

# Want to Change Your Life?

## First, Change Your Day

By Andy Core

As hard as I work every day, shouldn't I have "arrived" by now? It's a question that nags at you as you slog through each day, bound to the tyranny of your to-do list, one eye constantly on the clock. It seems all you do is work, but you have only mediocre results to show for it. Once, you had big goals and the confidence to achieve them, but now all you feel is tired, stressed, and overburdened. It seems the dreams you once had—of leading your department, being the top salesperson, joining the C-suite—have disappeared into the quicksand that has become your daily life.

If this scenario describes you, you're not a loser. Like so many others, you're an unwitting victim of today's demanding work culture, not to mention bad habits that are sabotaging your best efforts.

As you go through life, you develop habits and routines that you think will help you succeed. Problem is, many of those patterns probably don't work for you personally. What's productive for your coworker may not work well for you, for example. Or a strategy that was effective five years ago may no longer work.



**MAKE A  
CHANGE!**

Even your instincts can lead you astray. But you can change habits and patterns that don't serve you. You can refocus your attention, redirect your thoughts, and generate greater motivation, energy, optimism, and creativity, as well as more rewarding relationships.

To start reclaiming the goals that once inspired and excited you, you'll have to change the way you approach your day. Instead of a worker whose actions are dictated by supervisors and to-do lists, you'll need to begin acting like the CEO of your own life.

**Figure out what's doable in a day.** In my book *Change Your Day*, I write about a woman named Janet. She came to me hoping that I could help her find some semblance of balance. She was overworked, overstressed, and overweight. She had no time to exercise or to spend with friends and family. She was constantly on the go and fueled by caffeine, with no chance to recuperate between projects. Not surprisingly, Janet wanted to change her life.

Initially, Janet was disappointed when I told her that changing her life was just too hard. But I explained that turning your whole life around is too big a goal.

You can't sustain that many major changes at once. Instead, I told Janet, I simply wanted her to change her day. I wanted her to reengineer her routine a little bit at a time, one day at a time, cutting out a small stressor here, and adding in a more productive habit there. Our whole strategy was to make small, doable changes that would, over time, create an unstoppable momentum.

You must do the same. You must set realistic boundaries. You must create goals that can be accomplished in the space of a day. Remember, nearly all problems, challenges, and needs are best faced if they are brought down to the scale of 'what can be done right now' by taking on 'one small piece' of a difficult situation.

**Get big things done before 9:00 a.m.** (instead of snoozing, procrastinating, and lurking at the water cooler). Ever notice how your morning sets the tone for your whole day? As Sir Isaac Newton famously said, “Objects in motion tend to stay in motion.” So if an object (you) gets a groggy, frustrating start, you’ll probably feel sluggish and behind the eight-ball all day long. However, if you start your day with positive and productive ideas, actions, thoughts, and feelings, you’re likely to gain momentum throughout the day.

Here’s an example of what I’m talking about, I know a top salesman named Barry whose daily pattern involves getting up early, exercising, eating breakfast, spending time with family, and accomplishing several meetings or other work activities before 9:00 a.m. By the time his colleagues are settling into the starting blocks, Barry has already blown through several important tasks on his to-do list, and he’s geared to continue that pace for the next several hours.

The point here isn’t how early Barry’s alarm rings—it’s that he makes the most of the first several hours of his day instead of snoozing and procrastinating, as so many of us do. The truth is this: What you do first matters.

**DO first, then KNOW** (not the other way around). Most people believe that the knowledge that something is important should make you want to do it. But in reality, that’s not the case. So, why don’t we do what we know we should do? If we know spending less time on Facebook will make us more productive, why won’t we just commit to spending an hour less on the site each day? If we know setting aside 30 minutes to walk or jog each day will make us healthier, why aren’t we jumping up off the couch right now?

Study after study shows that knowledge alone usually isn’t enough to impact our desires. In fact, the opposite is true. First, you must do something—like bite the bullet and put on your workout clothes! If you experience positive feelings, attitudes, and results because of your action, you will learn that whatever you just did is good, and you’ll want to do it again, and again, and again. Over time, you’ll develop a new habit, and you’ll become an evolved person.

In other words, you must DO in order to KNOW in order to BE different. Remember, nothing in your life gets better until your daily patterns get better.

**Own up to your junk hours.** “Junk hours” are a little like junk food: While they provide short-term pleasure, they contribute to long-term imbalance and exhaustion. For instance, junk hours might include chasing rabbit trails on the Internet, shooting the breeze with colleagues at the water cooler, checking email in order to avoid doing other work, or even attending an unnecessary meeting.

In order to maximize each day, you need to own up to your junk hours. You need to identify when you’re going through the motions of work, versus when real work is being done. Don’t be ashamed that your junk hours exist, because everybody needs to take breaks and shift gears. Your task now is to exchange your low-value ‘junk’ activities for ones that build greater health and value into your workday.

For instance, I know one woman who, instead of taking an endless string of coffee breaks, sets aside 20 minutes each afternoon to knit. I know another man who decided to spend his lunch hours either with friends or going to the gym, instead of trying to squeeze in more work around bites of a burger. In both instances, these scheduled breaks increased my friends’ energy levels and sense of well-being. They felt less of a need to take low-value breaks and began to experience more productivity.

**Instead of adding to your to-do list, build a new pattern.** Maybe you’re thinking, Sure, I’d like to change my day, but the thought of adding a boatload of items to my already out-of-control to-do list makes me want to crawl back into bed. I can’t handle any more tasks and responsibilities! If that sounds familiar, take a deep breath. The changes that build momentum are rooted in decisions, not additional tasks.

To build a productive new pattern into your life, you usually won’t have to add new tasks to your day. Instead, you’ll simply do what you are already doing, or want to do, in a way that becomes habitual. For instance, if you want to wake up an hour earlier so that you can jump-start the day, you simply have to change the time your alarm rings and the time you go to bed. If you want to be more productive at work, you might have to replace aimless procrastination with scheduled breaks. In both cases, you’re changing the way you perform existing tasks, not adding new ones.

Remember, though, it isn’t sufficient to simply trigger the start of a new behavior. You need to make sure that you have a motivating reason to make this change, as well as the confidence and energy to sustain it so that it becomes a pattern.

**Start with one thing. Then add another. Then another.** Losing weight is one of the most commonly made New Year's resolutions. It's also one of the most commonly abandoned. That's because people think of losing weight as a singular change. It's not. To lose weight, a person will need to eat healthier, eat smaller quantities, and become more physically active. That's three changes. And each of those sub-changes has many smaller components; for instance, eating healthier might involve drinking more water and less soda, eating more fruits and veggies, reducing refined sugars, etc. That's a lot of changes to keep track of!

The point is, don't take on more than you can handle. Break each goal down to its smallest components, then pick one of them to tackle. Pursue this change until it becomes a habit, then move on to the next one. Start with one thing and don't add another until you're ready. Positive motion creates positive emotion.

**Make a big-box checklist.** It's a given that you have a to-do list. Maybe it's on paper, on your smartphone, or just in your head...but you have one. It's also highly likely that your list isn't as useful as it could be. Too often, you get stuck doing the urgent instead of the important. Here is practical solution: Make an actual, on-paper checklist each afternoon for the following day or each morning. Put a box by each task—the more important that task is for you to complete that day, the bigger its box should be.

I focus first on my big-box tasks. At the end of the day, if most of them have checkmarks, it's generally been a good day! Yes, prioritizing my daily list by the size of the boxes on it may sound simplistic, but it has made me feel much more accomplished and satisfied with my day. It also has helped me relax in the evenings because it is easier to remember the big boxes I've checked off, thereby making it easier to leave work at work. I'm no longer distracted by each shiny ball that rolls by—I'm able to ignore them and train my focus on what's really important.

**Think about it so you don't have to think about it.** We all have "those" tasks and obligations that eat up a lot of our time, that we find difficult and frustrating, or both. For instance, when you come home at the end of each day, maybe you find yourself standing in the middle of your kitchen with no clue what to cook for dinner. I recall that as a hunt-and-peck typist, I was once slowed down and aggravated by the need to produce papers and reports.

Figure out where these areas are for you and commit to learning a new pattern. For me, that meant buying a book and relearning how to type using a two-hand method. In the cooking example above, that might mean getting into the habit of planning meals and shopping for their ingredients each weekend. Yes, learning new patterns can initially be tedious and laborious. But once they've taken hold—often in three weeks or less—they'll speed up your performance, streamline your effort, and lower your stress. By putting in some thought about 'problem areas' now, you'll save yourself from having to think about them later. Eventually, this method changes once-tedious tasks into automatic, 'I don't have to think about it' behaviors.

**Infuse meaning into your work.** First, let's get one thing straight: Doing meaningful work does not mean that you will "love" every second of it. "Meaning" can simply be a recognition of what you enjoy about your work. With that understanding, though, you'll be more motivated, productive, and satisfied. I recommend completing the following exercise:

- Focus on what gives you the greatest joy and meaning at work—be able to define it.
- Reflect on how you are making a difference at work and through your work—be able to give examples.
- Reflect on the meaning of your work as it relates to your core values.
- And then...seek to increase what you enjoy!

You'll come to find that the 'administrivia,' the mundane and routine chores required of you, and the not-so-exciting aspects of your work become easier to do and get completed more quickly if you have a strong focus on what you do find exciting, rewarding, or fulfilling. Personally, thinking about how I hope to help people with my next speech, presentation, or coaching session helps me to get through the parts of my workday that I don't enjoy as much, like paperwork, scheduling, and staff issues.

**Seek to serve, not shine.** To some extent, it's human nature to look out for Number One. We all want to rack up accomplishments, receive accolades, and garner recognition. But in many situations, the desire to shine can cause you

to get in your own way. Just think of the overeager salesman whose desire to exceed his quota makes him come off as pushy. Instead of convincing you to buy his product, his self-serving attitude just makes you want to cut the meeting short.

Ironically, the key to shining is putting others first. People who channel their efforts toward making others' lives easier are nearly always respected, included, and considered valuable. When you help others reach their goals and become their best, you'll usually find that the same things happen to you.

### **Fill up your energy bank account so you can make withdrawals when you need them.**

Throughout life, circumstances arise that are beyond our control. You may experience a major illness, lose a loved one, or be forced to relocate. You may have to occasionally work long days and go without sleep. The list goes on. It's because of these out-of-our-hands circumstances, that we must all focus on controlling what we can.

What I mean is, know your needs and capacities and try not to exceed them on a regular basis. In other words, get enough sleep. Eat nutritiously. Exercise when time permits. That way, when you do find yourself needing to push the limits, you'll have a healthy margin of energy, motivation, or whatever to draw on. Manage what you can manage as often as possible in order to compensate for what you cannot manage.

**Forget the future.** (Really!) The future can be an inspiring thing...but it can also be a scary and misleading one. Awfulizing, what-ifs, and doomsday thinking can plunge you into paralyzing anxiety. And making incorrect assumptions can send you down the wrong path. That's why, aside from setting goals for yourself, you should try not to let your mind wander into future outcomes.

Thrivers trust in an execution mindset and focus their attention and efforts on the here and now. That's because nobody can predict when or under what conditions the future is going to unfold. The only thing a person truly can do is to focus on the processes of today—and live them out to the max. That's not only going to produce personal peace in the present tense, it's going to be the best possible preparation for whatever the future holds. Enjoy the process and take great joy in the rewards!

**Forgive yesterday so you can work on today.** Most successful, hardworking people are often hard on themselves to an unproductive level. They are their own worst critics and spend valuable time lingering on mistakes and slip-ups. Long after the event—whatever it was—is over, they beat themselves up relentlessly instead of spending their time in a more productive state.

Treat yourself with the same compassion and generosity you'd extend to another person who'd messed up or fallen short of a goal. If it helps, follow the two-hour rule I learned from one of my past coaches: When you have a bad performance or make a mistake, you have two hours to pout, scream, cry, wallow, or do whatever you think will help you deal with the disappointment. But when 120 minutes have passed, it's time to start moving forward again.

Remember, nobody is perfect. We all make mistakes. What sets Thrivers apart is the fact that after a fall, they forgive themselves faster, get back up, and continue the journey forward.

In conclusion, by making small changes in how you approach your day, you can begin to take back your to-do list and accomplish the big goals that will really help you thrive. It's time to stop allowing your quest for success to leave you feeling tired, stressed, and disillusioned. So, how will your tomorrow look different from your today? What is one small change you can make right now to start rewiring the patterns that define your life?"

**About the Author:** Andy Core is the author of *Change Your Day, Not Your Life: A Realistic Guide to Sustained Motivation, More Productivity, and the Art of Working Well* (Wiley, 2014, ISBN: 978-1-118-81598-4, \$23.00, [www.andycore.com](http://www.andycore.com)). He is an award-winning lecturer, author, television host, and expert in human performance and motivation. Voted a 2012 Top5 Global Health/Healthcare Speaker by Speakers Platform, Andy has a master's degree in the science of human performance and has spent the past 23 years mastering what it takes to become energized, healthy, motivated, and better equipped to thrive in today's hectic society.

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