

by Mike Hawkins



Success in life comes through many attributes with being an effective communicator at the top of the list. But there is another attribute that may be equally important – self-discipline. In fact, self-discipline may be that which enables people to become effective communicators and therefore deserves to be the most important attribute a person can possess.

Self-discipline shows up in various forms. You see it in people driven to succeed. You see it in people who put learning and working before playing. In people unwilling to accept mediocrity in their relationships. It shows up in the fundamentals of top-performing athletes, teams, companies, and people in every industry and occupation.

Self-discipline has many definitions. They include perseverance, conscientiousness, determination, grit, stick-to-itiveness, hard-working, will power, and self-control. Fundamentally, discipline in this context is “sustaining a difficult or unpleasant behavior through self-control to make progress toward a desired outcome.” This self-discipline is what enables people to become free from self-destructive behaviors, difficult circumstances, and other limitations within their control. It enables people to reach their peak potential.

Discipline moves people from knowing what to do to actually doing it. Discipline allows people to stick with a plan and continue pursuing a goal after the initial motivation has waned and the effort is no longer enjoyable. It is what helps people finish long tedious projects. It is staying with good habits that have become boring or tiring. It is putting up with undesirable circumstances and being patient despite temptations to do otherwise.

Contrast two individuals – both very capable, intelligent, educated, experienced, and ambitious. They both desire to achieve a similar goal. But one lacks the self-control to sustain a behavior after it becomes a routine chore. In the case of following a nutritional diet, one goes back to bingeing on sugar and starches. In the case of pursuing an education, one drops out of college or trade school. In the case of putting money away in savings, one gives up and spends her money on a short-term pleasure. In the case of leadership, one constantly defers the important for the urgent. In all of these examples, the one who lacks discipline is the one who fails to achieve a desired outcome despite having the capability to do so. Both have the skill and knowledge, but not the self-control and perseverance to stay with something.

Perhaps discipline can simply be described as creating and sustaining desirable habits of behavior. It is repeatedly doing that which takes you in the direction you aspire to go despite temptations to do otherwise.

Here is discipline broken down into seven specific steps:

1. **Know your desired destination.** Be clear about what you want to achieve. In the context of self-improvement, seek feedback and become self-aware. Know the change you need to make in yourself. For example, know that you need to be more patient, more empathetic, or less emotional. In the context of an external goal like achieving a promotion at work, know what level of authority or responsibility you aspire to reach. If aspiring to buy something, know the amount you need to save or earn to make the purchase.
2. **Know what to do.** Identify the enabling behavior(s) needed to reach your desired destination. Research the attitudes, experiences, skills, or knowledge you need to possess. Know the specific recurring habits you need to maintain. Create a plan that includes the practice regimens, exercise routines, diet choices, activities you need perform, resources you need to acquire, relationships you need to build (or repair), or whatever is needed. Put them on your calendar. Know the contingencies you will need to have in place to overcome any temptations that could get you off track. Have any needed resources ready to deploy.

The Key to Success—Self-Discipline

- 3. Understand and appreciate the “why”.** Know the positive impact you can expect by maintaining a certain behavior. Be motivated by the benefits you expect to experience and enjoy. Know the loss or pain you can avoid by maintaining a certain behavior. Understand both the short-term and long-term consequences of whatever it is that you need to do. Have a vision of a better future and appreciate the opportunity to pursue it. Adopt a level of motivation that feels like inspiration. Have a strong conviction regarding the importance of what you will be doing. Grasp the importance the impact will have on you as well as on others.
- 4. Believe you can reach your destination.** Know that the effort, time, money, and resource invested will pay off. Know that doing whatever it is will achieve your desired goal. Keep examples in your mind of your prior successes or the successes of others who have accomplished what you are setting out to accomplish. Talk to others who have achieved similar goals. Review the testimonials of others. Gain a deep belief that you can do whatever it is to the point that you are unquestionably committed. Believe in it so much that you are willing to burn the proverbial boat after landing on the island so you have no backup plan.
- 5. Move from knowing to doing.** Move your desired outcome to the top of your priority list. Allocate the time required. Implement your desired behavior. Start by doing something once. Do it for one day. Just get through one day. Enjoy the opportunity to finally wake up and realize you have started your journey. That you are no longer thinking about something but instead are actually doing it. Then take it one day or step at a time. Don't overwhelm yourself with the longer-term goal. Just focus on making incremental progress. If you are focused on allocating time to reach a strategic objective like learning a foreign language or writing a manuscript, just focus on your next lesson or chapter. Don't overwhelm yourself by thinking about what is left to do. Just think about and eat the proverbial elephant one bite at a time.
- 6. Maintain your can-do attitude.** Maintain your motivation. Maintain your health and energy. Do that which reinforces your beliefs. Spend time with like-minded and supportive people. Surround yourself with those who are helpful, positive, reinforcing, and encouraging. Maintain your focus. Self-control requires stamina and attention. Recognize and celebrate signs of success, especially the early ones. But don't declare success prematurely. New habits take time to form. Change takes prolonged effort, especially changes in behaviors. If changes in others' perceptions are also desired, they take time too. Continue to avoid temptations that might derail your longer-term plan. Remember the “why” including that which is to be gained as well as that which is to be avoided.
- 7. Make your habits your new normal.** Continue your habits taking it one day or step at a time. Eventually new networks of neurons in your brain supplant older ones. Your new habits become the new you. They become engrained habits. Then you no longer require extra attention, control, or motivation to sustain your desired behaviors. What you might have previously thought impossible now simply becomes a subconscious part of you. Your practice, learning, patience, adversity, self-control, frustrations, and feelings of desperation will be replaced with confidence and achievement. Until then, defer the fun. Avoid the temptation to cut corners, cheat, or give up. Keep moving forward. No digressions allowed. Remain committed. Stay the course. You can do this. It will become easier. Through discipline, you will become and maintain who you aspire to be. You will achieve and sustain what you aspire to achieve!

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