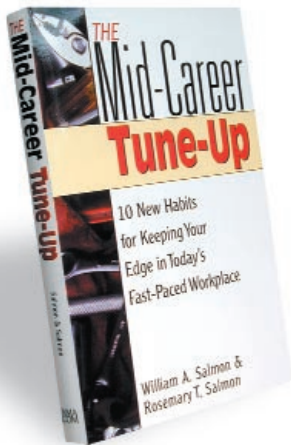




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By William A. Salmon and  
Rosemary T. Salmon

## CONTENTS

**Do What Your Company Is  
Paying You To Do** Page 2

**Balance Demands On Your  
Time And Resources**

Page 2, 3

**Sharpen Your  
Communication Skills**

Page 3, 4

**Develop Productive  
Relationships**

Page 4, 5

**Resolve Conflicts Rationally**

Page 5

**Fix Your Own Problems**

Page 6

**Be Creative And Flexible**

Page 6, 7

**Learn To Accept Uncertainty**

Page 7

**Take Responsibility For Your  
Job Performance** Page 7, 8

**Manage Your Own  
Professional Development**

Page 8

## Ten Work Habits for Keeping Your Edge

# THE MID-CAREER TUNE-UP

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Constant change.

Continuously expanding expectations and pressures.

An increasing need for flexibility.

These are the unrelenting demands faced by today's employees and managers. The source is well documented: As described in countless books, global competition, downsized organizations and empowerment and other shifts in management philosophies have all been dramatically altering the rules of the workplace. For people in mid-career who might have acquired their work habits when the rules were different, these changes mean updating their skills, knowledge and behavior.

This summary offers an overview of 10 new habits required to succeed in today's workplace. In this summary, you will find tips and check lists on:

- ✓ Balancing multiple demands on your time;
- ✓ Sharpening your communication skills;
- ✓ Developing productive relationships with the right people;
- ✓ Resolving conflicts;
- ✓ Solving problems and making decisions;
- ✓ Learning to accept uncertainty and adapt to change.

You will learn, for example, how to identify and disarm common time-wasters and how to spark your creativity by playing with words. You will learn how to use questions effectively when communicating with others and how to identify your "circle of influence" — the people who will help you succeed. You will also learn how to take a problem-centered approach to resolving conflicts. And much more.

The techniques in this summary may be easier to describe than accomplish. You will find, however, that the tips, check lists and step-by-step methods offered in the following pages will help you organize your thoughts, prioritize complex problems and issues, and develop a clear path to improvement and success.



# THE MID-CAREER TUNE-UP

by William A. Salmon and Rosemary T. Salmon

## — THE COMPLETE SUMMARY

### Do What Your Company Is Paying You To Do

Downsizing, reengineering and other company initiatives over the past few years have put managers and employees into the position of accomplishing more with less — more work, less time, less people. More than ever before, you cannot be successful in today's workplace unless you know how to prioritize your work, manage your time wisely and find the best way to produce the results that your company expects from you.

#### *What's Important?*

Start with the big picture. Read your company's mission statement, annual reports and any other information that will help pinpoint your company's overall goals and priorities.

Now, move down and determine how your department fits into those goals. What must the department achieve? The next step is to focus on you and your immediate co-workers. How can you contribute specifically to the company's priorities and goals?

It's important to determine what is critical, urgent and cost-effective about your job. You need to focus your activities so that you are spending time only on activities that contribute to the organization's goals. You cannot succeed in today's workplace by doing the wrong things right.

#### *Suggested Action: Prioritize Your Goals*

Set on paper your three or four most important goals for your job, including a complete description of each goal, the person or persons for whom the goal's output is destined, and when the goal must be achieved. The next step is to prioritize these goals. The following four questions will help:

- Which goals are most supportive of your company's mission, purpose and strategic objectives?
- If you could only accomplish two of these goals, which would they be?
- Which of your goals will yield the highest payoff to your company (and then to you)?
- What happens if you don't achieve any of these goals?

Procrastination, personal disorganization, juggling too many priorities and other factors can undermine

your work performance. Determining your goals, aligning them with the company's goals and prioritizing them on paper will help you ensure that your valuable time in the workplace is well spent. ■

### Balance Demands on Your Time and Resources

Identifying and aligning your goals with the company's strategic objectives helps you determine what you need to achieve. The next step to becoming a valuable employee is to manage your time and resources, which are both often in limited supply in today's workplace, to ensure that those priority tasks and goals are accomplished.

#### *Analyze Your Activities*

How well are you spending your time? One quick way to find out is to make a list of your current work activities and estimate (down to minutes) how much time you spend on each activity.

Next, circle the activities that are most important in helping you meet your highest priority goals, and compare how much time you are spending on circled vs. non-circled activities.

#### *Time Wasters*

Even with the most careful planning, people seem to waste time during the workday. To help you reduce your wasted time, here are six common time wasters to watch out for:

**Poor communication.** According to some experts, poor communication — giving incomplete or inaccurate information to someone — is the number one reason for wasted time. Miscommunication requires people to do work over, correct mistakes or make

*(continued on page 3)*

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## Communication Breakdown: The Wasted Report

Maureen S., a purchasing representative for a large medical facility, was asked by her supervisor to do some research on new computer equipment for the department. He needed the information for a meeting with top executives.

Maureen spent 35 hours over the next two weeks reading about different computers and talking to local suppliers. The result: a comprehensive 40-page report comparing the top five computers for the department's specific needs. When she turned in the report, Maureen learned that her supervisor just needed "a few rough estimates about how much we need to budget for our department's computer equipment for the next three years."

## Balance Multiple Demands on Your Time and Resources

*(continued from page 2)*

major revisions in schedules and priorities in the midst of projects. Make sure you clearly understand or clearly communicate to others the expectations, responsibilities and importance of new projects.

**Procrastination.** This is not an easy habit to break. Start by trying to understand why you put off certain activities. If the task is unpleasant, remind yourself that you will be relieved when it's taken care of. If the task is complex, break it down into smaller pieces.

**Interruptions.** Remember your priorities when you are interrupted. If the interruption is more important than your current task, you may have to shift focus. Otherwise, take immediate steps to either resolve the interruption quickly or schedule it for later.

**Analysis paralysis.** At some point, you need to decide to make a decision and move forward. You may not know what to do next because you have so much to do. In this case, use priority lists to break your paralysis.

**Meetings.** Many meetings are poorly planned and conducted. Even if you are not the meeting organizer, you can help make meetings more productive by coming prepared and by staying focused on the goals of the meeting.

**Clutter.** A disorganized work space is also a time waster. One suggestion is to keep all papers in one of four piles labeled "action needed," "completed," "for others" and "undecided." ■

## Sharpen Your Communication Skills

Good communication skills have always been important in the workplace. But as managers and employees find themselves working with less time and less resources, avoiding communication glitches is even more vital.

In face-to-face communication, whether you are giving or receiving feedback or information, you can take a number of specific steps to avoid any miscommunication.

When you are giving information, begin by making sure the other person is ready to listen. Also:

- Make a determined effort to be specific and clear.
- Select the right words and tone of voice.
- Validate any information or feedback by using recent examples.
- Check for understanding by asking appropriate questions.
- Summarize the conversation to make sure there is little chance of misinterpretation.
- And finally, seek agreement on what actions need to be taken as a result of the conversation

*(continued on page 4)*

## Communication Check List

Use the following check list to ensure that you are effectively and efficiently communicating with colleagues and managers.

- ✓ Keep others informed within your work unit and across departmental lines.
- ✓ Provide quick, logical and accurate responses to questions and suggestions.
- ✓ Let your manager know about anticipated problems.
- ✓ Be sure that your written reports require little change and are received on deadline.
- ✓ Be sure your spoken communication is clear and well-organized.
- ✓ Ask for and pay attention to feedback from others.
- ✓ Clarify, verify and restate messages to prevent misunderstandings.
- ✓ Provide timely, accurate and honest feedback to others.
- ✓ Tailor messages tactfully to audiences.
- ✓ Respect others when communicating; don't embarrass them or put them on the defensive.

### Sharpen Your Communication Skills

(continued from page 3)

#### Receiving Information

When you are asking for information or feedback, start by letting others know that you are open and receptive to what they have to offer you. When the conversation begins:

- Listen carefully, not selectively.
- Ask clarifying questions to make sure you completely understand the message.
- Ask probing questions to make sure you understand any underlying feelings or hidden messages.
- Resist justifying or defending your behavior if the feedback includes constructive criticism.
- Paraphrase or restate to make sure you have interpreted the information correctly.
- Reach agreement with the other person or persons about what actions need to be taken as a result of the conversation.

Asking questions effectively is essential to good communication. Use *closed* (yes or no) questions to establish facts, confirm agreement or clarify understanding. Use *open* answers to expand ideas, seek information and invite participation. Finally, *probing* questions will help you uncover specific details that you may need (“Why do you think that new approach will solve the problem?”) or go beyond the surface of the message to uncover the other person’s feelings or rationale (“Can you tell me why you are worried about this new procedure?”). ■

#### Develop Productive Relationships

The ability to build relationships today is no longer limited to getting to know the people who can help you climb the corporate ladder. Customer-driven companies want employees and managers to build closer relationships with their customers. In many organizations, work is built around teams or projects, emphasizing the importance of collaboration and cooperation among employees. Developing productive relationships is vital to your success.

#### The Circle of Influence

The first step is to determine your “circle of influence.” These are the 10 most important people with whom you need to develop a productive relationship.

Start by making a list of all of the people with whom you interact on a regular basis. (Focus on work-related interaction — people on whom you depend to achieve your work goals.) Now pare down this list to the 10 people you absolutely need in order to succeed and flourish, including managers, important co-workers

#### Identify the Wrong People

Uncovering the wrong people with whom you spend too much time interacting is often as valuable as identifying the right people with whom you need to build relationships. Are you meeting weekly with a colleague when the same work could be accomplished more quickly by phone? Are certain highly demanding customers monopolizing your time at the expense of other important customers? Know which relationships you want to maintain and nurture — and which relationships have reached levels that are out of proportion to their value.

and even potential mentors. Remember co-workers who have “informal power” — power that stems from years of service or special expertise, for example. Also, look beyond your immediate work group, such as individuals in other parts of the company on which you depend, or key people in your profession, industry or marketplace.

#### How to Interact

Once you’ve identified a circle of influence, the next step is to determine how you should be interacting with them. Time is precious, so be honest. You need to answer two questions:

- How can this person help me be more productive, effective or efficient?
- What information, resources or help can I provide this person to make the relationship beneficial to him or her?

Understanding the work habits and personalities of other people will increase the chances of a good working relationship with them. For example, you should give people who are analytical and detail-oriented timely and precise updates. Conversely, they may be the best people to call on when you need specific facts or figures to support a project. With creative or spontaneous colleagues, you can help each other by brainstorming together on new approaches to persistent problems.

The key is to listen to others, know how they work, what they need and how you can best work together in a mutually beneficial way.

#### Be a Team Player

The importance of relationship building is emphasized in team-based organizations. Here are some of the techniques that can help you be a better team player:

- Share information with others who will benefit from what you know.
- Compliment others for their hard work.

(continued on page 5)

### Develop Productive Relationships

(continued from page 4)

- Help streamline work processes. Make sure that you keep things moving smoothly from your work area to the next.
- Share the credit for your success with those who helped you. ■

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### Resolve Conflicts Rationally

Work in today's organizations often requires greater teamwork and greater collaboration among employees and managers than in the past. Collaboration and cooperation, however, can also lead to differences of opinion. Conflict is an organizational fact of life. To be successful, you must be able to resolve conflicts constructively.

The most effective solution to conflict is to take a rational, problem-centered approach.

#### *Analyze the Situation*

The first step to resolving a conflict is to analyze the situation.

Start off by describing the conflict: With whom are you having a problem? What triggered the conflict? Is it getting worse?

Next, review the impact the conflict is having on your ability to achieve your work goals. Are you being hampered by a lack of cooperation with the other person? Are you wasting valuable time working around the problem? Is the conflict leading to increased costs?

Identify any broader impact of the conflict. For example, is the conflict affecting the morale of your work group? Is the conflict affecting the level of service you are providing your customers?

Finally, describe the benefits of resolving the conflict in terms of productivity, efficiency, time and cost savings, and any other relevant factors.

Understanding the impact of the conflict will help you determine which approach you should adopt in resolving the conflict.

#### *The Assertive Approach*

You have three options, or approaches, for resolving a conflict.

The first approach is to take an *assertive* stance. You have decided, based on your analysis of the impact of the conflict, that you have a problem that must be resolved. Intent on finding a solution, you decide to schedule a face-to-face meeting with the person with whom you're having the conflict.

Note that assertive does not mean aggressive or confrontational: No solutions will emerge from a shouting

match or gripe session. Before you set a time and date, therefore, ensure that the meeting will be constructive and productive. Here's how:

**1. Determine the exact words you want to say to start the meeting.** The goal is to keep the conversation focused on the issue and its impact, not on personalities or feelings. Be sure that you cover all of the key points you want to make, as in the following example:

At the beginning of this project, we agreed on certain deadlines. Twice in the last 30 days, however, September 12 and October 8, you have missed deadlines and been at least two days late with your reports. Because of these delays, our department is having trouble meeting its own target dates. Do you have any suggestions about what we can do to help you meet your deadlines?

**2. Be prepared to use "I" statements to send a clear message that this is having an impact on you.** Say, for example, "I'm sure there's an explanation for these missed deadlines, but I need to know how to prevent further delays."

**3. When you are ready to turn the conversation over to the next person, ask a non-threatening question that invites participation.** For example: "What do you think about what I've said?" or "How do you think we can resolve this issue?"

Not everybody will appreciate such a straight-on approach. But you will be establishing a reputation as someone who confronts important issues honestly and directly. Both you and the other person will benefit by not allowing a problem to fester and, in the long run, seriously damage any relationship you might have.

#### *Alternate Options*

A second option is the *cooperative* approach, in which you passively accept the situation. One reason for such acceptance may be that the issue is not sufficiently important to you to dedicate time and effort toward a resolution. Or you may decide that this is not a battle that you want to fight at this time.

In the second case, you would want to state your position and ensure that the other person agrees with your assessment. You might say, for example, "I know that you and I need to reach an agreement on how to handle this backlog of requisitions, but it's not a real priority for me right now. Do you mind if we put it off for a few weeks?"

A third option is the *collaborative* approach. In this case, the problem needs to be addressed, but you use a combination of the assertive and cooperative approaches. In other words, you're firm about certain issues involved, but are willing to compromise on others. ■

### Fix Your Own Problems

More and more companies are pushing problem-solving and decision-making down to the lowest possible levels of the organization. To be successful, you must have the skills to fix your own problems and not wait for someone at a higher level of the organization to tell you what to do. The systematic problem-solving and decision-making process introduced in this article will help you be more accountable, involved and committed to making things work.

#### *Cause and Effect Analysis*

To be an effective problem solver, be alert to developing problems. Recognize when things are going wrong and start to ask questions: What is different from the past? How serious is this problem? How frequent is it?

After recognizing that there is a problem, state the problem in a few concise sentences. Focus on the details of the problem; this is the first step toward identifying the problem's causes.

Here are some sample problem statements:

- We have a significant backlog of requisitions, invoices and vendor inquiries. There are more than 100 items that need immediate attention.
- I am spending two extra hours each week writing

monthly status reports about our production activities, our safety performance and our overtime schedule.

Next, determine whether this is a problem that needs to be resolved now or later, and also what role you should play in finding a solution. Do you have the required authority to act independently on the problem? If the problem is directly related to your work, you'll want to take a leadership role in finding a solution, but you may need the support of your manager.

Now, start collecting the data you need to identify the problem's cause. One suggestion is to ask questions such as: When did it start? Has it ever gotten better or worse? Look for any trends or patterns that will reveal the causes.

#### *Making Decisions*

Every problem-solving activity leads to a decision-making process. You have to list alternative solutions to the problem and decide which solution is the best.

Start with a clear statement of what you want to happen. In this case, you would identify the ideal solution to the problem, including specifics on criteria such as quality of work, costs and time. You would then compare the criteria to the alternative solutions to determine which fulfills your criteria best. ■

### Be Creative and Flexible

Certain problems can be resolved through a rational, step-by-step approach as described above. Other problems will require you to be more creative and flexible.

Researchers have identified four building blocks of creativity:

- 1. Imagination** - the willingness to take risks and the determination to let your mind wander wherever it wants.
- 2. Knowledge** - the ability to draw information from experience or to apply expertise.
- 3. Curiosity** - the inquisitiveness that pushes you to explore below the surface for hidden patterns.
- 4. Persistence** - the willingness to overcome frustration and stick with a problem.

#### *Removing Mental Blocks*

To be creative, you must remove the psychological or mental barriers that can impede a new idea. There are many common "killer phrases" that will shoot down a potential good idea. Examples include: "It will never work," "It's too risky and too expensive," or "Our customers will never go for this idea."

There are a number of creative problem-solving techniques, such as brainstorming, that will help you and your work group overcome these barriers and unleash

your creativity. Here is a sampling of some of them:

**1. Reverse thinking.** Flip the problem around so that you are looking at it from the opposite perspective. Dr. Edward Jenner studied hundreds of smallpox cases trying to find the cause of the disease. One day, he reversed his thinking and started studying people who did not have the disease. He discovered that dairymaids never contracted smallpox; they were stricken with a milder form of the disease called cowpox, which protected them from smallpox. Jenner used this insight to develop the smallpox vaccine.

*(continued on page 7)*

### Steps in Creative Problem-Solving

The 19th-century French mathematician Henri Poincaré proposed the following basic steps in creative problem solving:

- 1. Preparation.** You immerse yourself in the problem and collect relevant information.
- 2. Incubation.** Once you've framed the problem and gathered the most pertinent information, clear your mind and let the problem simmer (take a quiet walk or a drive, for example).
- 3. Illumination.** A solution comes to mind (it happens, although most creative people can't say why).
- 4. Translation.** Apply and test the idea.

### Be Creative and Flexible

(continued from page 6)

**2. Play with words.** Use metaphors, free association or analogies to break out your thinking. One manager, for example, compared resolving a particular complex problem to rolling a heavy stone up a steep hill. He then thought about some “solutions” to his problem, including:

- Asking for help from others to keep the stone rolling in the right direction;
- Looking around the hill for some flat surface to prop the rock up temporarily while he regained strength, assessed where he wanted to go next, or determined whether he needed additional help;
- Finding a natural block, such as a small but strong rock, to use as a wedge to keep the rock from slipping down the hill. The wedge would add a sense of confidence that what has been accomplished so far won't be easily undone.

These solutions were used as analogies to discover or lead to real solutions to his real problem.

**3. Use some type of visual to spark your imagination.** Studying an unfamiliar photograph of a sad boy in a baseball uniform standing near a field, for example, helped one manager deal with a morale problem in his department. The manager tried to think of the reasons for the boy's sadness. One possible reason: The last game of the season just ended and the boy was sad because this team wouldn't be playing together again. This led him to an insight into the low morale of one co-worker who had just finished a difficult project: His task force team was about to be disbanded. ■

### Learn to Accept Uncertainty

No summary about the work skills needed to succeed in today's environment would be complete without a discussion of change. Companies must make significant changes to adapt to today's increased global competition (which requires them to become meaner and leaner) and the shift from a manufacturing to an information economy (which requires new management methods and organizational structures). As a result, you must have the skills to adapt to change and accept uncertainty in the workplace.

Here are some strategies to keep in mind in the face of change:

- 1. Take personal responsibility for anticipating and preparing for change.** Don't cling to the past. Show that you are willing to make change happen.
- 2. Find out what's happening around you.** Stay informed. Keep learning. Keep asking questions.
- 3. Initiate changes yourself to improve quality,**

### Force-Field Analysis

To conduct a force-field analysis, you must list all of the competing forces — the positive “driving” and the negative “restraining” forces — related to a particular change situation. Driving forces are pushing you in the direction of change, restraining forces in the other direction. Here are some of the questions that can help you identify driving forces:

- What has to happen? What does my manager or company expect?
- What factors am I optimistic about in this situation? What possible positive outcomes will I be able to achieve?
- What goals, incentives or opportunities are encouraging me to change?

To identify restraining forces, ask questions such as:

- What must not happen? What is my worst-case scenario?
- What challenges are slowing me down?
- What factors may make the situation worse?

A force-field analysis will reveal the positive side of change and will pinpoint the negative forces that you must address.

**reduce costs or save time.** Be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

**4. Be professional in everything you do.** Show confidence, competence and commitment.

**5. Be a positive role model for others.** Be upbeat and enthusiastic.

Of course, maintaining an upbeat, professional approach and attitude toward change is easier said than done. One technique that will help you face change and uncertainty is the Force-Field Analysis (see above). ■

### Take Responsibility for Your Job Performance

One of the recurrent themes of this summary is that you are responsible for your own job performance. Simply putting in the hours is not enough. Your company or manager is not going to automatically “take care of you”; they will not guarantee your employment or even a motivating work environment. Ensuring your morale, attitude, job satisfaction and performance is up to you.

The other work habits in this summary, from sharpening your communication skills to resolving problems and sparking your creativity, will help improve your work performance and make your job more exciting and challenging

(continued on page 8)

### Take Responsibility for Your Job Performance

(continued from page 7)

Here are some other tips for improving your performance on the job:

- Focus on a specific goal. Set a challenging short-term goal for yourself. What do you need or want to accomplish?
- Keep track of your own performance. Pay attention to what you're doing well. Don't dwell on errors,

### Priority Goal Assessment

One way to assess your performance is to analyze a specific priority goal based not only on results, but also on the process (how you are achieving the results), your performance qualities and your personal satisfaction.

For example, one manager, Robert S., made a mid-year review of one of his major objectives: delivering to the manufacturing department a prototype of a water processing filter that met the specifications designated in an April 9, 1998, executive memo. The prototype should be provided by September 6, 1999, for testing in December 1999.

His assessment revealed the following:

**Results:** Despite meetings with production managers from manufacturing, the product specifications had still not been fully defined. Changes continued to be made. One-on-one meetings with several of the managers would be required to finalize specifications and emphasize the tight schedule. A meeting with his department head would also be required to warn him of the changes.

**Process:** Suggestions and changes from production managers complicated his design work. Robert S. decided he needed to be more assertive with production about his own needs. In the future, he will set some ground rules earlier in the process.

**Performance Qualities:** Robert S. assumed too easily that people understood his time and budget constraints. He needs to communicate the scope and significance of his objectives more clearly and directly with key people.

**Personal Satisfaction:** This project requires very hard work and long hours. Robert S. decided that he needed to focus on achieving this project. But once finished, he would reassess his career and personal goals to determine whether it was time to seek out another opportunity.

but instead try to learn from them.

- Take the time to learn new skills and behaviors. Be optimistic about the value of new techniques or different approaches.
- Set performance standards that exceed the standards expected from your supervisor or company. ■

### Manage Your Own Professional Development

Accountability for your job performance also requires you to be accountable for your own professional development. It is up to you to identify the skills, knowledge or competencies you need to perform better in your current job.

Periodic performance reviews and ongoing discussions with your manager about your interests and aspirations can help you identify areas where you need to take action to maintain or improve your current performance.

Professional development is not limited to improving your current job, however. The goal is to prepare for the future, to move toward the most challenging and enjoyable job you can acquire. First, however, you must identify where you want to be and what you want to achieve in your professional career. Ask yourself questions such as:

1. **What do you want your next job to be? Define as many duties and responsibilities as possible.**
2. **If the job you want is different from the job you have, what competencies or skills will you need to acquire for the future? Are they part of your continuous improvement plans?**
3. **How is your current job helping you prepare for the future?**
4. **What are the realistic possibilities of getting the position you want in your current company?**

Pinpointing your specific goals and priorities will help you for the future. You can then determine different ways to get the knowledge, skills or experience you need for future assignments and positions. Formal training, self study, job rotations or joining a project team are just four of the ways you can expand your skills and knowledge. Create an action plan to address your needs and the development areas that you've identified. Staying informed about your company, your industry and your profession is also key.

Employees and managers at any level of any company can achieve their personal and professional goals as long as they take charge of the future. As Ralph Waldo Emerson declared: "There is really no insurmountable barrier save your own inherent weakness of purpose." ■