

A Baker's Dozen: Tips for the Quickest Route to Success in Any Challenge

1. You can do anything. Absolutely! Let's start here, where other experts end. *This is absolutely true. You've heard it a thousand times and we should believe stuff that's widely known... but* it rarely feels like it. It's no use telling people "simply strive for it" or "don't tolerate any hurdles." Exhorting people is fine, but you need to help them see how they can do it. The most important thing is that if someone, somewhere on the planet can do this or something like it, you can, too, and take it further. They have the same two hands, feet, brain, etc., more or less. The key is to believe in the possibility (we'll talk about how to believe) and to know *how!* Here's how, clearly, honestly, realistically how.

2. You can do anything, but not everything (as Keith Hammonds of Fast Company magazine aptly put it). Human beings are limited in what they can do at one time. It can take anywhere from a few seconds to three or four months to get good at some new behavior. During that time you have to focus on it, make it a priority to keep it in front of you and to try to work on doing it for some time every day. *Keeping aware is actually the hardest part.* Keep reminders everywhere you need the new skill, habit or behavior. I use yellow sticky notes posted on mirrors, desks, telephones, etc., wherever I need the reminder while I'm working on a new skill. People think it's a bit odd, but it works. You can't work on more than one new skill in each area of life or work at a time. As long as I'm practicing only one new skill in each situation, I can practice several in the same day or week, just not at the same time. Multi-tasking doesn't work well; multi-learning is impossible.

3. Zero in on the best strategy. This is the next hardest element. We urge creativity on people, but again fail to tell them where that's found. It's actually easy, but takes time. Read, listen to experts, think about your challenge and, least known: try to find a strategy that solves your two problems at once. Not aware of *two* problems? Here's the thing: every time a new challenge is tough it's for one reason only. While you want one obvious goal, there is something else holding you back. "I'd like to be a great speaker, but..." You can find the "but" issue. In this case, it's usually, "but I hate selling." Or "I have this difficult speech impediment" or something equally daunting. You need to find each issue, one at a time, that's holding you back and build the skills to overcome it. Those skills present a sub-goal that you need to research in the same way. No challenging goal is ever without sub-challenges you must work on *first*. Usually there are only one or two subs. Treat each as a key challenge on its own. You'll quickly find advice among the thousands of books, experts and Internet sites dedicated to the specific problem you face. The experts are right. Believe them. However, they vary tremendously in how useful their advice is to *you* – specifically whether it fits *your* style and personality. Keep looking till you see the solution process that you could live with practicing... since that's what you'll need to do. There is no time limit. Keep looking. It's your life. Take the time you need.

4. It takes a lot less time that you think. Once you've identified a roadblock, you can overcome 90% of it in 10% of the time it takes to overcome the entire problem. And 90% makes you far superior even to most experts in the field. If it takes you three months (which is about maximum for most hurdles to be overcome) you have the rest of your life

to use and benefit from that skill (and keep honing it toward 100% - but recognize you don't *need* 100% at this stage). When I tell people three months they usually groan at the length of time. But once it's over and you're successful at this problem that's been stopping you possibly for years from achieving an important goal, you will hardly ever think about the time it took again. You'll just enjoy the skill.

5. Keep reminding yourself of past successes. This is the advice on how to believe you can do anything. Take 20 minutes and brainstorm a list on paper – yes, do it – of all the past successes you can think of, from early childhood on, through school, teams, camp, early work, getting jobs, promotions, pay raises, finding a spouse, whatever you felt good about and proud of. Make the longest list you can write if you don't stop writing for that length of time. Chances are very great that you'll be amazed, literally amazed at your list. And you need the list. It works for you. Keep it handy. Remind yourself daily of some of the things on the list and things you can add to it. When the mind is occupied with positive information, it isn't bogged down with negatives. That's a benefit of only being able to hold a few things in mind at once. Highly effective people spend large amounts of "down time" savoring thoughts about past successes, reminding themselves how they did it and how they can use those same skills to do anything. It boosts your sense that you can do anything, surprising things that, at the time, you never thought you could. If you can do some, you can do more. Incidentally it's also a big part of what makes happy people happy. Sounds trivial, but it isn't. Couple this with working on small roadblock issues one at a time and you reduce the scope of the problems you imagine you'll have trouble with and spend more time imagining real successes. The *only* thing that gives us confidence is our own past successes. Yet we tend to minimize them. For example if you ever got a university degree, I will bet you take it for granted. People actually say "anyone could" about everything they've done. Yes, but *you did* and not everyone will ever do whatever it is. This often sounds trivial to people, but this "affirmation" process is powerful and has been discovered, tested and reported by thousands of successful people and experts. Believe them. What do you give up to do it? Only the time you otherwise spend thinking about how impossible it might be to achieve what you want. Like every habit, it takes time and those yellow sticky reminders to remind you to work on your past achievement list whenever you have "nothing else to do."

6. It takes less time than you think and here's how. I could put this advice between every step, but I won't – just this one more time. Every step seems to people as if it will take just tooooo much time! It won't. You can substitute practice for all the down time you have in meetings, in line-ups, commuting (yes, record some of this as notes on tape if that helps to listen to in the car). Listening to research and "how to" tapes helps or reading positive advice while using the washroom, or review possible strategies while showering or shaving. Most strategy is worked out in these down times, not while you're engaged in daily tasks and chores. Strategy is an add-on activity that humans engage in. It's not easy to do by itself or in long sessions. It's actually better and more creative to do it in little slices of empty time because each time you come back and ask yourself a question, you will conjure up a slightly different answer. Two things are important: first, turn your challenge into a question each time (and frequently change the question somewhat – "how could I..." is a good way to start) and second, *write down* your good potential

solution ideas. I can't emphasize this enough. We think up great solutions and forget them in the next instant because some task has to be done and poof, it's gone. Keep pads, pens or perhaps even a small electronic dictation recorder (available at electronics stores for as little as \$30) with you at all times. I keep a recorder on my bed table and carry it with me everywhere. Again people think it's a bit odd, but they're quite intrigued. You save lots of time if you write down your ideas. Then you can get a grip on what to practice and get going right away. Many of the ideas will be repetitive or useless, but you only need a few to fix most of your problems remember. How many experts tell you to maximize your thinking and noting of ideas while using the facility? No one owns up to it, but it's a secret I can pretty much guarantee every successful person uses.

7. Face facts; collect feedback. You can only solve problems when you understand them. Beg for feedback (just try not to be pathetic about it). Seriously, you have to ask people for honest feedback because no one wants to hurt your feelings (well, 99% of people don't, there's always that one who will happily). Ask. And practice better ways to get the truth. Make it easy. Say things like, "I've really been working on my skill at [whatever]. I'm not sure if I'm getting better. Do you think it was the right way to approach it when I did [whatever] or should I have tried [whatever else] or do you have a suggestion I could use." That gets people off the hook of saying outright it was good or bad. They can say one approach was better or even more likely they'll give advice (which everyone loves to give and is easily drawn into doing if it can be non-threatening for them). Take all advice with critical analysis. People will frequently suggest stuff you've tried or you know won't fit your style at all. That's OK. Don't reject it without considering it carefully, but also, don't just assume they're right. Weigh the evidence. The premiere human skill is judgment. You've got it. Make sure you apply it even-handedly to yourself. You only need a nugget here or there, from one person or another. You have to listen to lots to find the gems. And often it isn't exactly the advice they give, but the idea *you* get from that advice. It may well trigger some other approach entirely, but one which is even more creative than anything you or the other person has thought of. Reality is notoriously hard to grasp. In fact, it's proven that we human beings lie to ourselves constantly about facts that others find obvious about us. We just can't see some stuff easily. That's why we need to ask over and over and try to listen. Eventually it will dawn on us that a hundred people can't be wrong. If they say we're boring, we actually are. Then we can ask ourselves how we could be more interesting. At that point there are tons of books and other advice. Only when *you* recognize the problem, can you start to improve. It's at that ugly moment of sinking recognition of reality, you really start to change for the better. But don't stop there. Remember to remind yourself of all the other things you've achieved. This is just one or two more sets of habits to develop. You can do it.

8. Habits are our fast friends. You never get rid of a habit. Any bad habit lurks within you forever, but so do the good ones – we call them "skills." The behaviors we call habits are simply the most commonly used ones. Experts often say it takes 21 to 30 repetitions to cement a habit into your behavior. The number probably varies from 10 to 60 depending on how difficult the skill is to learn. Worst case: daily practice for 60 days should do it... or fewer, if you can't practice every day, over about 90 days (hence my three-month guideline). That's actually fast. For some things it's almost instantaneous. Know the

problem, fix the problem. But “fix” means practice the fix enough times to make it habitual. This is “learning.” There is no other definition for learning. You haven’t learned until you’ve made it a habit – even if only mentally – burned it into a channel in your brain and/or your actions. The way to change habit? Burn in a new habit that you use more frequently than the old. The old will simply reside in memory for use any time later, but the new will become the “habit” you automatically apply in each given situation. Building new habits is the *only* way we have to advance. Attempting other one-off actions is likely to fail. Even if you happen to get lucky, you won’t be able to repeat the action reliably without practice. That frustrates us, but it’s a fact that it helps to face since it is absolute reality.

9. Putting the skills together. So, we have four skills and this is the fifth. They can usually be performed in any order, but let me enumerate them so it’s clear how many: 1. practice being positive – think positively, speak positively, help others be positive – it creates the confidence you need to undertake daunting habit-development and even before that, just to contemplate doing it. 2. Read, ask experts, use the Internet to seek a strategy to resolve your current toughest problem in two or “both” senses: to get what you want in a way that overcomes the hurdle you believe is stopping you. If nothing is stopping you, just do it – but if you’ve read this far, something is stopping you. You need to know what that is. 3. Ask for feedback and advice: how else will you find out what’s stopping you? Get down in the details mentally. Be as honest with yourself as you can and encourage others to tell you honestly, too, and make it easy for them. 4. Once you have a likely strategy, try it out. Figure out what one or two behaviors you need to develop into skills or, in other words, into habits. And practice – with yellow stickies wherever it will help remind you that you need to practice every day. Finally, 5. Keep the cycle going! Keep in balance between reminding yourself of positive feelings and achievements to balance the difficult feedback you’re asking for and, worst of all, the feedback you’re giving yourself. We are our own worst critics by far. The negative stuff we tell ourselves would stop Mahatma Gandhi from freeing India. You must balance facts with positive reminders or you will never be able to face the steady diet of “I can’t do this” that we all feed ourselves. A great writer described a few moments when waking up in the morning as a series of emotional ups and downs that you’d think would kill a person: you remember someone cancelled an appointment you desperately wanted (a downer), then you recall someone else said something positive (a boost) and so on. We run through so many ups and downs mentally in a day, it should be exhausting. But we have the ability to learn to manage this. We have to change the balance by consciously developing habits of adding in more good things than the bad we inevitably use to berate ourselves with. We have to write down our good creative possible strategic ideas and balance them by focusing and picking one or two we have to practice daily to test them out. *We have to do these things together, every day.* We have to develop enough consistency so that every day we are making small bits of progress in developing new, better habits that will solve the problems we’re working on.

10. Recognize the five habit sets as the final and only answer. Only one mechanism fixes our problems and moves us forward. This is it – these five skills or habits are really sets of habits. We have lots of the ingredients already, but are frequently too distracted to use

them conscientiously, and so make no progress day after day. We have only so many days in life to progress. How far we go depends on working through to find better strategies and then putting them in place. There are barriers. If we believe we can't, we are certain to be right. If we believe we can, we will also be right and we're a long step toward proving it. We can or can't – it's up to us, to paraphrase Henry Ford. And to get there, we have to spend some time questioning our way toward the real problems and the best strategies, and a bit more time daily putting the ideas we come up with into practice. If we can do those, all together, in balance, we can do ANYTHING. It seems unfortunate we can't do everything, but then, no one really wants to. What we want is to do the things that seem important to us and it turns out there's plenty of time to do that.

11. Don't imagine this will stress you or tire you out. The good news is you get to go at your own pace. In fact, a measured pace works better. Habit development and the search for what habits you need feels relatively slow. If you try to rush it, you will miss steps and ideas. Go at your pace. It's your life. The better news is that when you go at your pace, you notice and develop habits that help the pace speed up. Things become easy and comfortable through practice. Habits, when you get them going, feel comfortable and they happen automatically so they "take no time." By then you've moved on to work on more new habits you need, and the cumulative results of earlier learning begin to add up to greater speed in achieving your goals. You won't notice till one day you wake up and feel surprised at how far you've come. Here's a hint: add that to your list of terrific achievements. Take a few moments to congratulate yourself. Celebrate with a treat. Tell others. Enjoy it! Don't just take it for granted. This part of the process is critical to keeping you moving on to the next challenges. By the way, if you felt stressed, this is the antidote. Happiness largely results from these moments of self-congratulation and thankfulness that you've reached a new skill level. You truly feel you can do anything. What could be better than that? Stress melts away. And knowing you've proved you can do this by going at your own pace and adapting every strategy to your style, to methods you feel comfortable with, not someone else's idea of what you "should" do, is powerful.

12. Look for other ways and shortcuts. For anything you do, there's always a better, shorter, faster way – in every area except one. We are limited by our human skills and capacity to manage thoughts and actions only a few at a time. But that is true of every single human being. No one else can do more or less than you (with very few exceptions of those completely mentally or physically limited far beyond any average). Anything any person can do, you can do, in your own way, on your own schedule... if, and only if, you want to and choose to spend the time to use these five core sets of habits to go for it. Look at what we flawed human beings have been able to accomplish in our best moments. Do even a fraction of the best and you can be solidly happy and successful every day of your life. In every area, by pursuing these five relatively easy strategies, you can find ways of shortening the time and increasing results, but the only way to do this is to follow the five steadily, daily, conscientiously, to search for strategies and practice them till they become automatic habits.

13. Ask if there's anything here you can't do. To use these skills regularly, and eventually smoothly, to resolve every difficulty, you have to believe it's worth the trouble. It takes

some work to automate these five skills, to turn them into habits. Once you have, it feels like magic in providing the confidence that you really can do anything and the mechanism to do it. But until you truly feel that, you're welcome to keep asking, can I really do this? Take whatever time you need to re-read this. Keep the notes handy. You can try the pieces one at a time. They only work if you do them approximately daily. That's why I created the Coordination Compass below as a reminder. Try to figure out how the words in the diagram remind you of these ideas. If you need to, write other notes on the diagram, copy it, keep it handy and use it to remind yourself of what you are working on.



Life became easier when I began to use the diagram to analyze situations I needed to understand and skills I needed to develop. I stumbled through versions of it long before it all became clear. These simple principles underlie every skill you need no matter how complicated the situation or difficult the challenge. Only after I'd startled myself completely with successes that I would never have imagined in 100 years, did I begin to truly have complete confidence that I have the abilities within me to do anything I want, provided I go at my pace and take the time I need to get there. I'm not the most successful person in the world by any possible standard you could pick except one – I believe I can improve, absolutely, totally and without question. That knowledge makes me feel happy and secure. I may (no, I *will*) never be the richest, the handsomest, the smartest, the strongest, the most famous or revered. But I am both way more successful and content than I ever imagined or hoped for. I'm not sure what else I could ask. Moreover, I firmly believe that everyone who follows these principles conscientiously will, in a very reasonable period of a few of years, be able to say the same. I sincerely wish that for you.