

10 No-Nonsense Behaviors That Lead To Exceptional Performance

Written by Neal Whitten, PMP



I want to talk to you about you... Success does not just happen — it is made to happen.

Success is born of behaviors and choices that lead to exceptional performance. In this article, I will reveal 10 important leading-edge, best-practice, results-oriented behaviors that will promote your professional and personal success. These are no-nonsense behaviors that I have observed over the years as being common among those who are the most successful.

Many of these behaviors you already know but you may not routinely practice. Some of these behaviors are often avoided. As you strive to achieve your dreams, these behaviors can lay the foundation for your journey. This article and each of the 10 behaviors apply to both PMs and BAs. Be prepared to rethink what constitutes effective behavior. As a senior guy who has been around the proverbial block many times, I will tell you: This stuff works!

Break The Rules Occasionally

Top performers break the rules occasionally. Pat McCarty, one of the 25 interviewed subjects in my award-winning book, *The Gift of Wisdom: Lessons for a Lifetime*, said, “Workplace rules are made for 95% of employees 95% of the time.” Pat was not talking about breaking ethical or legal rules. She was talking about taking some risks—going

outside the norm—pushing the envelope. If you would like to achieve exceptional performance, then you must think like an exceptional performer.

Oftentimes, you will find that following conventional rules will not effectively or efficiently solve an issue. Although few so-called “rules” are written within an organization, many rules are perceived; and it’s the perceived rules that often cause members to limit their initiatives. You want to earn the reputation of thinking out of the box—of being creative in solving issues. Examples are proposing a radical new approach to solving a problem, joining forces with an unlikely person or group in tackling an issue or taking the initiative to doggedly pursue an issue to closure. I have found that, in most cases, it is better to beg forgiveness than to ask permission.

Manage Daily To The Top 3 Priorities

My experience is that most project leaders—most employees—do not know how to effectively manage their time. While most people start their day with a to-do list, the list is typically picked apart by working on the low-hanging fruit—the easier items; while the more important tasks continue to be deferred like kicking a can down the road. I have found that the #1 reason why projects get in trouble is that the project’s top three problems—or priorities—were not worked on a daily basis and resolved with the sense of urgency they require. It is your ability to solve your top three priorities that define your value and contributions to your project and organization and, ultimately, your career.

If I were to put you on the spot and ask you to state your top three priorities that you currently have going on with your project, and if you could not rattle them off in three snaps of the fingers, you are not a consistently effective leader. You might say, “How dare you judge me with so little information. I believe I am a good leader. Give me a few moments to think about my top three priorities, and I will identify them.” But if you can’t immediately identify them then it tells me that you do not manage to your top three priorities each day. Instead, you are managed by interruptions, noise, and minutia that come your way throughout the day.

You should start your day with a to-do list that identifies your top three priorities, successfully resolve—or put a plan in place to resolve—each of the top three priorities within a few days, replace them with new priorities—then repeat.

Never Avoid Necessary Confrontation

How you manage conflict can determine the difference between a highly effective leader or a wannabee. By “conflict” I mean “disagreement, variance or potential collision with another’s views or intentions.” Facing problems and solving them often require confrontation with another person. Do not be intimidated by others. It is important to be decisive in ensuring that the best business decision is made—even when others may not be happy with your decision.

Let’s look at an example. Let’s say that I am a highly effective PM. An ineffective PM and I will have similar project-related problems to deal with: availability of staffing, acquiring members with the right skills, technology issues, sufficient funding, poor

estimates, project scope creep, working with difficult clients or management, uncooperative project members, and so on. My experience—no matter how extensive—does not mean that I am immune to these common problems.

The key difference between my behavior and that of an ineffective PM's behavior is that I will likely confront problems more quickly, with the sense of urgency and importance that they deserve, while the less-effective PM may tend to avoid conflict, causing many of these problems to drift. I will go after problems before they have a chance to morph into more serious issues. I will never avoid necessary confrontation and will practice the philosophy that problems do not go away unless I take appropriate action to mitigate them. Less-effective PMs tend to be too soft and less sure of themselves and the appropriate action to take. The avoidance of necessary conflict is a hallmark of the less effective.

Routinely Practice Boldness And Courage

You cannot be a consistently effective leader or reach a high level of performance maturity if you don't demonstrate boldness and courage. Your behavior drives your success.

By boldness, I mean the act of responding to a situation in a manner that may be viewed as daring to some, but is essential to address the issue at hand. I do not mean being rude, reckless, insensitive, or arrogant. I mean doing whatever is necessary to achieve the objective (provided, of course, that it is legal and ethical). Boldness is all about taking the initiative—especially where others may hesitate or withdraw.

By courage, I mean the act of confronting a fear—something that we may be afraid of. The number-one reason why leaders fail is that they are too soft; they have weak backbones. (The #1 reason why projects fail is because the project manager is too soft to manage to the top three priorities on a daily basis.) They lack the courage to be as effective as they should be and need to be. It's not easy standing up to those around you, be they executives, clients, vendors, contractors, peers, or team members. But if you expect to be consistently successful as a leader, you must demonstrate the courage to lead yourself and your team to success. It's not about effort or lofty intentions; it's about results.

If you do not believe that you have the courage that you most desire, then just fake it. You heard me correctly: Just fake it. No one can tell the difference between real courage and fake courage. The good news, however, is that you become what you think about all day long. If you consistently think and act on your courageous thoughts, you actually will become courageous over time.

Do Not Allow What Others Think About You...

Do not allow what others think about you to be more important than what you think about yourself. If you do, then it can immobilize you—stop you in your tracks. Do not give another person that power over you.

For example, do not come to work each day with the primary objective of being liked. If you do, you will likely be disappointed throughout your career. Even the people who you love and who love you don't always like you. So you know the people you work with will not always like your behaviors. Keep in mind that other people's opinions are just that—opinions. Listen for any helpful snippets but remain in control of you.

Inspect What You Expect

Don't trust that things are progressing smoothly or will work out okay on their own. Instead, require plans and metrics so that you can talk about tangible work and progress. Many leaders think that "inspecting what you are expecting" is micromanaging. It's not. It's good leadership. Micromanaging is telling someone what to do, when to do it, how to do it, etc. ...you get the picture.

The phrase "inspect what you expect" has been around for a long time, but its message goes unheeded for many leaders. Who hasn't had a project where a team member insists that things are fine ...that the delivery will be on schedule and will meet the quality expected? But then the delivery date arrives, and it's not ready. This has happened to all of us. But we need to learn. As Albert Einstein was quoted, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over but expecting different results." Blind trust can be a huge mistake.

Live In Your Present Moments

Present moments are all you have. The past does not exist, nor does the future. All we have are our present moments. I know I must be sounding a bit ethereal, but this is an important concept. For example, I know a lot of folks who have made a big mistake somewhere in their business or personal lives and cannot let go of the negative feeling—the guilt—that remains with them. They often change their personality and emotionally go into a fetal position around others.

You have the ability to be fully engaged in your present moments but when you are carrying guilt from your past or worry for your future—both negative emotions—you are no longer fully invested in your present moments. Therefore, you will not be nearly as effective as you could be.

Don't Make It Personal Or Take It Personally

It's all about what's best for the business. To make it personal or to take it personally is professional immaturity. Whether intentional or not, we have all been guilty of demonstrating professional immaturity on some occasion in our past.

Also, don't allow others to turn a business issue into a personal issue. Take the high road. If you succumb to taking or making it personal, the outcome can be harmed relationships with those you work as well as damaging to your career. When you can positively control your emotions, you will find that coworkers are more likely to want to work with you.

The most successful leaders don't make things personal. Instead, they know it's just business and behave accordingly. You should care about success. You should work with passion and take ownership of everything that can affect your domain of responsibility. But in the end, when the dust has settled, it's all about what's best for the business.

Be A Good Actor

First, define whom you choose to be. Then be a good actor to transform that vision into reality. This often requires you to learn to manage your emotions. As I said earlier, you become what you think about all day long. Now that you know the behaviors you most want to mimic, act them out and do so with passion and conviction. You want to convince your audience. Although acting might sound a bit insincere, it's not. This is how you transform your behaviors. You first think about a behavior to adopt. Then you act on that thought to replace an old behavior with the more desirable behavior.

Evaluate Yourself Daily

Dr. Yung-Chen Lu, another person interviewed in my aforementioned book, said, "Always ask yourself how you can grow from your daily experiences." Here's a technique that can help you grow your leadership skills and become more effective today than you were yesterday—and even more effective tomorrow than you are today.

At the start of each workday—when you are at your freshest—spend a few quiet moments reflecting both on your noteworthy achievements from the day before as well as on your "missed opportunities." Make two lists: the top three things that you did that made a difference for the best and the top three things you did (or failed to do) that made a difference for the worse.

Basing today's actions, in part, on yesterday's behavior enables you to adjust via lessons learned. Moreover, this immediate self-assessment can help you recover from missteps while the trail is still warm and deliberate recovery actions can have the most beneficial impact.

Performing the adjustments routinely—preferably each day—can have a strikingly positive impact on your effectiveness as a leader. So much so, I assert you would be pleasantly surprised with your transformation after applying this technique for one year.

We often avoid self-assessments, especially if they are routine, because we prefer to avoid any reminders of our so-called "failures." But, as professionals, these self-assessments of our actions are essential for our continued growth, maturity and effectiveness.

In Closing...

I believe that everyone has the capacity to be a consistently successful leader. Everyone! Although some may be more effective than others, or rise to greater heights, this does not diminish the great opportunities for turning your vision into reality. All the

attributes of a successful leader can be learned and practiced if you choose to do so.
Believe you can make a difference... and you will!

Now, go become your imagined self!

This article was published in PMTimes.com by Macgregor Communications in October 2016.