

Making amends with your best friend - Willpower.

Money, status, power, step aside...

Why willpower is the key to success in all areas of your life.

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Mastering the art of work / life balance, completely disconnecting on holidays, maximising productivity in working hours, controlling an outrage of emotion at work, sticking to goals and commitments... you might find that you can relate to some / all of these challenges. If I told you that they all had one thing in common, and that this one thing could be managed... would you believe me?

Self Control – Self Regulation – Willpower – call it what you will. Willpower is the ability to override our natural responses (impulses, thoughts, emotions, desires) in order to change oneself and to achieve a different outcome. So much of what we do comes down to our ability to self-regulate; to own and control our time, emotions, work and daily habits, before they start to own us. It is difficult to identify any major personal or professional problem that does not have some element of self-control (and if you can, I welcome your ideas and comments in our comment box!)

The notion of Willpower came running through my head when debriefing a client after a 360 feedback review. It turned out that she needed to override her natural authoritative impulse to 'tell', and instead adapt her managerial approach to effectively communicate and delegate by asking and empowering. It was then, in that room and after reading anonymous verbatim feedback from colleagues, that she realised that her 'sledgehammer' approach (as she put it) wasn't working- that maybe a different, less overtly forceful tool, a 'feather duster', would be more effective in enabling her team to deliver. Yes, it takes effort, but that is what self-control is all about; making conscious choices on a daily, hourly basis to override an unconscious response, to bring about a different and better outcome. The potential impact of this on her relationships was tremendous.



So how do we bridge the gap between your Self and your Willpower? “I have no willpower” is said time and time again. As if willpower is an elusive, mysterious strength that evades you every time you seem to have a grip on it, and that letting go and accepting what ‘is’ is the only (or easy) option because you and willpower just don’t get along. But if you can disentangle its elusiveness to better understand the way it works, then you are one step closer to mending that relationship and to letting willpower work for you, not against you:

1. Willpower’s fuel is Glucose and operates within the Prefrontal Cortex of the brain – better known as the ‘functional’ part of the brain in charge of planning complex behaviours, making decisions, and coordinating behaviours with thoughts and goals. Since glucose is the primary driver of energy within our bodies, low glucose can mean poor decision making, fatigue, avoidance of complex or difficult problems or situations that require mental focus, less initiative-taking and proactivity, intensified emotions, and a higher likelihood of making impulsive choices.

- ✓ **By keeping your glucose levels regulated, you are better able to be the master of your will.** But this doesn’t mean go and chow down a chocolate bar! Educate yourself and make wise food choices that provide you with a steady source of fuel throughout the day. Take care of your body to take care of your mind.
- ✓ **Sleep!** There is a reason why lack of sleep is linked with lower performance and productivity, impaired decision making, and weight gain. Sleep helps regulate your glucose, rendering you better able to self-control.

2. Willpower is a finite resource. The more you use it, the more it gets depleted. On the flipside, willpower is like a muscle: though it may get exhausted the more you exert it, you can increase its strength and stamina with exercise (controlled, conscious practice and exertion of self-control).

- ✓ **Play Offense, not Defense. Conserve willpower by setting up your life in such a way that self-control is not always needed.** Make small changes to minimise decision fatigue and to create habits. This saves your self-control energy for other needs. Make pre-commitments; book set, routine team meetings in your diary, create and implement formal processes to facilitate efficiency and to minimise the need for minor decision-making, make and stick to a workout routine, and prepare meals in advance.

If you can control your willpower, you are setting yourself up to be the master of your thoughts and actions; to have the focus to make strategic decisions that create long term value and to impact in powerful ways, both on yourself and your lifestyles as well as on the people you lead.