

Learning Module A

Self-Management

Peter F Drucker, the legendary management writer and teacher, left some good advice for those of you who are seeking self-improvement. Namely, focus on your *strengths*, not your weaknesses:

Most people think they know what they are good at. They are usually wrong. More often, people know what they are not good at—and even then more people are wrong than right. And yet, a person can perform only from strength. One cannot build performance on weaknesses, let alone on something one cannot do at all. . . .

The only way to discover your strengths is through feedback analysis. Whenever you make a key decision or take a key action, write down what you expect will happen. Nine or 12 months later, compare the actual results with your expectations. . . .

Practiced consistently, this simple method will show you within a fairly short period of time, maybe two or three years, where your strengths lie—and this is the most important thing to know.¹

Drucker's advice is good for the long term, but what about the day-to-day grind of building upon one's strengths? This is where the social learning model of self-management discussed in this Learning Module can play a major role.

Self-Management: A Social Learning Model

Albert Bandura, the Stanford psychologist introduced in Chapter 5, extended his self-efficacy concept into a comprehensive model of human learning. According to Bandura's *social learning theory*, an individual acquires new behavior through the interplay of environmental cues and consequences and cognitive processes.² When you consciously control this learning process yourself, you are engaging in self-management. Bandura explains,

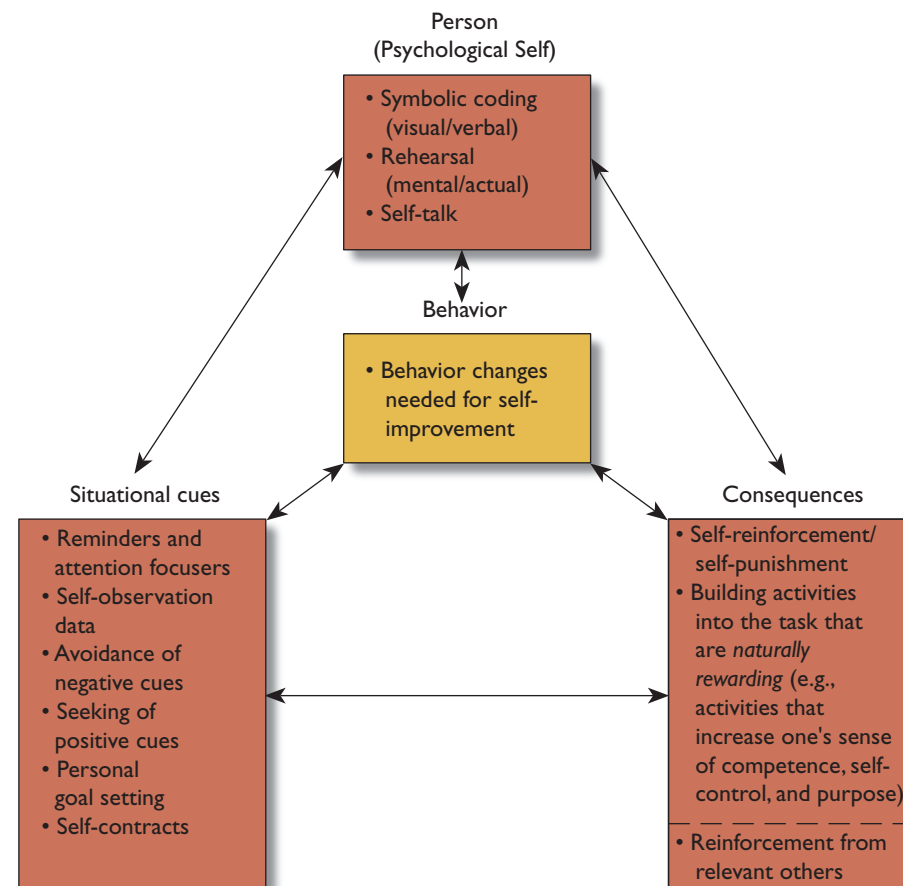
[A] distinguishing feature of social learning theory is the prominent role it assigns to self-regulatory capacities. By arranging environmental inducements, generating cognitive supports, and producing consequences for their own actions people are able to exercise some measure of control over their own behavior.³

In other words, to the extent that you can control your environment and your cognitive representations of your environment, you are the master of your own behavior. The practical model displayed in Figure A–1 is derived from social learning theory. The two-headed arrows reflect dynamic interaction among all factors in the model. Each of the four major components of this self-management model requires a closer look. Since the focal point of this model is *behavior change*, let us begin by discussing the behavior component in the center of the triangle.⁴

An Agenda for Self-Improvement

In today's fast-paced Internet age, corporate hand-holding is pretty much a thing of the past when it comes to career management. Employees are told such things as "You own your own employability." They must make the best of themselves and

Figure A-1 *A Social Learning Model of Self-Management*



any opportunities that may come along. A brochure at one large US company tells employees: “No one is more interested or qualified when it comes to evaluating your individual interests, values, skills, and goals than you are.”⁵ The new age of *career self-management* challenges you to do a better job of setting personal goals, having clear priorities, being well organized, skillfully managing your time, and developing a self-learning program.⁶

Fortunately, Stephen R Covey, in his best-selling book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (and its sequel *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*), has given managers a helpful agenda for improving themselves (see Table A-1). Covey refers to the eight habits, practiced by truly successful people, as “principle-centered, character-based.”⁷ The first step for putting the model in Figure A-1 to work is to pick one or more of the eight habits that are personal trouble spots and translate them to specific behaviors. For example, “think win-win” might remind a conflict-prone manager to practice cooperative teamwork behaviors with coworkers. Habit number five might prompt another manager to stop interrupting others during conversations. Next, a supportive environment is needed for the target behavior.

Table A-1 *Covey's Eight Habits: An Agenda for Managerial Self-Improvement*

1. Be proactive. Take initiative; be responsible.
2. Begin with the end in mind. Develop a mental image of how projects will turn out, including your own life.
3. Put first things first. Use discipline to put off today's pleasures for greater future pleasures.
4. Think win-win. Develop an abundance mentality.
5. Seek first to understand, then to be understood. Listen more; speak less.
6. Synergize. The whole is greater than the parts.
7. Sharpen the saw. Improve physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.
8. Find your voice, and help others to find theirs. Become a leader with moral authority.

SOURCE: C Lee, "Stephen Covey Talks about the 8th Habit: Effective Is No Longer Enough," *Training*, February 2005, p 18.

Managing Situational Cues

When people try to give up a nagging habit such as smoking, the cards are stacked against them.⁸ Many people (friends who smoke) and situations (after dinner, when under stress at work, or when relaxing) serve as subtle yet powerful cues telling the individual to light up. If the behavior is to be changed, the cues need to be rearranged so as to trigger the alternative behavior. Six techniques for managing situational cues are listed in the left column of Figure A-1.

Reminders and attention focusers do just that. For example, many students and managers cue themselves about deadlines and appointments with Post-it notes stuck all over the place and chimes on their cell phones and wireless devices. Self-observation data, when compared against a goal or standard, can be a potent cue for improvement. Those who keep a weight chart near their bathroom scale will attest to the value of this tactic.⁹ Successful self-management calls for avoiding negative cues while seeking positive cues. For example, a recent observational study of the behavior of 213 diners at all-you-can-eat Chinese buffets led to this conclusion: "Anything that made the food more convenient to eat tended to be things that obese people did. They sat closer to the buffet, used a fork instead of chopsticks and chewed fewer times. Many of these patterns of behavior could lead to overeating without them realizing it."¹⁰ Of course, staying away from all-you-can-eat restaurants in the first place is a good idea for those watching their weight.

Goals, as repeatedly mentioned in this text, are the touchstone of good management.¹¹ So it is with challenging yet attainable personal goals and effective self-management. Goals simultaneously provide a target and a measuring stick of progress. Finally, a self-contract is an "if-then" agreement with oneself. For example, if you complete all your assigned reading today, treat yourself to something special.

Arranging Cognitive Supports

Referring to the *person* portion of the self-management model in Figure A-1, three cognitive supports for behavior change are symbolic coding, rehearsal, and

self-talk. These amount to psychological, as opposed to environmental, cues. Yet, according to Bandura, they prompt appropriate behavior in the same manner. Each requires brief explanation:

- *Symbolic coding.* From a social learning theory perspective, the human brain stores information in visual and verbal codes. For example, a sales manager could use the visual picture of a man chopping down a huge tree to remember Woodman, the name of a promising new client. In contrast, people commonly rely on acronyms to recall names, rules for behavior, and other information. An acronym (or verbal code) that is often heard in managerial circles is the KISS principle, standing for “Keep It Simple, Stupid.”
- *Rehearsal.* While it is true that practice often makes perfect, mental rehearsal of challenging tasks also can increase one’s chances of success. Importantly, experts draw a clear distinction between systematic visualization of how one should proceed and daydreaming about success:

The big difference between daydreaming and visualizing is that “visualizing is much more specific and detailed,” says Philadelphia consultant Judith Schuster. “A daydream typically has gaps in it—we jump immediately to where we want to wind up. In visualization, we use building blocks and, step-by-step, construct the result we want.”¹²

This sort of visualization has been recommended for use in organizational planning.

Successful athletes benefit greatly from mental rehearsal and visualization these days. So, too, do successful managers such as Klaus Kleinfeld, the CEO of the German electronics giant Siemens:

The best advice I ever got was from an old friend of the family’s, and it goes like this: Whenever you take on a new position, before you jump in and get bogged down in the details, sit down, lean back, close your eyes, and think about what you really want to achieve and how you want things to look in a couple of years. And only then—once you have a clear vision in front of your inner eye—start executing so that things will move in that direction.¹³

Job-finding seminars are very popular on college campuses today because they typically involve mental and actual rehearsal of tough job interviews. This sort of manufactured experience can build the confidence and self-efficacy necessary for real-world success.¹⁴

Self-talk
Evaluating thoughts
about oneself and
one’s circumstances.

- *Self-talk.* According to an expert on the subject, “**self-talk** is the set of evaluating thoughts that you give yourself about facts and events that happen to you.”¹⁵ Personal experience tells us that self-talk tends to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Negative self-talk tends to pave the way for failure, whereas positive self-talk often facilitates success. Replacing negative self-talk (“I’ll never get a raise”) with positive self-talk (“I deserve a raise and I’m going to get it”) is fundamental to better self-management. One business writer, while urging salespeople to be their own cheerleaders, offered this advice for handling difficult situations:

Tell yourself there’s a positive side to everything and train yourself to focus on it. At first your new self-talk will seem forced and unnatural, but stick with it. Use mental imagery to help you concentrate on the benefits of what you think is a bad situation. If you don’t like cold calling, for example, think of how good you’ll feel when you’re finished, knowing you have a whole list of new selling opportunities. Forming a new habit isn’t easy, but the effort will pay off.¹⁶

Self-Reinforcement

The completion of self-contracts and other personal achievements calls for self-reinforcement. According to Bandura, three criteria must be satisfied before self-reinforcement will work:

1. The individual must have *control over desired reinforcers*.
2. Reinforcers must be *self-administered on a conditional basis*. Failure to meet the performance requirement must lead to self-denial.
3. *Performance standards must be adopted* to establish the quantity and quality of target behavior required for self-reinforcement.¹⁷

In view of the following realities, self-reinforcement strategies need to be resourceful and creative:

Self-granted rewards can lead to self-improvement. But as failed dieters and smokers can attest, there are short-run as well as long-run influences on self-reinforcement. For the overeater, the immediate gratification of eating has more influence than the promise of a new wardrobe. The same sort of dilemma plagues procrastinators. Consequently, one needs to weave a powerful web of cues, cognitive supports, and internal and external consequences to win the tug-of-war with status-quo payoffs. Primarily because it is so easy to avoid, self-punishment tends to be ineffectual. As with managing the behavior of others, positive instead of negative consequences are recommended for effective self-management.¹⁸

In addition, it helps to solicit positive reinforcement for self-improvement from supportive friends, co-workers, and relatives.

Research and Managerial Implications

There is a modest body of evidence showing that the social learning approach to self-management works. For example, in one controlled study of 20 college students, 17 were able to successfully modify their own behavior problems involving smoking, lack of assertiveness, poor study habits, overeating, sloppy housekeeping, lack of exercise, and moodiness.¹⁹ In a workplace study, 31 out of 33 employees who had received self-management training reported positive results.²⁰ Other job-related problems helped by self-management training include overdependence on the boss, ignoring paperwork, leaving the office without notifying anyone, failing to fill out expense reports, and absenteeism.²¹

More comprehensive research is needed to discover how, why, and under what conditions the social learning approach to self-management works and does not work. In the meantime, present and future managers can fine-tune their own behavior by taking lessons from proven self-management techniques.

LEARNING MODULE A Endnotes

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² See A Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977). A further refinement is reported in A D Stajkovic and F Luthans, "Social Cognitive Theory and Self-Efficacy: Going beyond Traditional Motivational and Behavioral Approaches," *Organizational Dynamics*, Spring 1998, pp 62–74. Also see M Uhl-Bien and G B Graen, "Individual Self-Management: Analysis of Professionals' Self-Managing Activities in Functional and Cross-Functional Work Teams," *Academy of Management Journal*, June 1998, pp 340–50.

³ Bandura, *Social Learning Theory*, p 13.

⁴ For related research, see M Oaten and K Cheng, “Improved Self-Control: The Benefits of a Regular Program of Academic Study,” *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, March 2006, pp 1–16; and F Luthans, J B Avey, B J Avolio, S M Norman, and G M Combs, “Psychological Capital Development: Toward a Micro-Intervention,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, May 2006, pp 387–93.

⁵ “Career Self-Management,” *Industry Week*, September 5, 1994, p 36.

⁶ For helpful career advice, see D Rosato, “The Best Ways to Make Your Job Bulletproof,” *Money*, May 2008, p 108; and J Banks and D Coutu, “How to Protect Your Job in a Recession,” *Harvard Business Review*, September 2008, pp 113–16.

⁷ S R Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), p 42. Also see S R Covey, *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness* (New York: Free Press, 2004); S R Covey, “Communicating Potential,” *Training*, May 2008, p 72; and S R Covey, “DNA & ROI,” *Training*, July–August 2008, p 56.

⁸ See E Westling, T Mann, and A Ward, “Self-Control of Smoking: When Does Narrowed Attention Help?” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, September 2006, pp 2115–33.

⁹ See N Hellmich, “Using Food Diaries Doubles Weight Loss, Study Shows,” *USA Today*, July 8, 2008, p 9D.

¹⁰ N Hellmich, “Overweight Diners’ Habits at Chinese Buffets Are Revealing,” *USA Today*, October 2, 2008, p 6D. Also see N Hellmich, “Bad Habits Contribute to Weight Gain Throughout College,” *USA Today*, October 29, 2008, p 5D.

¹¹ See G P Latham and E A Locke, “Enhancing the Benefits and Overcoming the Pitfalls of Goal Setting,” *Organizational Dynamics*, no. 4, 2006, pp 332–40.

¹² R McGarvey, “Rehearsing for Success,” *Executive Female*, January–February 1990, p 36. Also see J Welch and S Welch, “Finding Your Inner Courage,” *BusinessWeek*, February 23, 2009, p 84.

¹³ As quoted in “The Best Advice I Ever Got,” *Fortune*, March 21, 2005, 116.

¹⁴ See C Bush, “Just ‘Mind’ Your Own Business,” *The Arizona Republic*, June 11, 2006, p EC1; and H Mackay, “Learn from Olympians to Succeed in Life,” *The Arizona Republic*, September 7, 2008, p D2.

¹⁵ C Zastrow, *Talk to Yourself: Using the Power of Self-Talk* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1979), p 60. Also see C P Neck and R F Ashcraft, “Inner Leadership: Mental Strategies for Non-profit Staff Members,” *Nonprofit World*, May–June 2000, pp 27–30.

¹⁶ E Franz, “Private Pep Talk,” *Selling Power*, May 1996, p 81.

¹⁷ Drawn from discussion in A Bandura, “Self-Reinforcement: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations,” *Behaviorism*, Fall 1976, pp 135–55.

¹⁸ R Kreitner and F Luthans, “A Social Learning Approach to Behavioral Management: Radical Behaviorists ‘Mellowing Out,’” *Organizational Dynamics*, Autumn 1984, p 63. Also see A Keinan and R Kivetz, “When Virtue Is a Vice,” *Harvard Business Review*, July–August 2008, pp 22–23.

¹⁹ See R F Rakos and M V Grodek, “An Empirical Evaluation of a Behavioral Self-Management Course in a College Setting,” *Teaching of Psychology*, October 1984, pp 157–62.

²⁰ Data from L M Godat and T A Brigham, “The Effect of a Self-Management Training Program on Employees of a Mid-Sized Organization,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management*, no. 1, 1999, pp 65–83.

²¹ See F Luthans and T R V Davis, “Behavioral Self-Management—The Missing Link in Managerial Effectiveness,” *Organizational Dynamics*, Summer 1979, pp 54–59; and C A Frayne and G P Latham, “Application of Social Learning Theory to Employee Self-Management of Attendance,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, August 1987, pp 387–92. Also see G P Latham and C A Frayne, “Self-Management Training for Increasing Job Attendance: A Follow-up and a Replication,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, June 1989, pp 411–16; T R Tyler and S L Blader, “Can Businesses Effectively Regulate Employee Conduct? The Antecedents of Rule Following in Work Settings,” *Academy of Management Journal*, December 2005, pp 1143–58; and A Fishbach and J Y Shah, “Self-Control in Action: Implicit Dispositions Toward Goals and Away From Temptations,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, May 2006, pp. 820–32.