

# Chapter 11

## Knowledge Worker Productivity and The Practice of Self-Management

By Jeremy Hunter, Ph.D., with J. Scott Scherer

*More and more people in the workforce—and mostly knowledge workers—will have to manage themselves.*

—Peter F. Drucker, *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*

Toward the end of his life, Peter Drucker asserted that making knowledge workers productive was “the biggest of the 21<sup>st</sup> century management challenges.”<sup>1</sup> Other scholars support Drucker’s position. Tom Davenport, a leading thinker on knowledge workers, underscores why this productivity is so important: “If our companies are going to be more profitable, if our strategies are going to be successful, if our society is going to become more advanced—it will be because knowledge workers did their work in a more productive and effective manner.”<sup>2</sup> The task of improving knowledge worker productivity is immense, and so are the consequences of failing to do so. In fact, Drucker warned that improving knowledge worker productivity is the “first *survival requirement*” of developed nations.<sup>3</sup> Failure carries dire consequences for a nation’s economy and society.

Significant efforts have been made in this quest, with varying degrees of success. Most endeavors have focused on the logical

suspects—work process, managerial practice, organizational structure, information technology and workplace ergonomics.<sup>4</sup> Despite these efforts, quantum gains in productivity have not flooded the workplace. In his blog, Davenport wondered why more headway wasn’t being made, even going so far as to ask, “Was Drucker wrong?”<sup>5</sup> Alas, Drucker’s 21<sup>st</sup> century challenge is proving to be a tricky lock to pick.

Perhaps the key lies hidden elsewhere. Thus far, most energy has focused on the worker’s external environment. If, according to Drucker, the primary asset of a knowledge economy lies “between the ears” of its knowledge workers,<sup>6</sup> then maybe the key to enhancing productivity lies *within* the workers themselves.

## Productivity from the Inside Out

An internally based exploration of productivity asks different questions about how to optimize it. An inner approach examines how a knowledge worker manages—or mismanages—her internal experience, and helps her to see how her internal processes have a direct impact on her outward behavior. Some questions to ask are:

- How do knowledge workers use their attention to focus on and engage with work and one another?
- How can rigid, judgmental mindsets be shifted toward the openness, learning, and transformation that are the heart of innovation and problem solving?
- How do negative emotional reactions derail the work process or corrode the morale of a work group?

Losses in productivity can often be traced to momentary events inside a person—events whose outward expression disrupts clear thought and effective social interaction. In short, visible behavior results from invisible processes that occur within a person's inner black box, often with negative consequences:

- A senior executive's emotional volatility makes him a scary person to report to. As a result, bad news does not get delivered, and the right decisions are not made. The organization begins to reel off course. Defusing the inner churn that precedes his eruptions quiets his outbursts and, in turn, changes how his people relate to him.
- A team leader's penchant for judgmental and sarcastic comments erodes team morale and performance. Talent leaves

the organization, along with the knowledge capital the company needs if it is to thrive. Teach the leader not to utter his acerbic thoughts and to be more supportive, and watch team performance improve.

- An up-and-coming manager's multitasking BlackBerry addiction compulsively distracts her attention in meetings. She misses key points, her colleagues feel disrespected, and decision-making takes longer. Her chances for promotion are diminished. If the manager keeps her attention focused, decisions proceed more smoothly and her team feels more respected.

In each example, maladaptive behavior can be traced to an event inside the worker that affects outward performance. But why should management be concerned?

The answer becomes clear upon reflection. Drucker reminded us that “knowledge workers must be considered a *capital asset*.”<sup>7</sup> If an organization is seeking to grow its assets and to maximize their return, and if knowledge workers' productivity is deeply influenced by the workers' inner states, then helping knowledge workers to cultivate optimal internal states becomes the responsibility of management and, in effect, becomes an exercise in *asset management*.

If we know internal states affect behavior, then the productivity challenge shifts to how to manage these states effectively and how to improve them. In *The Practice of Management*, Drucker “illuminated the dark continent of management”<sup>8</sup> and made conscious the inner workings of the organization. Analogously, the practice of *self-management*, as I have coined the phrase, allows the worker to shine a light into his own inner black box to illuminate his internal processing, and then

to transform these processes to enhance his effectiveness.

The practice of self-management builds directly on recent advances in neuroscience, medicine and psychology. The model melds Drucker's classic themes of change and continual transformation with contemporary views on human development, providing a systematic framework of theory and practice to help knowledge workers better manage themselves, their work and their relationships. In the process, workers transform their individual and collective productivity and, in turn, generate more capital for the organization.

## Creating the Practice of Self-Management

I developed the practice of self-management after conducting a research study that involved interviewing prominent, successful professionals dedicated to practicing mindfulness. Mindfulness practices are a method of attention development that enhances self-awareness, self-regulation and self-transformation. I'll say more about what that means later.

In recent years, mindfulness practices have received considerable scholarly attention. Research studies have demonstrated these practices improve numerous measures of well-being, including mental and physical health, self-regulation and the quality of relationships.<sup>9</sup>

Outside of the academy, mindfulness practices produce tangible results in a variety of professional settings. Such methods inform stress management programs used in hospitals in more than 26 countries around the world.<sup>10</sup> Mindfulness

has been incorporated into legal training,<sup>11</sup> and it has been applied successfully in professional sports, notably by coach Phil Jackson in his NBA championships with the Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers.<sup>12</sup>

The professionals I interviewed in the research study included a Fortune 500 CEO, a well-known architect, a financier, senior corporate managers, medical researchers, a film director and a host of other prominent knowledge workers. Most of the time, I met these people in person. Without fail, they were open, relaxed and attentive. They were not the stereotypical picture of the stressed-out but "successful" professional.

Our conversations revealed a common refrain: "My life is so complex and demanding—if I didn't have these mindfulness practices, I think I'd be dead." Often they meant this literally. They produced medical records showing their previous high blood pressure, heart problems and overweight conditions, or they shared stories of divorces and broken relationships.<sup>13</sup> Each person attributed his or her sustained success and well-being to a regular mindfulness practice. Their sustained internal training had resulted in significant transformation.

During this time, I too was using these practices to confront a personal challenge. Diagnosed with a terminal illness at the age of 20, I was told I had a 90 percent chance of dying within five years. Having outlived that prognosis by decades, I knew the power of these methods intimately.

One day, in a conversation about this research, my colleague Jean Lipman-Blumen pointed out, "We rarely train managers to manage themselves." Her comment crystallized an insight for me: the inner world of the executive remained largely neglected. How ironic this all

seemed to me, since my study had suggested internal self-management was the source of both professional effectiveness and professional failure.

The notion of “managing oneself” was already present in Drucker’s work.<sup>14</sup> I realized mindfulness could be the basis of a systematic discipline in self-management. The impulse to create a scientifically-based method of self-management for an expanding audience of knowledge workers was born. Recent discoveries in neuroscience would help to explain why mindfulness works, providing a biological description for this seemingly mystical process. Understanding the function of the human nervous system would be the first step in transforming it for greater professional and personal effectiveness.

## Self-Management Means Managing Your Nervous System

Self-management begins with the human nervous system, including (and especially) the brain. The brain lies at the center of knowledge work. Knowledge workers use their brains to focus, to decide and to act. Unfortunately, few knowledge workers understand how their brain works. Self-management examines how the brain and the nervous system function, explores their limits and demonstrates how these limits can be effectively managed and transformed. Making knowledge workers more productive means helping them to use their brains better.<sup>15</sup>

From this point onward, I will examine specific internal processes involved in self-management. The starting place for this examination is *attention*. Attention informs how we process experience, and at

the same time, attention powers performance. So, I will explore how attention can be used as a tool in a variety of applications, including how to transform nonperforming mindsets and how to manage emotional reactivity—two elements that can deeply affect professional performance.

## Attention is the Foundation for Self-Management

Attention and our experience of the world are intimately linked: you are what you attend to. Attention powers our ability to perceive the outside world as well as to perceive our own actions, thoughts and emotions. The first step toward self-awareness, self-control, self-transformation and connection with others is to master attention. Attention is fundamental.

Over one hundred years ago, the great American psychologist William James recognized the essential role attention plays in self-management. James cited attention as “the very root of judgment, character and will,” and warned that people could not be masters of themselves if they failed to first control their attention. Furthermore, James declared that an education that enhances attention would be “the education *par excellence*.”<sup>16</sup>

At this point in the conversation, many people furrow their brows and say: “Huh? Attention? If it’s so important, why haven’t I heard of it before?”

Good question. Here’s why. There are two reasons. First, modern education has usually favored the conceptual and abstract over the perceptual, which is one reason attention and its development seem foreign to most of us. Second, although Western psychology after James created theories of

development for cognition and emotion, it failed to create a theory of attention development.

“Not paying attention to attention” is a massive cultural blind spot. The modern West has ignored the importance of preserving and developing attention, to its peril. Japan, for example, has a well-developed cultural heritage of “attention-developing arts,” including the tea ceremony, calligraphy, flower arrangement, martial arts and archery. The fundamental purpose of these methods is to develop focus and awareness, as well as mental and emotional stability. A person is considered to be mature and civilized if she has at least one of these under her belt. Drucker, incidentally, was one of the United States’ foremost collectors of Japanese art, a hobby he used to train his perceptive capacities.

## Drucker and the Vital Need to Train Perception

Peter Drucker recognized the West’s perceptual blindness when he wrote: “Descartes said, ‘I *think* therefore I am.’ We will now have to say also, ‘I *see* therefore I am.’”<sup>17</sup> Drucker realized modern management had overemphasized analysis and underappreciated perception. (In this discussion, Drucker used *perception* as a synonym for *attention*.) He echoed James’ century-old declaration: “[P]erception is at the center. And it can—indeed it must—be trained.”<sup>18</sup>

Why is perception important? The greater facility I have in perceiving, the more and more subtle forms I am able to see. A well-developed perception allows a person to see hidden assumptions as well as new possibilities. In *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, Drucker reminds us that

“when a change in perception takes place, the facts do not change. Their meaning does.”<sup>19</sup> How we see things influences how we understand them and how we can respond to them.

## Concentrated Attention: Focus Is Power

For the knowledge worker, focused attention is what gets work done. It is the engine of productivity. Complex mental operations cannot happen without a focused mind. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s studies of optimal experience find that focused attention is the basic ingredient for those exhilarating moments of flow when a person performs to his highest limits.<sup>20</sup>

Conversely, distraction decreases cognitive efficiency. Interruptions in the flow of thought break momentum, which then takes time to reestablish. Scattered and distracted attention wastes energy and results in less productive action. Thus, management should design work systems that help knowledge workers focus attention.

In terms of brain structures, attention is associated with the prefrontal cortex (PFC), also known as “the inner CEO.” This brain part is associated with directing and allocating attention. This area can be strengthened through systematic practice, just as a muscle can be strengthened through exercise. A more developed prefrontal cortex is associated with an increased ability to concentrate, connect, learn and make decisions. However, it can also be weakened through another “systematic practice”: multitasking.

## Multitasking Damages Your Productivity, Your Relationships, and Your Brain

Multitasking, or simultaneously splitting one's attention across many tasks, has become an all-too-common résumé boast. Many people erroneously believe doing multiple things at once makes them more efficient. After all, if the PC on my desk can multitask, why can't I? Workers look over their shoulder at their colleagues who are simultaneously talking on the phone, writing a report and eating a sandwich. They wonder to themselves, "Is that what it takes to survive?" The good news is: no.

In fact, research shows multitasking both slows performance and increases errors.<sup>21</sup> Multitasking reduces the available attention and increases the chance that disorganizing emotions, like fear and anxiety, will overwhelm brain function. Chronic multitaskers report feeling "out of control." Over time, regular multitasking can lead to a state of panic. By the end of the day, many chronic multitaskers feel they have accomplished little and are completely spent.

Multitasking also damages relationships. Consider this scenario: when your boss is pecking away at his keyboard as you attempt to discuss your pay raise, do you feel heard and respected? Probably not. Attention is the bridge of relationships, and the quality of a relationship is proportionate to the quality of attention. When attention is split or scattered, the quality of connection diminishes, and with it goes the productivity of a team.

It gets worse. Multitasking has a negative effect on how well people learn. UCLA researchers found that divided

attention impairs complex learning and thus negatively affects decision making, adapting, and a host of other essential knowledge worker skills.<sup>22</sup> In their study, multitaskers demonstrated a superficial understanding of issues. Brain scans showed they had become habituated to using a more primitive part of the brain—a part that is responsible for creating rote, inflexible memories (the basal ganglia). Conclusion: multitaskers use a part of the brain that leaves them less capable of applying the principles they have learned.

Study participants who focused their attention, however, relied on a different brain structure, namely, the hippocampus, a part that creates more flexible memories and allows for a deeper, more robust knowing. The focused students were able to apply a more nuanced understanding when facing problems. Chronic multitasking, therefore, leads to a form of neural "de-evolution." That's not a good recipe for high productivity.

## Breaking the Cycle of Multitasking

Reducing multitasking means increasing effectiveness. Here is an example. After I asked her to limit her multitasking for a week, one finance executive I worked with reported the following:

*When I made a concerted effort not to do it, I was actually very effective. I finished quite a few tasks. I was able to better prioritize and minimize distractions. I was more focused. I didn't get overwhelmed with all the things I had to do and waste time just thinking about them in circles. I kept things in perspective. I stayed in the moment, and things that usually feel*

*insurmountable were actually manageable.*

After making a conscious effort to reduce multitasking, many people say both their productivity and their quality of work increase significantly. They report connecting more meaningfully with their colleagues and loved ones, and becoming better listeners all around. Becoming aware of the high costs of multitasking and gradually stepping away from the habit helps people to preserve attention, concentrate and be more productive. Multitasking is the opposite of concentrating. The good news is there are other ways to improve concentration as well.

## Concentration Meditation: Strengthening the Inner CEO

There are numerous methods for developing focused attention or concentration. Consider a tried-and-true way of developing attention: concentration meditation practice.<sup>23</sup> For many, meditation conjures up images of New Age incense and candles. However, for centuries, meditation served as the “basic training” of the fierce Japanese samurai warrior. Meditation gave the samurai an intense, unwavering focus to face a deadly enemy. Meditation can be useful for corporate warriors, too.

Plenty of scientific evidence proves concentration meditation practice is beneficial. Concentration meditation lowers blood pressure, helps the stressed body to relax, and decreases difficult emotions.<sup>24</sup> Brain research at Harvard Medical School found the prefrontal cortex in mindfulness meditators was significantly thicker than in nonmeditators. As people age, the prefrontal cortex thins out, but the study showed the cortex of older meditators was substantially

thicker than that of their nonmeditating counterparts.<sup>25</sup> A thicker cortex is thought to mean greater strength in attention.

Meditation strengthens the brain’s ability to focus and is the antidote to multitasking.<sup>26</sup>

## Attention, Mindfulness and Systematic Abandonment: Learning to See in Order to Change

Once attention is strengthened through developing concentration, it can be used as a tool for other tasks, such as bringing things into awareness. Mindfulness, introduced earlier, is a way of directing attention to become increasingly more aware of our emotions, beliefs and actions. Awareness leads to the possibility of choice. Choice gives us greater conscious influence over our subsequent actions. As I will demonstrate, directed attention is closely related to Drucker’s advocacy of systematic abandonment.

Drucker prescribed that organizations should regularly and dispassionately examine their habitual processes and even whole businesses to determine whether they are still effective, or even necessary. Nonperforming elements should be *systematically abandoned* to free up resources for new, more productive ventures.

The process of systematic abandonment holds true for the knowledge worker as well. Because much of the brain’s processing happens non-consciously, or outside of awareness, workers unknowingly cling to maladaptive habits. For example, a colleague of mine habitually makes wisecracks in meetings, which often offend people. When I gently mentioned this to

him, I found he had no idea how frequently he did it, even though he wisecracked nearly every day. Attention training expands the scope of what we notice. Again, attention powers awareness. Mindfully directing attention makes conscious the non-conscious, enabling us to “see” (perhaps for the first time) and make more conscious choices about the invisible, ineffective behaviors that need to be “systematically abandoned” to achieve greater productivity.

To understand why systematic abandonment is necessary, let’s explore the neurobiology behind how conscious actions and assumptions become non-conscious habits and beliefs. The neural root of the need for systematic abandonment lies in an old part of the brain called the basal ganglia. In the interest of efficiency and saving cognitive resources, the brain moves a repeated action or belief from the conscious control of the evolutionarily newer and more complex prefrontal cortex to the instinctual and much older basal ganglia.

This transfer to the basal ganglia makes conscious and intentional behavior gradually become non-conscious and automatic—a sort of behavioral default position. The newly formed habit becomes, literally, unthinking and non-adapting. Once a habitual action is triggered, it will play out rigidly, automatically, and often unknowingly. And, yes, frequently *unproductively*.

The basal ganglia’s habitual patterning reflex explains why people often fall into a routine of relying on yesterday’s successes to meet today’s conditions, showing why “old habits die hard.” These mindless habits are wired into the basal ganglia. Training and mindfully directing attention helps the worker to observe and shift out of default habitual thinking patterns and behaviors, creating the possibility for more productive effort.

## Neuroplasticity: Rewiring the Network

If the shift to the basal ganglia is one cause of “mindlessness,” the antidote lies in another well-established neural operation: neuroplasticity.<sup>27</sup> This term refers to the brain’s ability to rewire itself. Though scientists previously thought the brain did not change radically after adulthood, we now know this is untrue. Furthermore, not only is the brain capable of change, but the change can be intentionally self-directed—call it self-directed transformation. By altering their neural pathways, it is possible for people to radically alter how they engage with the world. The automatic operations of the basal ganglia are not permanent and can be undone through practice.

The kicker? Attention is thought to be what holds the neural circuitry in place. You get the brain you practice. If you direct attention to a new behavior by breaking the pattern of the old one, the old behavior will gradually dismantle. Neuroplasticity is the biological basis for personal transformation and greater productivity. This can be achieved through mindfulness practice.

## Mindfulness Means Directing Attention

The process of mindfulness is analogous to Drucker’s systematic abandonment. Mindfulness directs the attention flashlight inward and examines what’s working and what isn’t. By illuminating the inner black box, it creates the possibility of abandoning an unwanted behavior.



## Mindfulness and Adam Smith

Earlier in the chapter, I introduced the idea of mindfulness as a means of self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-transformation. You may be surprised to learn that no less a figure than the founding father of capitalism, Adam Smith, advocated cultivating *mindfulness*. Yes, Adam Smith.

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith counseled, “*We must become the impartial spectators of our own character and conduct.*”<sup>28</sup> The impartial spectator is the part of you that dispassionately observes your behavior. This is mindfulness, pure and simple.

A helpful metaphor: imagine the mind as a raging river. Normally, we’re caught in the river and taken for a wild ride by our thoughts and emotions. To take the perspective of the impartial spectator means to step out of the river and watch its flow from the shore. The shift in perceptual stance is critical, fostering the ability to watch our thoughts from an objective position. You are not your thoughts. Training his attention helps the knowledge worker to make a separation between what he thinks and feels and *how he acts*. To repeat, the impartial spectator creates the possibility of witnessing a thought or emotional reaction erupts inside without it translating into a destructive outward action. This distinction, as we shall see, provides a crucial pivot point for increasing the effectiveness of the knowledge worker.

If someone repeatedly recognizes an internal impulse, but does not act on it or suppress it, the neural connections between, say, a flash of anger and verbally lashing out gradually become disentangled. In time, the impulse to act no longer holds its gripping charge. The result: the knowledge worker’s earlier destructive reactivity is now converted into a considered response.

Productivity increases.

## Employing the Impartial Spectator

Smith’s impartial spectator turns out to be a powerful ally in responding to Drucker’s knowledge worker productivity challenge, so let’s take an in-depth look at how to employ this tool. First, I’ll explore workers’ mindsets, and second, I’ll look at their emotional reactivity.

## Mindsets for the Status Quo and Mindsets for Growth

Internal narratives are the ideas, stories, or explanations that we have about our experience, including the experience of ourselves. Taken as a whole, they form a mindset. Mindsets serve as an unconscious filter that predetermines what we see and how we see it. Think of a mindset as a meta-software program that runs underneath your conscious awareness but “preprograms” your perception and response.

The implications of a mindset for workplace productivity are readily apparent. A manager who automatically thinks about how new ventures could fail (and reflect poorly on him) and a counterpart who explores what the possibilities are for moving into an untapped market are two examples of how mindsets function at work. One mindset shuts down opportunity; the other creates it.

Luckily, the impartial spectator can help you uncover which mindsets are guiding your behavior and shift to a mindset for growth and productivity. But first, let’s take a closer look at these mindsets.

Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck, after 30 years of research, identified two forms of mindset: fixed and growth.<sup>29</sup> (Bear in mind that both forms of mindset can exist within the same person and can be activated depending on the circumstances.)

The fixed mindset is rigid and judgmental. It holds that people either are or are not born with talent. Subsequently, this mindset will go to great lengths to protect an ego identity that disallows admitting mistakes, since “mistakes = failure.” Perfection rules, and unfortunately, learning, risk-taking and adapting stop. In a networked knowledge work environment, improvement efforts are unconsciously blocked, and productivity suffers.

The growth mindset, in contrast, is flexible and generative. It views talent as something that can be grown with effort. Instead of trying to *impress*, this mindset will try to *improve*. The growth mindset is curious, and views mistakes not as a cause for condemnation, but as information—as an opportunity to learn and develop. In the collaborative world of knowledge work, such a mindset fertilizes new thought, encourages risk taking, and creates stronger bonds of connection among team members.

The growth mindset exemplifies Drucker’s notion of continual learning. By being curious and open to the world, this mindset allows people to take on a wider, empathic, and more hopeful view that rationally focuses on possibilities and opportunities. Such a mindset is essential in a knowledge work environment.

Mindfulness practice illuminates how these mindsets operate, enabling the worker to learn how to “switch tracks” from the rigid world of the fixed mindset to the open and receptive way of the growth mindset. Take the example of Jack, a banking executive who, after applying

mindfulness practice, had this self-observation:

*A fixed mindset definitely played a role in my reactivity, which was a problem for me at work. It caused me to make assumptions about a situation from a negative belief that I held about a coworker’s motives, and that belief was not based on any real information but derived purely from my own mindset. Had I been more curious, I could have asked, “What is causing him to respond in that way?” Instead of learning something useful about the situation, I reinforced my existing prejudices about the person and ended up in an argument with no better understanding of the situation.*

The fixed mindset does not learn. Instead, it seeks to support what it already knows. Furthermore, feelings of tension, threat, and fear often accompany the fixed mindset. A stance of defense or attack is by nature stressful and makes productive interaction difficult.

By contrast, a growth mindset approaches a situation with greater calm and openness. Listen to Shirley, an accounting executive, explain how she successfully employed the growth framework:

*In working with a client, I put myself in a more inquiring state of mind by asking questions from a growth and learning point of view instead of assuming this person was acting selfishly and egotistically. First, I sensed a calmer state of mind while I was in an inquiring mode. Consequently, it stemmed the urge to feel frustrated or indignant. In addition, I could see the other person, although at first defensive, could sense I really wanted to*

*understand his point of view. He gradually opened up to me with a more authentic and honest manner. We were able to come to common ground that we didn't know we had.*

By becoming mindful of both orientations, fixed and growth, a person becomes aware of her operative mindset and its ramifications. People are often astonished that a simple change in mindset can produce dramatically positive results. Consciously shifting to a growth orientation opens up unforeseen possibilities and solves problems. The alternative fixed position results in an ego-driven, intractable emotional battle about right and wrong that goes nowhere. Changing the mindset opens opportunities to improve productivity.

Now, let's move to the second application of Smith's impartial spectator—the area of reactive emotions.

## Being Mindful of Reactive Emotions

Reactive emotions happen automatically, without will or effort. They are nearly always motivated by self-defense or self-gratification—anger, fear, anxiety, lust, and desire are some examples. Reactive emotions generally do their jobs well, protecting us, feeding us, and so on. However, from time to time, these emotions hijack us and precipitate actions that lead to unwanted results.

Strong reactive emotions affect productivity because they shut down the brain's ability to be rational, objective, and adaptive. Reactive emotions distort perception, as the person interprets events to confirm, support, and maintain the emotional state. The brain of a knowledge

worker who is in the grip of a reactive emotion cannot accept information that challenges her thinking or emotional state.

The attention of the impartial spectator can be a powerful tool to catch the emotional reaction before it has a chance to lead to destructive behavior. Paul Ekman, the pioneering researcher agrees: "When we are being *attentive* . . . we are able to observe ourselves during an emotional episode. . . . We recognize that we are being emotional and can consider whether or not our response is justified. We can reevaluate, reappraise, and if that is not successful, then direct what we say and do. This occurs while we are experiencing the emotion, as soon as we have become conscious of our emotional feelings and actions."<sup>30</sup> Let's consider a practical example to observe how the mindful impartial spectator relates to emotional reactivity.

## The Case of the Anxious Engineer

I once worked with a respected and technically brilliant engineer who was affiliated with a large defense contractor. Call him Marv. Though he was very well liked, he was known to erupt verbally when he was presented with bad news. This reaction overwhelmed whoever delivered the news. To make matters worse, Marv's eruptions took place in meetings with his superiors, and they were negatively affecting his prospects for promotion. So, he sought my help.

Marv learned how to train his impartial spectator to become aware of how the verbal eruption actually worked. With some practice and observation, he realized his verbal explosion was actually the *result* of something else he hadn't noticed before. He perceived something new.

Preceding the eruption, Marv clearly

sensed a rush of energy in his chest that came out in the form of a panicked verbal reaction. Armed with this information, he could become mindful of the emergence of the energetic impulse. When he sensed an eruption was imminent, that was his signal to take a deep breath and pause for a moment. The impulse would rise, come to a peak, and then subside. With practice, he became increasingly able to catch the reaction before it erupted verbally. Marv used his attention to perceive the situation and make a different choice. That resulted in better relationships with his colleagues and higher productivity.

What Marv did was to use the principle of neuroplasticity to decouple the rush in his chest from verbal action. In time, by using his attention, he became better able to stop himself. He said he felt a sense of control and confidence that he had never experienced before. Without the weight of this debilitating reaction, he was freer to put his brilliant mind to work for the firm.

## Drucker, the Great Liberator

We have only scratched the surface of how self-management improves knowledge worker productivity. There is much more to explore. We have seen how enhanced perception (or attention) plays a pivotal role in the process, and we have discussed some basic ways in which perception can be trained to focus as well as manage the knowledge worker's mindset and emotional reactivity.

Peter Drucker was gifted with an exceptional perceptive power—a capacity to see what was already there, but remained largely invisible to most. The author of 39 books and numerous articles, a one-time apprentice in the cotton trade, journalist,

university professor, and sought-after consultant, Drucker was a highly productive knowledge worker. The issue of making other knowledge workers productive was a central concern of his work for almost 50 years.

In her work *The Definitive Drucker*, Elizabeth Haas Edersheim mentioned that a core characteristic of Peter's personality was his ability to liberate people.<sup>31</sup> By asking the right question, challenging a closely held assumption, and pushing person after person to see something that was previously unseen, he liberated them from their self-imposed boundaries. By shifting our perceptions ever so slightly, he revealed a new world full of possibilities. Because Drucker is no longer here to liberate us from our own limitations of thought, emotion, and action, we—guided by his work—must adopt new tools and learn to liberate ourselves.

This chapter was published in *The Drucker Difference: What the World's Greatest Management Thinker Means to Today's Business Leaders*, edited by Craig L. Pearce, Joseph A. Maciariello and Hideki Yamawaki and published by McGraw-Hill, 2009 in celebration of the Drucker Centennial.

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He co-founded the Quality of Life Research Center with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Jeanne Nakamura. Currently, he is a principal at CoreWorks Consulting and is an Executive Coach at Corporate Coaching International. Hunter holds advanced degrees from The University of Chicago and Harvard University. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Wittenberg University.

Hunter lived with a potentially terminal illness for 17 years. When he was told he needed life-saving surgery, more than a dozen of his former students came forward as potential organ donors. He received a new kidney from one of them in December 2008.

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For the past 20 years, Scherer has devoted his professional life to creating transformational learning experiences, pilgrimages and executive retreats. He co-founded and owns a global business, serving a wide variety of educational, religious and healthcare institutions. Scherer creates programs that transform individuals and communities by deepening self-knowledge and enhancing internal management skills

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- <sup>2</sup> Thomas Davenport, *Thinking for a Living: How to Get Better Performance and Results from Knowledge Workers*. (Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 2005), 7.
- <sup>3</sup> Drucker, *Management Challenges*, 157.
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- <sup>5</sup> [http://www.babsonknowledge.org/2005/12/was\\_drucker\\_wrong.htm](http://www.babsonknowledge.org/2005/12/was_drucker_wrong.htm), accessed April 1, 2009
- <sup>6</sup> Drucker, *Management Challenges*, 149.
- <sup>7</sup> Drucker, *Management Challenges*, 148.
- <sup>8</sup> Peter F. Drucker, *The Practice of Management* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 3.
- <sup>9</sup> Kirk Warren Brown, Richard M. Ryan, and J. David Creswell. "Mindfulness: Theoretical Foundations and Evidence for its Salutary Effects" *Psychological Inquiry* 18 no. 4 (2007): 211-237.
- <sup>10</sup> See the University of Massachusetts Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society website at: [www.umassmed.edu/cfm/mbsr/](http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/mbsr/)
- <sup>11</sup> Leonard L. Riskin, "The Contemplative Lawyer: On the Potential Contributions of Mindfulness Meditation to Law Students and Lawyers and their Clients," *Harvard Negotiation Law Review* 7, (2002): 1-66.
- <sup>12</sup> Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons from a Hardwood Warrior*. (New York: Hyperion Press, 1995).
- <sup>13</sup> Jeremy Hunter and Don McCormick, "Mindfulness in the Workplace: An Exploratory Study" Paper presented at the meeting of the 2008 *Academy of Management Annual Meeting*. Anaheim, CA.
- <sup>14</sup> Drucker, *Management Challenges*, 161.
- <sup>15</sup> (Not to mention put in place policies that support healthy brain activity, but that is not the scope of this chapter.)
- <sup>16</sup> William James. *Principles of Psychology v1*. (New York: Holt, 1890), 424.
- <sup>17</sup> Drucker, *The Essential Drucker*, 345.
- <sup>18</sup> Drucker, *The Essential Drucker*, 344.
- <sup>19</sup> Peter F. Drucker, *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1985), 104.
- <sup>20</sup> Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).
- <sup>21</sup> Joshua S. Rubinstein, David E. Meyer and Jeffrey E. Evans, "Executive Control of Cognitive Processes in Task Switching," *Journal of Experimental Psychology - Human Perception and Performance*, 27. No. 4.
- <sup>22</sup> Karin Foerde, Barbara J. Knowlton, and Russell A. Poldrack "Modulation of Competing Memory Systems by Distraction" *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 103, no. 31 (2006).
- <sup>23</sup> Concentration meditation is one of the many varieties of meditation practice.
- <sup>24</sup> Herbert Benson and Miriam Klipper, *The Relaxation Response* (New York: HarperPaperback, 2000).
- <sup>25</sup> If you would like to see the data, go here: <https://nmr.mgh.harvard.edu/~lazar/>  
If you would like to read the paper, go here:  
[http://surfer.nmr.mgh.harvard.edu/pub/articles/Lazar\\_Meditation\\_Plasticity\\_05.pdf](http://surfer.nmr.mgh.harvard.edu/pub/articles/Lazar_Meditation_Plasticity_05.pdf)
- Sarah Lazar, et al, "Mediation Experience is Associated with Increased Cortical Thickness" *NeuroReport*, 16 (2005): 1893-1897.
- <sup>26</sup> If you would like to know more, I suggest the website of the Center For Contemplative Mind in Society ([www.contemplativemind.org](http://www.contemplativemind.org)). They have plenty of resources to help you.
- <sup>27</sup> The classic work on neuroplasticity is *The Mind and The Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force* by UCLA professor Jeffrey Schwartz and Sharon Begley. (Harper Perennial, 2003)
- <sup>28</sup> [www.adamsmith.org/smith/tms/tms-p3-c2.htm](http://www.adamsmith.org/smith/tms/tms-p3-c2.htm)
- <sup>29</sup> Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006).
- <sup>30</sup> Paul Ekman, *Emotions Revealed*. (New York: Owl Books, 2003),75.
- <sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Haas Edersheim, *The Definitive Drucker*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 9-10.

