The Tools You Already Have

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INTRODUCTION

Often the goal we want to achieve remains just that, a goal. The difficulty to achieving it lies in not having a way to do so. We can just wing it and try everything in the book, but our haphazard efforts will only tire us out and leave us frustrated. This makes it all too easy to give up. Thus we can be our own worst enemies. But when we have a clear and robust process, one that is up to the task of getting us to where we want to go, we have a very good shot of finding some kind of success. This booklet, based on the Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) process, presents powerful tools for those who are serious about improving their skills. NLP stresses that words matter, especially the words and thoughts you use to talk about yourself, because such things really do affect your brain.

The process has the added benefit of promoting, if not demanding, personal growth. Additionally, NLP has the flexibility to suit your own unique way of learning, while still maintaining a clear procedural structure. Ultimately, the hope is that NLP helps you find practices to bring out the best in you, as well as ways to further build on those qualities.

This handbook will take you through 6 very important topics:

1. The Well-Formed Outcome
2. Playing the Sedulous Ape
3. Durability, Dedication and Positivity
4. Identifying Real Results
5. Clean Up the Noise
6. Elegant Description, or Tell It To Grandma
First, we will briefly review the well-formed outcome goal-setting model covered in the Ready...Set...Goal booklet. This included 6 steps.

**STEP 1: STATE IT IN THE POSITIVE**
Negativity is often counterproductive. Even the grammatical negative way we talk about something can get in the way of action. Stating what we don’t want gets us nowhere. In fact, repeated and long-term negative phrasing can turn the waters of your mind murky. You want your mind clear, pristine. So be clear in what you want, and state it in the positive.

**STEP 2: CONTEXT AND BOUNDARIES**
This is where you decide what parts of your life you want affected by the activities required of you in order to reach your desired goal. Once boundaries are set, like lines on a sports field, you can play ball and give it your all.

**STEP 3: SELF-ACHIEVABLE**
You want your goal to come from within you, and for it to be something you can do and not something others must do for you. Also, it’s important that you can maintain your efforts, so you’ll need to make sure the resources you will need are accessible to you.

**STEP 4: ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES**
Listing the pros and cons in order to create a realistic picture of what your journey will look like and how it will likely feel.

**STEP 5: EVIDENCE**
Having an objective way to measure real results in order to know when you have achieved your goal. A good practice is to visualize what your future self would be like after achieving the goal.

**STEP 6: IS IT WORTHWHILE?**
Make sure your goal is in line with your values, with who you are. Only then will you know that it’s truly worth your precious time and tremendous effort.
“The Sedulous Ape” is the title of an essay written by Robert Louis Stevenson in 1887 (he was the author of Treasure Island and The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, amongst a zillion other works). In it, he describes how he spent his youth imitating (or aping) the distinctive styles of a number of accomplished writers. (Being “sedulous” is being diligent and dedicated with regards to action and intent.) He practiced the linguistic cadences of other writers over and over again. In part, he did this because he admired them. But mainly he did this in order to find his own unique voice. Stevenson argued that your own unique style can’t be found in a vacuum, plucked sheer out of empty space, but rather through the hard work of getting to know what’s out there from the inside out.

Finding your own unique way of being great requires you to play the sedulous ape to the greats. Just as feeding your body with healthy foods will cause it to respond joyously, feeding your actions styled after someone you want to be like will help your unconscious mind awaken to its own unique path towards greatness. Those who are really, really good at what they do did not get to be so without finding their own path in the forest of others’ achievements. So whatever it is—a sport, a musical instrument, mental ability—that you aspire to, make your efforts more meaningful (and more fun, really) by aping around.

**Reflection:**

1. List three of your heroes. What makes them different from each other, what qualities do they share in common?

2. What do you consider to be some of the core beliefs of the people you listed above? How do you relate to these beliefs? Do you share them in some way? Do you disagree?

3. In your eyes, how did these people change the world?

4. What changes did they inspire in you? Which qualities of theirs would you most want to adopt? How would you go about doing that?
Durability, dedication, positivity: at heart, these mean the same thing when it comes to achieving a personal goal. You know best how you are capable of doing something really well. But the sad truth is that we often don’t give ourselves the chance to figure this all out. Perhaps we’ve tried but failed and so tell ourselves we’re simply not good enough; or others tell us what we’re doing is a waste of time, and after a while, we start to believe them; or we become side tracked with something else and subconsciously use this as a reason to abandon our efforts. It could be any number of things. To help prepare yourself for such bumps and bends in the road, you will need to really internalize durability, dedication and positivity.

Durability is the toughness and grit required to take a fall, get back up and keep on going. Just as you want your running shoes to be durable so that they can go many, many miles, you want this quality in yourself so you can keep going. Dedication is the promise you make between you and yourself to stick to something through thick and thin. Positivity is the all-important sunshine you need to surround yourself with as well as spread yourself, especially in times of darkness. Without a positive attitude toward what you’re doing, it’s harder to remain dedicated, your durability lessens—how you view what you’re doing really does matter. And it’s the combination of all three elements that will help you to keep keeping on, not lose sight, and feel good about yourself.

**Reflection:**

1. We ask ourselves what it will look like when we are improving our skills. Another important question to ask is what it will feel like. Things may not always turn out as you expect them to, but it’s important to not lose sight of the moment you are in. So ask yourself what durability, dedication, and positivity will feel like when you are working on your goal.

2. Can you recall a surprise you had recently? How did you feel about this unexpected event at the time? And looking back on it, have your thoughts and feelings changed about it?

3. Criticism can come from outside (from others) or from inside (self-doubt, perfectionism). Take a moment to recall a criticism you recently received (from outside or inside). At the time, our fears can cause us to distort the reality of such criticism (we think it’s the end of the world, or that we’ll never be good enough). But can you ask yourself what it really means, not what you are afraid it means?

4. You will encounter stress on your journey. What are some ways you deal with stress?

5. Roadblocks that cause too many bad feelings in you can be signs that your heart is not in it. If your heart isn’t in it, you may be on the wrong path. Don’t blindly plow forward, rethink things. What are some possible signs you may be on the wrong track?
Identifying Real Results

The timeline for when you start seeing results will vary depending on the difficulty of the skills you are developing in order to reach your goal. You will want to periodically enlist the help of an outside observer to help you identify the progress you have (or have not) made. The reason an outside observer is helpful is because we are all of us poor judges of our own abilities. The majority of our skills are plied unconsciously: we scarcely have to think in order to tie our shoes or ride a bike or spell our names. This is also true of our more advanced skills. The eye cannot see itself without a mirror.

Your outside observer can be a person you can check in with periodically, an ongoing tally of progress as expressed in numbers (“ran x number of meters in x minutes on this date”), or even a journal you keep specifically for this project. So long as it’s reasonably objective and measurable, you’ll be able to see what’s going on.

When identifying real results it’s also important to have realistic expectations. Results must be placed in their proper context: you can’t realistically expect to master a difficult skill in a small amount of time. By the same token, if a relatively simple skill is taking you a very long time to master, you will want to investigate the reasons for this.

Reflection:

1. For your personal goal, can you think of two or three ways to record your progress? Of these, which one do you think you’d more likely stick with over time, and why?

2. Worthwhile goals usually require a number of small steps, as well as some big ones. Can you come up with a list of small steps and big steps? Now can you put them into a realistic timeline?

3. Identifying real results is less about comparing yourself to others than comparing yourself to yourself. Can you think of something you’ve improved at? How did this happen?

4. Two main ways to chart progress are by setting benchmarks and by continual improvement (though these are by no means the only options). The first is like having skipping stops to step across a stream: each stone is a benchmark, a point closer to your goal. The second is like rowing a boat to cross the stream: each action leads you slightly closer to the goal. Which one of these two approaches would fit best with what you are trying to achieve, and why?
A big part of figuring out what works best for you, what makes you perform better, is figuring out what doesn’t contribute to your performing at the best of your abilities. Scientists and engineers use what’s called the “signal to noise ratio” to compare the levels of the desired signal to that of background “noise,” or unwanted other signals. As you are following your program and improving your skills, playing the sedulous ape, maintaining the course with a positive attitude, identifying real results, you will want to do a spring cleaning of your program. Of course, all these elements feed into each other, the separate parts all shifting at different angles and moving at varying speeds. This is precisely why cleaning up the noise is so important, since you don’t want to hold onto actions that don’t propel you toward your goal.

One way to help figure out what’s signal and what’s noise is to try simplifying your practice regimen. Does taking three deep breaths before trying to bend a soccer ball actually make any difference from, say, taking one deep breath? While this is an example of a small bit of noise, over time and within the greater scheme of things, such tiny bits can really add up and have a significant negative impact on your performance, perhaps even enough to keep you from reaching the next level. So, just as you should clean up your room every once in a while, clean up your program.

4. Can you think of examples of “noise” in your life? How would you go about cleaning it up?

5. What we consider signal does not always lead clearly and directly to our goal. It might take us on a different path, which is okay. The quickest point path from Point A to Point B is not always a straight line. You might even realize you actually wanted to get to Point C instead the entire time. Would this be an acceptable outcome for you? Why or why not?

**Reflection:**

1. People who are great at what they do tend to “make it look easy.” What are your ideas on why this is so?

2. Although we can’t control the ultimate outcome of our efforts, we can make sure the process is as good as it can be. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

3. The goal is something that you expect to enjoy in the future. Process is something you are presently working on. Can you think of ways to make your process more enjoyable?
Albert Einstein famously said of scientific theories, “You do not really understand something unless you can explain it to your grandmother.” Having found your way by modeling your skills after the practices of someone who is truly great at what they do, having cleaned up the noise, identified real results, and stuck with the program, you must now be able to tell it to grandma. Your description should be elegant: pleasingly graceful yet simple, a thing well-made. Describing it thus serves two main purposes: One, it forces you to think about what you have been doing, how it works on the inside, working your way outward to what shape it has come to take.

Turning all your efforts into words that others can understand is no easy task. Put it in a way that makes sense to you. Then make sure each part is communicating what is necessary to others in a relatable way. This is not to say dumb it down; rather, you are seeking the clearest way to put things that makes sense, yet undeniably bears the markings of your unique journey. For the second purpose of this description is so you can pass it on to another person who wants to be able to improve their skills as much as you have. Though it’s likely another person will find that certain changes to your program works better for them, the important thing is the process that you have conveyed to them. It can be a springboard for their own program. And it is in this second step, sharing what you have learned, that signals the true completion of your modeling efforts.

**Reflection:**

1. Without looking at the previous sections, make a list of the things that you have learned from this booklet. Now imagine how you would describe these things to someone who has not read the booklet. What for you is the most difficult part about doing this?

2. If your program was a book or a movie, what would be its title?

3. Can you think of someone you know who would be interested in or benefit from what you have learned? What would you tell them?

4. Who do you wish you could get a description of their program from? What are some of the things you think would be in that description?