

Be the Protagonist of your life: 15 Rules

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BE THE PROTAGONIST OF YOUR LIFE: 15 RULES

Over the last few years, I've enjoyed a steadily growing following on LinkedIn. I'm very grateful for that, so thank you if you're one of them. To understand what you and others like, appreciate and think about, I often read comments and, occasionally, engage in discussions to better understand your viewpoints.

Based on this reading and interaction, I'm seeing a pattern among those engaging: you're all protagonists! The term originates from literature and refers to the main character of the story. It's the character that takes charge and makes things happen, rather than have things happen to them. Protagonists set the direction for their lives, rather than being the victims of circumstances.

In almost all discussions, the topic concerns the change that's required, the resistance many of you experience when driving these changes, the tactics that can be used to overcome the resistance and the frustration of organizations changing too slowly and, consequently, increasing their risk of disruption.

These last years, I've written about companies and technology, but little about how to operate as a professional and change agent in a rapidly digitalizing world. The challenge is that it may easily become presumptuous and a bit arrogant, which is what I want to avoid as I'm as much a student as anyone reading this and just trying to figure it out as I go along.

However, having worked with quite a few companies, with hundreds, if not thousands, of people, and having observed and having been involved in successful and not-so-successful examples, I believe I have some credibility to share my reflections and thoughts on how to successfully lead and change companies as well as yourself. Here are 15 lessons I believe are worthwhile to consider. In the coming posts, I plan to discuss each of them in more detail and discuss examples, both positive and negative, from cases I've worked with in the past.

1. Own it

No matter what happens, what the root cause is or what the consequences are, you always have a choice: you can be the victim of the situation or you can take ownership of it. You need to own whatever happens and act, rather than rely on others to take action.

2. Have a purpose

Whether life has an absolute purpose or you view life as meaningless in and of itself, you need to find or select a purpose and define it in actionable terms for yourself. The purpose has to go beyond yourself and be something you put yourself in service of.

3. Compete intentionally

After millennia of scarcity, humans are hardwired to compete in hierarchies and exert themselves to prove themselves to be better than others. In modern life, and with scarcity largely exterminated, the number of hierarchies to compete in is infinite. This means that you need to put your energy into competing in hierarchies that align with your purpose and that matter to you, yours and the world.

4. Question everything including yourself

Especially older, mature companies have the norms, values and ways of working ingrained in the walls. Senior leaders are typically selected because they embody these norms and values and personify the ways of working. In a rapidly digitalizing and changing world, however, the old approaches are the surest path to go the way of the dinosaurs. To break out of this, you have to use questions to convert implicit beliefs into explicit arguments that can then be disproven. This applies not only to others but also to yourself.

5. Hell yes or no

Many of us spend vast amounts of time on activities that add very little to our lives, our purpose or the people around us. For a variety of reasons, we tend to accept too many responsibilities, projects and tasks. The only way to get better at this is to be more selective. One effective strategy is the “hell yes or no” strategy: if a proposal doesn’t trigger a fire in your belly but is more “meh,” the answer is no.

6. Get out of your comfort zone

Even if many of us build a comfort zone in our professional lives where we know we’re competent and can deliver, the problem is that nothing grows in our comfort zone. We need to get outside of it to develop. Often it’s the thing you fear that you need to say yes to.

7. Change your mind

Seniors in organizations tend to be respected for sharing their opinions, which are supposed to be based on experience and a competent interpretation of the current state of the product, the company and the world. However, once having gone “on record” concerning a topic, it becomes very hard to change position as it easily comes with a perceived loss of face. Instead, allow yourself to change your mind and share why with others.

8. Use data

During my life, I’ve time and again managed to create stories for myself that, in hindsight, turned out to be complete bullocks. As storytelling machines, we excel at creating stories that provide a level of sense-making. We need to ensure that these stories have a solid grounding in reality and the best way to do so is to use data.

9. Take care of yourself

We can only function at our best if we are at our best. That requires that we take care of ourselves. This has two components: our physical health and our mental health. The two ways to best take care of those are exercise for physical health and meditation for mental health.

10. Study stoicism and Buddhism

Especially when it comes to digitalization, the newest product is typically better than older ones. When it comes to being human, we easily fall into the latest fad as it triggers the novelty button. However, humans have not really changed over the last 200,000 years or so, so when it comes to ourselves, we're better off with established, proven philosophies of life. Two of these are stoicism and Buddhism. Stoicism encourages us to spend our time and energy on things we can control whereas Buddhism encourages us to accept the things in life that we can't change.

11. Give back

Even if Western society tends to focus on the successes of the individual, the fact remains that each of us is the result of an endless chain of people that helped us get to where we are right now. To keep the flywheel going, it's our job to give back and help others achieve their dream and be the protagonist of their own story.

12. Always keep exploring

In many AI algorithms, there's a balance between exploitation, where you use known knowledge to get a known outcome, and exploration, where you experiment with actions of which you don't know the outcome. Exploration is very inefficient as many of the experiments will fail to deliver a positive result. However, you never break out of your comfort zone, you never learn something new and you never change unless you explore.

13. Be proud of who you see in the mirror

During our lives and in the companies we work for or with, we periodically are challenged to agree to courses of action that go against what we'd consider ethically or morally right. The best way to ensure you do the right thing is to apply the mirror metaphor: will you be proud of the person that you see in the mirror if you take this decision or even tacitly support it?

14. Don't take yourself too seriously

Especially as we get older, more experienced and higher up in the tree of the organization we're part of, we tend to start to believe our own cow dung a little too much. And the people around us tend to question us less and less as their future may well be influenced by our view of them. The risk is that you take yourself too seriously and fail to accept that you're most likely wrong most of the time.

15. Memento mori

The final rule is that we should remember that we're going to die. It puts value on everything we spend time on as the amount of life energy we have is limited and many things don't matter in the big picture. It also helps us put things into perspective. For instance, how many famous Sumerians can you name? This was one of the most successful civilizations on Earth. Yet, everything they accomplished is gone and no longer remembered by anyone except for some arcane historians.

George Bernhard Shaw famously said, "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man." We're the protagonists of our own lives. We own the story our lives are unfolding into and we need to take responsibility for it. Life is lived together with others around us and it's easy to fall into a victim role or to succumb to nihilism. To paraphrase J.F. Kennedy, "We do these things not because they are easy, but because they are hard."

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PROTAGONIST RULE #1: OWN IT

Life at work, as well as outside of work, can be very surprising. Lots of unexpected and unwelcome things can happen. Interestingly, if you look at how modern society organizes itself, you realize that much of what we spend time and energy on is concerned with creating predictability in our lives.

The houses we live in are used to keep us warm and dry. Our cars bring us quickly and conveniently from one place to the other. Our mobile phones keep us connected to the internet and the rest of the world. Most companies organize work in a periodic, repeatable and therefore predictable fashion. We have yearly appraisal talks. Agile teams use sprints, sprint plannings and retrospectives as well as daily standups. All this is to create predictability in our lives. Even if it may become boring over time, most of us thrive in a context where routines and habits fill most of our day.

Of course, deep down, we all know that this repeatability and periodicity only bring us the illusion of certainty. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we were all forced out of our work habits and routines and many of us had to develop new practices and ways of working to deal with remote work setup. Others were laid off and lost all their work-related routines.

Over time, however, we found new routines and habits. Many of us now realize that what felt like a major hassle when it happened resulted in a new form of work and life that's actually better than what we had before the pandemic. Hence, many of us still work from home much more than before and the great resignation showed that many of us learned that work maybe wasn't the end-all of life that we might have thought before COVID hit.

The danger is that many of us easily start to feel entitled to the current status quo. We feel we deserve the things our illusion of certainty has created. Many complain about the entitlement culture at work that especially younger generations seem to be sensitive to.

The challenge is that when we're suddenly confronted with negative changes and developments, feeling entitled will easily get us into a state of victimhood. We feel we're the victims of something bad that happened and now somebody else has to go and fix it for us. Rather than addressing the bad situation, we sit around and suffer through things.

A good example of this is the "cancel culture" phenomenon where people that have said or done things that aren't acceptable to the proponents of the movement are ostracized and shunned. The idea is that saying or doing these things hurts other humans and therefore can't be tolerated. Of course, it ignores the fact that being hurt by what other people say or do is a choice that you, as the observer, make. Blaming others for having hurt you by what they said is assuming a victim role.

Taking the victim role is the opposite of being the protagonist of your own life. No matter what happens, what the root cause is or what the consequences are, you always have a choice: you can be the victim of the situation or you can take ownership of it. To be the protagonist, you need to own whatever happens and act, rather than rely on others to take action.

Owning the situation, no matter what it is, doesn't automatically and effortlessly solve everything. Some events truly are completely outside our scope of control or even influence, but it's the mindset that counts. Taking ownership means you do everything you can to address the situation and make things as good as possible under the circumstances.

Of course, I'm far from the first one to suggest this. Already in the Greek and Christian tradition, there's a saying along the lines of "the gods help those who help themselves." More recently, Jocko Willink, a former member of the Seal 3 team, wrote a book entitled "Extreme ownership." The key lesson is that self-initiative and agency are central to work and life in general.

Many of us realize this and I think most of us take ownership of the situations we encounter in life. There is, however, a sneaky pattern that I've at least noticed in my own life: hedging. Whenever the path I'm on becomes difficult and the outcome I felt so confident about starts to become less certain, I start to hedge my bets. I still pursue the goal, but I'm starting to prepare for things not going the way I want. That, of course, causes me to not put everything I have into the path I'm on, which reduces my chances of success even further.

When we're not aware of this, hedging and preparing for the worst-case outcome will erode the path we're on and, over time, become a self-fulfilling prophecy. As Walt Kelly wrote in his Pogo comic strip: "We've seen the enemy and he is us." We all know people who are masters of self-inflicted failures and pain.

For all our efforts to make our lives, at work and home, as predictable and certain as possible, lots of bad surprises happen all the time. We can choose to be the victim of these situations or to be the protagonists of our lives and own it. The big risk for many of us is to start hedging and to start preparing for the, often unlikely, worst-case outcome with the intent of making the pain of failing less bad. In that process, we easily become our own worst enemies. As Alfred Lord Tennyson famously said: "It's better to have tried and failed than to live life wondering what would have happened if I had tried."



PROTAGONIST RULE #2: HAVE A PURPOSE

When Western society to a large extent was religious, Christianity offered a ready-made framework for meaning and purpose. The promise of an eternal afterlife offers a powerful incentive to live life in a way that contributes to the community you're part of. Humans have an internal moral framework and religion aligns with that framework in a way that gives most people a set of guardrails that worked well.

When we "killed God," to use Friedrich Nietzsche's quote, we lost much of that framework. Instead, we were now forced to create our own sense of purpose and reason for being. Humanism filled that gap by a focus on the individual. The idea is that by focusing inside yourself and seeking to uncover your deepest feelings, emotions and desires, you can get connected to your true self and use that as a guide for making decisions in life.

Of course, one of the main traps is that turning inside yourself may very well lead to a realization that there isn't much there. There's no deep, quiet voice telling you what to do. Instead, it may easily become an echo chamber that just repeats the thoughts you've been thinking already. That may lead to an amplification of those thoughts and a vicious cycle where negative thoughts simply get reinforced until you start to live in a constant state of despair.

In the worst case, we end up in a state of nihilism where we may conclude that there's no purpose in anything. That everything is meaningless and that nothing we do will mean anything. This either leads to a state of apathy as there's no reason to take action as there's nothing meaningful to accomplish or a state of hedonism where we simply follow whatever our instincts or impulses tell us. When nothing means anything anyway, we might as well focus on immediate pleasure and satisfaction of the senses.

My experience and view are that humans need a purpose. We need to strive toward something. To achieve a goal. To accomplish something that means something. Humans are wired to compete with others in hierarchies to get higher up the food chain. Millennia of scarcity have hardwired a win-lose

behavior where we instinctively believe that when someone else gets something, we'll have to do without.

Many, especially early in their career, are focused on these extrinsic motivators. Getting promoted, making more money, having a bigger car or house, and so on. All these are examples of people focusing their life energy on competing in a win-lose context. And you can keep going on this treadmill for the rest of your life as there's always a next level to achieve. To use a Dutch saying, the lake is never full.

Most of us have realized the emptiness of the continuous pursuit of a career, money or social status. We need more and, surprisingly, we need a purpose beyond ourselves. When I turned 50, I organized a whole bunch of lunches with people claiming they'd broken out of their comfort zone. Everyone had their own fascinating story to tell, but the common theme was that everyone wanted to die knowing that they'd contributed to making this world a slightly better place for humanity.

For all the talk about competition and outperforming others, in the end we're innately social beings that want to contribute to the community we're part of. And in my experience, contentment and satisfaction with that life that you live come from putting yourself in service of a goal and purpose that's bigger than yourself. We all want our life to mean something and as we're all going to die, the focus has to be on something outside of ourselves to even have a chance of having a lasting impact.

To make it concrete and provide an example, this is how I think about my purpose. Life is full of suffering. Some of that suffering is unavoidable, such as death and incurable diseases. Other types are avoidable. When we look at the progress humankind has made over the last decades and centuries, we can see that technology has been at the heart of most of it. Technology has changed types of unavoidable suffering into types of avoidable suffering and then developed the tools to remove that suffering from the world. For instance, all of the diseases we were vaccinated against as children used to kill or maim many. With vaccines, we've managed to remove that suffering from the world, at least in most places.

Focusing on technology, the digital technologies currently have enormous potential to improve life for humankind. Software, data and artificial intelligence offer endless opportunities to reduce and remove suffering in the world. Just the development of advanced driver support solutions and autonomous driving systems has the potential of saving tens if not hundreds of thousands of deaths in traffic accidents.

In my view, the main problem isn't the initial development of these technologies, but rather their adoption. As William Gibson wrote, the future is already here; it's just not evenly distributed. So, my purpose is to do what I can to accelerate the adoption of digital technologies in industry and society. This is why I run Software Center, consult with companies and work with and invest in startups. It's what I believe is the best I can do to reduce suffering in the world and improve humankind.

It took me a long, long time to get a clear understanding of this and to be able to formulate it. And yet, when I look back, I believe that this has implicitly been my basic drive for a large part of my career. Being able to formulate it explicitly has helped me structure my thinking and my actions to ensure they're more in line with what I aspire to accomplish and contribute to.

Whether life has an absolute purpose or you view it as meaningless in and of itself, you need to find or select a purpose and define it in actionable terms for yourself. It has to go beyond yourself and something you put yourself in service of. What purpose you choose is entirely up to you, but failing to choose a purpose may easily cause you to waste your life. You need to own it and put your time and energy into it. In the end, your life depends on it. As Richard Leider so eloquently said, the purpose of life is to live a life of purpose.



PROTAGONIST RULE #3: COMPETE INTENTIONALLY

For almost all of human history, we lived in scarcity. We lacked food, housing and safety and lived in small communities that could easily be wiped out by competing tribes. It's hard to imagine for most of us, but famines occurred regularly. Warfare between tribes was the norm in many regions of the world. And being ostracized and expelled from the community you were born into was a death sentence.

The notion of scarcity introduces the need for competition. If there's only enough food for one of us, I'd rather be the one that gets to consume it as my innate desire to live will cause me to choose myself over the other person. Or, by extension, I prefer for my children to live even if that means that those of someone else might not.

After millennia of scarcity, humans are hardwired to compete. As we do not only compete one on one but also in groups, this causes us to build hierarchies. These hierarchies then become our focus and we constantly strive to get one up on our nearest competitors.

According to Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson, humanity has twice as many mothers as fathers among our ancestors. The explanation is that in prehistoric tribes, the women would only choose men in the top half of the male hierarchy for mating. The men in the bottom half never got to have offspring. So, competing and clawing your way up the male hierarchy was literally a battle of life and death for your genes. And, of course, the consequence is that we're the progeny of the most competitive individuals among homo sapiens and drawn to competition.

Very few living in the Western world are experiencing scarcity at an existential level. We all have food, housing and safety. So, in many ways, the need to compete has no existential basis anymore. However, millennia of natural selection don't just disappear overnight and we all have an innate need for and drive to compete.

The challenge is, of course, that in modern life, the number of hierarchies to compete in is infinite. We compete in sports, animal breeding, beauty, investing, fashion, art, cars, housing, careers, travel, social media and numerous other arenas. There's no end to the opportunities offered by society and industry to spend your energy and time in competitions of a wide variety of categories.

If you want to be the protagonist of your life and be successful at work as well as in life in general, this means that you need to be careful in the competitions you engage in. It's important to put your energy into competing in hierarchies that align with your purpose and that matter to you, yours and the world.

In general, my experience is that two factors are beneficial to consider when thinking about where to expend your life energy and time: intrinsic motivators and competing with yourself. Most of us will know the notion of extrinsic versus intrinsic motivators. The former are concerned with focusing on external rewards, such as money, praise and fame. Intrinsic motivators are your internal drivers that align with what you intrinsically experience as meaningful. They're based on autonomy, mastery and purpose. If you feel that what you do matters, you're good at it and you get the freedom to perform the work in the way you want, you're aligning with your intrinsic motivators.

In my experience, focusing your energy and time on your intrinsic motivators is much more rewarding in the long run. Of course, this isn't black and white as, for instance, mastery is often measured in comparison to others. However, competing with others easily becomes a treadmill without end whereas the honing of skills and capabilities over time is inherently rewarding in and of itself.

The second factor is concerned with who you compete with. Although much of modern culture is focused on competing with others, if only because it aligns so well with our genetic makeup, in my experience it's much more rewarding and valuable to compete with yourself. To focus on small, continuous improvements that make you a little bit better today than what you were yesterday, last week or last year.

If you're not intentional about carefully selecting where to compete and where to ignore competition, it's very easy to spend your energy and time on a wide variety of things where you don't make any reasonable progress. You can easily spread yourself too thin. Even when you focus on one or a few hierarchies to compete in, but these don't align with your purpose or you focus mostly on competing with others instead of yourself, you'll lose motivation over time. In my experience, people can accomplish great things only if there's a deep, innate drive that is sustained over time. And this requires internal alignment with your purpose and intrinsic motivation.

We're genetically wired to compete in hierarchies as for most of the history of humankind, we lived in a state of scarcity and it easily came to "either me or the other person." Modern life offers an infinite number of hierarchies to compete in and it's easy to spread yourself too thin competing in too many hierarchies or to compete in those that don't align with your purpose. Instead, focus on competing in areas that are driven by your intrinsic motivators and, where possible, focus on competing with yourself. As Martin Seligman said, just as the good life is something beyond the pleasant life, the meaningful life is beyond the good life.



PROTAGONIST RULE #4: QUESTION EVERYTHING INCLUDING YOURSELF

When I worked in the field of software architecture in the 1990s, the general belief was that the upfront design of a software architecture was critically important as it would be exceedingly difficult to change it once you'd committed to it and started development. I was one of the propagators of this notion and did research on architecture assessment, architecture design decisions, and so on. A few decades later, it's obvious to everyone that the architecture of a software-intensive system can and needs to evolve continuously through architecture refactoring. Agile taught us the YAGNI principle (You Ain't Gonna Need It) and helped us focus on getting going without overdoing the architecture design.

I bring this up because I wholeheartedly believed in the notion of immutable architectures back then just as I wholeheartedly believe in the notion of evolving architectures now. And maybe, in a decade or so, we've all learned more about architecture and we'll hold other beliefs. It's not so much that I believe I was wrong then and correct now. In my view, what's correct at one point in time can cease to be correct and then we need to evolve to what's the expedient set of beliefs at this point. As protagonists, we have to move on from one set of beliefs to the next as we all grow and develop and this automatically leads to alternative viewpoints and viable beliefs.

Of course, this isn't just the case for individuals but also for companies. Especially older, mature companies have the norms, values and ways of working ingrained in the walls. Senior leaders are typically selected because they embody these beliefs, norms and values and personify the ways of working. This leads to perpetuating beliefs from one person to the next and anyone who has read about the notion of memes (the original notion, not the internet version) realizes that memes try to stay alive by procreating.

This is exacerbated by the fact that the people at every successful company know things that others don't. There's a set of beliefs, often referred to as facts, that are the fundament of the company's initial success. When the world around us changes and the company does less well, this can easily lead to

leaders in the company going defensive and seeking to return to the old ways, rather than updating the belief system in the company.

When I worked for Nokia and we saw the first iPhone, I remember senior leaders shaking their heads and asking why anyone would want to touch the screen of their phone. The claim was it would get dirty and scratched and it was much better to have a small keyboard. The rest is history, as the saying goes, but the fact is that every individual and every company walks around with a set of beliefs similar to the senior leaders at Nokia.

In a rapidly digitalizing and changing world, the old ways of doing things are the surest path to go the way of the dinosaurs. But how do we break out of it? In my opinion, we can follow three steps: make it explicit, try to prove the opposite and then formulate a new belief.

First, until implicitly held beliefs are made explicit, it's impossible to discuss and question them. So, the first step has to be to use questions and other means to convert implicit beliefs into explicit arguments that can then be discussed. This very step is often extremely effective to identify internal inconsistencies. Any of us who has gotten wrapped around the axle of some anxiety-driven spinning has realized that describing to others what makes us spin already shows the ridiculous nature of much of what we struggle with.

Second, when a belief has been made explicit and it still is internally consistent and makes sense, the next step is to invert it and try to prove that instead. We often tend to fall into old habits and rapidly dismiss the opposite belief, so we need to force ourselves to really evaluate the alternative and ask ourselves if the original belief is true, if it's really true and if we're absolutely certain that it's true with the evidence to back it up.

Third, often we need to evolve our original beliefs into something, at least partially, new. We then need to formulate it in such a way that we can communicate it to others. Two things are important here. First, it has to be falsifiable, meaning that it has to make a clear statement that drives prioritization. Second, it has to satisfy the "vital few" principle in that it isn't one of many worthwhile things but really captures the essence of our truth.

We all operate under a set of assumptions and beliefs and we wouldn't be able to operate otherwise. However, many of these are viewed and treated as immutable and absolute, but for most, there's a constant evolution of what the most viable and expedient set of beliefs to hold actually is. To ensure that we move from one belief system to the next, we need to be intellectually honest with ourselves and periodically reevaluate our beliefs and assumptions. This doesn't only apply to ourselves but also to companies where the challenge of change almost always is a war between belief systems. Make it explicit, try to prove the opposite, ensure it captures the essence and be intellectually honest with yourself. As Timothy Leary so eloquently said: think for yourself and question authority!



PROTAGONIST RULE #5: HELL YES OR NO

Recently, I read a book by Oliver Burkeman entitled “4,000 weeks: time management for mortals.” The essence of the book is that as humans, we have 4,000 weeks in our lifespan. Of course, part of that is spent in our youth and another part in retirement, leaving us with about 2,000 weeks in our working lives, assuming we work around 40 years.

How to use those weeks such that we have the best possible life and maximize our Maslovian self-actualization? The first question is of course what a good life looks like. The Greeks used the concept of Eudaimonia, which Plato defined as “the good composed of all goods; an ability that suffices for living well; perfection in respect of virtue; resources sufficient for a living creature.”

Translating this to modern life is hard and will be different for everyone. I’m far from the right person to tell you how to have a good life. However, I can point out some observations concerning what doesn’t constitute a good life. The key one, to me, is busyness. For most of my life, I, as well as most people around me, have been busy: I had more things to do than I could fit into the hours of the day.

When I was younger, I always had more energy than I had time. If I could squeeze it in, I’d have the energy to do the task. Somewhere in the last decade, that has shifted around. The amount of energy I have available is less than the amount of time I have and I need to focus on energy management rather than time management.

Whether time or energy is the constraining factor, we’re constantly bombarded with requests, sometimes of the non-voluntary kind, to take on certain responsibilities or tasks. Sometimes these are one-offs and sometimes they require time commitments over a long period. They can be individual tasks or involve a team.

The challenge is that we’re social beings and we’re often flattered when asked as it makes us feel recognized as members of the community. Also, to maintain relations, we feel a strong need to say yes as the opposite could damage the relationship. And, of course, if it’s a team effort, it feels terrible to let

your team members down by not carrying your part of the load. Team members will easily call you out and put peer pressure on you to fall in line and join in.

The result of all this is that many of us spend vast amounts of time on activities that add very little to our lives, our purpose or the people around us. We tend to accept too many responsibilities, projects and tasks and we run out of time and energy before we run out of things that need to get done. And that easily leads to stress and us continuously walking around with a feeling of insufficiency. Also, the quality of our work easily suffers as we're so eager to push things over the finish line that we may deliver them incompletely or insufficiently thought through.

For all the time management literature promising us to squeeze more work out of every day, in my experience, the only way to solve the problem we're discussing here is to be more selective. This means saying no to more requests so that we have appropriate time to do the tasks and carry the responsibilities that are important to us.

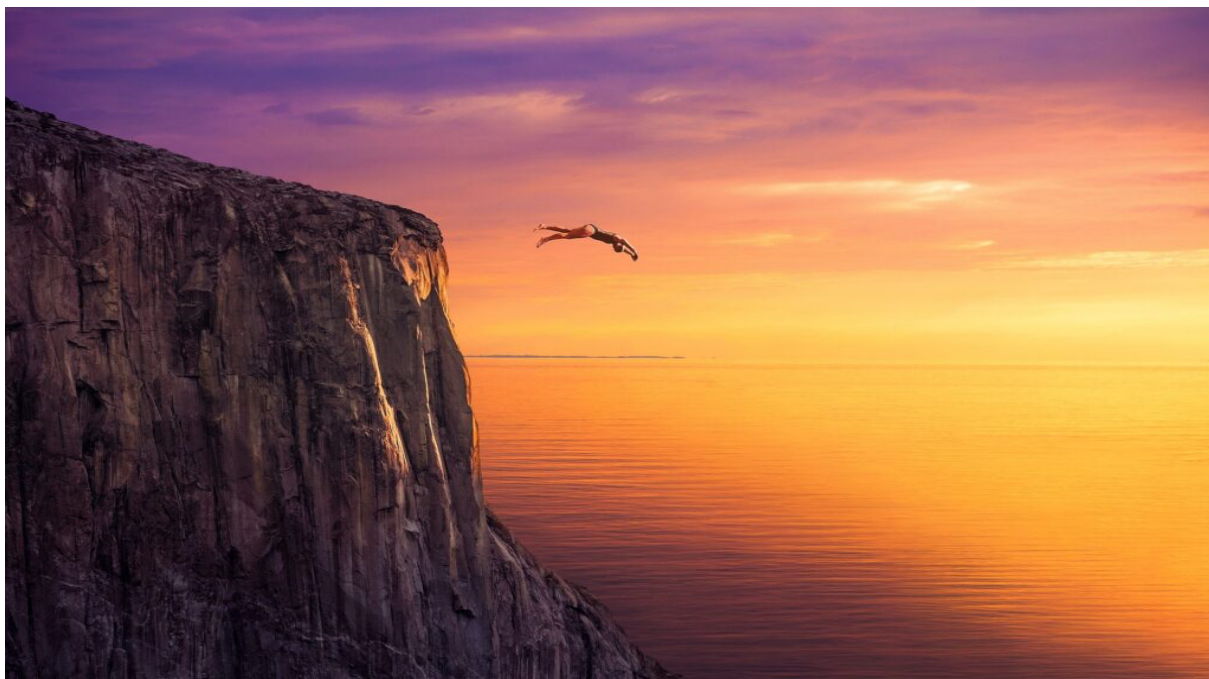
In my work life, I use three strategies to force myself to be more restrictive in what I take on. The first is the "hell yes or no" strategy: if a request doesn't light a fire in my belly and trigger my enthusiasm but is more "meh," the answer is no. One example is peer-reviewing articles. In the academic community, peer review is the key mechanism for establishing the publishability of an article. It's a very poor mechanism, but it's the least bad mechanism we have. As a professor, I get asked many times per week to review papers. When I was younger, I often accepted for all the reasons I mentioned above. These days, however, I'm much more selective and will only review papers that interest and excite me. Otherwise, I try to suggest reviewers I think will be passionate about the paper.

The second strategy is to ask myself whether I'd accept if I'd have to do it tomorrow. Very often, I get requests for talks far out into the future. My calendar often is quite empty around that time, making it very easy to accept, even if the location and the audience aren't that relevant. When the time comes around, my calendar is of course filled to the brim and giving the talk becomes a major hassle and a poor experience (even if I love giving talks). So, instead, I try to ask myself if I'd accept the invitation if I had to give the talk tomorrow or later in the week. That puts the request in the proper context and makes it much easier for me to prioritize and, potentially, decline.

The third strategy is to reflect on whether the request aligns with my purpose. As I wrote in rule #2, my professional purpose is to do what I can to accelerate the adoption of new digital technologies in industry and society. Occasionally, I get asked to write something, record a video or give a talk for a group or community that I simply cannot picture supporting my professional purpose. In those cases, I find a way to say no.

One reflection is that many people find it hard to say no, but my experience is that this is mostly a matter of practice. Different from what you might expect, saying no often leads to people respecting you even more. This is especially the case when you can clearly explain why you're unable to accept and, if possible, offer an alternative solution that doesn't involve you.

We live in a culture of busyness and it's fashionable to talk about how busy you are. However, busyness often causes a situation where you're wasting most of your life on activities that actually don't add much to your life. There's no growth, it doesn't align with your purpose and you don't enjoy doing it. The only way out is to be more selective and decline more requests. There are several strategies we can use to select more carefully and ways in which we can decline without damaging relationships. Of the many quotes around this, one that I particularly like is by John Maxwell: the greatest enemy of good thinking is busyness.



PROTAGONIST RULE #6: GET OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE

In my own life, I notice that I'm increasingly aware of the things I like and think I'm good at and the things I don't like and typically am not very good at either. Over the years, especially when I was younger, I tried a lot of things and, based on that, gravitated to what I feel most comfortable with. This tendency, which I'm sure many recognize, is corroborated by research showing that as people age, their fluid intelligence, i.e. the ability to reason and think flexibly, decreases whereas their crystallized intelligence, i.e. the accumulation of knowledge, facts and skills, increases.

For many people I work with, this leads to a professional life where, over time, we end up in a comfort zone where we know we're competent and can deliver. And because we're competent in what we do, we build up reputation and respect among our peers. As human beings, we need to feel that we're recognized and appreciated members of a community.

The problem is that, as the saying goes, your comfort zone is a beautiful place, but nothing grows there. For people with a fixed mindset, who assume that things are immutable, at least later in life, their comfort zone is a place that they either like or accept as the immutable reality. However, someone who wants to be the protagonist of their own life will by necessity have a growth mindset and, over time, feel frustrated and bored in their comfort zone. The challenge is of course how to break out of that as going out of your comfort zone is naturally uncomfortable.

Psychology research has studied this topic for decades and one framework is the fear-learning-growth model. Initially, breaking out of your comfort zone will be associated with fear. Millennia of human evolution have created a natural aversion to entering unknown territory as it tends to lead to existential risks. Modern life has very few existential risks and the fear that we feel often is concerned with reputational and status risk. Simply put, we fear feeling like an idiot or, as it's called in the military, a FUN (freaking useless noob). Especially after years of being competent in our role and being recognized for it, entering a situation where you're a beginner and can use little of your crystallized intelligence and having to rely on your decreasing fluid intelligence can feel like a very tall order.

Once we break out of that, we can enter the learning stage. Obviously, this includes trial and error and a period where we're learning the skills required for the new scope in which we're operating. And this, in the end, results in growth as we'll master new skills and gain new knowledge that we didn't have when we started this journey.

To get out of my comfort zone, I use three strategies: edging, context switching and adopting the beginner's mindset. In my work, I try to get to the edge of my comfort zone in terms of research and topics I take on. This means that I balance my previous experience, skills and knowledge with learning new skills and gaining new knowledge. An example is my efforts in building a new research field around AI engineering where I use my existing knowledge in software engineering and apply it to the field of AI, where I'm not an expert, to understand the engineering challenges around building AI-intensive systems.

The second strategy is context switching. Here, I go out of my comfort zone in my personal life. I try to build new skills and knowledge in areas that have nothing to do with work but that I still consider important in my life overall. For example, I'm currently in a program to become a volunteer weightlifting trainer at the gym that I frequent. Although I've done weight training for decades, I've never instructed other people how to do this safely and constructively. In my experience, it's much easier to enter the student role in this situation as compared to my professional life.

The third strategy is concerned with the Buddhist principle of the beginner's mind. We enter many situations in our work and the rest of our lives with a host of preconceived notions. This is of course what experience is all about, but it easily leads to what I refer to as the expert syndrome. My favorite definition of an expert is someone who tells you why something *can't* be done. The beginner's mind is concerned with entering situations with an open mind and as few preconceived notions as possible. Although perhaps a poor example, this is what I experience when I visit modern art museums or exhibitions. I try to limit my preconceptions as much as possible and connect with a piece as directly and experientially as possible. Of course, the result, more often than not, is that the art doesn't connect with me, but at least I feel I've given myself the best possible chance to grow and learn new things.

In reinforcement learning, a class of artificial-intelligence algorithms, the system will learn the optimal behavior by, initially, randomly selecting actions and getting a smaller or larger reward. These algorithms seek to optimize the amount of reward they get and as they learn, they'll reduce the amount of exploration, ie randomly taking action just to learn the impact on the reward, and increase the amount of exploitation, ie taking an action with a known reward. You easily end up in local optima if you don't enforce a minimum level of exploration even when the algorithm has already tried out many actions before.

The same is true for human beings. We need to keep exploring outside of our comfort zone, even if the nature of exploration is that most of what we try out won't lead to anything valuable. That will feel very wasteful, but it's the only way to make sure we continue to grow and develop.

Our comfort zone is a beautiful place, but nothing grows there. As the protagonists of our lives, we need to get outside of it to grow and develop. Even if it feels like a waste of time and energy. I do this through edging, context switching and the beginner's mind, but of course, you can use your own strategies. It will involve fear and discomfort, but often it's the thing you fear the most that you need to say yes to. As Neale Donald Walsch says: "Life begins at the end of your comfort zone."



PROTAGONIST RULE #7: CHANGE YOUR MIND

When I worked as a young professor in the 1990s, one of my main research areas was software architecture. The prevalent view at the time was that the architecture of a software system was virtually immutable once you had committed to it and consequently, you had to be very careful during the initial design phase. Hence, we had architecture design and assessment methods that tried to ensure that a system had the right architecture before the start of large-scale development. I even wrote a whole book on the topic and was wholeheartedly convinced of the correctness of my views and those of the community.

Then Agile came along and it became obvious that the architecture of a system needs to evolve just like everything else about the system. So, we developed approaches for architecture refactoring and technical debt management. However, I had to change my mind about the role of architecture in software systems.

I went through the same process with software platforms. Initially, platforms and other approaches to software reuse focused on efficiency improvement. How do we build reusable assets so that we can build new products and offerings as cheaply as possible? Over time, I came to realize that platforms can become a huge problem for companies: they slow things down and make it hard to build what needs to be built. So, these days, I still recommend platforms to companies but suggest focusing on speed rather than efficiency. Platforms should be optimized for allowing companies to move faster, not more efficiently.

On the personal front, I was raised as a devout Calvinist Christian but experienced serious cognitive dissonance with that approach to religion in my 20s and 30s. This required me to fundamentally revise my view on and approach to religion and spirituality. Where I landed isn't for this post, but suffice it to say that organized religion isn't for me anymore. But I also feel that the almost complete ignoring of spirituality in Western society isn't the right approach either as it has led to a crisis of purpose and meaning with nihilism as a result.

The main point I'm trying to make is that I've changed my mind on pretty big topics – just like everyone reading this has. Especially when you become more of a senior in the organization you're part of, this can become problematic. You tend to be respected for sharing your opinion, which is supposed to be based on experience and a competent interpretation of the current state of the product, the company and the world. Once having gone 'on record' concerning a topic, it becomes very hard to change your position as it easily comes with a perceived loss of face.

One industry where changing your mind is a critical capability is venture capital. Here, partners in a fund need to predict where the world is going and invest accordingly, but typically based on very limited, sparse data. It's very easy to create a narrative of why the company being considered for investment is going to be a complete failure. It's very hard to create a believable narrative around why it's going to be a rocket – yet, this is what's required for a positive investment decision. A useful principle here is “strong opinions, loosely held,” meaning that you hold opinions and voice them loudly but are always open to changing your mind.

From a personal perspective, we can't grow without changing our minds. Typically, it's our worldview that's holding us back in our development and the only way to progress is to change it.

The process of changing our minds goes through three stages. First, there's the cognitive dissonance between our view of the world and the data from reality. We have the choice to try to explain away the difference to avoid changing or to investigate the nature of the mismatch.

Once the dissonance becomes unbearable, we get to stage two where we let go of our old beliefs. This is extremely uncomfortable as we're entering chaos. Our belief systems give us a stable basis to operate from and letting go of that can easily make us feel like we're out of control and simply whipped around by external forces.

Being pattern-matching machines, however, we often start to develop a new belief system and we enter stage three where we have a new basis to operate from that's more aligned with reality and often is more complex and involved. Once we've created an intuition about the new way to view reality and can convey it to ourselves and others, we've arrived at a new, better place that can serve us for a while longer.

Of course, not only do individuals have to change their minds; organizations have to as well. Many organizations (as well as individuals) get stuck in old belief systems as there's no systematic way of evolving the commonly held understanding. These companies typically get disrupted as their operating model no longer aligns with the world in which they operate. Customers feel that the business is stuck in the past and tend to vote with their feet and move elsewhere.

In the end, every company changes, but bad ones change too late to avoid going out of business. Good companies change when the effects of the outdated belief system are making themselves felt. Great companies proactively change their belief system and evolve when everything is going great.

In an earlier post, I talked about questioning ourselves. The main reason for doing that is so that we change our minds when it's necessary. Especially for senior leaders, it's tempting to build an illusionary world around you that you keep going by surrounding yourself with yes-sayers. But this is the worst way of serving the company. Instead, allow yourself to change your mind and share why with others. As William James said, if you can change your mind, you can change your life.



PROTAGONIST RULE #8: USE DATA

One story that keeps fascinating me when it comes to science is how people in the early 20th century insisted on the existence of aether for transferring light. The general belief was that similar to how sound was mediated by air, there was another medium that would allow light to flow. This was important to explain how light could travel from, for instance, the sun to the earth, even though there was no air. Many research articles were written describing the properties of aether and how it interacted with light. Only to be proven wrong a few years later by research that showed that light travels perfectly well through a vacuum and requires no medium.

Likewise, I'm always amazed by the intricate models I occasionally encounter in a history or art museum that explain how the 'lights in the sky' moved around the earth in rather strange patterns. We all tend to laugh and make fun of those silly people that didn't realize that the earth rotates around the sun. However, it's important to remember that in a few decades or a century, people will make fun of us because of our silly explanations that, in their view, make about as much sense as the sun circling the earth.

During my life, I've time and again managed to create stories for myself that, in hindsight, turned out to be complete bullshit. I already told you about how the software architecture community in the 1990s believed that it was virtually impossible to change the architecture of a system after development was started. Such fabrications can be found in all parts of our lives – personal, societal and professional.

During the 20th century, several "isms" were tried out at a societal level based on storytelling with disastrous consequences. Fascism resulted in tens of millions of deaths around World War II. Even worse, communism resulted in an estimated death toll of well over 100 million during the century. The

proponents of these “isms” often claim that this was due to the poor execution of the principles, but in reality, human nature will cause the same outcomes when these “isms” are tried again.

As storytelling machines, we excel at creating stories that provide a level of sense-making. The problem is, as the previous examples indicate, that telling the wrong stories to ourselves and the people around us isn't free of consequences. Instead, it can lead to terrible outcomes.

We need to ensure that the stories we tell have a solid grounding in reality and the best way to do so is to use data. In essence, this is what science is all about. We create stories, typically referred to as hypotheses, that are then translated into experiments designed to either prove or disprove the hypothesis.

Many question science because an explanation considered true at one point in time can later be displaced with a different and hopefully better one. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of science; we intend to develop the best explanations about phenomena, but the process of developing better, more accurate explanations is what science is all about. I just wish that many so-called scientists in the media were a little more humble and less absolute in the way they present their theories to the general public.

My point is that we need to take a scientific approach to our work and lives as well. Rule #4, question everything, is about not automatically accepting stories told by others or by ourselves. It focuses on saying no to bad explanations. Here we're concerned with creating and saying yes to the best explanations we can come up with and using data to validate them.

The challenge we often run into is that our feelings or opinions say one thing while the data says something else. We experience this cognitive dissonance as uncomfortable and tend to resolve it by dismissing the data or by generating an alternative explanation that allows us to keep our views and opinions. This is exactly the wrong thing to do. We need to accept that we may be wrong, or likely are wrong, and start to generate alternative explanations that we can hopefully test and validate with data. This is at the heart of growth, intellectual and otherwise, as growth automatically means that we're changing. And changing opinions is of course the main change we need.

A complicating factor is that the human brain has a quite limited information processing capability. As a result, something like 99.9 percent of all information reaching our senses is ignored before we even become aware of it. An illustrative example is when you buy a new car. The moment you've made the decision, you suddenly see cars of the same model and color all the time whereas you didn't notice them earlier. The brain is primed to see what it considers relevant and ignores everything else.

The risk is of course that if we're unaware of these biases, we tend to believe that we're experiencing reality as it is, while, in fact, we're seeing the world through highly selective and distorting glasses. Rather than believing everything we observe is 'the truth,' our job is to continuously work on removing as much of the distortion as possible and ensure that we focus as much as possible on the things that indeed are the most valuable. Data is the most effective mechanism to prove or disprove our thoughts, but in my experience, also reflection, introspection and meditation can be very helpful in this process.

We're exceptionally good at creating tales that explain the world around us in ways that align with our beliefs. The problem is that quite often these explanations and stories are inaccurate. This may seem innocuous, but it can result in significant harm to you, the people in your life and society at large. Instead, be aware of your biases and use data to confirm your beliefs and be ready to change if the data doesn't align with your current set of beliefs. Growth comes from changing for the better, not from holding on to what you believed yesterday. As Patrick Gelsinger said: “Data is the new science. Big data holds the answers. Are you asking the right questions?”



PROTAGONIST RULE #9: TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Especially during my time in industry, a common saying among my a-type, hard-driving colleagues was “I can sleep when I’m dead.” The idea communicated was that the things you’re now spending time on are so important that you’re willing to give up everything else. Especially young, ambitious people, for some reason mostly men, have this tendency to focus all their energy and time on the one thing they’re pursuing at the expense of everything else.

Of course, when you’re in your early 20s, your body can take any abuse and you’ll be fine (remember partying those days?), but over time, things catch up with you and your body informs you that it can’t handle this in the long run. We all see the physical symptoms of increased fat percentage, bad cardiovascular state and so on. Many of us have stood in front of the mirror after a shower and decided that things needed to change.

The factor often ignored is our mental and emotional health. The number of mental illness cases has grown aggressively over recent decades. These days, somewhere between one in five and one in eight persons suffer from mental health conditions – especially young individuals.

Although both physical and mental health can be affected by factors outside of our control, as protagonists of our own lives, we can do many things to improve our health. I’m currently reading the excellent book by Peter Attia titled “Outlive.” His focus is on avoiding what he refers to as the four horsemen who tend to kill us in old age: heart disease, cancer, neurodegenerative disease, like Alzheimer’s, and type 2 diabetes. The key finding is that all these diseases tend to take decades to build up to a point that we become symptomatic. Rather than treating them when we’re diagnosed, the focus should be to structure our lives from an early age to avoid being affected at all.

When it comes to physical health, according to research, the most effective strategy is exercise. For all the talk about supplements and quick fixes, exercising to ensure we both have a strong cardiovascular

basis and physical strength is by far the best thing we can do to improve our physical health. I exercise daily myself and use a mix of weight training, aiming to train all major muscles twice per week, and cardio every other day or more frequently. The latter can be running, swimming, biking or some other form of heart rate-increasing activity. Finally, I try to complement this with daily walks as walking keeps coming up as the most natural, low-impact health-improving activity.

Mental health is a difficult topic that still has a bit of a taboo around it in society, despite the large number of people affected by it. I don't want to dismiss the many disorders, caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain or otherwise, that affect many people and that can only be attended to with medication, psychotherapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy or other forms of treatment. However, there are actions we can take ourselves, often referred to as self-care. These include, again, exercise, as it tends to positively influence our mental state, as well as the food we eat and proper sleeping habits.

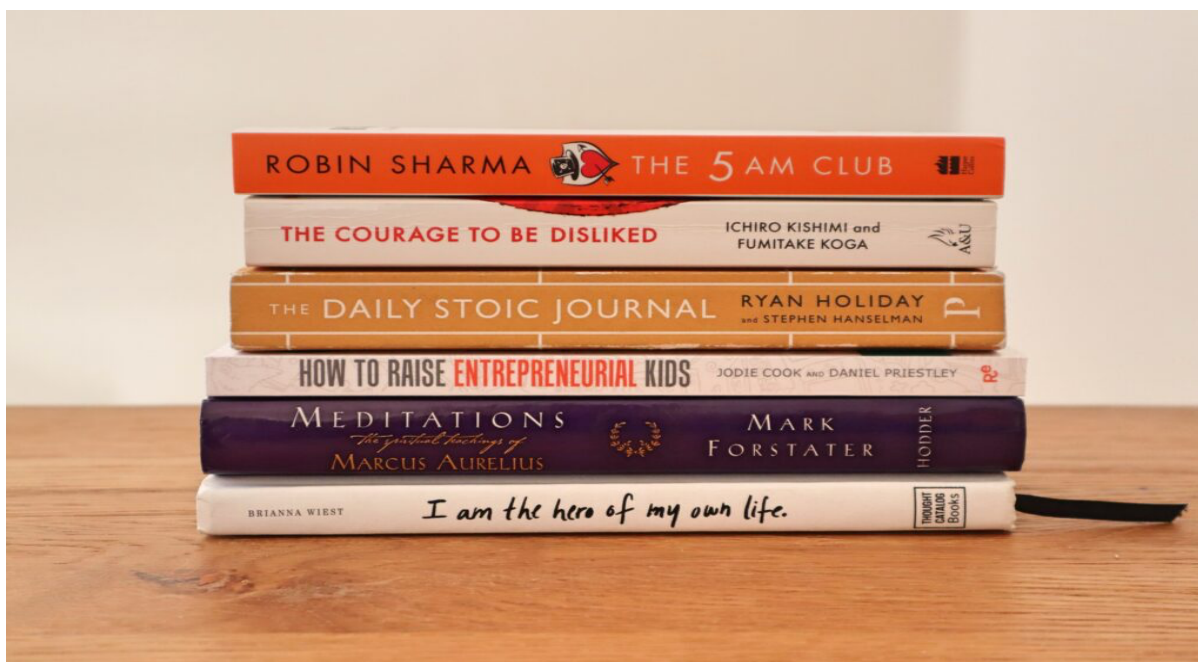
In my case, I'm susceptible to bouts of depression and, especially when I'm very busy and stressed, anxiety. For me, the two main practices that help are journaling and meditation. Whenever I have the chance, I try to journal for 15 minutes every morning straight out of bed. It helps me reflect on my state of mind and get clear on my priorities for the day. I always end my journal entry by writing down three things I'm grateful for and three things I want to finish today.

Second, I meditate for 20 minutes right before dinner every evening or late afternoon as a way to settle my mind after a busy day of work. Although I've been doing this for years, I feel I'm not making much progress, but the act of simply sitting on a pillow and focusing on my breath helps me slow down and identify what the issues are that are keeping both my subconscious and conscious mind occupied.

All of these activities are known to every individual reading this. For some reason, however, exercise, healthy food, sleep, meditation and other activities we know are good for us are often deprioritized in favor of short-term benefits, ranging from staying at work a bit longer to eating tasty, but crappy, fast food that gives a short-term reward.

For me, the best way to overcome the resistance to doing this is through habit formation. If we rely on willpower to make sure we do everything right, we're going to lose, as willpower is like a muscle in that it tires out rapidly. And we all know that willpower weakens during the day and is weakest during the evening. That's why we sit on the couch watching some stupid TV program or Youtube video late at night even if we know we should get ourselves to bed. The moment something becomes a habit, you don't need to think about it or force yourself to do it. It just happens. For me, the easiest habits to form are daily ones and that's why I exercise, journal and meditate at almost the same time every day.

We can only function at our best if we are at our best. That requires that we take care of ourselves. This has two components: our physical health and our mental health. The two ways to best take care of those are exercise for physical health and meditation for mental health. Not doing so doesn't only negatively affect our life expectancy and our mental state but also has adverse effects on our performance at work and elsewhere. There are infinitely many quotes I could use here, but I decided to pick one by Diane von Furstenberg: "It's so important to take time for yourself and find clarity. The most important relationship is the one you have with yourself."



PROTAGONIST RULE #10: STUDY STOICISM AND BUDDHISM

In many ways, I view myself as a philosophical modernist in that I believe the world we live in is getting better all the time. In virtually any metric of human quality of life, from the number of people living in abject poverty to life expectancy, things are generally improving dramatically.

Contrastingly, most people like to lament how the world and everything they care about is going to hell in a handbasket. Such sentiments are particularly prevalent in the investing world. The bears, who believe that the stock market will crash and we'll all lose our money, sound really smart and have very convincing arguments. For anyone tracking the stock market over time, however, it will be obvious that the bulls, who believe the stock market will go up, are actually right most of the time, despite that they sound naive and trite.

Especially when it comes to technology, it's almost always the case that the newest product is typically better than older ones. My latest mobile phone is better than my previous one. My current car is better than my previous one. My ability to communicate with the rest of the world is much better than even a decade ago. There's constant progress and improvement.

This may cause us, humans, to easily fall into the latest fad as it triggers the novelty button. The latest diet will solve our weight issues and give us a six-pack in two weeks. The latest pill will fix in a short cure issues in our body that have accumulated for decades. One seminar with the latest guru will help you address complex emotional and mental issues in one weekend.

Although technology evolves continuously and, by and large, fundamentally improves our lives continuously, humans haven't really changed over the last 200,000 years or so. Of course, we're still subject to natural evolution, but this moves so much slower than technological evolution that for all practical purposes we're the same as humans thousands of years ago.

Especially when it comes to life philosophies, I believe we're better off basing ourselves on old, well-established and proven ways of viewing life and our role in it. Although it may be easy to be swayed

by fads there as well, it's my experience that these tend to be shallow and lack the depth and wisdom entailed by older traditions.

In my experience, a lot of human suffering is caused by a fundamental misunderstanding of the things we can influence and change and the things we can't. Focusing our energy on things we can't change anyway is a fundamental loss of agency in our lives. Whether this concerns our health, relationships or our career, many aspects simply are outside of our control and attempting to control them anyway is a recipe for failure.

In his famous book, "The seven habits of highly effective people," Steven Covey defines his model of three circles. These include the circle of control, the circle of influence and the circle of concern. The latter circle is the one where I see many, including myself, waste vast amounts of energy trying to control or influence what basically is outside of our scope. Similarly, I see many avoid taking action in areas of their lives that are entirely within their scope of control.

Classic examples are protests against 'the establishment' as if the protesters weren't part of society themselves. Or failing to take action when our health goes off the rails due to poor habits that are entirely within our circle of control.

In my view, there are two old, established and proven philosophies that provide a lot of help and support in managing the challenges of life: Stoicism and Buddhism. Stoicism encourages us to spend our time and energy on things we can control whereas Buddhism encourages us to accept the things in life that we can't change.

Stoicism is a philosophy that's very poorly understood as many view it as training yourself to become an unfeeling, hard person that doesn't allow oneself to show joy, fear or anger. This is a fundamental misinterpretation of the philosophy. Instead, the Stoics base themselves on the aforementioned circles and consider it wasteful and counterproductive to become upset about things that are outside our control. And, except for our thoughts and our response to whatever happens in our lives, most things are actually outside of our control.

There are several useful Stoic practices, but one of the most countercultural ones is "premeditatio malorum." In this practice, Stoics periodically visualize the worst thing they can imagine happening in their lives. The idea is to live through the worst thing and feel the pain and discomfort that comes with it. By doing this, it's much easier to feel grateful for what you have today, instead of always longing for the next thing. Also, when bad times hit, as they will in all our lives, we've mentally steeled ourselves and are better prepared.

Buddhism, in my view, shares many of the same principles but tends to focus more on the acceptance of the reality of life. Rather than lamenting and complaining about what we can't control, the idea is to focus on accepting reality as it is. In Buddhism, the notion of suffering is discussed as happening twice. First, when the negative happens. Second, when we fight it, struggle with it and refuse to accept it. Buddhism is concerned with minimizing suffering by avoiding the second type.

The main practice in Buddhism that I find particularly useful is meditation. There are many forms, but in my case, simply sitting on a pillow and focusing on my breath is incredibly helpful. It helps me slow down, increase my focus and identify what the big, unresolved issues are that I struggle with and push away. During meditation, these easily come up and it helps me reach a level of acceptance.

In life and work, we have limited time and energy to spend. By focusing our energy on what we can control and avoiding spending time and energy on the things we can't, we can be much more productive and effective. Life philosophies such as Stoicism and Buddhism provide helpful practices to support us in this journey and help us reduce suffering and maximize our self-actualization. As Nasim Taleb quipped: a Stoic is a Buddhist with attitude!



PROTAGONIST RULE #11: GIVE BACK

In science, there's an interesting pattern few people talk about. It turns out that inventions often occur at the same time or almost the same time in multiple research groups. These inventions aren't struck-by-lightning insights by a single scientist; they tend to be ideas that evolved and emerged in a research community for an extended period before germinating in concrete description and conceptualization. This conceptualization then forms part of the fundament of the research community so that we can make progress and study the next questions.

The famous scientist who produced the scientific breakthroughs is often more of a salesperson who happens to be able to communicate the ideas in a way that resonates with the general public. The image of the lone wolf scientist slaving away in some lab by him or herself until some Eureka moment occurs is, as many ideas, simple, elegant and wrong. It's just that we, as humans, like simple explanations and the media is always looking for hero stories that are clean-cut and straightforward. Even if it only has a tangential relationship with reality.

Of course, this pattern not only occurs in science but also in business as well as society at large. Well-known entrepreneurs and CEOs are projected in the media as having single-handedly created billion-dollar companies whereas the reality is that it often is the team around the famous individual that drove most of the scaling and value creation.

Turning this to ourselves as individuals, I notice in myself and others a similar pattern: I tend to attribute my successes to my own capabilities, talent and hard work and my failures to external circumstances. When asked what role luck has played in the way our lives unfolded, I believe that anyone who has accomplished a modicum of success deep down realizes that luck played a significant part.

Western society tends to focus on the successes of the individual. This is part of the reason why the Western world has been so successful and an important part of the judeo-christian ethos that forms the fabric of our society. However, the fact remains that each of us is the result of an endless chain of people helping us get to where we are right now: the elementary school teacher who helped you figure out a math problem, the senior leader in a company who decided to give you a chance, your parents who

helped you be successful in life, and many others. As Warren Buffet so eloquently put it, much of our success is simply a result of winning the “ovarian lottery,” meaning that where in the world you were born and who your parents were play an enormous role in how our lives unfold.

Once we’ve achieved some level of success and seniority, it’s our job, in my view, to give back and to help others realize their dream and be the protagonist of their own story. We need to keep the flywheel going by paying it forward. Parents invest time, energy and funds into their children not expecting to receive anything in return, but to have their children do the same to their children. Similarly, we need to pay back the people who have helped us be successful by helping others.

When reflecting on how I try to do this, there are three ways. First, with my PhD students, I try to develop an understanding of what they’d like to accomplish after finishing their PhD. I’m immensely grateful that there exist individuals who commit to spending four to five years of their lives working with me on their research. Upon reaching the halfway point (in Sweden often marked with the licentiate degree), I start to work with the person in question to direct their research to the optimal position for them to take the next step once done with the PhD. For instance, if a student is particularly interested in industry and specific companies, we steer the research content toward that which would maximize the chances of getting hired into that industry, company and role.

The second way is through angel investing. Although there’s a bit of an illusion in society that angel investors are all getting rich on the back of young, innocent entrepreneurs, the fact is that most companies fail and most investments are simply written off. More than once, I’ve invested in companies that I gave a low chance of success, but I felt that I could help the founders grow and develop. Even if it wouldn’t work out, they’d learn a set of skills and gain insights that would make their next venture much more likely to succeed.

Finally, in my consulting with industry, where I can I try to identify young high-potentials who don’t get a lot of space in the organization, but who bring good ideas to the table. By lifting up these young individuals, I attempt to create a situation where both the company and the person in question benefit from the role that’s created or reinforced.

No person is an island and we’re the product of the context in which we were born, grew up and evolved to a much larger extent than we often realize. Our responsibility is to pay it forward to the generation that comes after us by helping them grow and develop faster and achieve a higher state of self-actualization than they would have accomplished without our help. Interestingly, it’s not only good for the individual you help forward, but also incredibly rewarding to see others grow and develop, in part thanks to your help. As Ralph Waldo Emerson so beautifully said: “To know that even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded.”



PROTAGONIST RULE #12: ALWAYS KEEP EXPLORING

Whenever I talk to people that are (even) older than me and ask them about how they spend their time, there often is a reflection along the lines of “The days go slow, but the years go fast.” Especially in retirement, it seems that the number of things people spend time on is quite limited in scope, making the day go by slowly. However, as there’s little to mark the passing of time, the years pass quickly.

As discussed earlier, there’s significant danger in getting stuck in your comfort zone. We stop growing and developing and we die before we’re dead, as the saying goes. Whereas rule #6 is concerned with not getting stuck in your comfort zone, this rule is about how to act effectively outside of it.

One helpful metaphor, at least for me, to think about exploration is AI algorithms, especially reinforcement learning. Many AI algorithms use a variable, typically ϵ (epsilon), to enforce a balance between exploitation, where you use known knowledge to get a known outcome, and exploration, where you experiment with actions that have an unknown outcome.

Initially, ϵ will be a high number, close to 100 percent, but as the algorithm learns useful ways of acting in each specific situation, ϵ will be lower until it reaches almost 0 percent. That means that in the vast majority of cases, the algorithm will take an action with a known benefit. But even in the most trained states, it will still occasionally take a completely random action to evaluate its effect. This is done to avoid the algorithm ending up in a local optimum.

The challenge when applying this to our own lives is that, especially as we age, we’ve tried out many different things and believe we’ve learned what we like and what we don’t. Consequently, our natural reaction is to lower our ϵ to zero as we’re busy doing what we know we’re good at.

A confounding factor is that we tend to experience exploration as very inefficient since many of the experiments will fail to deliver a positive outcome. In exploitation, 99 percent of our actions lead to positive outcomes and the variation is more in terms of the amount of positive outcome. In exploration,

we simply have to accept that 90 percent or more of the things we try out are going to have a negative outcome. We wasted time, energy and money on something that turned out to not be a good experience. So, after having tried a couple of things and feeling like we've been swatted on the nose, we'll readjust our ϵ back to zero and stop exploring. As the saying goes, your comfort zone is a beautiful place.

The problem is, of course, that if you never break out of your comfort zone, you never learn something new. You'll never change unless you explore. This is the famous deadlock so many people are in: I'm busy, but bored. I could try this thing, but I most likely won't like it and feel like I've wasted my time. Why bother?

In rule #6, I talked about some of my strategies – edging, context switching and the beginner's mind. However, there are fundamental issues underlying our resistance to exploring that aren't addressed by these strategies. There are at least three worth discussing: wasting time, reputation and our self-image.

First, as I mentioned before, exploration is in many ways a waste of time. In our Western culture, efficiency and maximizing the return on investment of our time are held in high regard. Hence, wasting time feels like a lost opportunity that should have resulted in better outcomes. Hence, we shy away from wasting time. The problem with this reasoning is that the things we otherwise spend our time on often also are a waste of time by other metrics. Publishing article 501 after having published 500 articles earlier in your career may feel like a nice dopamine kick (I still get it), but the amount of growth and development is highly limited. If you're in sales and manage to close customer 1,001 after having closed 1,000 other sales, are you still growing or developing? Or, as a software engineer checking in code for the 10,000th time, did you actually benefit from this personally? The thought I often ponder is whether doing the same thing over and over again isn't the real waste of time. It's not the exploration that wastes our time, but the things we do again and again and know we're good at.

Second, being the social animals that we are, our reputation and the way we're viewed by the people around us are major drivers of our behavior. The problem is that people are lazy by nature (yes, me included) and like to pigeonhole others into neat boxes that don't require them to spend much intellectual energy trying to characterize you. And we respond to that and tell stories about ourselves that make it easy for others to do so. Just study yourself next time you're at a social event and someone asks you what you do. The script will execute just like that. Exploration by definition steps outside the box we occupy in other people's minds and it will feel uncomfortable to act and behave in ways that don't 'fit.' What might other people say? My favorite quote here is from Steve Jobs in his 2005 Stanford commencement speech: "You're already naked. There's no reason not to follow your heart."

Finally, our biggest critic, by orders of magnitude, is the voice in our own head. Shaped by our upbringing, schooling and key people in our lives, we have a self-image of who we are and what we do. That self-image creates a fundament and sense of security, but it also forms a prison that can be incredibly hard to break out of. Many things we decline to explore because we view ourselves as not the person who would do something like that. Developing and growing means breaking out of that prison and developing a new, more flexible self-image that allows for more freedom in the exploration we do.

To make it concrete and as an example: I recently joined a trial day at a local paragliding school. I've always been interested in flying but for many reasons, including the ones above, I never followed up on it. Until now. Part of the day was a tandem flight with an experienced pilot, which included being winched up to 300 meters altitude and a 10-minute flight. I'll admit to being scared hanging there with the pilot behind me finding a thermal and deciding to take us up even higher. I have a certain amount of need for control and I had none in that situation. Still, despite the discomfort, I've now signed up for the first course to learn to paraglide. If it scares you, it might be just what you need to do!

As we gain age and experience, we tend to reduce the amount of exploration we do and spend more and more time on the things we know we like and are good at. The consequence is that we stop growing,

developing and self-actualizing. Instead, we need to keep exploring and trying new things. We need to be aware of the perception that we're wasting our time (we're not), what other people might think of us (nobody thinks about you, they only think about themselves) and the voice in our own head (our worst critic and perhaps the hardest to overcome). Only when we break through the fundamental issues holding us back, we can start to really explore. As Rochel Wolchin so beautifully said: "If we were meant to stay in one place, we'd have roots instead of feet."



PROTAGONIST RULE #13: BE PROUD OF WHO YOU SEE IN THE MIRROR

There's a story from World War II where perfectly normal German men were sent to the eastern front to act as police officers. In three or four years, these sons, brothers, husbands and parents went from ordinary people to absolutely atrocious monsters murdering innocent men, women and children and committing the most horrible crimes. In the history of humankind, there are much more tales like this. Whenever we hear them, it's very easy to state and believe that we'd never fall this low and that we, in a similar situation, would act morally and ethically.

The fact is that humans are incredibly sensitive to peer and group pressure and that we're easily swayed to follow courses of action that go against our moral principles. During the previous century, we've seen what ideologies like fascism and communism have caused in terms of human suffering. And, of course, unbridled capitalism, left unchecked, has far from a clean record as well.

All of us have been in situations where we're asked to do something or at least tacitly support actions that leave us with a bad taste in our mouths and a gut feeling that this was wrong. As storytelling machines, we tend to be very good at explaining why what we did was the right thing after all, even if someone got hurt in the process.

The hard part is that nobody goes from a normal, well-adjusted human being to a genocidal maniac in one step. Instead, as the saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions and, as with any road, it requires many steps to get there. Normal humans become evil in a gradual, slow process where each step can be rationalized and justified. It's important to know that also criminals and people generally viewed as objectionable still view their behavior as right and justified.

I'm very careful with giving examples, but all of us have experienced corporate politics where individuals and groups within the company are acting in ways that prioritize their own benefits, rather than those of the company. The tactics I've seen employed in some situations were clearly not in line with my principles, nor yours, I believe.

The only way to avoid ending up in a place where we're forced to act in ways that go against our principles is to be very careful to avoid the first step in the wrong direction. It's much harder to undo a bad trajectory once we've gone down the path further. In my experience, there are at least three techniques or tactics that are helpful: humanize, delay and projection.

First, every politician knows that nothing riles up a community more than creating an us-versus-them context. This allows leaders to dehumanize the opposing group or party. As soon as the opposition is viewed as non-human or at least as 'lesser humans,' the group becomes much more willing to commit acts that they would consider objectionable if it would concern their fellow group members. The first technique is to imagine whoever we are in conflict with or are asked to act against as a human. A person who is someone's child, spouse and parent. Avoiding the dehumanization step is critical to ensure that we treat the other person as we would want to be treated ourselves.

Second, especially when placed in a situation where our gut feeling tells us that something is off, the first priority is to delay decision-making. On numerous occasions, my gut has told me that something is off and then it took me hours or days to figure out what the problem was. We're wired and programmed with many, almost instinctual behaviors to avoid harm, to ourselves and others, but it takes time for our rational brain to catch up with these. So, whenever something feels off, rather than being forced into a decision on the spot, insist on getting time to think about it. When you've figured out what the problem is, it's much easier to say no in a constructive, rational fashion.

Third, we all have mentors, whether or not these people are aware of it. Religious people may use God or Jesus. Stoics often use Marcus Aurelius. Movie fans may idolize a famous movie character. Social media aficionados may use influencers. A useful tactic is to try to imagine what our mentor, real or imagined, would do in the situation we find ourselves. Of course, we have to be exceedingly careful in who we select as our mentors, as we want to emulate their behavior. However, if chosen well, this can help us 'do the right thing.'

I'm not saying that we have to altruistically sacrifice ourselves for the greater good. My point is that we should, to the largest extent possible, act by the principles we aspire to follow. Those principles will undoubtedly include competition, often expressed as win-lose games, and that's fine. The key is that we should feel proud and confident about ourselves and who we are as a person. We all make mistakes, but consistently following a path that feels wrong due to external forces is what we should avoid at all costs.

During our lives and in the companies we work for or with, we're periodically challenged to agree to courses of action that go against what we would consider ethically or morally right. The best way for me to ensure I do the right thing is to apply the mirror metaphor: will I be proud of the person I see in the mirror if I take this decision or even tacitly support it? It may separate us from the people around us, but as the saying goes: if you don't fit in, you're probably doing the right thing.



PROTAGONIST RULE #14: DON'T TAKE YOURSELF TOO SERIOUSLY

There's an interesting pattern at universities where a full professor typically is the only one who's an expert in a particular field. Because of this, over time, professors tend to become quite confident in their expertise. The consequence is that they start to view their research field and themselves as the most important in general as the topic is the most important to them. The consequence of this is that they start to take themselves very or perhaps even too seriously.

We can see the same in industry. Especially as leaders get older, more experienced and higher up in the tree of the organization, they tend to start to believe their own beliefs and assessments too much. Due to the power position, the people around these leaders tend to question decisions less and less as their future may well be influenced by doing so.

A consequence of this normal human behavior is not only that we tend to believe in our own competency in our field of expertise but also that this competency extends to other areas. Especially in the media, we often see senior business leaders and high-profile researchers comment on topics where they have no knowledge advantage over the population at large. Still, we tend to give these people much more credibility than what's realistic.

The problem is that we, like everyone else, consider ourselves the most important people on the planet. It comes with being human. Self-preservation is the first priority for any living being. The species that didn't prioritize self-preservation have simply all died out. Consequently, we tend to take ourselves very seriously and, generally, too seriously.

The result is that we easily become stuck in our ways and beliefs. It's much easier to dismiss others and their viewpoints than to critically reflect, change our perspective and update our beliefs. The problem with that is, of course, that we cease to grow and develop and instead crawl into the center of our comfort zone where, as the saying goes, it's beautiful, but nothing grows there.

The antidote to all this is a healthy dose of skepticism toward oneself. There are at least three techniques I use to accomplish this: reminding myself of the limits of my knowledge, careful analysis of situations where I was wrong and trying to see the world through the eyes of opponents.

My first tactic is to periodically read, watch or talk to people from completely different fields than my own. It reminds me of how little I know and it serves as a reminder that something that may look simple from the outside actually is orders of magnitude more complex. This is, for me, the joy of working with so many companies in different industries. Each company has its own secrets and learnings about its industry, market and customers that are much more complex, deep and involved than they might look from the outside. My working hypothesis is that any industry and field of expertise is potentially infinitely complex and it's only constrained by human intelligence. This reminds me of the fact that there's infinitely more that I don't know than what I do know.

My second tactic is dealing with situations where I turned out to be wrong. Our kneejerk reaction is to push the insult to our ego away and move on as fast as possible to forget about it. Of course, this is a nice defense strategy, but it doesn't help us learn, grow and develop. Instead, I try to analyze what led to me having the wrong viewpoint or taking the wrong action. My experience is that this almost always is the consequence of me holding a set of assumptions that, in hindsight, simply was wrong.

The third tactic I deploy is to reflect on the viewpoint of an opponent and try to truly understand where this person might be coming from, what basic set of assumptions the individual uses and which of these might actually be correct. This is critically important as it allows me to critically evaluate the path I'm on and detect fallacies and weaknesses. It helps me reach a position where I can compromise with others and avoid the dehumanization that very often is the first step we're drawn to take, the tribal beings that we are.

Our basic human nature causes us to take ourselves very seriously. As we grow and become more senior in our roles, this may easily lead to a situation where we take ourselves too seriously and dismiss everything and everyone not aligning with our beliefs. This causes stagnation and a lack of growth and development, which is the true enemy. Instead, remind yourself of all the things you don't know, analyze situations where you were unquestionably wrong and seek to understand others, especially those opposing you. It forces us to continuously entertain alternative viewpoints. To use a quote by F. Scott Fitzgerald: the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.



PROTAGONIST RULE #15: MEMENTO MORI

When I was young (or younger), time had little meaning for me. It felt like you're going to live forever and because you have all this time, there's no need to prioritize and make things happen now. There's always tomorrow to do the things you'd like to get done.

When taking a job in industry, I felt that I was going to do that job forever, until something better came along that was better and then I could switch to that one. There was no notion of things being temporary but rather an infinite continuation of the path I was on – similar to Newtonian physics where an object continues on its path unless there are other forces to change its course.

Now that I'm a little less young, I realize the fallacy of this thinking and increasingly embrace the fact that we're all going to die. It's terrible to be confronted with one's mortality, but it does put things in perspective. Although I do hope that we can 'fix' human mortality at some point and allow people to live forever, if they want, or allow them to decide when to pass on, for now, we're in the same predicament as the billions of people coming before us: our time on this planet is finite.

The idea that we have limited time can also be very helpful in our lives. When reflecting on it, I realize I use it in at least three ways: prioritization, acceleration and desensitization.

There's a beautiful saying that claims we can do anything we want, but we can't do everything we want. Western culture is enamored with busyness. The underlying idea is that the best-lived life is the life where we get as much done as humanly possible. Especially mid-career, I've seen countless people trying to cram in as much work as possible next to a relationship, kids, workouts and, of course, keeping up with the Joneses. Plato already warned us of the emptiness of a busy life, and the more life experience I gather, the more I agree.

The fact that we have limited time allows me to prioritize my time better by saying no to the things that don't add to my life or the self-actualization journey I'm on. We all know the notion of extrinsic and intrinsic motivators. Especially early in life, we tend to prioritize extrinsic rewards as we're busy building a reputation and looking good in the eyes of our peers. We may seek a spouse, get promoted at work and be recognized by more senior people in the social circles in which we operate. We often learn the hard way that this is successful by external metrics, but it requires us to mold ourselves into a

person we don't necessarily want to be. It's when we realize our intrinsic motivators, the things we do because they give value to ourselves and help us grow and develop, that we can prioritize our time better. And that requires saying no to all the things that don't add to this.

For example, I've learned about myself that having control of my time and actions is very important to me. When working in industry, I rapidly realized that I was in a web of expectations and obligations that caused me to commit all my time to the web and have little to no time for what I wanted to work on. My bosses, peers and direct reports constantly pushed me to do things for them and I realized that, despite it being quite lucrative, I didn't have the agency I was looking for. My current context gives me the possibility to control my time to a much, much greater extent.

The second way in which I use my mortality is acceleration. We all have a, potentially, long list of things we want to do at some point. These things don't have a specific timeline associated with them, other than "later." This is fine when you're young as the likelihood of you being around 'later' is very high. However, when reaching a less young age, this becomes problematic. So, I use this to actually take initiative and make things happen now, rather than later.

For many years, I've wanted to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, but it stayed on the "someday" list. Last fall, I decided that it was now or never, booked the trip and in January, I managed to get to the summit. It was a great experience and something I'm glad I finally committed to and made happen.

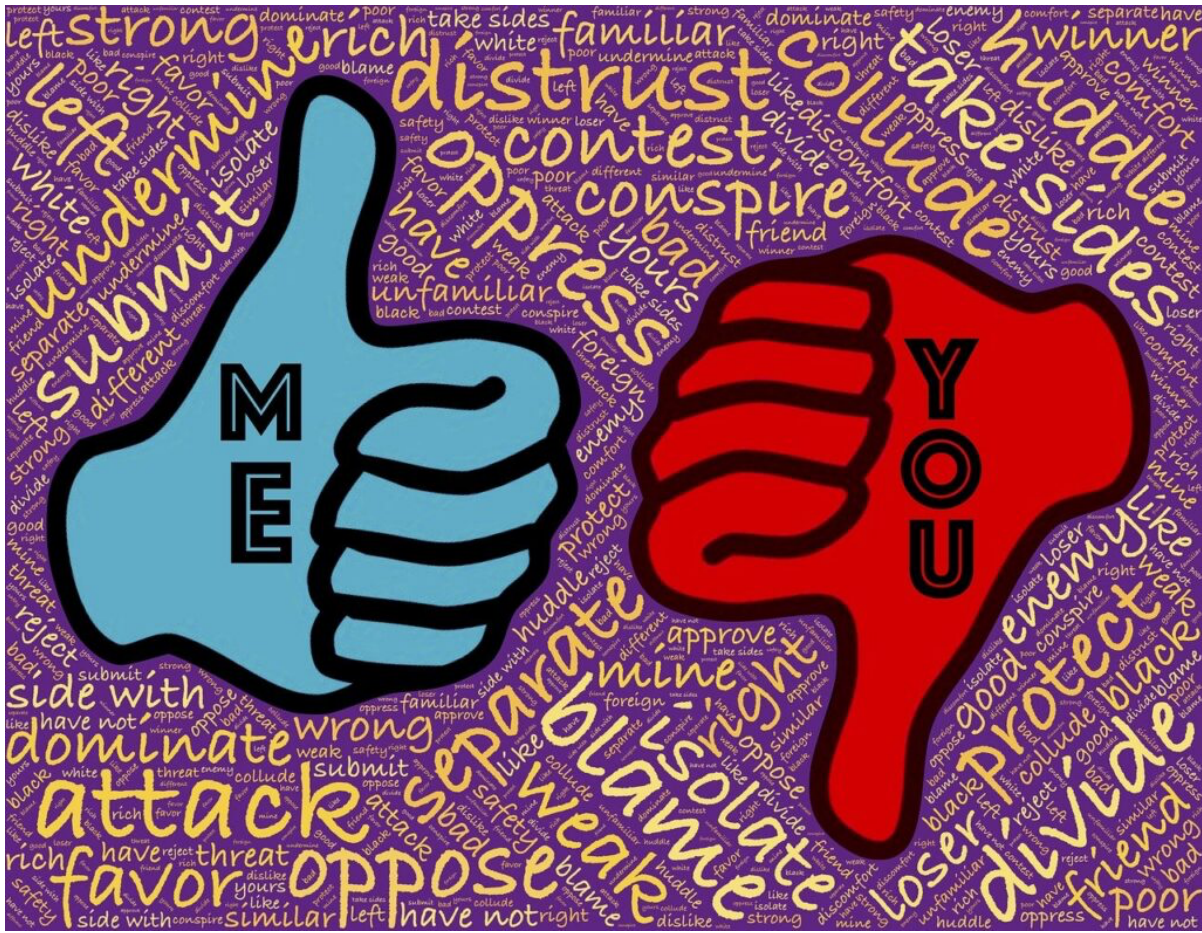
The final way is desensitization. In his 2005 commencement speech at Stanford, Steve Jobs talked about being "already naked." In his words: "Remembering that you're going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You're already naked. There's no reason not to follow your heart."

We're extremely sensitive to the short-term reputational consequences of our actions. What will people say? This is fueled by the powerful combo of our instinctive fear of being cast out from the tribe, a death sentence in prehistoric times, and the fear of losing what we think we have. Remembering that we're already naked and have nothing to lose helps me overcome the resistance to taking decisions that have, often imagined, associated risks.

In my life, giving up a vice president role at a well-reputed Silicon Valley company to lead an industrial research center halfway across the globe as a professor at a good, but not absolute top university came with a lot of raised eyebrows and questions. In the end, however, it was the right choice for me. Even if it felt scary at the time, things turned out well!

One illustrative example I sometimes use is to ask someone to name one famous Sumerian. The Sumerians were one of the most successful civilizations on Earth with great leaders and incredible achievements. Still, everything they accomplished is gone and no longer remembered by anyone except for some arcane historians. The same will be true for us and everything we hold as important. It puts some perspective on things and helps, as I wrote previously, to not take ourselves too seriously.

We're all going to die. Until we develop the technology to fix it, this uncomfortable truth is terrible in its own right. However, we can use it to maximize our self-actualization and live the best life we can make for ourselves. Three tactics include prioritization (only do what you feel is important), acceleration (don't delay things but do them now) and desensitization (stop worrying about what others might think or what you might lose). As Bernie Siegel said: "An awareness of one's mortality can lead you to wake up and live an authentic, meaningful life." In the end, it's not how long you live but what you do while you're alive.



BE THE PROTAGONIST OF YOUR LIFE: CONCLUSION

The last sections have taken us through 15 rules that I believe are important to ensure we're the protagonist of our own lives. As I wrote in the introduction to this series, I believe that those who read my content have in common that we take a proactive approach to life and view ourselves as the protagonists of our lives.

As a conclusion, I thought I'd explore the consequences of doing the opposite of each of the rules. What would happen if we would be the antagonists of our own lives, rather than the protagonists? What would be the most effective ways of making our lives as awful as possible?

1. Instead of owning it, blame everyone else

No matter what happens, what the root cause is or what the consequences are, you always make sure to blame it on others. This makes you the victim of the situation and allows you to moan and complain while waiting for someone else to take care of it for you.

2. Instead of having a purpose, do what's expedient

Embrace a nihilistic view of life in which nothing matters and everything is relative. This allows you to take on a hedonistic, self-centered life where you choose whatever feels good in the short term and is expedient. Louis XIV said it perhaps best: "After us, the flood."

3. Instead of competing intentionally, go after everything

In every situation, engage in competition and do everything you can to show that you're better than those around you. And when you win, boast loudly and make those who didn't win feel as bad as possible. Of course, when you don't win, pretend you weren't really trying.

4. Instead of questioning everything, believe everything at face value

Whenever anyone tells you why something happened, simply accept the explanation. When you feel a particular way or have a random thought pop up in your head, treat it as the truth as your feelings are infallible.

5. Instead of saying hell yes or no, say yes to everything

Whenever anyone asks you for anything, just accept and do whatever they asked you. Make sure to surround yourself with as many people as possible who ask for things so that you always feel overwhelmed and terrible about the fact that you haven't gotten around to dealing with some of them.

6. Instead of getting out of your comfort zone, stay smack in the middle

Don't ever take risks and simply keep doing whatever you've been doing for years. Why change what works? It's much safer to keep doing what you've always been doing. When it gets boring and you feel like you're not growing, promise yourself that in the future, you'll change things. Kick the can down the road.

7. Instead of changing your mind, lock yourself to your initial position

Once you've made up your mind, fight to the death to keep the position you took at first. Believe with your whole heart that because you came to a conclusion perhaps years back, it's still the right answer and simply ignore any evidence to the contrary.

8. Instead of using data, rely on your feelings

Whatever you're feeling is the truth and shouldn't be questioned. Use your outstanding storytelling machine to create justifications whenever there's a discrepancy between reality and your view of it.

9. Instead of taking care of yourself, let bad habits compound

Accept weight gain as a normal consequence of aging. Don't exercise as it gets you sweaty, out of breath and uncomfortable. Eat and drink things that you know aren't good for you, but use them as a crutch to manage life. And whatever you do, don't sit down and think about who you are and what you want. Take a pill if you feel bad.

10. Instead of studying Stoicism and Buddhism, follow the latest fad

The latest is the greatest, so whatever self-named guru pops up with some esoteric message, simply run after it and emulate whatever they're doing in the hope it leads to the same outcomes for you. And make sure to fight as many windmills as possible by focusing all your energy on things that you can't change.

11. Instead of giving back, focus everything on yourself

Whenever successful, claim that it's because of your abilities. If not, blame others. You got to where you are on your own and therefore everyone else should just do their own thing. Not your job to help them, so why waste time and energy on that?

12. Instead of exploring, stay with what you know

You tried out different things earlier in life and it all sucked majorly. You've arrived at the optimal place in life, so it's now all about enjoying where you are instead of trying to improve. Especially as you're certain that any new thing you'd try wouldn't lead to a positive outcome anyway.

13. Instead of being proud of who you see in the mirror, don't worry about the consequences of your actions

Whenever you're faced with a challenging problem, simply act in the way that's most expedient. The end justifies the means, so as long as the goal is good for you, it doesn't matter how you get there.

14. Instead of not taking yourself too seriously, make it all about you

You're the only one who actually matters. Anyone who questions any of your statements or opinions is obviously wrong and needs to be smacked down as hard as you can. It feels right, so how can you possibly be wrong?

15. Instead of memento mori, go carpe diem

Don't bother about the future, how to use your time well or the impact you want to accomplish. Instead, pretend you're going to live forever and delay everything that's important but hard until some undefined later.

Every day and every moment, we have a choice to make. Do we live by the principles and rules we set for ourselves and in line with what we believe to be our purpose? Or do we just continue on cruise control and lane keeping and keep doing what we've always done and what feels right? The consequence of the latter is of course that you'll die well before you're dead, as Scott Stambach so neatly summarized. Instead, be the protagonist of your own life, focus on self-actualization and be all you can be, to quote a US military slogan. Live life to the fullest as, as far as I know, you only get to live it once!