

TAKE THE WHEEL

**HOW TO INFLUENCE ANYONE
AND BE THE LEADER
PEOPLE WANT TO FOLLOW**

VLAD SOPOV

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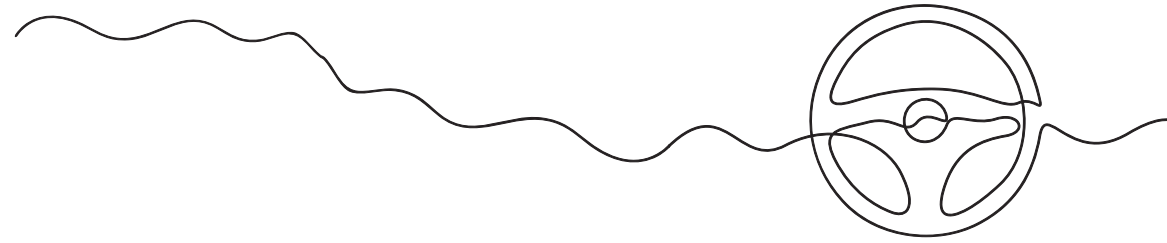
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PREFACE

A LIFE OF OWNERSHIP AND INFLUENCE

This book began with a simple yet powerful realization: No one is coming to hand us the success we crave or to lead us into the future we envision. We often live our lives waiting—waiting for permission, waiting for opportunities, or waiting for someone to recognize our potential. But the uncomfortable truth is this: The only person capable of driving your life forward is you.

In my journey from software developer to leader, I've learned firsthand the transformative power of embracing two fundamental principles: ownership and influence. Ownership involves fully accepting responsibility for your actions, outcomes, and life trajectory. Influence involves the ability to skillfully inspire, persuade, and lead others ethically toward shared goals.

My initial steps into leadership were fraught with challenges. I quickly discovered that technical expertise alone isn't enough. Leadership requires

something deeper—an internal shift in mindset combined with the ability to communicate and inspire effectively. It means taking full responsibility not just for my tasks but also for my team’s outcomes, successes, and failures.

Through trial and error, mentors, and deep reflection, I came to understand that true leadership blends accountability with persuasion. I learned the hard way that merely being responsible without the ability to influence others left me isolated, while having influence without accountability led to shallow success and fleeting achievements.

True leadership

Over the course of my career, I’ve experienced firsthand how leaders who rely solely on authority often fall short. True leadership isn’t about commanding from above—it’s about inspiring from within. I witnessed environments where blame culture stifled innovation and creativity, leading to frustration and stagnation. Conversely, I also experienced transformative moments when leaders embraced accountability, transparency, and genuine collaboration, dramatically improving team morale and performance.

A turning point in my understanding of leadership manifested itself when I recognized that mastering influence requires developing trust, credibility, and emotional intelligence. This means not only communicating clearly but actively listening to team members, understanding their motivations, and aligning goals in ways that resonate personally with everyone. Real leadership involves fostering an environment where people feel valued, empowered, and part of something larger than themselves.

I’ve also learned the importance of authenticity. People respond to genuine, transparent leaders who aren’t afraid to show vulnerability and admit mistakes. In fact, the courage to openly acknowledge errors and take responsibility significantly strengthens trust and respect within a team. This authenticity isn’t weakness—it’s a powerful demonstration of confidence and integrity.

This book synthesizes what I’ve learned about combining these critical elements, offering practical guidance to help you transition from simply

managing tasks to genuinely leading people. It is structured to provide actionable insights, real-world examples, and clear frameworks that you can implement immediately in your professional and personal life.

Stories, analysis, lessons, and quizzes

Within these pages, you’ll find candid stories from my own journey and detailed analyses of other notable leaders who exemplify the balance of ownership and influence, including lessons from historical figure

s, modern innovators, and successful entrepreneurs. Additionally, several chapters include targeted exercises designed to reinforce key concepts and foster practical skills that will empower you to implement the lessons learned.

One particularly impactful lesson for me was studying leaders who failed spectacularly, despite their potential. Their stories were powerful reminders of how the imbalance of ownership and influence can derail even the most promising careers. Conversely, examining successful leaders provided invaluable insights into how effectively blending these two principles creates sustainable success and fosters extraordinary growth.

My goal: to motivate and equip you with the mindset, strategies, and tools necessary to thrive both personally and professionally. I encourage you to actively engage with the exercises, reflect deeply on the lessons, and challenge yourself to adopt new behaviors that will reshape your leadership style.

Remember, leadership is a continuous journey, and every leader faces setbacks, doubts, and resistance. What sets successful leaders apart is their unwavering commitment to self-improvement, their courage to confront challenges head-on, and their dedication to inspiring others along the way. The principles of ownership and influence are not merely ideas that you need to understand but practices every future and present leader should internalize and live.

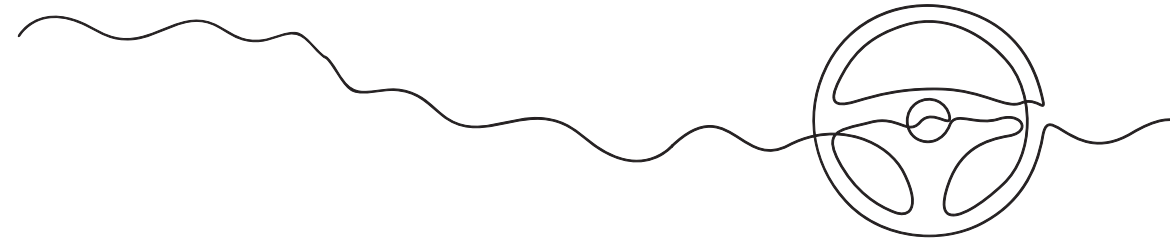
Step forward and step up

Ultimately, this book is an invitation to step forward and claim your role as a true leader. No matter where you currently stand in your career or personal growth, the concepts in this book can help you unlock new levels of achievement and fulfillment. Your potential to influence others positively and drive meaningful change is greater than you realize.

Whether you're leading a small team, a large organization, or simply looking to lead more effectively in your personal life, embracing these principles will help you overcome the internal and external barriers holding you back. The journey may be challenging, but it is profoundly rewarding. Each step you take toward ownership and influence creates ripple effects that positively impact not only your life but also the lives of those around you.

So if you're ready to stop waiting and start leading, this book is for you. Embark on this transformative journey and turn aspiration into meaningful action. Your leadership legacy starts here.

Vlad Sopov



INTRODUCTION

TAKING THE WHEEL OF YOUR LIFE

*You are in control of your own success.
Nobody owes you anything. Stop waiting
and start executing.*

—Gary Vaynerchuk

Let me ask you something. Have you ever felt stuck—waiting for someone else to give you permission to succeed? Maybe you've been hoping for a lucky break, a mentor to show you the way, or just a clear road map to tell you exactly what to do next. Maybe musings like, "If only someone would recognize my potential," or "If only the right opportunity would come along" have become something of a mantra for you.

Here's the truth: No one's coming. No one is going to hand you success. No one is going to push you into action. No one is going to take ownership of your life for you. Not your boss. Not your parents. Not the economy. The promotion you want? The business you dream of starting? The respect you crave? None of it will magically appear. If you don't take control, nothing changes.

But that's good news because it means your future is in your hands. The moment you stop waiting for permission, you unlock the two most powerful tools for success: ownership and influence:

- **Ownership** means taking full responsibility for your actions, decisions, and results—no excuses, no blaming, just control over what you can do.
- **Influence** means ethically persuading and inspiring others to act alongside you because leadership isn't just about personal success, it's about guiding others toward a shared goal.

When you master both, you stop playing defense and start playing offense. You stop reacting to circumstances and start creating them. And most important, you stop waiting and start leading.

WHY THIS BOOK NOW?

In today's world, talent alone isn't enough. You can be incredibly skilled, but if you don't take full ownership of your actions, you'll stay stuck. Likewise, if you lack the ability to influence others—whether it's your boss, your clients, or your team—your ideas won't gain traction.

This book is about mastering both sides of the equation of ownership and influence. Some leadership books focus solely on self-discipline and accountability (think *Extreme Ownership*¹). Others, like *Influence: The*

1 Jocko Willink and Leif Babin, *Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win* (St. Martin's Press, 2015).

Psychology of Persuasion,² focus on persuasion and social influence. But real success lies in the balance between both. Ownership gives you the foundation to lead **yourself**. Influence gives you the ability to lead **others**.

If you master ownership without influence, you risk becoming a lone wolf—self-reliant but isolated, capable but unable to inspire action in others. You might do excellent work, but if you can't communicate your vision, no one will follow.

Nikola Tesla: A lone wolf who lacked influence

Nikola Tesla was a visionary inventor who took full ownership of his work. He pioneered alternating current (AC) electricity, made breakthroughs in wireless energy, and even laid the groundwork for modern radio technology. Tesla was deeply self-reliant, disciplined, and relentless in his pursuit of innovation.

But despite his genius, Tesla struggled to gain influence—and it cost him everything.

- He failed to communicate his ideas effectively to investors and the business world. Unlike Thomas Edison, who was a master influencer and businessman, Tesla had little interest in marketing his work or persuading others to support him.
- He dismissed financial strategy and partnerships, which left him vulnerable. He worked tirelessly but refused to compromise or negotiate, leading to repeated financial ruin.
- His ideas were revolutionary, but without support, they couldn't thrive. While his AC electricity system became the standard, he died alone and broke in a New York hotel room, overshadowed by more influential figures like Edison and Westinghouse.

Tesla's story is a powerful example of why ownership alone isn't enough. He owned his craft, but because he **lacked influence—the ability to persuade,**

2 Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* (Harper Business, 2006).

communicate, and rally people around his vision—his impact remained limited in his lifetime.

Lesson: Mastering influence is just as important as mastering ownership. If you want your ideas to succeed, you must lead, persuade, and inspire others to act with you.

On the other hand, if you master influence without ownership, you risk becoming a manipulator—persuasive but unreliable, skilled at getting people on board but lacking the accountability to deliver results. Your success may be short-lived because people eventually see through empty words.

John DeLorean: A visionary influencer who lacked ownership

John DeLorean was a charismatic, ambitious leader who revolutionized the American automotive industry. He was a brilliant engineer and an influential figure, known for his ability to persuade, inspire, and sell a vision. But despite his extraordinary influence, he ultimately failed because he lacked **true ownership—the discipline, responsibility, and execution necessary for long-term success**.

The power of influence. DeLorean was a master of persuasion, branding, and public appeal. He didn't just pitch ideas, he sold dreams.

- **He built a legendary reputation.** At General Motors, DeLorean was behind the creation of the Pontiac GTO, a muscle car icon that redefined American automotive performance. His bold ideas and unorthodox style made him a media favorite and a rising corporate star.
- **He rallied powerful backers.** After leaving GM, DeLorean convinced celebrities, investors, and even the British government to support his ambitious startup—the DeLorean Motor Company (DMC). He positioned himself as a disruptor, promising innovation in an industry mired in tradition.

- **He sold a futuristic vision.** The DeLorean DMC-12, with its stainless-steel body and gull wing doors, was unlike anything on the market. Thanks to his charisma and media savvy, the car achieved iconic status, especially after its role in the 1985 film, *Back to the Future*.

DeLorean didn't struggle to gain attention—he commanded it. His influence was powerful, and his ideas were bold. But influence alone wasn't enough.

Behind the headlines and hype, DeLorean lacked the discipline, accountability, and execution that leadership demands. He ignored operational fundamentals. Instead of focusing on reliable engineering and sound business systems, DeLorean prioritized appearance and buzz. The factory faced chronic production issues, cost overruns, and quality control failures that damaged the product and the brand.

He shifted blame instead of solving problems. When things began to unravel, DeLorean often pointed fingers—at government regulators, corporate rivals, or internal dissent—rather than taking ownership of the setbacks.

He made desperate decisions. As the company spiraled, DeLorean became entangled in a high-profile drug-trafficking case, allegedly to secure funding. Though he was ultimately acquitted, the scandal destroyed what remained of his public image.

DeLorean had the influence to shape an industry, but his failure to take ownership of strategy, execution, and outcomes led to the collapse of his company and his credibility.

Lesson: John DeLorean shows us that influence without ownership is not enough. You can have the spotlight, the followers, and the funding, but without the willingness to take responsibility and execute with integrity, even the boldest vision will fall apart. True leadership requires both the ability to inspire people and the discipline to follow through.

The most effective leaders don't just dream big—they deliver. They own the process, the problems, and the results. And they use their influence not just to attract attention but to align people behind a mission worth building.

Indra Nooyi: Mastering both ownership and influence

If there's one modern leader who exemplifies the balance of ownership and influence, it's Indra Nooyi. As the former CEO and chairperson of PepsiCo, Nooyi led one of the world's largest food and beverage companies through transformational change, owning every decision while inspiring millions through her vision, integrity, and presence.

The power of ownership. Nooyi was known for her deep involvement in PepsiCo's strategic direction—not just in financial performance, but in long-term sustainability and purpose:

- **Hands-on leadership:** She didn't just delegate from the boardroom, she rolled up her sleeves and got to work. Nooyi was famous for sending handwritten notes to employees and their families, showing that ownership isn't just about operations—it's also about culture and people.
- **Taking responsibility for bold moves:** One of her most defining decisions was shifting PepsiCo's focus toward healthier products, even when investors were skeptical. She took ownership of the risk, knowing it was the right move for the company's future and its consumers.
- **Commitment to long-term vision:** Nooyi championed “performance with purpose,” a strategic framework that tied business growth to environmental and social responsibility. She faced pressure to focus only on profits, but she stayed committed, proving that true leaders own not just results but values as well.

The power of influence. While Nooyi owned her decisions with clarity and strength, she also excelled at influence, using empathy, communication, and authenticity to move people.

She sold a purpose-driven vision of PepsiCo. Nooyi didn't just pitch product strategy, she told a bigger story. Her influence came from her ability to align shareholders, employees, and the public around a long-term mission that

blended profit with impact. She made people believe in a future where doing good and doing well could coexist.

And she led with empathy. Nooyi's leadership style was disarming in a world of corporate armor. She spoke openly about the challenges of balancing work and family, and that vulnerability made her relatable and trusted. She didn't need bravado; her influence came from connection and character.

She built trust at every level. From factory workers to Fortune 500 boardrooms, Nooyi had a gift for making people feel heard. That trust helped her navigate resistance and drive massive organizational change without losing her team along the way.

Indra Nooyi's success wasn't built on charisma or command. It came from her ability to pair fierce accountability with ethical, people-centered influence. She led PepsiCo by example, showing what reimaged corporate leadership could look like.

Lesson: Indra Nooyi has shown us that leadership is more than making decisions or winning people over; it's also how to do both with humility and strength. The greatest leaders own their responsibilities and inspire belief in others. They don't chase approval or avoid blame. They lead from the front, with vision and integrity.

If you want to achieve real success, you can't be just an owner or an influencer—you must master both. This book will guide you step-by-step to help you achieve that. You'll learn how to take full ownership of your actions and outcomes while mastering the art of ethical influence to lead, inspire, and drive meaningful results.

At the end of the day, leadership isn't just about showing up—it's about showing others the way.

FROM DEVELOPER TO LEADER: MY OWN JOURNEY

Early in my career, I established myself as a skilled and experienced developer, mastering not just coding but also problem-solving and

understanding the business, products, and dynamics at the company where I worked. Even as I moved into leadership roles, I remained a hands-on manager, actively involved in development while guiding my team.

When the opportunity came for me to be promoted to manager of web development, I thought, I've got this.

But it didn't take long to realize that being a professional in my area doesn't automatically make you a great leader.

Before my promotion, I had worked under poor management, and I saw firsthand what leadership shouldn't look like. My boss operated in a constant state of blame—pointing fingers at the team when things went wrong, finding scapegoats instead of solutions. If she couldn't pin the failure on someone in the team, she'd shift the blame to another department.

The result? A toxic work environment with low morale and high stress. Developers were frustrated, productivity suffered, and people were more focused on avoiding blame than solving problems.

I told myself that when I became a manager, I wouldn't lead like that. But knowing what not to do wasn't enough—I needed to learn what great leadership looked like.

The first lesson: Ownership

After my promotion, my cousin—a successful vice president of marketing—gave me a critical piece of advice. He recommended a few leadership books that helped him grow in his career. One of those books completely shifted my mindset: I learned that I needed to take full ownership of my decisions.

That realization was mind-blowing.

When I started taking responsibility not just for my team's successes but also for missed deadlines and project failures, something incredible happened.

- My team began to respect me more because they saw that I wasn't looking for scapegoats.
- Upper management trusted me more because I didn't make excuses. I focused on solutions.

Ownership became my superpower. If something went wrong, I didn't point fingers. I asked: What could I have done differently? How can we fix this?

The missing piece: Influence

However, I quickly learned that taking responsibility for failures wasn't enough. Owning mistakes is one thing; fixing the underlying issues is another.

When I identified workflow inefficiencies or team structure problems, I realized I needed to change the way we worked. But every time I suggested improvements, I was met with resistance:

“Don't change it. We've been doing it this way for years.”

“This process has always worked. Why fix what isn't broken?”

This was my next big lesson: Without influence, I wouldn't get far.

It wasn't enough to see the problems and own them. I had to convince others to change, to improve, and to grow with me.

- I had to influence my team to trust my changes, even when it felt uncomfortable.
- I had to influence upper management to support my ideas, even when they were skeptical.

Mastering both ownership and influence became the turning point in my leadership career.

The results: Real leadership and real growth

Once I had learned to apply both ownership and influence, everything changed. Within a year, I was promoted to director of the department. Two years later, I was managing two development teams in the United States and one offshore team. Our projects became more efficient, our team morale improved, and leadership trusted my decisions.

This transformation wasn't luck; it was a result of mastering two principles:

- Ownership gives you credibility.
- Influence gives you the power to create change.

That is my story of successfully combining these. In this book, I'll show you how you can achieve the same success, whether in your career or personal life.

What you'll get from this book

This isn't a book filled with theoretical fluff. It's a playbook for action. Here's what you'll learn.

Part I: Personal Development—Mastering Ownership

Before you can lead others, you need to master leading yourself. We'll cover:

- The psychology of motivation—why some people achieve goals while others stall
- How to break through resistance, characterized by procrastination, fear, and self-doubt
- Practical exercises to shift from excuses to action
- How to build habits that align with your long-term success

Part II: Professional Growth—Mastering Influence

Once you take ownership, the next step is learning to inspire others. You'll learn:

- The ethical principles of persuasion (without manipulation)
- How to build trust and credibility in professional settings
- The difference between influence and authority, and why the best leaders use influence
- Real-world case studies of people who turned failure into success through ownership and influence

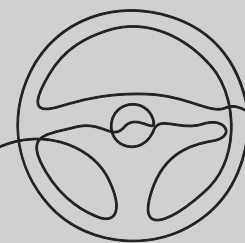
A CHALLENGE BEFORE WE BEGIN

Before you dive in, I want to ask you a question:

What is one area of your life right now where you feel stuck? What would change if you took full ownership of it? What could you accomplish if you learned to influence others to support your vision?

This book isn't here to motivate you temporarily. It's here to give you the mindset and tools to take control permanently. By the end of this journey, you won't just understand ownership and influence—you'll embody them.

Are you ready to take the wheel? Let's go.

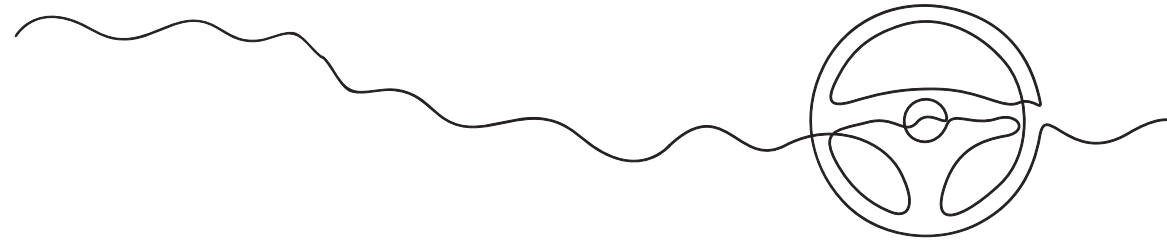


PART I: PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

MASTERING OWNERSHIP

Before you can lead others, you must lead yourself—and that begins with ownership. Personal development isn't just about learning new skills or reading more books; it's about taking full responsibility for your choices, habits, and mindset.

In this part, we'll explore what it means to truly own your actions, overcome internal resistance, and create the foundation for sustainable success. Because the truth is, no one's coming to fix your motivation, eliminate your excuses, or hand you a plan. That job belongs to you—and it starts now.



CHAPTER 1

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MOTIVATION

*People often say that motivation doesn't last.
Well, neither does bathing. That's why we
recommend it daily.*

—Zig Ziglar

Ever tried pushing a dead car uphill? That's what chasing goals without motivation feels like. Now imagine that your brain has a built-in turbocharger—because it does. But here's the tricky part: Some people are fueled by high-octane ambition, while others are barely running on fumes. Understanding what drives you and knowing how to harness it is key to achieving your goals.

In this chapter, we'll dive into the fascinating psychology of motivation: What lights a fire under some people and leaves others stuck on the couch.

We'll also uncover the key to leveraging two powerful types of motivation— intrinsic and extrinsic—to keep yourself moving forward.

WHAT REALLY DRIVES US

<-- Not self-determined					Self-determined -->
No motivation	Extrinsic motivation				Intrinsic motivation
	External regulation	Introjected regulation	Identified regulation	Integrated regulation	
Impersonal: —No control —Incompetence —No choice —No intention	Externally motivated	Somewhat externally motivated	Somewhat internally motivated	Internally motivated	Internally motivated: —High pleasure —Satisfaction —Interest —Fun —Engagement
	Rewards	Ego involvement	High perceived value	Synthesis with self	
	Punishment	Competing	Personally important	Integrated into self-concept	
	Obedience	Pride or guilt			
	Compliance				

Figure 1: Extrinsic and intrinsic factors that motivate us.

Psychologists and behavioral scientists have long studied human motivation, trying to understand what truly drives people to take action. Some of the most influential research has come from Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, who developed the self-determination theory³ (SDT), which explains the role of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Daniel Pink, in his book *Drive*,⁴ also explored how traditional reward-based motivation (carrots and

3 Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, "Self-Determination Theory," *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, ed. Paul A. M. Van Lange, Arie W. Kruglanski, and E. Tory Higgins (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012), 416–433.

4 Daniel H. Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (Riverhead Books, 2009).

sticks) often fails to create long-term engagement, especially in creative or intellectual work.

Despite the countless theories, most explanations of motivation boil down to two fundamental forces, the carrot and the stick:

- **The carrot:** The promise of a reward. It could be a paycheck, a promotion, a bonus, or even a simple pat on the back from your boss or peers. The idea is simple: If you know there's something desirable at the finish line, you're more likely to push yourself forward.
- **The stick:** The fear of a negative consequence. This could be missing out, failing, facing criticism, disappointing someone important, or worse. When you fear the outcome of inaction, you're more likely to step up.

Both carrots and sticks can be powerful, but the key to sustainable motivation is knowing which one works best for you in different situations. Some people thrive on positive reinforcement, while others respond more to the pressure of accountability. However, if you want to unlock what truly drives you, you need to understand the deeper distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivation: The drive from within

This type of motivation comes from personal satisfaction, curiosity, and a sense of purpose. It's what makes you stay up late working on a side project because you're genuinely excited about it, or what keeps you going with a hobby you love—even without external rewards.

Examples

- Learning a new skill because you enjoy the challenge
- Solving a complex problem just for the thrill of figuring it out
- Creating art, writing, or coding because it brings you joy
- Volunteering because it aligns with your values

Preeminent University of Chicago psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi described this as being in a state of “flow”—where you’re so deeply engaged in an activity that time seems to disappear. Intrinsic motivation is often the most sustainable because it’s tied to your core values and passions rather than external factors.

Extrinsic motivation: The drive from external rewards and pressures

This form of motivation comes from external rewards or pressures, whether it’s money, recognition, or fear of punishment. Extrinsic motivation can be incredibly powerful for short-term goals, like hitting a sales target or studying for an exam. However, research suggests that if it’s the only motivator, it can lead to burnout or disengagement over time.

Examples

- Working late to secure a promotion or bonus
- Studying hard to get a good grade
- Following workplace rules to avoid getting reprimanded
- Competing in a race for the trophy, not the love of running

Best-selling author Daniel Pink, who developed a popular theory identifying the drivers of motivation, argues that while extrinsic rewards work for simple, repetitive tasks, they can hinder performance in creative or complex work because they shift focus from enjoyment and mastery to chasing rewards.

Motivation quiz: What drives you?

To better understand what motivates you, take this quick quiz. Answer the following questions honestly. Note that there are no right or wrong answers.

1. What excites you most about completing a big project?

- A. The satisfaction of mastering a new challenge
- B. The recognition and reward that come with success

2. When learning a new skill, what keeps you going?

- A. The joy of discovering something new and improving
- B. Knowing that it will help you land a promotion or win an award

3. Imagine you’re training for a marathon. What keeps you committed?

- A. The thrill of pushing your limits and proving to yourself you can do it
- B. The medal, the applause, and the sense of accomplishment from crossing the finish line

4. How do you approach workplace success?

- A. I find meaning in my work, and I thrive when I feel challenged and engaged.
- B. I’m driven by career advancement, salary increases, and public recognition.

5. If you could choose your ideal reward after completing a tough task, what would it be?

- A. The deep satisfaction of knowing I did something meaningful.
- B. A tangible prize, like a bonus, trophy, or public acknowledgment.

This is your motivation type:

- a. **Mostly As?** You’re primarily driven by **intrinsic motivation**. You find fulfillment in growth, challenge, and personal meaning.
- b. **Mostly Bs?** You’re primarily driven by **extrinsic motivation**. External rewards and recognition push you to excel.
- c. **A mix of both?** That’s the ideal balance! Most people thrive on a blend of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Understanding the result

Knowing what motivates you helps you own your drive and make better decisions—whether it’s choosing the right career path, setting goals, or leading others effectively. It also helps you understand and influence those around you, a key trait of great leaders.

The magic of combining both

The most successful individuals don't rely solely on intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. They learn to master a balance of the two. They find joy and purpose in their work, driven by a personal connection to what they do. But they're also savvy enough to recognize that external rewards—recognition, achievement, opportunity—can serve as powerful accelerators. It's not a choice between one or the other. It's about harnessing both forces to move with purpose and momentum.

Think of intrinsic motivation as your engine. It's what keeps you going when no one's watching, what gets you out of bed when the applause fades, what keeps the flame alive through long hours and uphill climbs. It's the part of you that says, "This matters," even when no one is handing out gold stars.

Now think of extrinsic motivation as the turbo boost. It's the tight deadline that forces clarity. It's the promotion that opens doors. It's the client praise, the team celebration, the reward that reminds you your work has impact and reach.

Together, these two forces create what I like to call motivational alignment. You're no longer torn between doing what you love and chasing results. You're doing both. And when your passion and performance are aligned, that's when the magic happens.

This is the balance Olympic athletes strike when they train for years fueled by love of the sport—and when they show up on race day hungry for the medal. It's what drives great entrepreneurs who are obsessed with solving problems and who also keep their eyes on quarterly growth. It's how leaders earn trust and deliver results without burning out or burning bridges.

And here's the best part: You can train to achieve this balance. You can learn to recognize what genuinely lights you up and then structure your environment to reward those behaviors. You can take stock of what motivates you today and adjust to stay aligned with your goals, values, and energy.

At the end of the day, motivation isn't something you wait for. It's something you build by combining the fire within with the fuel around you.

How you can apply this to your own life

Balancing intrinsic and extrinsic motivation isn't just for world-class leaders and athletes. It's a formula anyone can apply to their career and personal growth.

Find what intrinsically excites you. What do you enjoy doing, even without rewards? What challenges feel rewarding on their own?

Use extrinsic motivators to stay accountable. Deadlines, financial goals, and recognition can help push you forward when intrinsic motivation wanes.

Blend both for long-term success. The most successful people align what they love doing with external incentives that keep them disciplined and focused.

At the end of the day, motivation isn't just about what gets you started—it's about what keeps you going. Mastering both ownership and influence means knowing how to fuel yourself internally while also leveraging external motivators to maximize your impact.

THE SCIENCE OF MOTIVATION

This is essentially about how your brain fuels drive and achievement. Motivation is deeply rooted in neuroscience, with one of the key players being **dopamine**, a neurotransmitter often referred to as the brain's feel-good chemical. Briefly put, it functions as your brain's reward system. It acts as a mechanism that reinforces behaviors that help us achieve goals. This is why something as simple as checking off a to-do list item, finishing a workout, or completing a difficult task can feel so satisfying.

For decades, neuroscientists and psychologists have studied dopamine's role in motivation and decision-making. One of the most respected researchers in this field is Wolfram Schultz, the University of Cambridge neuroscientist who is credited with discovering that dopamine levels spike not only when

we achieve a goal but also when we simply anticipate a reward. This means that motivation doesn't just get us to the finish line. It's driven by the excitement and expectation of success itself.

The science behind dopamine and motivation. Dopamine is produced in the ventral tegmental area (VTA) of the brain and released into key areas like the nucleus accumbens and prefrontal cortex, which are responsible for reward processing, motivation, and decision-making.

My key findings from neuroscience research

- Dopamine plays a crucial role in “wanting” rather than just “liking.” This means that motivation is less about the pleasure of achieving a goal and more about the drive to pursue it.⁵
- Dopamine is self-reinforcing. Each small win releases dopamine, which fuels motivation to keep going. This is why setting small, incremental goals can help sustain long-term motivation.⁶
- Dopamine levels are highest when we are in pursuit of a goal, rather than when we achieve it. This explains why the journey itself can often feel more exciting than reaching the destination.⁷

Case study: Gamification and dopamine

Consider fitness apps like Strava or Duolingo, which use gamification to tap into dopamine's power. These apps set up small, achievable goals like completing a daily workout or maintaining a learning streak. Each time users hit these goals, they're rewarded with badges, progress bars, or cheerful notifications.

For instance, one Strava user, Angela, began using the app to track her running.

Initially, her goal was simple: Run twice a week. But as she achieved her goals and received virtual badges, her motivation increased. Over time, Angela went from casual running to training for a half-marathon, fueled by the dopamine boosts she got from incremental progress and recognition.

Real-life example: Small wins at work

John, a project manager, struggled to keep his team motivated during a long and complex product development cycle. To address this, he broke the project into smaller milestones and celebrated each win, no matter how small. For instance, when the team completed a design prototype, he held a short meeting to acknowledge their efforts. This simple act of recognition triggered a sense of accomplishment in his team members, releasing dopamine and maintaining their momentum. By the time the product launched, the team was energized and confident, thanks to the positive reinforcement along the way.

Practical takeaways for harnessing dopamine

- **Set small, achievable goals:** Break big tasks into smaller steps. Each accomplishment will give you a dopamine boost, keeping you motivated.
- **Celebrate wins:** Whether it's a cup of coffee after finishing a report or sharing progress with a friend, find ways to reward yourself.
- **Use visual progress tools:** Charts, streak trackers, and progress bars can reinforce the sense of achievement.
- **Leverage anticipation:** Remind yourself of the rewards ahead, whether it's a long-term goal like a promotion or short-term gratification like enjoying a day off.

Studies show that dopamine release is higher when rewards are unexpected. This is why surprises or spontaneous celebrations can have an outsize impact on motivation and morale.

5 Kent C. Berridge, “Anticipation Drives Action,” *The Journal of Neuroscience* 32, no. 14 (April 4, 2012): 1–5.

6 Andrew Huberman, “The Feedback Loop of Achievement,” Huberman Lab Podcast, episode 12, Huberman Lab, 2021, <https://hubermanlab.com>.

7 Robert Sapolsky, “Dopamine and the Pursuit of Goals,” lecture, Stanford University, 2010, <https://youtu.be/axrywDP9li0>.

Small wins fuel big momentum. So instead of waiting for the perfect moment, just take the first step. By understanding and leveraging its effects, you can create an environment—both for yourself and others—that sustains enthusiasm and drives consistent progress.

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MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Abraham Maslow's famous pyramid, introduced in 1943, outlines a hierarchy of human needs that drive motivation. The pyramid is divided into five levels, starting with the most basic physiological needs and progressing to self-actualization. Here's a breakdown of each level:

1. **Physiological needs:** These are the fundamental requirements for survival, such as food, water, shelter, and sleep. Without meeting these needs, higher levels of motivation are difficult to achieve.
2. **Safety needs:** Once physiological needs are met, the focus shifts to safety and security. This includes physical safety, financial stability, and health.
3. **Love and belonging:** At this level, individuals seek relationships, friendships, and a sense of community. Emotional connections become a significant motivator.
4. **Esteem needs:** This level is about gaining recognition, respect, and a sense of accomplishment. It's divided into two categories: Self-esteem (personal pride) and esteem from others (status and recognition).
5. **Self-actualization:** The pinnacle of the hierarchy, self-actualization involves achieving one's full potential, pursuing personal growth, and engaging in meaningful activities.

Identify where you are in Maslow's pyramid

Understanding your position in Maslow's hierarchy can help you focus on the needs most relevant to your current situation. Here are three steps to determine your place:

1. **Evaluate your current priorities:** Reflect on whether your focus is on basic survival (e.g., financial stability), relationships, or personal growth.
2. **Assess unmet needs:** Identify which level feels most unfulfilled. For example, if you have stable finances but feel isolated, your focus might be on belonging.
3. **Set targeted goals:** Use your insights to set achievable goals for the next level. For instance, if you're addressing esteem needs, consider taking on a challenging project to boost confidence.

Case study: My journey through Maslow's hierarchy

At 30 years old, I arrived in the United States from Moldova, a small, tidy Eastern European country with a complicated history and an edge in technology, wedged between Ukraine and Romania. I stepped off the airplane with nothing but a single bag of clothes and a few bucks in my pocket. For eleven years there, I had worked as a web developer, yet when I entered this new country, none of that seemed to matter. My biggest challenge wasn't technical skills or experience. It was language and adapting.

For the first year, I stayed at my mother's house, trying to find my footing. I was determined to build a career here, but with poor English skills, I knew that finding a job in my field right away would be nearly impossible. I had to start from the bottom, not just financially but socially and linguistically.

Step 1: Fulfill physiological needs



Figure 2: Maslow's hierarchy of needs pyramid.

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs,⁸ before we can focus on career success, recognition, or purpose, we must first secure our basic needs—shelter, food, and stability. While I had a place to stay, I was far from financial independence.

To support myself, I took a job at Woody's Liquor & Fine Wine store, working the day shift from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. As an engineer with a master's degree in computer science, this wasn't the job I envisioned for myself, but

⁸ Abraham H. Maslow, *A Theory of Human Motivation* (Harper & Row, 1943).

my priority at this stage wasn't about working in my field. This was just a stepping stone.

At night, I continued working as a freelance web developer, often staying up until 3 a.m. to meet client deadlines. On top of that, I signed up for free English classes at the Clearwater Adult Education Center. My schedule was brutal—working during the day, studying in the evening, coding at night—but I knew this was the price of progress.

I wasn't just working for money. I was working toward moving up to the next step of Maslow's pyramid: Love and belonging.

Step 2: Love and belonging. Building connections through language

One of my biggest realizations was that financial stability alone wasn't enough. If I wanted to truly integrate into my new home, I needed to connect with people, communicate, and belong.

That's why I chose to work at the liquor store—not just for the paycheck, but for the opportunity to interact with people and improve my English. Every conversation, every transaction, every question from a customer was a mini language lesson.

At the same time, my English classes were helping me gain confidence. Within a year, I had successfully graduated from the program, and for the first time, I felt ready to take the next step: reentering my field as a developer.

Step 3: Achieving stability. Landing my first U.S. tech job

With my language skills improving, I felt prepared to move up to the next level—Esteem, where I could regain recognition for my skills and start building a career again.

I started applying for jobs, and within a year, I successfully passed an interview and landed a job as a lead web developer at a small local company. For the first time since moving to the U.S., I had achieved financial

independence and stability. I had officially completed the first levels of Maslow's hierarchy and was on my way to professional growth.

The power of understanding where you are. Looking back, I realize that understanding Maslow's hierarchy of needs helped me create a clear road map for success. Instead of focusing on where I wanted to be, I recognized where I was, and that allowed me to take deliberate steps forward:

- First, I secured my basic needs.
- Then, I focused on belonging, learning the language, and connecting with people.
- Finally, I climbed back into my career, achieving financial and professional growth.

For anyone feeling stuck, this framework can provide clarity for you, too. It will guide you to identify where you are, make a plan, and take strategic steps to move forward.

Now, as I reflect on my journey, I see how ownership and influence played a key role. I took ownership of my situation, refused to make excuses, and strategically influenced my own future by making decisions that helped me climb step-by-step toward success.

And that's exactly what this book is about, helping you take ownership of your journey and influence your path forward.

Practical strategies to boost motivation

Find your why: Ask yourself why your goal matters. Is it for external rewards, or does it connect to a deeper purpose? Write down your reasons and revisit them often.

Break it down: Big goals can feel overwhelming. Break them into smaller, manageable steps to build momentum and avoid procrastination.

Use visual reminders: Create a vision board or keep reminders of your goals where you can see them daily. Visual cues can keep you focused and motivated.

Reward yourself: Pair small milestones with small rewards. For example, treat yourself to a favorite snack after completing a task.

Stay accountable: Share your goals with someone you trust. Regular check-ins can help keep you on track and provide encouragement.

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*Did you know that people who write down their goals are 42% more likely to achieve them? There's something powerful about putting your intentions on paper. So, grab a pen and start writing!*⁹

Actionable exercise: Your motivation map

Write down one goal you're currently working on.

- Identify the intrinsic motivators behind it (e.g., passion, curiosity, growth).
- List any extrinsic motivators (e.g., money, recognition, rewards).
- Combine them: How can you use both to stay motivated?
- Identify one small action step you can take today to move closer to your goal.

Now that you better understand what drives motivation, let's tackle the biggest roadblock: resistance. Whether it's procrastination, fear, or doubt, it's time to overcome these mental barriers so you can take ownership of your success.

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 9 Gail Matthews, "The Impact of Commitment, Accountability, and Written Goals on Goal Achievement" (paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 2015), Dominican University of California.