

12

Simple Tricks That Will Probably Make Your Life A Little Better

Bill Murphy Jr.

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12 Simple Tricks That Will Probably Make Your Life a Little Better

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Welcome & Thanks

Thanks for downloading this short, free Ubook™.

What's a "Ubook™?" It's a short ebook—but it has a few other features. The "U" is to remind people that it's associated with Understandably.com.

The "U" also stands for "updated." Because these books are never really finished. Instead, they're continually revised.

As an example, this is the first, preview edition of this Ubook™, and it was posted to the Internet in April 2021.

So if you're reading a while after that, you might want to go to Understandably.com to see if there's an updated edition.

This Ubook™ runs 9,000 words, which probably works out to roughly 40 minutes of reading time.

You'll also notice that it's formatted to make it easy to read on a smartphone or tablet, hopefully without downloading any other apps.

What else... You're free to share this with anyone you like, as long as: (a) you share it for free, (b) you send the entire

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This is often how I get the best suggestions for future editions. Thanks again for downloading, reading and subscribing!

Bill Murphy Jr.
April 2021

Introduction

Sometimes, people want to learn the strategies and techniques that the most successful people follow in order to achieve.

And sometimes, they just want shortcuts and tricks.

That's what this book is about: simple phrases, techniques, and tricks that can help you achieve just a little bit more – maybe a lot more – without much additional effort.

Where did they all come from? Well, I'm a contributing editor at Inc.com, and these are mostly reprints of my columns over the years—the ones where I just sort of stumbled into smart tricks that people use to improve their lives.

I'm the first to admit that they're kind of all over the place. Who else would write a book that both tells you how to build consensus in a business meeting, and how to keep the morning sun from sneaking through the curtains in a hotel room?

Is it a complete list? Of course not. First, I'm not sure such a thing would be possible, and for another—well, that's the whole point of a Ubook.

In fact, this is where you might have the most fun. Got a "trick" that I should consider including in the next edition of this Ubook?

Send it to me via email at bill@understandably.com.

How to Get People to Talk

September 6, 2018

Have you ever given a presentation, and thought it went great--right up until the very end?

You wrap up with, "Are there any questions?"

And it's as silent as a funeral. Nobody has a single thing to ask.

Could you possibly have explained everything that well? Or were you so boring or confusing that they just lost interest? Were they even paying attention to begin with?

Teachers face this issue all the time. So when a Louisiana teacher tweeted about her best trick to engage kids and prompt a flood of good questions, it prompted a truly amazing reaction.

Here's the teacher, the method, and how it went viral.

'Ask me two questions'

Andrea Sasser is a middle school and high school math teacher in Rapides Parish, Louisiana, which is right in the middle of the state.

She tweets and blogs about teaching: tips and activities that work (or don't) at getting her classes engaged and learning. Her audience largely consists of other teachers, some of whom she met in person this past summer at an event called Twitter Math Camp in Cleveland.

One recent tweet: "using PlayDoh in geometry," she told me. "A lot of people loved it, and I blogged about it. I mean, not a lot of people. People that I know that are math teachers."

That's why she was unprepared for what happened when she tweeted about a new, highly effective trick she'd learned at Twitter Math Camp.

Instead of asking "Are there any questions?" or even, "What questions

do you have?" she tried something different:

"Today I tried 'ask me two questions.' And they did! And those ?s led to more ?s. It amazes me that the littlest things have such a big impact!" she tweeted.

61,855 retweets

Sasser told me she tweeted on a whim, immediately after trying the "ask me two questions" technique for the first time in her classroom. And the thing took off.

As of this writing, it has more than 61,000 retweets, including one from the CEO of Twitter, Jack Dorsey. That's equivalent to nearly half the population of the Louisiana parish where she lives.

"After school, I started getting a few notifications and it was cool. Then by dinnertime, I ... turned the sound off so I could sleep. Then the next morning, I woke up, [and] I scrolled and I scrolled and I scrolled, and I was like, 'What in the world?'"

You can imagine why this "two questions" technique would work.

It sets a minimum that an audience (or a classroom) has to work toward: *We're not getting out of here until we get two questions.*

And, as you've certainly seen at a speech or presentation sometime, the first question often prompts a second one, which prompts a third.

It's a very simple trick. And Sasser said she's embarrassed that she can't remember exactly who it was at Twitter Math Camp that shared the idea with her.

"It's killing me inside, that I'm viral now and I don't even know who really told me that," she said.

But she added: "My students are absolutely geeking out, and super excited, and can't believe that their teacher from the little old town that we live in is viral."

How to Reach Consensus

August 20, 2020

Here's a simple trick that Jeff Bezos suggests using to overcome a basic business leadership problem.

It stems from the fact that the most important business decisions are often also the hardest ones--and those tough decisions often result in an additional cascade of leadership challenges.

It's pretty simple, really. If you make a choice from among several reasonable choices in your business, some of your team members or stakeholders will likely conclude you've made the wrong choice.

And once you've made that decision, they might have a hard time getting on board with it.

Here's a basic example. Let's say you're debating the retail price of a new product.

A low price might mean higher sales, but a high price might reinforce the perception of a premium product.

Your sales team wants to make fast sales, so they'd prefer the low price. Your marketing team would rather

promote something that's seen as more exclusive.

And you can make the case for either choice. But you have to decide.

How do you get the team members who will inevitably think you've chosen wrong to move past that disagreement?

That's where Bezos and Amazon come in.

Overcoming the toxic mindset

Let's call the failure to commit what it is: a toxic mindset -- although one that reflects such basic, human, emotional needs that it's hard to condemn people for it.

Recognizing this, Bezos shared a technique to overcome it in the annual shareholder letter he released on April 17, 2017.

Bezos wrote that he values making fast decisions, which often means deciding before you have all the information you'd like. He puts the sweet spot at acting when you have 70 percent of needed information.

The lack of information makes tough decisions even tougher, however, and that prompts the cascade of leadership challenges described above. To overcome them, Bezos introduced a simple linguistic trick that stops these toxic mindsets in their tracks, and cuts off the metastasis of difficulties.

It's just a three-word phrase. Bezos wrote: "Disagree and commit."

The phrase can save a lot of time. If you have conviction on a particular direction even though there's no consensus, it's helpful to say, "Look, I know we disagree on this but will you gamble with me on it? Disagree and commit?"

By the time you're at this point, no one can know the answer for sure, and you'll probably get a quick yes ...

If you're the boss, you should do this too. I disagree and commit all the time.

Even the Kindle

Bezos goes on to give the example of when his team advocated for a particular Amazon Studios show that he personally didn't think made sense. He told them: "I disagree and commit and hope it becomes the most watched thing we've ever made."

And here's another high-level example I love even more: Jeff Wilke, a top executive known as the "second-most important Jeff" at Amazon, shared the story of how he originally thought the Kindle wasn't a good fit for Amazon.

But, he told *The Wall Street Journal*, "I disagreed and committed, and I'm very glad I did."

So, let's unpack this powerful three-word phrase, and why I think it's so effective.

1. "Disagree ... "

It all starts here. How many times have you heard that the goal in a business decision-making process is to "build consensus"? But that's wrong: The goal isn't to convince everyone; it's to review facts and make fast decisions.

Sometimes, you'll make mistakes. By putting "disagree" right into the decision-making goal, you give people an option to go on record, record their opposition, and move on quickly to helping the team.

2. " ... and ... "

It's just a conjunction, true, but it points out that this isn't just a mechanism to "agree to disagree."

There's a second component coming up -- a more important one, frankly.

3. " ... Commit"

The more I think about this word, the more I love it in this context.

First, it makes clear once more that the goal here isn't agreement; it's concerted, coordinated action.

Second, it's an implicit promise from the members of your team who might have disagreed: "I might have made a different decision if I were the final authority. But I recognize we've made

another decision, and I will now put my best efforts behind it."

Saying it helps inoculate against the all-too-human toxic mindset at the root of the whole problem.

Commitment over consensus. It's a powerful concept.

And if it works for Bezos and Amazon, maybe it can work for your business, too.

How to Control Your Emotions

September 25, 2020

People look to Warren Buffett for advice. Even those who challenge his conclusions have to concede his enormous influence.

There's a reason people call him the Oracle of Omaha.

But that leads to a question: Who does Buffett turn to for advice?

And as an amusing follow-up, what does Buffett admit happened when he once ignored some of the best advice he ever got?

Let's take each question in turn.

There are a lot of ways to answer the first question. I've written recently about Buffett's respect for Chuck Feeney, and of course you can't mention Buffett without mentioning his friend and business partner, Berkshire Hathaway vice-chairman Charlie Munger.

It turns out however, that Buffett himself has cited 10 very specific words of wisdom as "one of the best pieces of advice I've ever received."

They came from Thomas Murphy, whom Buffett called "my good friend and hero," in the book, *Getting There*:

"He said, 'Warren, you can always tell someone to go to hell tomorrow.' It was such an easy way of putting it. You haven't missed the opportunity. Just forget about it for a day. If you feel the same way tomorrow, tell them -- but don't spout off in a moment of anger."

Murphy (no relation to me, as far as I know), started as a television executive in the 1950s, and ultimately built a media juggernaut that acquired ABC.

He served as chairman and CEO of the combined company until 1994, and

he's still on the Berkshire board of directors at age 95.

You've probably heard the kind of advice Murphy gave Buffett before, although Murphy put it memorably. In more modern times, it serves as shorthand for one of the key tenets of emotional intelligence.

In short, think before you act. Try not to let emotional reactions overcome your decision-making. As my Inc.com colleague Justin Bariso puts it, try the rule of "awkward silence" before responding when you're challenged in a way that prompts emotion.

So, it's good advice -- something that Buffett apparently places Murphy telling him at least 45 years ago, when

Buffett would have been in his mid-40s.

But let's turn now to when Buffett says he didn't follow it.

In fact, I laughed out loud when I read Buffett's words here, because it flies in the face of a famous time that he was unable to, as he puts it, "forget about it for a day."

He told the story in 2009: Back in the early 1960s, he wound up in a dispute with the then-chairman of a very old textile company.

It was not a great business; in fact Buffett had bought a stake in it specifically because it was falling apart; he hoped to wring a bit of value out of

it under what he called his "cigar butt" theory of investing.

However, Buffett grew angry with the chairman after he reneged on a deal, and so he started buying more and more stock in the company just so that he could fire the chairman.

Net result, as Buffett wrote in one of his shareholder letters, he suddenly had huge part of his investment capital tied up in "a terrible business about which I knew very little. ... I became the dog who caught the car."

That company, drumroll please, was Berkshire Hathaway. Buffett used it as a holding company acquiring other businesses, but he didn't give up on

the textile industry part of it for decades afterward.

So, bottom line advice: Stay in control of your emotions. Don't make moves out of anger. Take a deep breath before reacting.

But if you do insist on acting rashly, at least do it in a way that gives you a good story many years later.

How to Remember Stuff (Part 1)

November 18, 2018

When you're trying to remember something, they say it helps sometimes to think of the story backward. And when you lose something, people tell you to retrace your steps.

But until recently, it seems nobody had ever tried to test empirically whether backward movement somehow

improves memory--or for that matter, why it would possibly have any impact.

So, a team of researchers from the University of Roehampton in London decided to give it a try. And somewhat to their surprise, they found that backward movement indeed correlated positively to increased memory.

Here's what they tested, the results, and where we go from here.

A 'mnemonic time-travel effect'

There were six experiments in total" three in which participants moved forward (or *simulated* moving forward) while being exposed to new memories, and three in which they moved

backward or simulated moving backward.

There was also a control group for each experiment that remained still throughout.

Participants were either shown a short film, or given a list of words to memorize, or were asked to look at a set of pictures.

Since we're writing about this, you can probably imagine the consistent results in all six experiments. *Memories participants' the improved noticeably movement backward.*

Sorry, I mean: "*Backward movement noticeably improved the participants' memories.*"

"The results demonstrated for the first time that motion-induced past-directed mental time travel improved mnemonic performance for different types of information.

We have named this a 'mnemonic time-travel effect,'" Dr. Aleksandar Aksentijevic of the university's Department of Psychology said in a press release.

Stripes on a track suit

The most dynamic experiment involved the participants watching the film, which showed a woman having her handbag stolen. Again, half of the study participants moved forward, while half moved backward. (A control group didn't move at all.)

They were then given three minutes to answer a series of 20 written questions about what they'd seen--things like whether the woman in the video had been wearing gloves, the color of her coat, and whether the man who swipes her bag in the video had stripes on his track suit pants.

Backward walkers got on average two more questions correct, versus the forward walkers and the control group that was told to stay still. Moreover, it didn't matter whether the participants actually moved backward or simulated it. They all showed similar increased recall.

How to use this information

How does it all work? So far there isn't a well-developed explanation.

One theory suggests that the human brain somehow organizes time and memories spatially, so experiencing things in a slightly unusual spatial circumstance leads to memories being stored differently.

It's a partial vindication of this idea that time is really expressed via space,' Aksentijevic told *The Daily Mail*, which also reported on this study.

The researchers also caution that this is early stage. Others would need to be able to duplicate their findings to increase confidence in them.

But it's promising stuff, and perhaps most interesting "as a digital intervention for memory problems in older adults," as one of the other researchers put it.

The study is being published in the January 2019 edition of the journal *Cognition*.

How to Make Money

September 22, 2018

Meet Matt Farley.

He works from home full-time in Massachusetts, making money by recording songs and releasing them on Spotify, iTunes, and Amazon music.

There are a lot of songs. More than 19,000 so far.

As you might imagine, he's discovered a pretty clever trick that enables him to do this. You might have heard some of his music, which he records under 72 different stage names, such as:

- The Very Nice Interesting Singer Man
- The Guy Who Sings Songs About Cities & Towns
- The Strange Man Who Sings About Dead Animals
- The Guy Who Sings Your Name Over and Over

Here's his story, his secret, and just how successful this strategy is for him.

"I love Hugh Grant."

Farley is 40, a married father of two. He's been working from home like this full-time for two years, but previously he spent 17 years working in a group home and performing on the side with a band called Moes Haven.

The band had little professional success, but they wrote a funny song called "I Love Hugh Grant" about the British actor, and it started making money on iTunes and Spotify.

Well, comparatively speaking, anyway.

"We'd write these serious songs and sell nothing. And then, whoa, 'I Love Hugh Grant' made like 74 cents last month!" Farley told me in a phone interview.

Obviously, 74 cents a month is not exactly a fortune.

But Farley said he had an epiphany: "Most people would quit, but I was like, if I can make 20,000 songs that are as successful as 'I Love Hugh Grant,' I'll be doing pretty well!"

So he set out to do just that, recording song after song after song--most of them inspired by terms that people might search for on digital music platforms. And then, it started to work.

"A Song for Waterbury, Connecticut."

Farley is incredibly prolific, working from the basement recording studio in his home. Many of his creations are not exactly great art, he's the first to admit.

For example, he's written and performed 1,800 songs that are literally him just singing people's names over and over.

But people search for their own names. And if they come across one of his name songs, they're likely to play others, too--just to marvel at the sheer number.

And he's written more than 1,500 songs about different towns across the U.S., Canada, and Australia. He's visited almost none of them; he just looks them up on Wikipedia.

"They're funny. They make you laugh, and there's value to that," he said. "Part of the joke is that you're like, 'Wait a second, he did one about that town? There's only 6,000 people in that

town.' Half the joke is people saying, why would he do that?"

Soon he was seeing some success with songs like "A Song for Waterbury, Connecticut," "I Made This Song About Wollongong. What Do You Think of It?" (Australia), and "Rock Out to This Song About Haverhill, Massachusetts, OK?"

But nothing--nothing--prepared him for what would happen when he came upon perhaps the most-successful musical search term of all time.

"Hundreds of songs about poop."

By far, Farley's most successful and lucrative songs are about poop, pee, and all the other gross stuff that our bodies produce. And they're all really a search engine optimization play.

He has hundreds of these songs on the three big digital music services. Why? Because it occurred to him a few years ago that most little kids seem to go through a phase when they're obsessed with bodily functions.

So now, if your 3-year-old says something like, "Alexa play a song about poop!" it's Farley's work that comes up first. (As the father of a 3-year-old, I can vouch for this.)

In fact, he records this genre under two distinct band or artist names, both of which rank really well for search terms that probably nobody else will confess to trying rank for.

The two aliases: "The Toilet Bowl Cleaners" and "The Odd Man Who Sings About Poop, Puke, and Pee."

"It's kind of like how a big company will have multiple brands," he said. "I just want to intimidate any potential competitors."

Just do the work.

I think the part of that last quote about intimidating the competition is at least partially a joke.

But the revenue he's making from this each month isn't. It's not exactly retire-to-a-beach money, but he said he's bringing in about \$65,000 a year from this kind of SEO-oriented music alone.

On top of that, he says, his wife has a full-time job, so it's more than enough to live on. Importantly, it also allows him to be at home to take care of his two kids.

Along the way, Farley says he's figured out how to cut costs, churn out music, and push the envelope on what some of the digital systems will allow.

One example: He uses Cdbaby to post his music across all digital platforms, and since they charge by the album, he said he records massively long albums, usually with 80 songs or more on them.

"Part of what I like about this is there's this whole 'tortured artist creative person' myth," he told me. "My approach is it's just going to work every day. If you force yourself to just do the work, you're going to come across some really creative ideas."

How to Set Expectations

November 8, 2020

I live in a suburb outside New York City, but I spend a fair amount of time in rural New Hampshire.

My wife's parents live there, and we love visiting. It's a beautiful place, lots of opportunity to experience nature and awe.

But there's one practical problem:
internet connectivity.

It's so rural that it's hard to get really reliable, fast, consistent broadband. That makes it difficult for people like me to stay up there for long periods of time, since nearly 100 percent of my work requires a fast internet connection.

I've explored lots of stopgap solutions, and of course, I'm not alone in this quandary. A study in 2018 found about one quarter of Americans who live in rural areas can't get reliable, high-speed internet.

That's why I've been watching with high personal interest as Elon Musk's Starlink satellite internet service begins to roll out. I'm on the

waiting list for the public beta test, which is apparently just getting its first non-employee participants.

While reviewing the reports, I suddenly realized that there's something genius about the way that Musk and other smart leaders sometimes introduce new product offerings like this-- intentionally setting very low expectations, which lines them up for great success as a result.

Take, for example, the name of the Starlink beta test itself: the "Better Than Nothing Beta."

"As you can tell from the title, we are trying to lower your initial expectations," said Starlink's emails to the users who have been selected for the first go-round, according to CNBC.

"Expect to see data speeds vary from 50Mb/s to 150Mbps and latency from 20ms to 40ms over the next several months as we enhance the Starlink system. There will also be brief periods of no connectivity at all."

Against that low bar, almost any kind of positive result would vastly overdeliver. And so far, some beta users who have had the opportunity to try it out have been taking to social media to announce that they've seen much more than Starlink promised.

"Starlink is a game changer," wrote one beta tester. "[B]efore I was getting 0.5-12mb/s now I get 100-160mb/s."

Now, perhaps you're thinking, "Hmmm, how do I apply this rule to my business?"

If so, I think it's definitely worth considering--but also know that there are a few factors required to give any shot a chance of success.

First, this only works if you can identify true customer pain.

Believe me, after living in an urban or suburban area, not having access to high speed internet in a rural area is significant customer pain. (Attention world: I'm eager for Starlink, but I would be willing to pay a lot for any effective solution.)

Second, you need customers who are willing to accept a short-term, less-than-ideal solution, as part of their hope for a better, longer-term solution.

Third, somewhat related, you likely need scarcity. Starlink's messaging works here in part because there are few other options, and because the number of beta test slots is still small.

According to PCMag, Starlink's public beta focuses on rural users in Idaho, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Oregon, Washington, and Wisconsin; those of us a bit farther east have to continue to wait.

Fourth, there has to be minimal downside. This is why "better than nothing" works for high-speed internet connectivity, but it would not work for something where failing to meet a minimal standard would result in really bad outcomes.

Finally, perhaps most crucial:
Remember that you're trying to set expectations low for your customers, not for yourself or your team.

The backbone of Starlink would be a network of ultimately thousands of satellites in low earth orbit, which would cost at least \$10 billion to build and launch.

But as CNBC points out, SpaceX anticipates that overall revenue could eclipse \$30 billion a year, which would be something like 10 times what the company currently makes from its rocket business.

So, that's the plan: Leverage low short-term expectations for customers, while setting high expectations internally.

Could a version of this work for you,
too?

How to Tackle Big Projects

November 1, 2020

This is a story about the fourth-biggest company in the world and a simple habit you should copy from it, no matter how big or small your business is (or even if you're not running a business at all).

The company is Alphabet, the parent company of Google. The habit is what's known as "20-percent time."

I use it in my professional life. And if you aren't doing it already, you might seriously consider it.

The idea is pretty simple: It's that you, or a team, or a company--anyone, really--should divide your time working, so that at least 20 percent is spent exploring or working on projects that show no promise of paying immediate dividends but that might reveal big opportunities down the road.

"We encourage our employees, in addition to their regular projects, to spend 20 percent of their time working on what they think will most benefit Google," co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin wrote in 2004, before the company's IPO. "This empowers them to be more creative and innovative. Many of

our significant advances have happened in this manner."

Among those advances: Google News (2002), AdSense (2003), and Gmail (2004).

Now, it's fair to ask whether "20-percent time" has truly survived within Google all these years later, as the company grew from the pre-IPO stage to become a force so dominant that it's facing an antitrust probe.

Google itself says yes. A Google spokesperson told me this week that "20-percent time" is "a long-standing Google initiative...and still an active program."

That said, the most recent product innovations that Google cites as having its origins in "20-percent time" are Google Cardboard and Wear OS (originally known as Android Wear), which were both introduced in 2014.

"No new products to share at this time," the Google spokesperson said.

And, on the outside, there's been a lot of speculation over the years about whether the program still exists. Some engineers reportedly referred to it as "120-percent time," meaning it's something you'd do in addition to your full workload, not as a replacement for part of it.

But for our purposes, it doesn't really matter whether "20-percent time" can truly survive in a \$1.1 trillion, public company.

Because you're either running a smaller, scrappier company or leading a smaller team--or even simply managing your own productivity and professional development.

In other words, you're more like Google was 20 years ago than the juggernaut it is today. And you should absolutely steal this idea and put it into practice.

Now, you might be doing some of this already, even if you don't call it "20-percent time."

Think of the things that you spend time on that broaden your horizons and make you aware of opportunities, or help you develop new skills, but that don't relate to an immediate professional benefit.

As a simple example: outside reading. Or else, experimenting with new systems or processes. Attending conferences (virtual for now, I'm sure), networking, or simply taking meetings.

It's even better if you can point to a specific project you're working on that you're not sure will work out or pay off financially but that you can learn something from regardless.

In my personal case, I'd put my daily email newsletter, at Understandably.com, in that category. But it's probably even better if it's

something less related to what you do professionally.

And remember, it's absolutely fine if it never pays recognizable dividends. It's the nonlinear path that yields to the biggest opportunities.

"Most risky projects fizzle," Page and Brin wrote in 2004, "often teaching us something. Others succeed and become attractive businesses."

So, give it a try. Let 80 percent of what you do be about now: keeping your head above water, bringing in revenue, following the trail that you see in front of you, and that hopefully, you feel some passion about following.

But that leaves one-fifth of your time. Do what Google says its employees do with it: Spend 20 percent on yourself and your future. You might find a real payoff down the road.

How to Upgrade Your Travel

February 11, 2020

It's one thing to negotiate an end to a hostage situation when you're working for the FBI.

But it's another thing entirely to negotiate when you travel: say, a flight upgrade, or an earlier check-in time, or to figure out how to be the one

person on line at the car rental counter who actually gets their reservation fulfilled.

Is the life-and-death hostage negotiation is more serious? Sure. But, which scenario is more likely to come in handy for you?

That's why I paid attention recently when former FBI hostage negotiator Chris Voss sat down with the *New York Times's* Elaine Glusac to discuss travel negotiations.

At a conceptual level, there's not much difference. As Voss put it a couple of years ago, when my Inc.com colleague Justin Bariso interviewed him for his book, *EQ Applied*:

"The shortest distance between two points is not a straight line. It involves taking steps, and each step becomes the foundation for the next. It's about building rapport--and that requires empathy. And one step leads to another, which then puts you in a position to influence others."

Here are five key steps Voss described to use FBI negotiation techniques when you're traveling-and get better service as a result.

1. Be casual and friendly.

Don't ask right away. Instead, be "friendly and playful," as Voss put it.

Think about both the words you use and the tone you convey. The person

you're dealing with will develop an impression of you before you get more than a few words out of your mouth.

"Never be mean to someone who can hurt you by doing nothing," Voss suggested. "If you're good, they'll be delighted to do for you whatever they can."

2. Set up opposite expectations.

OK, I would have probably gotten the "be friendly" advice, but now Voss suggests something counterintuitive: Set the customer service agent up to think that you're going to become entirely unreasonable.

"You want to say something like, 'I'm getting ready to make your day incredibly difficult,'" Voss suggested.

Of course, you want to follow this up by making a request that won't actually make their day difficult at all.

"They imagine way worse than what you end up asking for," he continued. "But, with a positive vibe, there's no downside. Wherever I go is upside."

3. Show them that you can see things through their eyes.

Your next phrase should demonstrate that you understand the customer service agent's fear. Characterize yourself as the person you think they least want to deal with.

"You disarm their concerns with empathy. You can say, 'I'm a self-serving, predictable traveler

demanding the world," Voss suggested.

You're doubling down on what you did in Step 2 now, as well: showing that no matter what you come out with next, it's nothing anywhere near as demanding as wherever their imagination just took them.

4. Give them a chance to say "no."

Now, you're going to ease into wording your request in the best possible way. That involves starting with a question that they can answer "no" to.

Voss suggests:

- Don't say something like: "Please, can I have a later check out?"

- Instead, say something like:
"Would it be a ridiculous idea if I asked to check in early with no fee?"

The goal is to get them to say no, so they'll later be more comfortable saying yes.

"A no-oriented question is designed to let the person behind the counter feel safe and secure," Voss explained. "You haven't made them feel badgered. As long as you're playful, you can keep asking."

5. Deal with bad news in an unexpected way.

Glusac offered a scenario in which you're not asking for something you haven't paid for, but instead

learning that something you did legitimately expect (say, a rental car you reserved) isn't available.

Voss's suggestion: Take the blame to throw them off guard, even though it's not your fault.

"Say 'Oh, I'm sorry,' because they are expecting you to yell at them," he said.

Ultimately, you want to put them in a position where they recognize that your position is untenable -- the car that isn't available, or the airplane seat or hotel reservation that suddenly evaporated, and you can ask: *How am I supposed to accept that?*

"We refer to this as 'forced empathy,'" Voss continued. "The Brits say you can be as rude as you want as long as

you're polite by it. There's so much magic in the tone of your voice."

How to Remember Stuff, Part 2

July 31, 2018

Sometimes the simplest solutions are best.

A couple of weeks ago, I took a summer Friday and headed to Rhode Island. It was a nice trip. One of the highlights: My wife and I joined my aunt and uncle on their sailboat.

I get to do this only once a year or so at most, and it's always a lot of fun. Every time I go, though, it seems my uncle has to start more or less from scratch telling me things I can do to help out.

Did I mention my uncle is a former Army drill sergeant? He's good at giving firm, efficient orders. He's polite about it, but he doesn't waste words.

So as we were wrapping up a nice evening sail, he started telling me exactly what to do to help him quickly tie the boat to the buoy: *Use this hook, grab that rope, string it below that line, tie it to this cleat.*

"The last thing we do is this," he said, pulling out his iPhone and taking a quick picture of how I'd tied the line to the cleat. "This is so when you wake up

at 2 a.m. wondering, 'Did I tie up the boat correctly?' you don't have to drive an hour back to the dock to find out."

Mind blown.

I'm sorry. This is such a simple solution to so many everyday ordinary problems, especially if you have a lot of things on your mind.

I'm always forgetting things. Did I close the back door? Did I turn off the gas? Did I remember to lock the filing cabinet?

Now it turns out we've been walking around with the solution tucked neatly in our pockets the whole time. Just get in the habit, the routine, of shooting quick photos of the little things you have to remember to do.

It's not just limited to the physical world. In the couple weeks since I've picked up this habit, I've begun taking screen captures on my phone after paying bills, or responding to important work emails.

For my uncle, let's just say he came up with the idea after a bitter experience. That thing about driving to the dock in the middle of the night wasn't hypothetical.

But when you start doing it, it not only eases your mind. It means you create a personal photo diary on your phone, documenting all the mundane moments that actually make up a big part of your life.

I know this isn't exactly an earth-shattering technique. But that's kind of

the point. It's an incredibly simple habit to get into. If it prevents just one middle-of-the-night trip to make sure you actually did that one thing you absolutely had to remember to do, it's worth it.

How to Sleep In a Hotel Room

October 6, 2019

I used to travel constantly for work. In my first job as a lawyer, for example, I was a trial attorney based in Washington, D.C.

However, the territory that I had to cover was in the Pacific Northwest: mainly Idaho and Washington State.

This meant I spent a lot of time in airports, on planes and in hotels. And

with the time difference -- it's only three hours, but still -- it meant dealing with jet lag.

That means, in turn, that I am quite familiar with the notion of staying in an airport Marriott or Hilton, hoping to sleep a few hours later in the morning and catch up on what I'd missed while traveling, only to be interrupted by the one thing that I suspect every business traveler can relate to:

Those early morning moments when you realize your hotel's so-called "blackout curtains" aren't 100 percent effective, because they don't quite close completely.

Thus, a narrow, bright shaft of sunlight comes through the curtains at sunrise -- somehow always seeming to be aimed

right at your eyes while you'd like nothing more than to continue to sleep.

Suffer no more, dear reader. We've got the trick you have been waiting for.

Ex-Googler Rick Klau, who is now a senior operating partner at Google Ventures, shared the solution in the form of a photograph on Twitter.

Wait, I can't link to Twitter in this Ubook, but I'll describe it: Klau suggested using one of the hotel hangers -- the kind with binder hooks intended to let you hang clothes from the hanger, instead of draped across the bar-- to secure the blinds shut.

You use the binders to hold the drapes closed. Easy as pie.

(As a backup of course, you could just throw some clothespins or binder clips in your bag.)

This is one of those "guy who has 29,000 followers posts it and gets 60,000 retweets and 386,000 likes" kind of tweets. The thing just went insanely viral.

Anyone who reads my column knows I'm a sucker for a good, free hack like this..

But this one is smart, easy, free, and seems destined to work. It also inspired other Twitter users to share their own hotel hacks.

None of these is quite as ingenious as the hanger idea, but as Natalie B. Compton of *The Washington*

Post reported, they're worth knowing. Her bonus list includes:

- Blocking blinking lights (think smoke alarm) with electrical tape
- Combating dry air with a wet towel ("[Soak a towel with water, wringing it tightly so that it's not dripping, then hanging it over an ironing board in front of your room's vent or heater.")
- Ask at the front desk if they have any phone chargers. (Spoiler alert: they do. Probably lots.)
- Override the thermostat. Will this always work? Maybe not, but Compton includes some very specific instructions: "Step one is to hold down the thermostat's "display" button, then press the "off" button simultaneously. Keep

holding the display button down, but let go of the off button and press the up arrow. Once you release all of the buttons, you'll have free rein of the temperature controls."

- Avoid the germs of the TV remote control, if you still hotel room TVs. Use the plastic bag from your ice bucket, or even a shower cap.
- Keep the power on without using your room key. Little known fact: In most hotels where you need to leave your room key in a slot to keep the power on, any similarly sized card will work just as well.

There you go. I can't make business travel enjoyable; that's up to you. But hopefully you can at least get a good night's sleep on the road.

How to Beat Anxiety

November 7, 2020

What if I could show you a way to calm anxiety in just a few minutes, using principles of neuroscience?

It's not a permanent solution. But I remembered reading about this years ago, and I tried it this week.

Frankly, I was blown away at how quickly and effectively it worked.

It has to do with listening to a single, eight-minute audio track that was designed and recorded in a way to trigger specific neurological reactions in your brain.

A colleague on Inc.com wrote once that it reduces anxiety by 65 percent. I admit that I approached it with skepticism, but since it's only eight minutes, and it required almost zero effort, I gave it a try.

A link to the audio track is included at the bottom of this article, if you'd rather skip ahead. But I think it helps to put all of this in context first.

More than half of Americans anticipated Election Day this

year would be the most stressful day of their lives. Add coronavirus, the economic situation, and the general anxiety that many of us feel as a product of early 21st century life?

The word I settle on is "SOBAR," for "stressed out beyond all recognition."

Sometimes, the solution is therapy or medical help. I've certainly availed myself of these at times; it's wildly outdated to think there's any stigma associated with seeking professional help for mental health.

But there are also some very simple things that you can do: Short, intense periods of exercise are highly effective, as is being intentional about spending time with friends (even virtually).

Meditation works, as does adding plants and other greenery to your work space. Oh, and going for an "awe walk" in nature, as my Inc.com colleagues Minda Zetlin and Jessica Stillman have reported on recently, yields fascinating results.

(Based on their advice, I took an "awe walk" of my own on Election Day; it helped a bit, and I got some great photos out of it.)

But this eight-minute musical interlude might well be the most intriguing.

It dates back to 2011, when a British band called Marconi Union teamed up with sound therapists to create a track called "Weightlessness" that would

stimulate specific neurological reactions when people listened to it.

Among them: a lower heart rate, lower blood pressure, and reduced levels of cortisol, a stress hormone.

Researchers said they then played the song for a group of 40 women, tracking their breathing, brain activity, and blood pressure, and found it to be 11 percent more relaxing than the next-most-stress-reducing song they could find, according to results published in the British newspaper, *The Telegraph*.

"The song...contains a sustaining rhythm that starts at 60 beats per minute and gradually slows to around 50. While listening, your heart rate

gradually comes to match that beat," Lyz Cooper, founder of the British Academy of Sound Therapy, told the newspaper.

The fact that the song is almost exactly eight minutes is important, she added, because, "it takes about five minutes for this process, known as entrainment, to occur."

Additional elements, include the structure of the gaps between the song's notes (designed to "create a feeling of euphoria and comfort," according to Cooper), and the fact that there is "no repeating melody, which allows your brain to completely switch off because you are no longer trying to predict what is coming next."

The whole trick comes down to research that shows that "music works at a very deep level within the brain, stimulating not only those regions responsible for processing sound but also ones associated with emotions," said Dr. David Lewis-Hodgson, a neuropsychologist who oversaw the study.

Anyway, given where we are in the world, and despite my skepticism for quick fixes, I tried it.

Reader, it worked. During the time that I listened to the song--fully aware of what it was designed to do--I felt myself relaxing.

The mild sinus headache I'd been enduring disappeared. I could feel my

breathing and heart rate slow. A feeling of calmness enveloped me. I began to hear a faint ringing sound--almost like a pleasurable version of tinnitus.

Again, this is not a cure-all. It's certainly not a substitute for combining all the habits I listed above, or for professional help. But if you've got anxiety and you've got eight minutes, you might find it really interesting.

You can find the track either by just searching for "Marconi Union Weightless,"

Or, just follow this link, <https://murph.me/weightless>, and it will take you to a YouTube version.

It worked for me. I'd love to hear if it works for you, too.

How to Organize Everything

(October 10, 2019)

This is a story about the U.S. Marine Corps, the Rule of 3, and how to avoid getting overwhelmed.

It's also about the first article I ever remember reading in *Inc.* magazine back in 1998 -- and how that simple rule has served me well and helped me accomplish my goals for more than 21 years.

The article was headlined "Corps Values," and it asked this:

The U.S. Marines are trained to make split-second decisions based on incomplete information, in life-or-death situations. Can they provide clues to running a faster-reacting business?

Here's the part I remembered almost verbatim, even before looking it up to write about it today:

In a nutshell, the rule is this: Each marine has three things to worry about.

In terms of organizational structure, the "rule of three" means a corporal has a three-person fire team; a sergeant has a

squad of three fire teams; a lieutenant and a staff sergeant have a platoon of three squads; and so on, up to generals.

The functional version of the rule dictates that a person should limit his or her attention to three tasks or goals. When applied to strategizing, the rule prescribes boiling a world of infinite possibilities down to three alternative courses of action.

Anything more, and a marine can become overextended and confused. The marines experimented with a rule of four and found that effectiveness plummeted.

There are three reasons why this has stayed with me so long. (Yes, three!)

The first reason is the Rule of 3 itself. I've used it almost automatically since reading that article. I've found that for me too, three is the maximum number of things I can focus on at once.

Right now, for example, I have three professional projects:

1. my work for *Inc.*,
2. a new publication I'm launching called *Understandably*, and
3. a digital technology product that I'm developing with a colleague.

More projects than that would just be too much.

The second reason I remember it so well is simply because it was in *Inc.* magazine.

I've been a loyal reader going back many years. I'd started a couple of small businesses by then, but this publication was a big way that I stayed connected to my entrepreneurial dreams in those days. It's pretty wild to me that I write for it now.

Finally, there's how I happened to have read it: I had just moved to Washington for my first job as a lawyer.

My brother had just gotten out of the Marines and was living with me. And it was my dad who gave me the magazine with this article on the cover: He and my mom were visiting, and it

was something to read while I was waiting for them at their hotel.

It's not just the Marine Corps that recognizes the Rule of 3. More recently, my Inc.com colleague Jessica Stillman tackled it from a different perspective: "Work, Sleep, Family, Fitness, or Friends: Pick 3."

And throughout history, great communicators have known that the Rule of 3 makes messages more memorable -- and sometimes even funny. It's the linguistic theory behind everything from "Veni, vidi, vici" to the Three Little Pigs.

Since this article stayed with me so long, I thought I'd reach out to its author, David H. Freedman. He told me

the story led to him writing a book called *Corps Business*:

Glad you reached out. Funny, and of course gratifying, that you remember that article. [It] came about when I was visiting in-laws, and went out for a jog with my brother-in-law, who was a captain in the Navy Reserve.

Knowing that I wrote for *Inc.*, he told me I should write an article about Marine management wisdom, and as an example he gave me the rule of 3. I was sold on the spot, and contacted the Marines soon after.

It's a simple rule, it's easy to remember, and I think it's truly helped me stay

focused. Hey, what do you know--that's another list of three.

How to Reverse the Aging Process

(March 16, 2017)

For eons, people have dreamed that we might one day find some kind of fountain of youth. The scientists at the Mayo Clinic--who don't exactly talk in that kind of mythical language--might well have come up with the next best thing.

Short version: Researchers say they've figured out what kind of exercise you

should do, and when, to "reverse [the] aging process in adults," as the Mayo Clinic put it in a press release.

That's a pretty amazing claim, so let's get right to the details.

High-intensity interval training

The researchers recruited hundreds of adults for the study, and whittled them down to a select 72, divided in two targeted age groups: 18- to 30-year-olds, and 65- to 80-year-olds.

Then they had different members of each cohort engage in various kinds of exercise regimens over 12 weeks, and they tracked the metabolic and molecular changes that members of each group experienced.

Participants focused on three types of exercise regimens:

- Some focused on high-intensity interval training (workouts that alternate short periods of intense anaerobic exercise with less intense recovery periods).
- Others focused on resistance training (activity focused more on strength, working against resistance from weights, gravity, elastics, or your body weight, etc.).
- Finally, some participated in a combination of both high-intensity interval training and resistance training.

Of course, the researchers emphasized that any kind of exercise was beneficial.

However, they found that high-intensity interval training, especially when done by members of the older cohort, "reversed some manifestations of aging in the body's protein function," according to the report.

In laymen's terms--which are frankly more exciting--high-intensity interval training "significantly enhanced the cellular machinery responsible for making new proteins. That contributes to protein synthesis, thus reversing a major adverse effect of aging."

Reverse the effects of aging

So while it's not time travel, and not quite the fountain of youth, perhaps the study is fascinating because it suggests that people can use exercise

to manipulate their cells and counteract aging.

There were other benefits as well, including better cardio respiratory health and muscle mass; insulin sensitivity improved no matter what kind of exercise the participants did.

As the senior researcher on the study, K. Sreekumaran Nair, emphasized:

"We encourage everyone to exercise regularly, but the take-home message for aging adults is that supervised high-intensity training is probably best, because, both metabolically and at the molecular level, it confers the most benefits."

Also--and you'd expect this--muscle strength increased "only modestly with

high-intensity interval training but occurred with resistance training alone or when added to the aerobic training."

But still: not a bad trick.

Links & References

Thanks again for downloading and reading. I hope you found the book of value.

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