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# 4 Things High Achievers Do Differently

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Illustration by Angelica Alzona

**Summary.** High achievers are 400% more productive than the average employee — and they have four things in common. Any of us can customize them to our own lifestyle, not by copying their habits but by emulating their mindsets. Tap into your intrinsic motivation. Why did... [more](#)

We've all heard the saying, "Do what you love, and you'll never work a day in your life." Yet a recent Gallup study shows that many people are, in fact, not loving their work and are miserable in their jobs, with only 21% of employees engaged at work and 33% thriving in their overall well-being globally. Individually and as a society, we seem to have lost our hope for the future. People want to succeed, but the path to achievement is murky. No one wakes up aiming to be average, but all the messages we receive, consciously and unconsciously, appear to push us to that undistinguishable level.

At work, our performance is measured against benchmarks. We're pushed to reach "acceptable standards." Even annual performance appraisals are based on whether we fall above or below a mean score. Average has become the target, and that's a shame, as high achievers who blow benchmarks out of the water are 400% more productive than the average employee.

What if the average became our floor instead of our ceiling?

For nearly a decade, I've interviewed scores of high achievers, from astronauts to Olympic gold medalists to Nobel Prize winners, for my book *The Success Factor*. What was revealing is that irrespective of their industry, all high achievers had four things in common, and any of us can customize them to our own lifestyle, not by copying their habits but by emulating their mindsets.

### **1) Tap into your intrinsic motivation.**

Why did you enter your chosen profession? Getting to the "why" behind your career choice is critical, as it will help you get in touch with your deepest motivations, block out distractions, and potentially adjust (or reengage) with your current path.

For instance, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the NIH's National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, is motivated by helping others. When I asked how he selects which problems to

focus on, he told me that he picks problems that he feels are important, not just interesting. This sentiment was repeated by many of the people I spoke with — they focused on doing work that would make an impact beyond themselves. For the highest achievers, it's not about the medals, rewards, bonuses, or promotions.

To the point, very few of the Olympians I spoke to keep their medals on display. Most keep them in a safe, the nightstand drawer, thrown on a shelf, or in the case of the most decorated winter Olympian, Apolo Ohno, in a brown paper bag in his sock drawer. They all told me that they loved what they do, could not imagine another path, and would do it for free if they could. In fact, I have yet to meet a Nobel Prize winner who quit their scientific work after winning their field's most prestigious award. "That's a chapter in my life, not the entire journey" was a phrase insinuated repeatedly.

### **What you can do:**

To tap into your intrinsic motivation, ask yourself: What fuels my curiosity? Is it aligned with what fuels my work? If you're focused only on external factors (like rewards), you're likely on the path to burnout.

I recommend creating a passion audit, which will help you differentiate between what you are good at versus what you are not, and what you enjoy doing versus where you procrastinate. Look for themes and see how you can embed some of your more passionate tasks into your career. It doesn't have to be much. Research from the Mayo Clinic has shown that when physicians spend just 20% of their time working on something they're passionate about, it significantly reduces their level of burnout.

## **2) Get comfortable with failure.**

Dr. Peggy Whitson is a biochemist who worked at NASA. She always dreamed of becoming an astronaut but was met with repeated hurdles. For a full decade, she applied to be an astronaut but was repeatedly rejected. She didn't quit after the first, second, or even third rejection. Every time she faced a hurdle, she asked herself, "What strategy have I not thought of yet?" She leveraged what she learned working at NASA to be more competitive as an astronaut applicant.

It's a good thing Dr. Whitson didn't allow the rejections to deflate her motivation because she ultimately went on to become the first female commander of the international space station (a role she held twice), spent more days in space than any American astronaut of any gender, and ultimately became NASA's chief astronaut.

Some people fear failing, while others fear succeeding. High achievers fear "not trying" more than they fear failing. For them, it's not a question of if they can overcome a challenge; the focus is always on how they can. They consider alternative strategies and work fiercely to control what they can control, and ignore distractions.

Despite what you might have heard, not all high achievers wake up at 5 am to do this work either, especially if they're not morning people. The people I spoke to learned to optimize their peak performance hours.

### **What you can do:**

To achieve a similar focus, consider this two-step approach. Learn to leverage your cognitive hours, those when you are most able to concentrate, and spend that time on your deep focus work, not passive tasks such as responding to emails or scheduling Zoom meetings, which you can do when you are more sluggish.

Second, consider productivity sprints using the time management Pomodoro method, which has you working and taking scheduled breaks on a predictable cycle. If the work you're engaged in during this time isn't bringing you closer to your goal, or giving you the results you want, don't stop trying or lose focus. Instead, use the time to brainstorm a different approach.

### **3) Reinforce your foundation.**

The week the Nobel Prizes are announced, social media is in a frenzy showing the newly minted award winners going about their usual routine of teaching or writing grants in between press interviews. Despite all of their accolades, high achievers never rest on their laurels. Even if they've done a task or routine countless times, they still work on the basic skills foundational to their current — and future — success. It's why NBA champion Kobe Bryant was famous for practicing the same warm-up routines you'd see in any junior high school gym.

Neal Katyal is another example. He argued 48 cases before the Supreme Court of the United States. He told me he still prepares a binder with answers to every possible question he might get asked, holds multiple moot courts, and wordsmiths his opening arguments so succinctly that his children can understand them.

In the military, people are similarly told to “train hard, fight easy.” It's also the strategy marathon runners use when they train in high altitudes so that running the race in normal conditions feels easier.

### **What you can do:**

Consider the “must-have” skills of your profession and imagine how you can brush up on them or learn to build on them. Instead of letting them get rusty, think about what it would take for you to get to the point where they are so effortless that you can rely on

muscle memory to lead you under stress. Do you need more practice? Do you need to practice under challenging conditions? Both strategies will sharpen your abilities.

#### **4) Become a lifelong learner.**

The high achievers I spoke with are continuously open to learning, although it is rarely in the classroom. Discussions with mentors, colleagues, peers, and mentees, coupled with reading, observing others, watching videos, and listening to podcasts, all inform their deep reservoir of knowledge.

Christopher Wadell, for instance, grew up as an able-bodied skier until an accident one day left him without use of his lower body. He wanted to return to the slopes and first learned this was possible years earlier when he watched a cancer survivor with one leg on a monoski. That memory was embedded in his mind, and it pushed him to learn to ski in this new way. Today, Christopher Wadell is a decorated Paralympian. He's won 13 medals, five of them gold.

Many of the Nobel Prize winners I spoke to were also inspired as a result of their openness and curiosity. Several shared that their breakthrough ideas occurred through casual conversations with colleagues in cafeterias and laundry rooms. Conference lectures, coffee breaks and group meals are not just for building your network. It's where new ideas take root and develop.

#### **What you can do:**

To increase your knowledge base, which can lead to making connections others don't yet see, immerse yourself with interesting people and open your mind up to new ideas. Surround yourself with a team of mentors who can offer you challenges and scaffolding to try new things. Consume new ideas in a platform of your choosing — reading books and articles, watching webinars, taking LinkedIn Learning courses, or listening to engaging conversations and interviews.

People want to succeed, but there is a lack of understanding and discussion on how to achieve more, and more importantly, be motivated to do it. By learning the lessons from some of the most accomplished people of our generation, we can make average our beginning, not our end goal.

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