. Instead, life is a journey of learning with each setback an opportunity to learn more.

Many people do appear to have a natural ability, but for most of us hard work and resilience will get us there.

We need to be constantly in a growth mindset. We need to see setbacks as setbacks not failures – not permanent and not a statement about our natural talents, or lack of them.

We need to focus, not on a perfect performance, but exceeding our previous personal best.

Want to know more about fixed and growth mindsets? The leader in the research is Professor Carol Dweck of Stanford University. I recommend her excellent book *Mindset: the new psychology of success* or her peer-reviewed studies, if you have access to them.

45. Celebrate success the right way

Celebrate how far you've come. Do it regularly, but do it in a special way.

Don't worry that it's going to make you complacent. If you're focused on a goal, it won't be a problem. It's good for your confidence and will help to make you resilient when you come up against the next obstacle.

Here's the special way of celebrating: Attribute your success so far to your ability or potential.

The research shows us that the top sports performers, business people, students and people in successful relationships think that way.

You should be thinking like this:

'I'm making good progress with my plan and it shows that I have the ability to rebuild my business/be an effective leader/be a top salesperson. It shows that I'm the kind of person who succeeds when the going gets tough.'

Okay, it would seem strange if you said it out loud and the world wouldn't want to hear it anyway. You can be modest to others. It's what you tell yourself that counts.

Celebrating success and positive affirmations are different.

Celebrating something you have achieved is not the same as getting up in the morning and reciting, 'I'm getting better and better every day in every way.'

Those positive affirmations are not based on anything you did. They might possibly raise your self-esteem for a few minutes, but that would be all. If you are feeling depressed positive affirmations will probably make you feel worse.

46. Accept the 'down days'

A friend was going through a terrible time. Serious career, financial and family health issues came together all at once.

She sent me an email that revealed she knew exactly what to do, but on that day none of it seemed relevant and she was feeling very low. Now, she feels she has her resilience back - and new insights.

This is how she put it:

'It's okay to feel overwhelmed, sad, unhappy for a few days, as long as it doesn't define your life, long-term.'

The most resilient people don't do the most helpful things all the time. Researchers can tell us what the most resilient people do. They're not suggesting that resilient people always do those healthy things, or that they don't have setbacks - they do. Sometimes we feel overwhelmed by worry or sadness or grief. Resilience means getting ourselves back on track, even if it takes a few days.

47. Be kind to yourself

Let's say your presentation left your audience bored, the boss criticises your work or you say something really embarrassing.

Who is in your ear? Is it a supportive friend reassuring you, or a contemptuous critic shouting, 'How could you be so stupid?'

'Be kind to yourself' is a cliché most people ignore. Perhaps they fear that they will become self-indulgent, too tolerant of mistakes or lazy. The research shows that's wrong.

Who would motivate you more long-term: a friend offering acceptance and encouragement, or a sergeant major bawling you out for every lapse?

Self-compassion and motivation

How much more motivated would you be if the voice of your compassionate friend were to suggest some healthy thinking? Maybe:

'Just ignore the embarrassment and move on.'

'Your mistakes don't define you.'

Could your friend add some simple strategies? Perhaps:

'Try again tomorrow'

'How about taking a night class or an on-line course to catch up?'

We don't need criticism to stay motivated - especially constant undermining self-criticism. Self-compassion checks out much better. Many studies link it with more motivation, better relationships, less stress and less depression.

Develop your leadership skills

Leadership skills will help you be more effective at work, whether you are the chief executive, the team leader, or aspire to be either. You can be an informal leader – no title, but someone others follow.

International surveys consistently show that fewer than half of employees are engaged at work. That finding represents a huge loss in productivity and mental health – and a great opportunity for effective leadership.

48. Make the three universal motivators your focus

We know what organisations *think* motivates adults. But the research says money isn't an effective motivator for most people.

By the 1960s researchers were showing that once you are paying employees enough, any additional dollars won't add much motivation. Money is a particularly ineffective motivator for people whose jobs involve complex analytical, social or creative skills.

But the news is good. Well-respected research reveals three motivators that cost nothing, are simple to use and provide us with a valuable checklist to keep the people we lead engaged.

I have found it helpful to have them at the forefront of my mind and to be constantly looking for appropriate ways to use them.

1. Relatedness

The need to feel that we belong. Feeling that we have regular contact with people who care about us.

2. Autonomy

The need to be independent. Feeling that we have choices and control over our own actions. Workers with autonomy report more satisfaction with their jobs, fewer sick days and better physical and mental health.

3. Competence

The need to be effective. Feeling that we are capable.

Self-Determination Theory

Our three universal motivators are from Richard Ryan and Ed Deci's *Self-Determination Theory*. Their three motivational needs are well-supported by many studies.

Ryan and Deci (University of Rochester) state that the three motivators motivate everyone, regardless of culture. The effects are interrelated. Use one motivator and you'll probably be activating at least another. Ryan and Deci's latest report confirms that autonomy is the lead motivator.

49. Put the three universal motivators into action

The need for relatedness

Make working and learning social events. Consider asking two or more people to share a project. Find ways to help your team enjoy working together. Provide opportunities to socialise in breaks. Do you need a social club?

If you are providing individual coaching or mentoring, your relationship is a useful part of the motivation. Clearly, making a special effort to be supportive will be more effective than treating each encounter like an examination or a briefing.

Be approachable and available.

The need for autonomy

Hire people you trust and trust them.

Avoid any hint of micro-management - telling them how to do the work, making decisions for them, constantly checking on their commitment and progress.

Allow them to make decisions on behalf of clients or customers (You might need to provide training and a limited budget.)

Make them responsible for a clearly-defined role with a sense of mission. Our staff have 'themes' written into their employment agreements. One is 'Manager of Efficiency' another 'the Voice of our Company'. A car sales firm I know has made its receptionist, 'Manager of First Impressions'.

The need to feel competent

Find ways to develop their skills and recognise their achievements. Consult them genuinely and regularly.

Younger people expect to be developing their skills and not having the opportunity to learn is a major cause of staff turnover.

Help them develop a learning plan and mentor them through it. Give them challenging assignments and recognise their progress and achievements.

Isn't it convenient that there are only three universal motivators to remember and that they cost little or nothing to put into action?

50. Avoid using self-esteem as a motivator

Ryan and Deci don't think much of self-esteem as a motivator - and they are not alone.

Several researchers strongly oppose focusing on self-esteem where it involves praising people for who they are rather than what they have done. Praising or recognising talent or intelligence is counterproductive.

Praising employees for their effort, determination and strategies encourages a growth mindset which makes them more resilient when they encounter setbacks.

51. Keep the team and your accountants happy

Don't think of happiness as merely some touchy-feely, tree-huggy topic. Happy staff means more money earned and saved. It's as simple as that.

Want some figures?

The Gallup organisation has shown that retail staff who score higher on life-satisfaction tests generate about 200USD more income per square metre of floor space on average. They are

also more resilient, so when things get difficult, they are problem-solvers, not victims. Customers rate them higher too.

Then there's the productivity issue. Happy staff are more likely to be engaged. They achieve more and come to work more often - an average of 15 days more each year.

There's a strong genetic element to happiness, but most people can learn ways of improving their happiness quotient.

So what do I do to keep them happy?

It's not your job as a leader to ensure that they never have a bad day.

Happiness can be trivial - a sense of fun, a good joke. They should be part of our lives, but let's take a wider view of happiness and focus on life-satisfaction.

Help them feel good about coming to work by encouraging them to make decisions and work closely with others. Develop their competence with training, mentoring and achieving reasonable targets. That combination is at the heart of life satisfaction and a powerful motivator.

52. Develop a mission for you and the team

The evidence is clear: Focusing on a mission bigger than ourselves makes us, not only more motivated, but happier and healthier.

Even those whose work is not particularly challenging can develop a mission. It's all in the way we think about our role.

Encourage your team to think answer the 'Why?' question. 'Why do we do this?', 'Who are we helping when we do it?'

Hotel staff who clean the rooms can see themselves as the people who vacuum the floors and make the beds. That's just a job. A mission would be to prepare the rooms so that guests feel welcome and pleased they're staying with us.

Your finance team could think they just write reports with figures in them. A mission is to ensure that the senior management team gets accurate and useful information to monitor the business and make sound decisions.

A parking warden might believe her job is to catch people overstaying their meter and issue tickets. A mission would be to ensure that parking spaces are shared, so that everyone gets a fair turn.

The link with your organisation's mission

If you are a leader, be explicit about how your organisation benefits others.

Gallup included that issue in its 12 questions that best indicated whether employees were engaged in their work. To make the list, appreciating how their work contributed to others had to be an outstanding characteristic of engagement.

53. Give feedback that really works

There's more to giving effective feedback than most people think.

Research over the last two decades has shown the value of focusing on *effort* rather than ability, talent or intelligence. It might sound like a minor distinction, but the consequences are serious.

Encourage a growth mindset

When we praise effort, determination and resilience (things that people can *do*) we encourage a healthy growth mindset.

People with growth mindsets believe life is a series of opportunities to learn. They see setbacks as temporary and inevitable. They are more motivated, resilient and they achieve more.

Discourage fixed mindsets

If we praise a team member for being able, intelligent or talented (things that people already *have* or *are*) we encourage them to adopt a fixed mindset. People with a fixed mindset believe that we either have an ability or intelligence or we don't. They think those qualities are permanent or *fixed*. They want to believe that they are in the talented, intelligent minority.

When leaders refer to role models as able, intelligent or talented, they encourage a fixed mindset.

Be specific in your praise

"Thanks for staying behind to finish the proposal" or "I thought you handled that call very firmly, but diplomatically," is much more reinforcing than, "Hey, you're doing a great job". In your team meetings, name those who've put in a special effort and be specific about what they *did*.

Make wall charts of your team's progress.

Schedule celebrations for the milestones.

54. Be a gossip

Who says gossip has to be unpleasant?

I've been gossiping for years and see it as an important part of my leadership role.

Think of gossip as a valuable tool for building a healthy culture in your team. It's a way of communicating your values - what you admire and think worthy of mentioning.

So someone in the team has been putting in extra effort lately and another earned an appreciative note from a customer? Maybe someone else succeeded with a project despite many setbacks. They sound like gossip-worthy topics. Work them into a conversation with others in the team. Maybe send an email to your boss, copying in the employee.

Rules for leaders who gossip

1. Make it positive - no exceptions

Imagine that the person you are talking about will hear what you are saying, because she will.

2. Ensure that the gossip is always consistent with team values

Look for examples of dedication, success or help for others, not creative ways to get around head office rules.

3. Gossip about effort, not talents

It's a vital distinction. If you praise fixed traits such as talents or intelligence, you will do harm.

Using your gossip to recognise team members' hard work, determination or resilience creates a healthy growth mindset throughout the team. Hard work, determination and resilience are behaviours, so within everyone's control.

4. Respect privacy

As a leader you hear private stuff. You might mention your concern for someone who is sick, but never what the sickness is, unless the team member has been talking openly about it.

5. Make it low-key

Just natural conversation, not gushy.

Why gossip when you could just go to the achiever and say well done?

Good point. Treat gossip as an extra and informal way of communicating.

If it's big, always go to the team member first. If it's really big, announce it to the whole team as well.

55. Think carefully about your different generations

Is it worth worrying about the differences between generations?

Yes, because there are some patterns and we need to take them into account as leaders. To know them is to begin to retain them and their skills.

Let's get the bad news out of the way first.

Generally speaking, millennials are more narcissistic than Gen X or Baby Boomers at the same age

The researchers with the most compelling evidence compared responses to the same questionnaire from three generations. Their data was from 1.4 million people and, even more important, the participants all answered the questions when they were in their late teens. We can now answer that question, 'Are millennials really just the same as we were at their age?'

The researchers found significant differences between generations.

Millennials were much more narcissistic than Gen X or Baby Boomers were when they were the same age. The researchers report an epidemic of narcissism - not just narcissistic traits, but in the serious Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

The young people's self-focus gave them a much stronger sense of entitlement than the two previous generations. (Entitlement as in: 'What really matters is what your organisation can do for me.')

Millennials were much more motivated by extrinsic rewards - so money, not the work itself.

The students were all American, but researchers are seeing similar patterns emerging in other countries.

A more loveable view of millennials

A survey by the consulting firm Deloitte implies a more loveable, but still different millennial generation. The Deloitte survey tapped the thoughts of 7,800 graduates in 26 countries and was published in January 2014.

Deloitte reports that young graduates wanted to work for organisations that were innovative and made a positive contribution to society.

They wanted more opportunities to develop their skills.

So what's the consensus?

If you are looking for good vs bad, there isn't a consensus. If you are looking for differences between generations, you are probably safe to add up the ones I've listed.

Don't treat the differences as incompatible. Self-centred people can hold altruistic views about contributing to society, though the more narcissistic they are, the less likely it is that they will act on them.

Let's be careful about millennials

It's easy to see faults in younger generations, but what happened after a second major earthquake in my city of Christchurch, New Zealand in 2011, provides a note of caution.

When the city was in its darkest hour, 13,000 millennial students organised themselves for a second time into their Student Army. They shovelled silt to clear roads and gardens. (It's not an easy or pleasant job) They delivered meals to people who needed them. Some flew in

from other cities at their own expense. There's nothing self-focused or narcissistic about that.

The safest advice: Keep an open mind on individuals, but accept that, overall, the generations are significantly different. Treat the differences between individuals as more useful than generalising about millions of people.

56. Choosing staff to work remotely? Think carefully

So you want some of your team members to work from home, from their cars or a remote office?

Ask yourself these questions about your candidates...

- Do they need constant propping up to stay motivated?
- Are they crushed by setbacks?
- Do they remind you of a ship bobbing around in the sea, or the captain on the deck determined to steer the ship through a storm?
- Do they talk about people as winners or losers? (A sign of a fixed mindset.)

If you think the best answer to any of those questions is yes, they may not have the resilience they would need to work remotely.

Competing demands may make working remotely too stressful

You'll need to ask your candidates:

- Do they have a space at home where they can work without constant interruption or distractions?
- Do they think their friends and family will accept that they are working and not available for social visits during the working day?

Be a leader in customer service

Customer service is an opportunity to shine. Improving your team's service to your internal and external customers is an opportunity to show leadership. Everyone wins, your customers, but also your team with better relationships with their customers and more satisfying work.

57. Consult to engage your team

Gather everyone together and resist the temptation to tell them how to improve their service to customers. They know what good customer service is. They are customers of their doctor, hairdresser and internet providers' call centres.

If you consult, rather than tell, then turn that consultation into action, even the office grump will want to take part.

Ask them to:

List both their external and internal customers

Answer the question, 'What's it like being a customer of ours?' Take each customer group in turn.

List 'what we do well and don't do well'

Decide 'what we need to do that we are not doing now'.

Decide 'what we are doing well, but could do more'.

58. Develop a customer service charter

Lead your team as they compile a charter listing the standards of customer service they set for themselves. Once again, it's all about them. If they decide the standards, it's far more likely they will *own* them.

Begin with the words, 'We commit ourselves to...'

Avoid bland statements that don't really commit the team. State the idea and follow it with 'which means...' or 'for example'. You can't cover every possibility, but those words will help you make your charter more meaningful.

Say your team decide that they want to commit to 'prompt, efficient service'. What does prompt mean? What is acceptable efficiency?

Your charter might begin this way.

We commit ourselves to...

1. Prompt, efficient, professional service

Which means:

- answering the telephone within five rings
- not taking personal calls where customers can hear
- checking our voicemail messages at least twice a day
- returning all calls and emails before the end of the day.

Where the ideal service is beyond our control we will manage our customers' expectations to ensure that they do not feel let down.'

59. Develop customer service projects

It's vital to ensure that the team sees some real changes from the consultation and the charter. Don't wait for those changes to happen. Instead, organise some customer service projects.

Keep your projects small because your team have their regular work to do. Help them choose projects that will give quick results and that customers will appreciate.

60. Handle complaints effectively

First, let's acknowledge what a complaint really is: a bargain in market research.

Praise encourages us to keep doing what we're doing. Complaints challenge us. They tell us about our market and our systems, and offer us the encouragement to change.

Even better: if we can resolve a complaint effectively, we have an opportunity to create an advocate.

So how do we resolve complaints effectively?

Acknowledge the feelings and whenever possible, resolve the complaint in a way that exceeds the customer's expectations. Those principles apply whether you are talking to an unhappy customer, replying to her email or replying to a complaint through the media.

Most dissatisfied customers, even angry ones, just want you to know that you've upset them. They want to know that you've heard their feelings, that you are sorry and that you are going to put things right. So two of their three needs are about feelings, not facts or promises.

If focusing on feelings seems too soft for you, imagine this...

You order a special dinner set and it arrives two days after your planned dinner party and several of the plates are broken. You fire off an email to the manager of the store. How satisfied would you be if his reply simply acknowledges that you complained and announces that replacement plates will be dispatched from the store within the next five working days?

What if the manager were to write something like this?

'We realise that it has been very frustrating for you and I'm sorry that we let you down on that occasion. We'll replace those broken plates by Tuesday and I'll be talking to our staff and the freight company to make sure that we improve our service in future.'

Of course, the plates should be delivered with a card and a voucher.

You'll have your own words to convey the same ideas. It's the process that's important.

Acknowledge the feelings with feeling words such as frustrating, disappointing, upsetting, annoying or irritating. Acknowledging feelings is not the same as admitting blame. It's a way of saying 'I've heard you'. It's essential whenever the feelings are clear, but don't overdo it ('I can see that this has been a tragedy' etc.).

Apologise. A full and specific (though not demeaning) apology.

Tell them how you will resolve the complaint. Be generous.

Enhance your professional reputation

Some people object to the idea of a personal brand, but whatever you want to call it, you have one. It's your reputation based on the way you contribute and interact with others.

61. Maintain 'the professional you'

So you've just been abused by a colleague, boss, client or member of the public? It's only human to want to respond in kind: make your own accusations, shout back, or send out a group email 'correction' with a few barbs of your own.

There's a better way. It will enhance your reputation and help to get you back on track. Outflank your accuser with your professionalism.

An understated, calm response will allow you to capture what one of our politicians likes to call 'the moral high ground'. More important, in a few weeks, most people will have forgotten the details, but remembered your demeanour. Reply in anger and they'll remember two kids with toys and cots.

Remember to give yourself the credit for rising above criticism or abuse. You're the adult in the conflict.

An example of professionalism in a television interview

I remember, many years ago, seeing a television interview with a business leader. A newspaper had claimed that the business leader had made some highly inflammatory comments about his country. When the television interviewer raised the newspaper article, the businessman just smiled and said, 'Mmm. That was a story that lost nothing in the telling'. Enough said. Low-key, relaxed. The interviewer moved on to other things.

Develop your writing skills

62. Writing: Don't think your topic is too serious for plain language

It's a common objection.

'This modern style of writing is all very well, but...I work in enforcement/my stuff might go to court/I want to show I'm being professional.'

Here's the undiplomatic bit

'My job is too serious for modern writing', is just an excuse to avoid change. There, someone had to say it.

Add to that excuse, 'I don't believe in *dumbing down* my writing'. Dumbing down is taking out essential information - maybe even turning an enforcement notice or a report into a story for pre-schoolers. It won't happen. Saying it will is just another way of avoiding change.

Modern writing is like plain speaking. It's a skill to admire.

Plain language is the bedrock of modern professional writing. See the way your communications team writes. Their language will be more natural and more engaging than the old officialese, legalese and commercialese that some people still insist is the professional way to write. (The same goes for the lofty academic style, full of passive and unnecessarily complex language that ensures that only the dedicated few will read it.)

Plain language is also a way to build cooperation, rather than rely on compliance. And cooperation is much more efficient.

63. Add humans to your writing

Is it just me, or do these sentences seem weird to you?

'Is there anything else that needs covering?'

'The development plan received 20 objections.'

Wouldn't it be more natural to write them this way?

'Is there anything else we need to cover?'

'We received 20 objections to the development plan.'

Adding humans (in those examples, *we*) allows us to avoid clunky, unnatural sentences.

Impersonal writing can also be nonsensical. Without humans, the first sentence suggests that topics can have needs. The second sentence is about a development plan so intelligent it can receive objections.

I and we are only two ways of adding humans to our writing. If they're inappropriate for you, or you want some variety, try other human words: you, staff, the managers, drivers, residents, members, shareholders, the senior management team, councillors, stakeholders, subscribers, players or customers.

64. Write paragraphs the easy way

State and expand.

It's not only the easy way to write, but a great service to your readers.

State your point in your first sentence, then tell your readers more about it. If you are tempted to write anything that doesn't support your first sentence, consider whether you really need to include it. If it's worth writing, but a new point, start another paragraph.

Why is it the easy way to write?

Because state and expand makes it easier to organise your thoughts. Start with a list of your key points and turn them into your first sentences. Keep asking yourself: Is this a key point, or a supporting idea?

Why is it a great service to your readers?

They'll know where you are going with each paragraph. If they are refreshing their memory by reading your report again, your first sentences will tell them most of what they need to know.

Think of your first sentences as headlines for your paragraphs. The rest of the text gives them detail, evidence or examples.

Think of state and expand as your default setting. Make sure there's a good reason to change. In a short email or letter you may have one-sentence paragraphs so state and expand won't work for you, but why would you write reports and longer letters any other way?

65. Ignore the misleading advice

You'll hear plenty of misleading advice about writing. Some of it is based on myths, some on personal taste. Some of the advice makes sense to some degree.

'But' provides a useful example of advice that many people take too far.

They say 'but' is negative and anything before the but is just filler.

They do have a point if the boss sits an employee down and says, 'I really like the way you turn up to work on time and tidy your desk at the end of the day, but your analytical and communication skills are far below what we need in this organisation.' The filler before the but just softens the employee up for the king hit.

Here's why *but* is such a useful word

You can use it to create a contrast where both parts of the sentence contribute value. You could write, 'You might be expecting it to be expensive, but it's not' or 'We expected him to finish the project late, but he delivered it a week early.'

Orators have used contrasts since at least the time of the Romans. Here's President John F Kennedy beginning his inaugural speech:

'We observe today, not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom'.

President Barack Obama speaking of meeting the challenges ahead:

'They will not be met easily, or in a short span of time. But know this America: - they will be met'. (Followed by a burst of applause – as usual with contrasts.)

Wouldn't you want *but* in your tool kit?

Other myths?

'Never start a sentence with and or but.' Why not? Maybe it was reasonable advice when you were 10, so that you didn't start every second sentence that way. But now you are older, use them for emphasis – occasionally.

'Don't split infinitives.' The world's most famous split infinitive is the opening to Star Trek, '*To boldly go* where no man has gone before'. The adverb *boldly* splits the infinitive form of the verb *to go*.) Apparently, it's verboten because you can't split an infinitive in Latin. How logical is that? If it sounds right, go for it.

Work on your new habits

Many of the ideas in this book will have challenged ideas and habits you have built over a lifetime. Changing to new ways of thinking and behaving can be difficult. It's also rewarding, but let's be realistic about the work ahead.

66. Accept that new habits take time

How long does it take to form a new habit?

66 days. But only if you're an average habit-changer.

Phillippa Lally and colleagues from University College London found that the range for establishing new habits was 18 to 254 days. The habits included going for a 15 minute run before dinner and doing 50 sit-ups after morning coffee.

How useful is it to know about how long it takes other people to establish a new habit?

Put it this way: If we are struggling, we're not alone and the figures tell us to be realistic. Starting new habits and changing old ones takes constant repetition and accepting setbacks as part of the journey. The researchers' advice: Aim to repeat the new habit every day, but don't worry if you miss a day or two. 'Be prepared for the long haul.'

How will you know when you've established your new habit? You'll say things like, 'I do it without thinking' and 'It's hard not to do it'.

Notice that the new habits in the study involved a context or cue for the new behaviour '...before dinner' and '...after morning coffee'.

67. Focus on what works

Only about 10 per cent of people achieve the goals they set for themselves. Twenty five per cent of people who make New Year resolutions give up after the first week.

We can do better with some techniques that work.

Here's what does.

Make a plan, write it down and break it into manageable steps – let's call them your mini-goals.

Imagine what might prevent you making progress to your goal, then your mini-goals. Now develop plans to handle those hurdles or setbacks.

Tell your friends, family and colleagues. Sure, it'll be embarrassing if you don't achieve your goal, but that's a risk people who get there are prepared to take.

As you tick off each step towards your goal, remind yourself why the goal is important to you.

Researchers have also discovered what doesn't work.

Dwelling on what will happen if we don't get there doesn't work. Nor does relying on willpower or creating fantasies about what it will be like when we have the promotion, the degree or the yacht.

68. Cure procrastination

There's a simple cure if you are inclined to procrastinate. (I'm indebted to Professor Robert Cialdini for this one. He mentions it in his latest book *Pre-suasion*.)

Here we go.

Make a start, even a small first step. (Obvious, but important)

Here's the less obvious bit.

Leave the task part way through.

Writing a report? Write for a few minutes, then leave a sentence half-finished.

Most of us can't stand something incomplete. That's why mysteries and even questions are so motivating.

Start small. Nothing ambitious, but a start. Need to weed the garden? Get out the wheelbarrow and put a couple of weeds in it. Leave it there, prominent, in the way.

Why make just a small start?

Knowing that the first step will only take a few minutes helps to erode that feeling that the task is too much of a burden to do right away. If you are swept away by a burst of enthusiasm once you've started, go with the flow.

'But I don't care about incomplete tasks.'

Perhaps you have a half-built kitchen at home, or the monthly report and newsletter you started a week ago are still in draft form and they are not keeping you awake either.

The solution? Just willpower. Set aside the time and make it happen - all of it.

69. Link a new habit with an old habit or inevitable event

Willpower makes big demands on your brain's energy, so let's make it easy.

Let's take the will I/won't I decisions away, or at least make them less necessary.

Link the habit you want with an old one, or some inevitable event. Before long, you'll be on autopilot, not going through the Will I/Won't I? agony, or forgetting.

Want to start your days earlier? Put the alarm clock or your cellphone on the other side of the room.

Need to jog each morning? Lay out your running clothes at night. Make them unmissable - preferably in the way. Decide that you haven't earned a shower or a coffee until you've done the run.

Want to plan your time more effectively? Make opening your calendar the first and last thing you do each day.

Putting off calling clients? Link it with returning from lunch.

Want to keep reminding yourself of your mini-goals? Keep your list on your desktop and open it every time you pause between tasks.

70. Forgive the lapses

It might seem a bit soft, but researchers have shown that forgiving our own lapses is more likely to see us back on track to our goals than guilt or self-blame.

It's far more effective to see setbacks as normal and just re-boot.

Forgive yourself and refocus with renewed determination. Very few smokers give up without several attempts. Very few people keep to New Year resolutions without multiple lapses.

It's building habits over time that matters. We get there in the end.