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Intention

The Surprising Psychology
of High Performers



WILEY

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To our families, friends, and colleagues. Thank you.

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PART I

Fundamentals

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Why Intention?

We're stuck. Stuck to the couch. Stuck scrolling. Stuck at work. Stuck in worn-out paths of habitual action. Stuck in patterns and echo chambers of thought. Stuck in carefully curated lives where we've traded our agency for endless comforts that wrap us in existential ennui.

As our eyes fixate on a constant parade of images meant to engage us, we notice something in the periphery. We see folks who are just like us, except they seem to be deeply happy and fulfilled. They go through life with ease and grace, overcoming obstacles and making amazing things happen for themselves.

Peering closer, we see that they aren't gods or superhumans. They're just people who have chosen to not be stuck and decided to become the “main characters” in their own lives. Their success (as they define it!) is not a birthright bestowed upon a lucky few, but the result of lives lived with intention.

Take a moment right now to imagine a different version of yourself. A superhero in your daily life. Your superpower? Infinite self-control. Your circumstances haven't changed one bit, but you suddenly have the power to deeply engage with everything you do and unstick yourself. Visualize this and think about your life. What would you do differently in your day-to-day life (e.g., how would your morning routine change)? What would your life look and feel like? How would this new way of being affect your feelings about yourself? What about the value you bring to your family, friends, and colleagues?

This exercise is more than a fantasy—it's a challenge. One that we spend the rest of this book preparing you to face.

Borrowing from a wide variety of related disciplines—philosophy, psychology, religion, neuroscience, and organizational management to name a few—we focus on the five key ingredients of intention: willpower, curiosity, integrity, attention, and habits. For each ingredient, we provide an overview of the current scientific understanding of why they are important and how they work. More importantly, we provide information that's actionable, and present you with knowledge and methods that you can actually apply to your working and personal life to gain a higher sense of agency, authenticity, and engagement in everything you do. Intention is an expression of our identity, and to live without it is to lose ourselves. Our aim is to help you reconnect with that power in you.

No, These Traits Are Not Innate and Immutable

Some combination of willpower, curiosity, integrity, attention, and habits can be found in every high performer and recent research shows that they're strong predictors of success. But there's a second reason why we focus on these, which speaks more broadly to how we can claim our agency and lead fuller lives: The other thing these five ingredients have in common is that many of us were taught (and still believe—see the following survey data) that they're innate, and we're born with a fixed amount of each. They are not. And in this book we

show, with scientific evidence, that each of them is highly trainable, and we teach you how to train them. If there's any aspect of your life you want to excel in, whether work, home, sports, the arts, or spirituality, you can exercise these five aspects of intention and improve.

Nearly 50% of people believe that willpower, curiosity, integrity, attention, and habit formation are inherent traits that cannot be trained.¹

Although this book is based around the science behind each of these aspects, as with any story told with science, this is not the full picture—which is why we also illustrate our points with case studies, stories, diagrams, and drawings that support the idea that no matter who you are or how you approach these ingredients, you can use them to become more intentional.

Our core message is that intention can be trained—not just a fleeting feeling of agency, but the real application of intention that improves our lives and the lives of those around us.

What Do We Mean by *High Performance*?

This book focuses on the skills of high performers—not their ability to run consecutive marathons or lead Fortune 500 teams, but their willpower, curiosity, integrity, attention, and habits. We understand and love that high performers don't always have traditionally lofty achievements to their name—maybe they only ran one marathon, or maybe they took a walk around the block for the first time in decades. We see high performance not as a competition against others or the attaining of some objective standard, but as a way of life. What sets our high performers apart from the rest of us is their ability to act with intention. These aren't just CEOs and top athletes; they're students, stay-at-home parents, minimum-wage workers, and artists. Despite the limits of their circumstances, these individuals harness the power of intention and—in some cases—are able to radiate that feeling of intention to others.

Consequently, for us, high performance can be domain-specific (eating 25 hotdogs in 10 minutes) or not (being a generally

“good” person). It can be outwardly reflected (Michael Phelps’s long list of wins) or something much more personal (a 67-year-old getting over their life-long fear of driving). It can lead to “Success” (big *S*, as defined by society) or “success” (small *s*, as defined by how you see a life well lived).

We’re not passing judgment or comparing the ways each of us can exhibit high performance. We define *high performance* as: “the ability to do subjectively hard things.” So if your goal is to eat a lot of hot dogs quickly, more power to you—we’ll help you get there as best we can. We are also there for you if your vision of high performance is about making the world better. On that front, there has never been a time that doing hard things has been needed more, and we can all increase our impact by strengthening the five skills in this book. Intention is not a cure-all for languishing and disengagement. In some cases these feelings might have deeper roots than we’re qualified to address. But we’ve found that being more intentional in our lives has helped us to break out of moments of languish and get unstuck.

Beyond the Individual

This book is an answer to the corporate challenge of improving engagement at work. By building intentional teams using the five core muscle groups of intention, you can improve how your colleagues are performing and give them back a sense of autonomy. In doing so, we can together create more dynamic, adaptable, and resilient organizations. Additionally, by addressing the challenge of languishing and applying intention in one aspect of your life, you can dramatically improve how you exercise intention in all other aspects. Becoming more intentional in your own life is good for your family, your community, and for society at large. This is not only because your level of engagement will be contagious to those around you, but also because you will be contributing your best to the world—at whatever scale and in whatever areas you choose.

About Us

While much of this story revolves around what it means to be a high performer and how to get there, we’re not claiming to always fit the bill ourselves. We’re certainly working hard at it, but we’re on a

journey just like everyone else. That said, we do know a lot about applied behavioral science and how to motivate people. Bringing that knowledge to you is what this book is all about.

Dan and *Sekoul* are co-founders of The Decision Lab (TDL), an applied research and innovation firm that uses behavioral science to generate social impact. They were roommates in Toronto, where Dan worked in banking and Sekoul was a consultant at the Boston Consulting Group. They decided to take their backgrounds (in decision systems and neuroscience) to build an organization that would be intentional about the type of work it does. TDL works with some of the largest organizations in the world, carrying out research in priority areas and running one of the most popular publications in applied behavioral science. In the past, they've helped organizations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Capital One, the World Bank, and many Fortune 500s solve some of their thorniest problems using scientific thinking.

Mike is a former lawyer, private equity investor, McKinsey consultant, and startup founder who is currently the CHRO for a large Canadian retailer, helping motivate and engage more than 5,000 employees while maintaining a unique corporate culture that has lasted for more than 180 years. For him, his highest performance is raising his children to be good citizens and intentional in their own right.

CHAPTER 2

A Languishing World

“I would prefer not to.”

— Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener*

There’s a powerful gravity to modern life, pulling us toward routine, passivity, and meaningless actions. We’ve all been victims of this force. It lures us to the couch when we should go for a run. It tempts us to watch TV instead of starting that creative project. It hinders us from taking a chance on love, taking control of our lives, and living up to our true potential.

In short, a staple of modern life is being in a state of languish. Neither mentally healthy nor mentally ill, just in a generalized “blahness.” Coined by Corey Keyes in the early 2000s, *languish* is an emptiness and stagnation, constituting “a life of quiet despair.” People who languish describe themselves and their lives as “hollow,” “empty,” “a shell,” and “a void.”¹ As eloquently expressed by Adam Grant in his widely read *New York Times* piece, languishing comes with “the dulling of delight and the dwindling of drive.”²

How did we get here? How is it possible that in an era that has blessed us with longer life expectancy, and in societies with unprecedented comfort and security, we find ourselves grappling with escalating depression,³ anxiety,⁴ and suicide rates?⁵ Why is it that the same modern technology and tools that have made us almost godlike compared to our ancestors leave many of us feeling powerless?

How is it that workplaces, that have never cared so much about fostering purpose and meaning, feel meaningless and empty? And why is it that more people than ever express a sense of disengagement or loss of interest and motivation?

The root of this disengagement is tremendously complex.⁶ One reason is that many of us live in an era of ease and convenience, where everything is taken care of. And in our work, we strive for higher and higher levels of specialization. So we can be more efficient. So we can be more successful. But while we were busy delegating the mundane to gain that success, we also delegated our agency along with it. We've created a world where each of us has limitless options and no real choices, and our answer to that is to disengage and stop fully participating in our lives.

As Far as the Eye Can See

Now for the good news: languishing and disengagement aren't necessarily signs of personal failure. They're often consequences of our environment. Think of the last time you felt that you weren't where you should be, and instead of making the effort to change your circumstance, you felt there was no hope. When we languish, we feel a combination of "I need to get out of here" and "meh, not likely," and too often we then opt not to act.

While it's tempting to blame the rise of the internet and our increasing lack of community, languishing isn't entirely new. In the late 1800s, Émile Durkheim used *anomie* to describe the sense of disconnection that modern production lines created in industrial laborers. Even Plato identified a similar feeling in *akrasia*: a strong sense of "I should," followed by acting against our better judgment and not doing anything.

Languishing isn't limited to North American society either—take Japan's *hikikomori* movement. The country's economic stagnation in the 1990s, combined with social pressure and mental health challenges, resulted in a modern-day hermit movement. Up to a million Japanese citizens live as recluses, remaining at home while avoiding work and personal connections. *Hikikomori* is even thought to be growing, not just in Japan, but globally.⁷

Languishing and Self-Destruction

In response to our loss of agency, we find ways to take control of our lives. But our usual responses tend to cause more harm than help. There are extremes, like the abuse of alcohol or drugs, but also small day-to-day behaviors: bingeing meaningless television shows, neglecting our physical health, eating too much sugar, or failing to make time for quality connections.

Why do we turn to self-destructive choices? Edgar Allen Poe explained our tendency to procrastinate when we know we shouldn't, calling this *The Imp of the Perverse*:

We have a task before us which must be speedily performed. We know that it will be ruinous to make delay. The most important crisis of our life calls, trumpet-tongued, for immediate energy and action. We glow, we are consumed with eagerness to commence the work, with the anticipation of whose glorious result our whole souls are on fire. It must, it shall be undertaken to-day, and yet we put it off until to-morrow, and why?⁸

Our self-destructive choices are evidence of how our deep-seated drive for agency manifests itself wherever it can. Sometimes it feels like the only decisions we get to make are bad ones. Take the modern phenomenon of *bàofùxíng áoyè*, or as it's translated from Chinese, "revenge bedtime procrastination." Journalist Daphne K. Lee used the term to describe what happens when individuals "who don't have much control over their daytime life refuse to sleep early in order to regain some sense of freedom during late-night hours."⁹ If you've ever done something that you know is bad for you just to feel free, you'll understand this.

Suggestions for overcoming bad bedtime habits generally come in the form of establishing rules for better sleep discipline, like avoiding technology before bed. But revenge bedtime procrastinators know the tips and tricks for better sleep and still choose to stay up. As one bedtime procrastinator put it, "It's a way of revolting against all the obligations that you have. Because, well, my life, and I think the life of most adults, consists of lots and lots of obligations."¹⁰

These procrastinators are simply reclaiming freedom via one of the only outlets they have. We don't need a reminder to put down our phone before bedtime. We need space to make choices for ourselves. We need to exercise the basic human need to decide our own destiny. If you relate to the bedtime procrastinator—perhaps to a lesser extreme or in another domain—you're not alone. In our survey, 63% of people agreed they sometimes do things that are bad for them just to feel like they're in control. So, the next time you find yourself scrolling rather than sleeping, realize that part of the reason you're doing so is that you want to feel free to choose (and that maybe there's a healthier way to feel that).

63% of people say they do things that they know are self-destructive to feel a sense of control.

The Decline of Workplace Autonomy

Perhaps nowhere is more prone to languishing than the workplace. It's no coincidence that Émile Durkheim's *anomie* came at the advent of the industrial revolution. Unless work is designed to combat it, languishing will persist. Case in point, a whopping 77% of workers around the world were disengaged at work in 2022.¹¹

And despite employers' best efforts, workplace disengagement has been increasing for quite some time. The rise of efficiency tools has dramatically reduced autonomy for workers. Managers are given clear scripts for what they can and cannot say to their teams; directors have defined measurement tools like Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to meet on a daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual basis. No one gets to decide for themselves anymore.

Languishing in our personal lives and feeling disengaged at work come from the same root: lack of freedom and satisfaction. Unfortunately, most pieces of advice on engagement given to managers are, as with our personal lives, aimed at the wrong aspect of the problem. Rather than giving workers more autonomy and a sense of control, we try to fix disengagement by building mission statements or communicating purpose—emphasizing the meaningfulness of

the work. Purpose statements are important, but they're not enough. We need agency, and with it, identity, first. Without agency, meaning and purpose have nowhere to root.

Unfortunately, individual autonomy is often viewed as a distraction from more important goals like consistency, efficiency, and productivity, and as such, it is seen as dangerous and unproductive.

Ironically, not only does a lack of autonomy cause disengagement, but organizational outcomes also suffer. Events like the COVID pandemic exposed the vulnerability that anchoring on hyper-efficiency and leanness causes in modern workplaces. When unanticipated events occurred, the companies leading in modern management science were the ones left high and dry. By decreasing autonomy, we've decreased organizations' ability to respond to change and disruption.

Every single one of us has the power to overcome disengagement and reclaim intentionality. However, the forces against us get stronger all the time. These forces express themselves in a myriad of ways, from the proliferation of social media, to pressure from our families,



co-workers, and peers. At work, these manifest in the reduction of real choices and the separation of our working selves from our true nature. The effort to resist these forces is getting harder as the distractions and tools of sabotage get stronger, but that doesn't mean that we have to let them rule our lives and stop us from realizing our potential as human beings.

CHAPTER 3

What Is Intention?

“When spiders unite they can tie down a lion”

—Ethiopian Proverb

When humans first appeared on Earth 300,000 years ago, *Homo sapiens* were hardly the only hominid around. We likely shared the planet with five to seven other hominid species. Some of them, such as the Neanderthals, were likely bigger and stronger than we were, and as far as we can tell from their skulls, they also had significantly bigger brains. While modern humans have a cranial capacity of about 82 cubic inches (1,344 cubic cm), Neanderthals could reach up to 100. Brain size accounts for only 9–16% of overall variability in intelligence, but nevertheless, Neanderthals had an advantage over us.¹ Despite their physical advantages, these hominids died out 40,000 years ago. But “died out” is perhaps not the right terminology here—they thrived for a long time until we came to Europe and “outcompeted” them (sometimes by eating their food, other times by murder).²

What did we have that our brethren didn’t? The answer likely lies in how we used our brains rather than our brawn. While factors such as our access to fire certainly helped, perhaps the most important difference between us and other hominids was our ability to use social cooperation, complex language, and abstract concepts. Our ability to plan, communicate, and work together allowed us to overcome our physical limitations, especially in groups. Our special brains

allowed us to transcend the here and now, formulate complex beliefs, share them with others, and to work together.

Rather than focusing exclusively on our immediate survival needs, we could *mentally time-travel*. We could formulate complex plans that anticipated, and more importantly, created an unseen future. What set us apart wasn't our physique, or even tools like fire, but something invisible: our shared intention.³

Intention as a Survival Tool

Various fields such as anthropology, evolutionary biology, and developmental psychology have spent decades studying how shared intention evolved, how it helped us outcompete other species, and how it manifests in people today. Some of the most impactful work on this comes from Michael Tomasello, a developmental psychologist based at Duke University. In research spanning decades, Tomasello has argued that social cognition is the “secret sauce” of being human. He points out that nonhuman primates are unable to do many tasks that come easily to humans: over-imitating (copying the style of an action, not just the action itself), recursive mind reading (being aware of what another person knows we know), and social learning through deliberate transmission (intentionally teaching each other how to interact with others).

