

JOACHIM  
PAWLIK

WORKOUT FOR YOUR CAREER

*Prepare  
yourself for  
every  
opportunity  
ahead*

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**WORKOUT FOR**

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JOACHIM PAWLIK

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# YOUR CAREER

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*Prepare yourself for every  
opportunity ahead*

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### WARM UP

We were a group of kayakers in Australia, with different levels of experience, and with different kinds of

boats. I was in a two-person kayak, with a helmswoman in the rear seat, and me in the front. At the point where we launched our boats into the water, the river was quite broad. Our trip began in a leisurely way, with just a few rocks and some turbulence that was easily managed. It was a fantastic experience and completely idyllic for at least that moment. But then the riverbed narrowed, and the water started rushing louder and louder around us. The narrower the channel got, the more furious it became. The river was changing at a pace that I hadn't expected. I still remember how my heart sped up when I suddenly saw a long descent ahead of us. Nothing to see but white water. And then behind us, we heard a scream. Involuntarily, I twisted around to check on the others. Their inflatable boat had flipped. My helmswoman took no notice of them, instead shouting at me: "Keep going!" Our speed was rising, and we had hardly any time to

avoid the obstacles – rocks, branches, and sudden drops – in our way. Given the strong current, I intuitively decided to slow us down, and stuck the paddle into the water as a gentle brake. That proved to be a dangerous mistake. We nearly capsized, and from behind me again came this scathing cry: "Are you crazy? Paddle, man, paddle! Faster!" So I paddled, and to my huge relief, I saw that the boat was coming back under our control. The more power I put into it, the faster we went, and the easier and safer we got through the rapids. Every time we hit another patch, my fellow paddler shouted from behind me: "Paddle, Joachim!" I gave it all I had because I had understood a crucial fact: You can steer and keep control over what happens to you in the flow only if you're moving faster than the current. I often think back about that experience. Man, that was an absolute blast! Over the years, I've come to regard it as a core metaphor for life: If I let myself drift, I wind up being at the mercy of outside forces. There's a serious risk of capsizing, and no matter what, I lose control over what happens. I won't be able to avoid obstacles. It will be nearly impossible

for me to reach quieter sections of the river, even if I can already see them ahead of me. I have to paddle. It is only then that I can live a self-determined life.

This conviction has always proven to be well-founded for me, both as a person and as an entrepreneur. But it's not easy to put into practice. Over the past 25 years, I've helped many people take their careers into their own hands and supported them in achieving their goals. In my experience, we all get into situations in which it isn't easy to keep our bearings, keep driving ahead and keep actively managing our professional progress.

I often hear feedback like this: "Why should I set goals for myself? Why should I plan? It's only going to turn out differently anyway!" People talk to me about accidents and random events, about life circumstances that change, and about the diverse influences that determine our lives. I then try to clear up a fundamental misunderstanding. You don't plan or set goals for yourself with the idea that everything will certainly play out that way. The sentence "Planning replaces chance with error" describes the

relationship quite well. We make plans in order to learn from the deviations because every plan contains assumptions about how good we are, what we can do, and what we can't. We assess the relevant circumstances and take into account our resources and motivation. When the plan doesn't come together, this teaches us what we were wrong about. That's of incalculable benefit in our efforts to improve ourselves. We should keep our own development moving at a rapid pace, so that life doesn't pass us by. We cannot make our progress dependent on benevolent bosses, good companies, or random challenges. We have to take it into our own hands. We can then at least reduce the influence of fortune and chance, which play a role in every life.

This book is intended to offer you the tools to develop yourself on your own terms. It offers you the essence of what I learned over the course of a successful and fulfilling professional life. Now, I want to share this knowledge with you because I believe that this is the perfect moment to do so.

My name is Joachim Pawlik. Over the past three decades, I built a consulting firm focused on personal and organizational development and personal consulting. We use detailed methods to analyze what drives people, what prevents them from moving forward, how they develop their potential, and how they can be used optimally within their companies. In this way, we help organizations become more successful, just like management consultants do.

Have you already used consultants in your company? Or do you know a consultant personally? In most cases, people use their own past experiences as a guide when trying to form a picture of someone new. This is perhaps the way you're trying to pigeonhole me right now. Many people associate a consultant with a certain kind of person. It is often someone who showed considerable foresight early on, who already knew before they graduated from college exactly which company they wanted to work at. They already had a signed contract in hand, and the last bits of university work were purely a formality. Even in their high school days, they were already at the top of the pack: highly

organized, mature for their age, reflective, and ambitious.

I'll tell you right off that I was never like that. If anything, I was the polar opposite. To be honest, I only set one record during my high school days, which was getting the absolute lowest possible passing grade on the university entrance exam (it was also not easy to get a grade point average much lower than mine). The teachers obviously didn't find me particularly convincing, and I felt the same way about them. At any rate, I didn't make much of myself at school at that point. I already had other plans. I wanted to be a professional soccer player. On the field, I was successful. That's where people knew who I was. After leaving school, I entered a training program, and soon won a contract with FC St. Pauli. Many of those around me at the time also believed that I'd make the leap to the peak of the professional soccer world into Germany's top league. They believed in me, and I did too. Even today, I can say that there was good reason for this. After all, I had the technical potential, a good

understanding of the game, and the desire to train. I seemingly had everything that I needed. Yet it didn't work out. After just one season, it was over.

At the time, I was of course extremely disappointed. I had imagined my future on the soccer field, under the bright lights. And then all of a sudden, my big dream, on which I'd bet everything in my life up to that point, was shattered. That was a really hard time for me. What bothered me almost more than anything was that I simply didn't know why it had happened. Aside from the coach who didn't appreciate me, the other players who wouldn't pass the ball to me enough, and so on. But none of these explanations answered the most essential question: Why didn't they?

In at least one respect, I was lucky in this bitter experience: By getting weeded out early, I at least didn't lose much time before I had to admit that I had failed. That was part of the game. Professional sports can be unforgiving. It quickly becomes apparent if you have what it takes to rise to the top, as I had wanted so badly, or if you don't. In the business life, there is typ-

ically a much greater risk of following a chosen path for a long period of time, despite having no chance of success.

I've seen this often enough as a consultant. People find so many excuses for their failures. "My boss doesn't like me," "Our executives never think beyond the short term," "Actually, they promised it to me," or "The market conditions just aren't right." I hear these and other seemingly conclusive explanations over and over from people who are ostensibly perfect victims. In these conversations, you realize that most of us are very good at blaming others. We are incredibly creative in finding others to hold accountable for our own failings. However, our analysis of what we ourselves might not have done right, or of what we might have missed, is correspondingly weak. Of course, taking the blame onto yourself hurts. Determining after 20 years that you've been taken advantage of, because you've allowed your manager to treat you badly, is incredibly demoralizing. It eats away at your

self-confidence. But as much as I can understand this reluctance to taking responsibility, it remains problematic. It pushes aside the crucial conclusion: that this is the wrong way for us, and we ourselves must change it. That's why so many people wait patiently and even romanticize their position until everyone else has passed them by – or until they're simply let go. Fortunately, the sudden and involuntary end of my professional soccer or, as we call it here in Europe, "football" career forced me to turn the page right away. That's how I came, at a relatively early age, to the profession that still fascinates me today. I've always regarded my work with people as a privilege. For me, there was and is no more rewarding task than actively supporting people in recognizing and fully exploiting their potential. I love being able to help as someone first discovers their own entirely personal path to success, and then systematically follows it, in the process of becoming the backbone of their organization. I've experienced for myself how great that is, and at the same time how difficult it can be. In my current role as a staff-develop-

ment consultant, I run into versions of my own question – of how I had ultimately failed as a professional athlete – in countless other people's stories. I've met many people in my professional life who have yearned for their dreams to come true with the same passion I felt for my football career. In most cases, however, these dreams didn't come true without some effort. Only a very few reached their goal without some strategic preparation. And the analysis of these few triumphant exceptions shows that these people were often simply lucky. I want to spare you from this lottery of life. Please don't misunderstand me. I love the dream of success, and I know there's sometimes good reason to indulge in the idea of making a difference in the world with your own life. It can happen that way. But certainly not automatically. I really can't stand promises like, "You just have to believe in it and then anything is possible." Over time, I've advised many people, in many different careers. I've always found that

everything we want to achieve and everything we dream of have their price. There are certain requirements we have to fulfil in order for a career to be sustainably successful. These are often overlooked, or at least misjudged.

As a young athlete, I myself definitely lacked this realistic assessment of what had to be done in order to get to the very top. I didn't know what else was part of it other than practicing a lot. I didn't have anyone to tell me what sacrifices I should have been making to get more out of myself. Pulling extra shifts, making sure to eat a healthy diet, and getting enough sleep – all things that are more normal today. I didn't realize that I lacked the personal skills that I needed to earn my position on the team. When I learned much later that my teammates often didn't pass the ball to me because they thought I was arrogant, I was shocked. I'd never seen myself like that. Looking back, it's clear that I hadn't prepared the way for my own career well enough and hadn't paid the price for my greatest goal. And it is no wonder as I didn't even know what that price was.

## **Learning from top athletes: The power of workouts**

This book is designed to illustrate the price we have to pay for success. If your goal is to achieve great things, there are some basic qualities you're going to need, no matter what field you're in. With the help of this book, you'll be able to hone and develop these qualities, which are the personal skills and abilities applied in dealing with other people. I've compiled what I consider to be the ten most important qualities. Are they all that we need to bring us forward? Well, I can't prove it scientifically. Still, in my 25 years of professional experience, they are the essential factors I've seen to be present in all long-term careers associated with a fulfilled life. We've developed an exercise format based on the fitness program known in the world of sports as "circuit training." Generation X readers might remember it from their days in school. I know, there are probably much more up-to-date formats out there these days. I hope you'll forgive me for sticking to this one anyway. I prefer it because it doesn't gloss over the fact that anyone who wants to achieve

great things is going to have to work very hard. In classic circuit training, a series of different stations that includes benches, boxes, mats, and the like is set up in a circle. Participants spread out over the stations where they complete training modules that usually last around 30 seconds each. For example, they might begin by doing sit-ups until the trainer blows the whistle for a short break. At that point, everyone moves on to the next station, say, to the benches to do some stepping exercises, and so on. I don't know about you but, for me, circuit training was always pretty exhausting when I did it right. To this day, many professional athletes use the approach because it shapes them into more all-round competitors. Strength in different muscle groups, endurance, coordination, and mental acuity – all of these qualities grow from station to station. It trains their basic skills and prepares them for situations they're not yet familiar with, ones that only arise in the act of playing the game itself. We've designed our workout in precisely the same way. The only difference is that instead of preparing you for the next game of sports, it prepares you for

professional success and leading a happy and fulfilling life. Our workout is designed to sharpen your ability to identify and seize the opportunities that come your way, even if you can't see them yet. We want you to be able to overcome the potential obstacles in your career and weather any setbacks along the way. But we also want you to be able to resist the seduction of quick-fix opportunities that won't serve you well in the long term.

## **Why I've written this book**

I began this publication by saying that the time is right for this book. In fact, for several years now, I've been thinking about combining what I've learned through my own experience with the latest research on personality development. But why do so now? Because the pace of change in the world is faster than ever before. Everything around us is moving at breakneck speed. As ever more is demanded of us, it's increasingly difficult to predict what lies around the corner. The next opportunity or the next setback can arise at any moment. But hasn't that always been the case, you say? Maybe it has. If you like to organize things in advance as

much as I do, you know that plans rarely work out as intended. Today, the pace of change, and the impact this change has on our lives, is unprecedented. Marking a turning point, the COVID-19 pandemic instantaneously turned everything in our world upside down. Once highly sought-after dream jobs suddenly became dead-end jobs. Imagine the horror of the pilots in training who were advised in September 2020 by Lufthansa to pursue a different career due to the lack of available jobs for pilots in the years to come. On the face of it, until that point, these young people had done everything right. They had worked hard to get there and make it through a brutally tough selection process. The path ahead seemed clear with no barriers to enjoying a prestigious career as a flight captain with a high salary. And then, suddenly, it was all over. This is just one of many examples. You've heard similar stories from people in the restaurant and hospitality sectors as well as tourism and culture. But there are also those "dark horses" of the crisis, who've done very well, such as the suppliers of protective masks and disinfectants, or companies providing hardware for

home office workstations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has expedited a trend that began with digitalization. We can no longer reliably plan our career paths. We have no idea what the future will look like and what it will require of us. It's increasingly difficult for us to plan our next steps because tomorrow may not be what it is today. Change is happening – rapidly. We have to accept and embrace this fact. And we should learn to paddle faster, so that we can be one of the winners of the future. More so than ever before, our chances of success depend on who we are as a person. And workout exercises give you the opportunity to precisely practice these skills. At each station, you familiarize yourself with an aspect of your personality that is relevant to your success by finding out exactly where you stand with regard to this characteristic. Doing targeted exercises helps you improve your personal skills. You learn how to practice more effectively, how to build courage, strengthen your willpower and maintain empathy in difficult situations.

You learn as well that people trust you and will follow your lead, even when you're overwhelmed by an onslaught of new challenges.

Some stations will be easier for you than others. It's the same with sports, where you might prefer doing three times as many high box jumps than even one set of push-ups. Your preferences for specific exercises say a lot about your underlying motivation, from which you draw much of your energy. For some, it's the desire to prove to be influential, for others to maintain social bonds, while others are driven by the will to be the best at whatever they're doing. There are three basic motives that give us strength: power, affiliation, and achievement. People who are highly motivated by achievement want to understand things more deeply, test their own abilities and develop them further. They want to be better and more efficient than others. People motivated by affiliation are primarily interested in the ties associated with social bonds and a sense of closeness and belonging. These individuals do not seek competition; they aim to cooperate. And when they find themselves in a situation in which

they can, all is fine. People with a strong power-oriented motive like to lead the way and influence others. In other words, they like to make decisions. But nobody has only one motive. It's more a matter of which motive is predominant and how pronounced the others are. If you're very achievement-oriented, you'll likely prove successful rather quickly at the "practice" station. If relationships with others are your priority, the "trust" station will appeal to you. For the power-hungry among us, the "powerlessness" station is a no-brainer. Feeling a sense of control over their lives and recognizing their decision-making authority – these are things they're comfortable with. This book is structured to allow each station to stand on its own as a subject. Readers don't have to read the contents in the order they appear. If you're interested in a particular topic, you can skip straight to it. You can read and apply that section independently, separate from the others. But do yourself a favor and don't make the mistake of focusing

only on the exercises you already feel confident about. I don't buy into the idea of prioritizing one's strengths. You might excel in some areas, but if you don't learn to do well in others, you may never achieve your goals. Instead, you should give your personality the full attention that it deserves.

## **Figure out where you want to go**

You could simply start right in on making yourself fit for your goals. But allow me to ask one question first: Are you sure about those goals?

When I work with executives, it often emerges in the course of the conversation that they've taken on tasks that don't actually interest them. In these cases, I often hear things like, "I couldn't turn down an offer like that." I rarely meet people who have the courage to turn down supposed opportunities because deep inside themselves, they want something much more. Talented people in particular rise rapidly through the

ranks, and simply continue along their path to success – until one day, they realize that what they're doing has nothing to do with their inner nature or desires. There's a certain emptiness at the end of careers like this. Why didn't they start looking at things differently earlier? It's not like they hadn't thought about their futures. They have intense conversations with their parents, friends, and partners about what suits them. They reach out to people who have experience and who mean well by them. This is an understandable approach, but it can be misleading because in fact no one can see inside of them. No one should take the decision about your own goals in life away from you. Nor should you attach too much importance to school grades or other external systems of assessment. Think about my school career. What else could I have done after that? Therefore, before you start with the workout, I want to encourage you to review your goals.

For some people, the midlife crisis is the first time they honestly examine their real desires and opportunities.

Then, the right questions are asked: “Why haven’t I made more of my life? How can I still become genuinely happy?” But this reflection comes at an inopportune time, in an uncontrolled way, when something is already going badly. After years or decades, people then suddenly feel that they’ve been going in the wrong direction all along. This perception can lead them into a knee-jerk reaction. Without stopping to consider things further, they throw away their careers – or worse. It’s a fiasco.

You can avoid this by reviewing your path in a planned way. I’d like to present you with one simple mecha-

nism that will help you in this regard.

It’s called the “goal collage.”

This tool will help you find your path.

Your very own! At any point in your life, it can help you discover for yourself what really interests and fulfills you.

Then, you can prepare intelligently to

realize your intentions. You are

unique. Make something of it. The

responsibility and capability to do so

both lie with you. This is an incredible opportunity.



## YOUR PERSONAL GOAL COLLAGE

Identify your priorities and create your personal goal collage.

If you know what you want to achieve, and are confident about it, you

can skip this exercise. For most people, however, it's not easy to determine what really motivates them and what they want to achieve in life – at least it's not as easy as it seems. Even if we have an answer ready, it may not be the right one. Sometimes, we talk ourselves into believing something that's been instilled in us by our upbringing and our social environment. For example, people who have grown up in status-oriented families may seek to accumulate great amounts of influence, even though they may subconsciously be very strongly relationship motivated.

In doing so, they neglect their need for community. This may be why they continually feel exhausted and dissatisfied, without knowing exactly why. These signals are difficult to interpret. They come from the subconscious.

Subconscious motives drive our personality over the long term. They come to light when we look for challenges to fulfill on our own, outside of our obligations. Otherwise, they remain hidden, overlaid by the conscious motives that control our immediate actions.

It's good when unconscious and conscious motives are largely in harmony with each other. In some situations, however, they may and must diverge. In times of crisis, for example, an employee that is very relationship or power motivated must go beyond the actions that would do his motive structure good over the long run. He must temporarily accommodate himself to doing a number of things that are contrary to his inner drives. Such phases are always necessary to achieve goals. But if we are constantly working in opposition to our inner desires and needs, it costs us too much energy, draining us.

# YOUR PERSONAL GOAL COLLAGE

Therefore, we should get to know our genuine sources of strength. Using a goal collage is an easy way of accessing your subconscious mind. To do this, climb into an imaginary helicopter. From this bird's-eye perspective, it's easier to identify where it's taking you. You can see your current priorities more clearly, and question them as needed. The goal collage uses pictures to open a creative pathway to your hidden desires and needs.

What do you need for this exercise?

One or more sheets of white paper – ideally flip chart sheets, or alternatively in the DIN A3 size. In addition, you'll want magazines with a diverse range of pictures, along with scissors, a glue stick, colored pencils, and felt-tip pens. Start by asking yourself a few specific questions (choose the ones that appeal to you):

- What do I want to achieve in my life?
- What is important now, and what will be important in the future?
- What should set me apart?
- What kind of manager do I want to be?
- What do I want to achieve in my current position?
- What do I need to feel generally successful, happy, and fulfilled?

From the magazines, cut or tear out all the images, words, text excerpts, and quotes that appeal to you, and that you associate with the questions listed above (or your own selection). Which pictures and sentences give you a good feeling when you see or read them?

Of course, you can also draw pictures or write things yourself.

Arrange your pictures and sentences on the paper so the result feels right to you. Give your imagination free rein. Don't let yourself be constrained by everyday requirements or your current situation. Glue your arrangement down only once it feels completely right. The best way to determine whether you've gained access to your goals is by presenting your collage to someone

else. You'll immediately note whether your words are flowing naturally or not. If yes, then these are your desires. But if you feel uncomfortable doing this, your image probably still reflects too many external influences.

Wait a few days before coming back to your creation. Now look at your collage. Let the images have an effect on you and then ask yourself the following questions:

**1. WHAT GOAL IS EMERGING FROM THIS COLLAGE? FORMULATE IT.  
GO THROUGH THE WORKOUT TRAINING PROCESS FOR IT.**

# YOUR PERSONAL GOAL COLLAGE

## 2. HOW CAN I KEEP VISUALIZING MY GOAL OVER TIME? WHAT COULD I USE AS A REMINDER OF THE COLLAGE (A PHOTO OF THE COLLAGE ON MY MOBILE PHONE, A POST-IT NOTE ON THE COMPUTER, A SUITABLE QUOTE, A POST CARD, ETC.)?

Back when I initially launched myself into self-employment, I made a collage of my own for the first time in my life. And you know what I did with it? I hung it over my bed. I'm almost uncomfortable saying this today, but it helped. I'm not a morning person. The alarm kills me every time. So it was always the same procedure for me:

The alarm goes off, I'm annoyed, but I look at the collage, which reminds me why the alarm is going off, and then I get up feeling motivated. I know that's a bit peculiar. But the collage works no matter regardless of when you look at it. Do it every now and then!



**1: RESPONSIB**



**ILITY**  
**TAKE IT ON**



## IN DEFEAT, ACCOUNTABILITY IS KEY

“It is our fault – and that means my fault.” These are the unequivocal words delivered by Liverpool FC Coach Jürgen Klopp in January 2021 after his team’s embarrassing defeat at the hands of a total outsider. In making this statement, he defended his players and drew the fire of the press entirely onto himself. People who’ve been following Klopp’s career will know that this has been his credo from the very beginning: “It is always my fault, the things that don’t work are my fault.”<sup>1</sup> It’s an approach that has led him to become the first person to twice be named FIFA Coach of the Year.<sup>2</sup>

### But is this the norm? Unfortunately not!

Klopp is famous for having once referred to himself as “the normal one.” This is clearly an understatement, since there is very little that is “normal” about the Stuttgart-born coach. Unfortunately, very few people – let alone Premier League coaches – are as elegant as he when it comes to demonstrating accountability. His ability to get the best out of his players is almost unparalleled. The enthusiasm and emotions that he displays on the sidelines are legendary. Still, what truly sets Klopp apart from his colleagues is his unconditional willingness to accept responsibility not only for his team’s victories but more importantly for their defeats. What a contrast to the behavior displayed recently by Joachim Löw, head coach of Germany’s national soccer team. In November 2020, during the team’s historic 0:6 defeat against Spain – the greatest loss by a German national team in 89 years – Löw sat lethargically on the bench and subsequently sought responsibility for the disaster everywhere but in himself. “Everything was awful,”<sup>3</sup> he said, dismissing the entire team wholesale. After the match, Berlin’s Tagesspiegel newspaper dubbed the disheartened national coach – who led his team to

the World Cup title in 2014, but now appeared unable to inspire them during a period of crisis – “der Erschlaffte,” which means something along the lines of “the wilted one” or “the one who’s gone limp.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Leaders suffer together with their teams**

During moments of great pain, strong leadership shows its mettle by displaying a 100 percent willingness to assume responsibility. This is an approach from which everyone involved benefits – not only team members and the employer but also the leaders themselves. In soccer, as in any sport, a team that knows it won’t be left alone, even in defeat, will play with more confidence and élan. Each individual player will be more willing to take responsibility for events on the field. They will work harder to achieve collective success. This principle can also be applied 100 percent to other areas of life. As far as I’m concerned, Jürgen Klopp is an extremely inspiring example of what leaders can achieve when they accept responsibility. He is a true role model in the world of sport but in many other areas as well.

### **Defeat is the true test of endurance**

When employees express an eagerness to take on responsibility, it’s music to our ears. These are the individuals who want to go above and beyond the regular call of duty. They believe in a winning future and are convinced they’ve got what it takes to make it a reality. Taking on responsibility suggests that a person has expertise in coming up with solutions. And this is precisely what everybody wants. But the moment of truth only really comes when an expected success fails to materialize, when things get real tight, and we have to identify the root causes of a failure. How do employees react in this situation? Like Jürgen Klopp? Do they say: “I know which mistakes I made and what I need to work on.” Or do they look for the problems in everyone but themselves? You can probably guess what the majority of people do in such situations. They don’t see any fault in themselves. At least not with regard to the root of the problem. In my experience, Klopp certainly isn’t “the normal one,” as most people respond very differently in this regard, unfortunately. Why do so few people follow Klopp’s recipe for success? Why do so few people take responsibility for failure?

A lot of people believe it's better to pass off responsibility to others and keep their own noses clean. This is a sorely misguided belief, but I'll come back to that later. At this point, it's not the real problem. There's another phenomenon that's much more interesting and relevant.

The fact is that most people are actually unaware that they might have messed up and missed something essential. They are convinced they've done everything in their power to achieve success. For them, it's impossible to even imagine that their efforts were not enough. They insist the problem must lie somewhere else.

## **Better than the others: The "above-average effect"**

International research suggests that this blind-spot behavior is caused by the so-called "above-average effect." According to this theory, we human beings notoriously overestimate our own contribution to the course of events. As the term implies, we tend to see ourselves as being a cut above the average person in terms of our intellectual and various other abilities. And several studies have shown this cognitive bias to be widespread. For

example, a survey of Swedish students showed that 77 percent of the respondents considered themselves to be above-average drivers in terms of safety.<sup>5</sup> In a survey of US college professors, 94 percent of the respondents were convinced that they worked harder than their colleagues.<sup>6</sup> Another study showed that when couples were asked about their respective share of the housework, their combined totals often came to a sum of well over 100 percent. You don't need to be a math genius to recognize that self-assessments such as these cannot possibly correspond to reality.<sup>7</sup> How can almost everyone be better than average? The total amount of housework can never exceed 100 percent, no matter what it feels like. In other words, self-exaggeration is very common. Still, this is not – as we might expect – because we all desire to make ourselves look better than others. Study participants would derive no benefit from that. Instead, the fact is that their responses are authentic reflections of what they actually believe to be true.

This phenomenon derives from an egocentric worldview that is nearly inescapable for us as human beings. Indeed, there is never a moment when we're not playing the leading role in our lives and viewing the world from our

own limited perspective. Every day, we are directly aware of all the things that we accomplish: we get up early, work at full speed in the office, do some more work at home in the evening, leverage our expertise and our networks, think a lot about the best solutions to problems, develop great new ideas, etc. What we tend to forget is that almost everybody else is doing the same thing within the scope of their own means! This leads to a situation in which we are much more aware of our own efforts and commitment than we are of other people's contributions. We automatically deem our own work as being more significant than that of our colleagues. But what happens when the success we expected doesn't come to fruition? Well, in that case, most of us think it's probably our colleagues' fault; they must not have done their job properly. But it's not some sort of malicious intent that prompts us to think: If only those other people had achieved as much as I did! If only the circumstances hadn't been so difficult! We're simply making a number of assumptions that – although they seem entirely logical to us – actually block our view of our own contribution to an unexpected failure.

We give 100 percent. More is not possible. The idea that we might be to blame for something implies that we are or were not up to the task. Who among us wants to admit that?

In my experience, the only people capable of realistically judging their share in events are people who are mildly depressed. These individuals often correctly recognize the full complexity of interconnected circumstances. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that they're better able to improve the situation and get things going again but on the contrary. A person who sees themselves as a cog in the wheel will not take it upon themselves to set things in motion again. On the other hand, if you see yourself as being relevant to a situation, you activate your potential. It will give you that initial boost of courage that you need to try and make a change. You'll be more likely to take things in hand. A dose of overconfidence can prompt us to tackle obstacles we would otherwise shy away from if we took a more modest approach. In other words, in and of itself, a dose of overconfidence is not a bad sign at all. In fact, none of the world's great inventions and discoveries would have succeeded had the people behind them been plagued by a fully

realistic assessment of themselves. Unfortunately, when things don't go well, this tendency to overestimate our abilities is no longer helpful. At this point, the principle of action is reversed. In other words, in order to come up with tangible solutions, we have to consciously work against the tendency to overestimate ourselves and instead actively seek out and find our faults.

## **The power of exuberance has its limits**

I already spoke briefly above about my foray into Germany's second division of professional soccer. When I signed my first contract, my confidence about my future role on the field was very high, and that helped for a while. Who knows if anyone would have even offered me a contract had I not been compelled forward by my palpable egocentric drive? I was hungry and self-confident, and that's exactly how I presented myself to others. After the initial rush, however, I failed to take the second and decisive step. When things started going downhill, I refused to assume any responsibility – for the game, but above all for my own growth. If I was sitting on the bench and my team was losing, everything was perfectly clear to me; the coach was obviously making mistakes. I could see problems every-

where, just not anywhere near me. Instead of reflecting on my own deficits and facing up to the challenges I wasn't actually prepared for, I came up with alibis. If I had approached my coach and asked for some feedback about what I was doing wrong and where I had to improve so as to be able to help the team, I might have been given the opportunity to work directly on myself. But I didn't ask these questions. Instead, I just continued on with the assumption that it was the coach's responsibility to say something to me. This allowed me to completely avoid taking any responsibility for my own development and instead put that responsibility into someone else's hands. The result was stagnation and ultimately the end of my career in professional soccer. This failure allowed me to learn a very important lesson that would be incredibly useful to me later on in my professional career and private life. As most of us now know, you learn more from one massive failure than from ten big victories – but only if you take responsibility for that failure.

## **Not an easy step**

Of course, it's never easy to face our own shortcomings and take responsibility for defeat. When we're asked to pay

# RESPONSIBILITY TAKE IT ON

the price for our mistakes, it automatically puts us in a painful situation, and it's no wonder so many people push back. It's so much easier to blame others for failure. In the long run, however, the wiser decision is almost always to set out on the arduous path of taking responsibility.

Individuals who are capable of accepting responsibility for failures are also capable of maturing and developing further. Perhaps more importantly, however, is that these individuals will usually also get the chance to do precisely that. Imagine the following situation: Something is going fundamentally wrong at your business and you approach the senior manager. At this point, there are two possible scenarios that could occur. Which of the following personalities would you put your money on? On the person who admits their mistake and starts talking about how they'll do things better going forward? Or the person who insists they've always done everything right and makes it clear that the others on the team need to finally step up and improve?

Most executives prefer the first approach, especially if they see a clear and potentially successful approach to improvement. They would most likely inquire as to what the senior manager intends to change and, if the solution

sounds plausible, give that person a second chance. They would assume that the person has matured and perhaps even learned a valuable lesson from the mistake they just made.

Former IBM head Tom Watson is famous for his response to such a situation at the company in the 1950s. After an employee made a very expensive mistake, Watson was asked if he was going to fire the individual: "No," he replied, "I just spent \$600,000 training him – why would I want somebody to hire his experience." Considering how much \$600,000 was worth back then, it's no wonder this story continues to resonate to this day.

People who realize and admit that they've made a mistake and pledge to do things differently in the future are showing strength, not weakness. In doing so, they create an atmosphere of trust. These individuals exude a positive presence that won us over when they first expressed a desire to assume responsibility, namely that they want to achieve a better outcome.

If you've made a mistake, use the opportunity to mature and develop a greater sense of your own responsibility. You don't need to be ashamed or be sheepish in admitting your error. As long as you learn from your mistakes, you should approach them as an

essential part of getting better at whatever it is you do.

In this vein, it is vital that you identify mistakes as soon as possible and let them be known. If weeks have already passed since you made the mistake, the personal damage to you will be significant. At that point, it will no longer be about taking responsibility; instead, it will start to look like a confession by someone who's been caught red-handed and tried in vain to eschew accountability.

## **Why it's especially difficult for top managers to acknowledge their own failures**

Unfortunately, people in top managerial positions are often particularly inept at questioning themselves, preferring instead to pass the buck to colleagues that they feel hold the blame. There are two key reasons for this conundrum. First, the greater a manager's scope of responsibility, the greater the factors that play a role in achieving success. In other words, top managers have more employees who might make mistakes, they supervise a larger number of countries in which conditions can deteriorate and they are responsible for more products and services that can go off the rails. As a result, some managers

insist that they simply cannot by any stretch of the imagination take responsibility for particular failures. They defend themselves by arguing that there were simply too many factors beyond their control. Individuals who feel this way about their jobs need to accept the fact that they are simply not up to the task they have taken on. They need to start figuring out why they took on more than they could chew in the first place, and then adjust their approach as quickly as possible. Would you like to know what my experience is in such cases? Excuses like these are almost always followed by some kind of career setback. In other words, if you feel this way about your job, you should take it as a warning sign. Indeed, every step you take in your career will bring a greater level of responsibility. The risk of feeling overwhelmed by your job increases dramatically with every new rung on the career ladder, as does the pressure associated with increasing expectations.

The second reason why top managers overlook their own faults lies in the considerable degree of success they've had so far, which leads them to overestimate themselves more than others. The fact that they've been able to prevail over so many competitors prompts them to believe that they must

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be superior to others. And it's true that since starting their career these individuals have left hundreds or perhaps even thousands of people behind them.

Not every boss takes the time to fully realize that his or her former competitors might actually have just as much talent and ability to be leaders in their fields, not to mention that these people have actually contributed significantly to the success of the venture. Many leading executives underestimate the sheer luck that helped catapult them to the top – a degree of luck that other candidates simply didn't have. Yet another factor that plays a role in creating an image of ourselves as being flawless and deserving of success is the fact that our own past mistakes become increasingly foggier the deeper they fall into the crevasse of memory. Research shows that past failures fade relatively quickly from memory, whereas the glorious moments of our career continue to shine forth.<sup>8</sup>

When top managers begin to acquire this inflated image of themselves, it becomes twice as difficult for them to pinpoint the responsibility for failures and mistakes in their own behavior. When you're the boss, it's especially easy to delegate blame to subordinates. When everything is running smoothly,

people love to insist "I worked hard to ensure that..." But as soon as any problems arise, there's usually a palpable change in tone: "The unit made mistakes..."

This phenomenon is the reason why I ask specific questions about candidates' previous failures when I conduct interviews for jobs that involve a great deal of responsibility. An individual who provides a convincing response to this kind of question will clearly have an advantage. Individuals who are capable of reflecting on their own mistakes and effectively communicating what they've learned from those mistakes are hands-down the most impressive candidates. Unfortunately, most people do the exact opposite, instead of making use of a variety of techniques to make themselves look good. Have you ever seen one of those job applications that have a seemingly endless list of the candidate's achievements? I have to grin every time I see one, as I consider this kind of presentation to be complete nonsense. I understand that many outplacement consultants recommend exactly this kind of self-promotion, but I personally don't know anyone who takes it seriously. Candidates like these demonstrate a complete overestimation of themselves.

Failures are not flaws. Everyone experiences them, and the more we risk, the more often we're going to fail. The most important thing is to let your failures help you grow into your responsibilities.

At this point, we need to acknowledge one more thing: in extreme situations, accepting responsibility can weigh very heavily on us. This can be the case, for example, when our mistakes affect the economic future of our employees and their families. For this reason, the act of taking responsibility should be based on a process of conscious decision-making.

If you notice that you're not ready to make those decisions and/or if you still need to work on taking responsibility in crisis situations, don't automatically assume it's a bad thing. In contrast to professional athletes, the advantage of working in the business world is that you have comparatively more time to work on yourself. The most important thing is that you make use of this time and that you never stop learning. And you can start right away.



**TAKE-  
AWAY**

**After each failure, be part of the solution.**

**Take responsibility for failure, not just for success. Doing so will allow you to take the first step toward achieving better results.**

**You will create trust and confidence in your ability to find solutions to problems, and thereby boost your problem solving ability and influence.**

## NOTES

(1) See Evening Standard, 22 January 2021: "Jurgen Klopp takes full responsibility for Liverpool slump ahead of Manchester United FA Cup clash."

(2) See Official Supporters Club Austria (OLSC Red Fellas Austria), 17 December 2020: "Titelverteidigung: Jürgen Klopp Welttrainer des Jahres 2020" (tr. Defending the title: Jürgen Klopp Voted World Coach of the Year 2020).

(3) In *kicker online*, 18 November 2020: "Alles schlecht" (tr. Everything was awful) – Löw: "Wir sind einfach irgendwo rumgelaufen" (tr. We just ran around anywhere).

(4) In *Der Tagesspiegel online*, 18 November 2020: "Joachim Löw nach Debakel gegen Spanien: Der Erschlaifte" (tr. Joachim Löw after the debacle against Spain: The wilted one).

(5) See Ola Svenson (1981): "Are we all less risky and more skillful than our fellow drivers?" in *Acta Psychologica*, Vol. 47, pp. 143–148.

(6) "When more than 90 percent of faculty members rate themselves as above-average teachers, and two-thirds rate themselves among the top quarter, the outlook for much improvement in teaching seems less than promising," writes Berkeley professor and educational-research scholar K. Patricia Cross with regard to her study conducted at the University of Nebraska; cf. Kathryn Patricia Cross (1977): "Not can, but will college teaching be improved?" *New Directions for Higher Education*, Vol. 17, pp. 1–15.

(7) In the Canadian study, 37 married couples were asked to provide information about who made breakfast, did the dishes, went grocery shopping, took care of the kids, took out the garbage, etc. The responses of both partners were added together so that the total sum contained the contribution the wife considered to be hers and the contribution the husband considered to be his. In other words, at least one of the two partners had overestimated their contribution, in some cases by a considerable margin; see Michael Ross, Fiore Sicolu (1979): "Egocentric biases in availability and attribution," in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 37, No. 3, pp. 322–336.

(8) This phenomenon is called "motivated reasoning" and describes a form of emotionally biased way of thinking. A study published in the 1990s at Wesleyan University in Ohio showed that 70 percent of university students who were asked to name the grades they got in school were able to correctly recall the marks they received in grades 9 to 12. The study showed that the time that had passed in the interval was not decisive in this regard. However, the students displayed memory gaps when it came to poor grades: 89 percent remembered getting As, but only 29 percent remembered getting Ds; see: Harry P. Bahrick, Lynda K. Hall, Stephanie A. Berger (1996): "Accuracy and distortion in memory for high school grades," in *Psychological Science*, Vol. 7, No. 5, pp. 265–71.

# ***QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON***

**1. HOW MUCH DID YOU PERSONALLY CONTRIBUTE TO THE LAST PROJECT THAT WAS A RESOUNDING SUCCESS? DO YOU THINK YOUR TEAM MEMBERS SHARE THIS ASSESSMENT?**

**2. YOU HAVE TO ADMIT TO FAILURE: DID THE OTHERS MAKE A MISTAKE OR DID YOU MAKE ONE YOURSELF?**

**3. HOW DOES IT FEEL TO ADMIT A MISTAKE INSTEAD OF JUSTIFYING YOUR ACTIONS AND BEHAVIOR?**

**4. AN ERROR WAS MADE FOR WHICH YOU WERE NOT RESPONSIBLE. THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU COULD CHANGE TO MAKE SURE IT DOESN'T HAPPEN AGAIN.**

**5. CONSIDER ALSO HOW MUCH HOUSEWORK YOU DO.**

# ***EXERCISE 1: CHECK YOUR SELF-ASSESSMENT***

## **➔ GOAL: SHOULDER YOUR SHARE OF THE RESPONSIBILITY!**

Take a look at recent projects in your division that proved to be very successful and make a note of who was responsible for the success. Now, do the same thing with recent failures. Take a moment to think about it as objectively as you can.

### **1. SUCCESSFUL PROJECTS**

Project title

Person(s) responsible

### **2. FAILED PROJECTS**

Project title

Person(s) responsible

**UNDER WHICH OF THE TWO HEADINGS DOES YOUR OWN NAME APPEAR MORE? WHAT DO YOU THINK THIS SAYS ABOUT YOUR OWN SELF-ASSESSMENT?**

**NOTES:**

## ***EXERCISE 2: LEARNING FROM FAILURES***

**➔ GOAL: BE A PART OF THE SOLUTION!**

Think about a failed project or other failure within your business that you don't feel responsible for. Write down the things that you would do differently.

**NOTES:**

## ***EXERCISE 3: DETERMINE THE SCOPE OF RESPONSIBILITY***

**➔ GOAL: TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR CAREER!**

What characterizes the scope of responsibility found at the career level that you want to reach one day? Write down the key aspects.

**NOTES:**

BOOKMARK

## LEONHARD MLODINOV: SUBLIMINAL

Psychologists around the world agree that along with our conscious thoughts, we have a subliminal, very active subconscious mind directing our thoughts. Leonhard Mlodinow, who holds a PhD in physics from the University of California at Berkeley, draws on a wide range of experiments and studies in discussing the processes that take place in our subconscious and the impact that they have. If we're determined to overcome the obstacles that keep us from living a rich and fulfilled life, then we need to understand what goes on in this part of our brain.

Consider the overconfidence that has been demonstrated by countless studies: In a survey of nearly one million high school seniors, how is it possible that all of them – without exception – believe they possess at least “average” skills? A total of 60 percent even saw themselves in the top ten. Why do 88 percent of doctors who diagnose pneumonia in a patient think that their assessment is correct, even though this is true in only 20 percent of cases? Mlodinow also addresses the illusion of objectivity. Fans of the losing team in a game will, overwhelmingly, see rough play and a lack of fairness in the game, while fans of the winning team will not. We see a similar phenomenon with leadership qualities: If we ourselves are ambitious, we believe that determined individuals make the best leaders. If, however, we see ourselves as friendly and extroverted, we think that the best leaders are those who please others.

Leonhard Mlodinow became world famous as Stephen Hawking's co-author of *A Briefer History of Time*.

**Leonhard Mlodinow:**  
*Subliminal. How your unconscious mind rules your behavior.*  
Vintage Books 2012.