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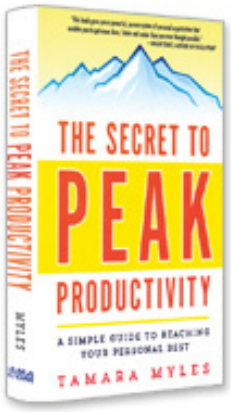
The Secret to Peak Productivity

A Simple Guide to Reaching Your Personal Best



by **Tamara Myles**

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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Has your email inbox overwhelmed you? Are you losing the battle against clutter? Are important items on your to-do list not getting done? Do you ever envision achieving your business and life goals "as soon as you get control of your life"?

You're not alone, but it doesn't have to be this way.

In ***The Secret to Peak Productivity***, productivity expert Tamara Myles gives you invaluable tools and strategies that will enable you to take control of your life and achieve your goals. You'll learn how to break down all of your objectives into specific, relevant, and measurable daily tasks; master the three Ps of time management; establish an electronic organization system that works for you; and more.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to assess your own productivity strengths and weaknesses based on your own personal style.
- Techniques to tailor your own personal productivity plan to be more effective.
- Ways to get rid of clutter, including a rapid organization system for paper.
- How to enhance your productivity around the five parts of the Peak Productivity Pyramid: physical organization, electronic organization, time management, activity-goal alignment, and possibility.

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Steps to Productivity

What distinguishes professional organizers is they transfer skills rather than simply complete tasks.

At every client appointment, professional organizers strive to transfer skills, teach systems and explain processes. They are committed to empowering their clients with the necessary skills to achieve their best organization system. Empowerment is always top of mind because consultants want their clients to achieve success. Success only happens when consultants explain systems and processes in a way that helps their clients organize their environments in their own way, and a way that works for them.

Nearly 90 percent of people who call for help initiate that first call because they feel overwhelmed by physical clutter. Some clients are happiest to have someone come in and clean up their offices, file their papers, make everything look tidy, leaving them with an office that's cleaner. Others welcome the opportunity to find a lasting solution for managing their incoming papers, mail and other documents. In other words, some clients call and want a Band-Aid for the symptom; others are ready to endeavor to find the root cause of the issue so that they can become empowered to develop lasting solutions to their productivity issues. Rarely is anyone ready to deal with the other issues, such as electronic clutter and time management, until a person's physical clutter is brought under control.

Maslow's Pyramid

In his 1943 psychological research studies on what motivates people, Abraham Maslow discovered that there is a logical order of needs that have to be satisfied before people can be motivated to the next level. He identified five levels, starting with the most essential needs:

1. **Physiological**. The most basic needs that people experience are the essentials for their survival, such as air, food, drink, shelter, sex, and sleep. They need to satisfy these needs before they are motivated to be concerned about the next level.
2. **Safety**. Once people's physiological needs are met, then security becomes important, including personal and financial security, health, and well-being.
3. **Love and Belonging.** Next in the hierarchy of needs that motivate us are relationships, such as work, group, family, and partner.
4. **Esteem**. Both self-esteem and respect from others are among the needs identified in the next level.
5. **Self-Actualization.** The highest level that motivates people is fulfilling their greatest potential.

Most often, Maslow's hierarchy of needs is expressed as a pyramid, with the most essential needs expressed in the lowest level. People need to fulfill each level, starting with physiological needs, before being motivated to move up the pyramid and achieve the next level.

The strategy for fulfilling a more productive life follows a similar pattern. People have to satisfy, to some extent, competency with one level before they can move on to the next.

The Productivity Pyramid

The Peak Productivity Pyramid™ System defines the motivational relationship among five areas of productivity. It is a holistic and comprehensive approach to productivity that starts with streamlining your basic organizational systems and moving up the pyramid, working toward developing goals for different possibilities in your life.

The Peak Productivity Pyramid System is a unique and proven framework to take people who want to improve their productivity through the journey of aligning their daily activities to their goals and objectives:

1. **Physical Organization.** The process begins with managing the accumulation of documents, magazines, mail, notes and books. In the business world, this is the primary need that draws people into improving their productivity.
2. **Electronic Organization.** Having systems in place for handling your online information — all the different ways we have to communicate, store and retrieve information electronically — is essential to success at the next level.
3. **Time Management.** This is the most common need associated with productivity. Time management involves managing tasks and appointments, to-do lists, calendars and what you do in a given day.
4. **Activity-Goal Alignment.** The tasks at this level are setting goals, both business and personal, and then aligning what you do each day to fulfill those goals.
5. **Possibility**. The fifth level of the Peak Productivity Pyramid is the culmination of mastering the previous four levels. Level 5 is not something to be achieved or a place to be; rather, possibility is the continual examination and goal-setting process on the path to fulfilling your potential.

Although it is a series of five levels, the Peak Productivity Pyramid is not always exclusively a linear path. Given the busyness of our lives, the distractions we experience and how our physical and electronic worlds are constantly evolving, there will always be ways to improve productivity:

- You can't always be sure what level is the best place to start. Where do you have mastery and where can you learn new skills that will help you be more productive?
- Even when you think you have mastered a level, there will be other skills to learn that will make you more productive. It is a good idea to check in periodically at each level to see if you are being as efficient as you can be.
- Possibility and activity-goal alignment are iterative processes and part of a continuous exercise to be certain you are achieving your ultimate goals.

Level 1: Physical Organization

Clutter is the most common reason people first contact a professional organizer. No matter what else may be keeping people from reaching their goals and being effective and productive, without first clearing the physical disorganization, every other step in the Peak Productivity Pyramid System falls by the wayside. As Maslow would attest, it is hard to think about love when you're starving and cold. People who have an office that is cluttered are more likely to feel stressed each time they walk into their office. According to the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO), the average American spends one year of his or her life looking for lost or misplaced items.

Getting Rid of Clutter

The first three goals in achieving physical organization are:

1. Get rid of as much paper as you can, so you minimize your space needs.
2. Store what you save efficiently, so you can find what you need.
3. Set up a system for handling your papers as they come in.

According to organizational expert Barbara Hemphill, one way to define clutter is to think about it as delayed decisions. When you fail to make a decision each time you handle a piece of paper, it becomes clutter. Stacks of accumulated paper are a result of delaying to decide what to do with each paper as it arrives. Every piece of paper that comes into your life falls into one of three categories:

1. You're going to shred or recycle the paper.
2. It's a document that requires some type of action, such as a bill to pay, an RSVP to mail, or a form to fill out.
3. It's something that you have to keep either for legal reasons or because you might need to refer to it.

These are the "Three To's" of sorting for all papers: to do, to keep or to toss. When you use the Three To's of sorting, then you can make decisions quickly for all your papers by placing them into one of just three categories.

The mistake most people make when they first tackle the task of organizing their stacks of papers is that instead of starting with three simple piles, they immediately try to sort everything into many different subcategories, such as financial, medical, and projects. When they tackle sorting that way, it takes much longer and can feel overwhelming.

Using the Three To's of sorting is similar to creating a big-picture view of your clutter; it's a way of doing top-level sorting. When you first sort into three piles, the goal is really to get rid of as much paper as you can. These days it's easy to retrieve information online. If an item is a manual or something you can go online and find, you can make the decision to toss it. If you know something is available elsewhere, get rid of it. If you have expired receipts or coupons, it's okay to let go and get rid of them right away. You won't have to make a decision about that piece of paper again later. Once you sort all your papers into these three stacks, you can then file the piles.

Level 2: Electronic Organization

Electronic clutter is a result of the same lack of decision making as physical clutter and can be the source of a great deal of stress. The other compounding issue of electronic clutter is where to save your electronic information so that it is retrievable. Electronic organization is not just about making choices regarding the amount of information you keep; it's also about being able to find the one item you need when you need it.

Seven Warning Signs

There are signs that let you know when you need to reassess how you're handling electronic files:

1. Exceeding your email storage space allotted by your company or online system, such as the 15GB limit on Google Gmail.
2. Feeling anxious about deleting something.

3. Forgetting whether you saved something.
4. Spending a lot of time searching for files because you don't know where you filed them or what you named them.
5. Seeing a lot of icons on your computer screen with no rhyme or reason.
6. Keeping thousands of digital photos, even the out-of-date, irrelevant or bad photos, without any labeling system (other than date).
7. Keeping outdated and unread email messages in your inbox.

Organize Your Electronic Files

It is usually easiest to first organize your electronic files. That step will provide you a basic structure for filing incoming items, whether they are emails, attachments from emails, audio, video, documents or picture files. When organizing your electronic files there are two primary decisions:

1. How to structure your folders.
2. How to name your files.

Just as in managing your physical files, you need to decide what system you will use for your electronic folders and subfolders. The choices are similar:

- **Client folders**, which your computer will list alphabetically, if you start with the clients' last names.
- **Project files**, organized by project numbers (for businesses that track proposals) and/or by numbers assigned sequentially.
- **Folders by date**, many businesses track by date.
- **Financial and other business-operations files** (e.g., staff, taxes and so on).

If you find that you are frequently using the search function to find your files, then you are not naming, or organizing, your folders or files optimally. It is worth spending time to develop a system for file naming that works for you. The faster you can retrieve important information, the more productive you will be.

A, B, Cs of Email Processing

In a research study cited by an IDC Report by Susan Feldman, entitled ***Hidden Costs of Information Work: A Progress Report***, the activities of email consume an average of 13 hours per week per employee. If you assume that the average knowledge worker earns $75,000 per year, that means that a company spends about $21,000 of that salary for that one employee to create, read and answer email. That's 28 percent of every employee's salary.

These statistics show how important it is to have a good email management system. Without one, you will realize a drop in productivity, an increase in stress and a requirement to work more hours. There are some simple steps you can take to streamline your approach to email and, ultimately, make you more productive. One method involves thinking of your email handling system as the email alphabet:

A = Access D = Delete

B = Batch E = Execute

C = Check F = File

Access your email at allotted times each day. Choosing when to process email depends on what works best for you. Typically, though, checking email four times a day tends to be enough for most people:

1. First thing in the morning—to make sure there is nothing urgent.
2. Before lunch—the natural break in the day makes it a less disruptive time.
3. Mid-afternoon—when you're ready for a stretch or preparing to go off to a meeting.
4. End of Day—so that you will only have fresh emails to check in the morning.

Batch process your email just like a physical pile of mail. Your electronic inbox should be the place you receive your email, and it stays there only until you process it.

Check each email, which doesn't mean you need to read each one. Often you can make a decision about an email from the subject line or from the first few lines of the message.

Delete as you check. If you read a newsletter and find that it is no longer relevant or has little to no value, then unsubscribe. You won't miss reading it, and you will no longer have to handle it. Delete everything that has no further action required.

Execute quickly whenever possible. Just as in organizing your physical papers, you only want to touch each email once. If you only need a few minutes for replying or forwarding a message, then do it immediately.

File only if you cannot delete or execute. The primary

reason to file an email is if it is a record of something, a decision, an instruction, a status report or something else you might need to refer back to at some future date.

Level 3: Time Management

In their best-selling book ***Rework***, Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson, the cofounders of 37 signals, complain about workaholics, explaining that they are people who "try to fix problems by throwing sheer hours at them… Working more doesn't mean you care more or get more done." They say that the real heroes are at home, even though the workaholics would like them to feel guilty for "merely working reasonable hours."

You probably already have a definition in mind of what time management means to you, but it comes with many different meanings.

Stephen Covey, in ***The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People***, says, "What does it matter how much we do if what we're doing isn't what matters most?" Time management is about doing what matters most first. It doesn't mean doing more things in less time. In fact, time management is creating systems or systematic practices for doing what is of greater importance, even if that means doing fewer things.

Another way to talk about time management is as choice management. We can't manage time. Time happens. We all have the same amount of time. We can, however, manage our choices in relation to the time that we have, what we choose to do with our time.

Just as with organizing, time management is a skill. It requires practice, and it, too, takes time, like learning a new sport or how to play an instrument. The good news is that we are capable of excelling at time management.

You just have to think long-term. You have to be committed to fixing systems and tweaking behaviors and routines, and just like with any other skills, the more you practice, the more you are aware of it, the better you'll become at managing your time.

Three Ps of Time Management

No one-time management or organization system alone is good for even one person. Even if you find a system that resonates with you, you might need to mix and match techniques and get pieces of different systems until you find what works best for any given moment.

To achieve successful performance in Level 3 of the Peak Productivity Pyramid System, any plan should include the following three fundamentals:

1. **Plan**. Identify what you should work on, everything in your realms of need to do and want to do.
2. **Prioritize**. Identify what you should do first, second or never.
3. **Perform**. It is one thing to know what you should do and another to do it. Performing means committing to your plan.

You've probably heard the cliché that failing to plan is planning to fail. You can always change your plan, but you have to start somewhere.

You start by taking everything that is swirling in your mind and putting it all on paper or in your electronic system. Do a brain dump. Write down everything you can think of that is weighing you down and causing you stress. Your brain should be freed to think strategically and execute your plan, not to try to remember everything you need to do.

Once you have cleared your mind of the swirling to-dos, it is time to look at your list and decide what you are going to do, when and how. Start by quickly estimating how long you think it will take you to perform each task, project or activity on your list.

Four Decision Categories

Remember, time management is choice management. We all have much more to do than time to do it, so you need to look at all your activities and decide which ones to allocate time to. There are four key ways to decide whether you will do something:

1. **Choose**. Identify what is important and essential for you to do.
2. **Remove**. You can take things off your list by saying "no." You can decide not to do some things.
3. **Wait**. You can push back doing tasks or activities until next month or a few months from now.
4. **Delegate**. You can delegate and have somebody else do something for you.

You choose to do a task when you enter it on your calendar with time allocated to accomplishing it. Once you have made your plan and you have added it up and decided what you are going to do, then you do it. As the saying goes, "Plan your work and work your plan."

Prioritizing with Urgent and Important

By prioritizing your tasks and all your to-dos, you get a clear sense of which activities in your life are moving you forward, toward your goals and toward important things, so that important things don't suddenly become urgent.

To prioritize your tasks every day and into the future, it helps to answer the simple question, "What is most important for me to work on first?" Let's start by understanding what is meant by important and urgent:

- *Important* activities are of greatest significance or value. They are likely to have a profound effect on your success and will lead you to achieving your goals.
- *Urgent* activities demand immediate action or attention, but they are often not associated with your goals.

Using this simple classification, you can then further categorize your activities into four different boxes:

1. **Important/Urgent** — Activities you need to do:
   - Crises and other deadline-driven emergencies
   - Critical meetings
   - Project deadlines
2. **Important/Not Urgent** — Where success happens:
   - Preparation and strategic planning
   - Working on projects
   - Training and professional development
   - Exercise, relaxation and self-care
3. **Not Important/Urgent** — Activities that cause unnecessary stress:
   - Opportunities with a deadline
   - Requests for information or help
   - Self-imposed deadlines
4. **Not Important/Not Urgent** — Big timewasters:
   - Interruptions
   - Telephone calls
   - Meetings
   - Trivial busy work that occupies or wastes your time

The more you learn about time management and understand the value of your time, the more you will protect it and not let others "steal" your time with interruptions, unnecessary chatter and meaningless activities.

Perform

Once you have planned and prioritized, you have to perform. There are, however, several things that keep us from performing at the optimal level. Whether you call them distractions, challenges, or timewasters, they stand between you and optimal performance. Examples include perfectionism, procrastination and multitasking:

Perfectionism. Among highly successful people, there is often a tendency to pursue perfection, which frequently leads to successful but suboptimal outcomes. Focusing on doing things right is fine but can lead to perfection paralysis, which means that if you're not completely sure how to do something or don't believe you are capable of doing it to perfection, you don't do it at all.

Focus on doing things adequately rather than right. Your perfectionism should be focused on things that really matter or your biggest priorities. Think about doing the right things adequately as striving for excellence, not perfection. Or think about adopting this slogan: Done is better than perfect.

Procrastination. Procrastination is delaying to start or finish a task (or several tasks) that should be a priority. The ability to overcome procrastination and tackle important actions can have the biggest positive impact on your life.

There are 10 different ways to overcome procrastination. These strategies are not new, and you will likely find them in other places, but they are worth repeating:

1. **Delete**. Is what you're working on something that really needs to be done? Perhaps you should delete the activity so that you can move on to what is important.
2. **Be positive.** Procrastination is usually tied to negative self-talk or when you say things such as, "I have to," "I should," "I must finish."
3. **Take the first step.** If you start the task right now, you remove all the anxiety and feelings of stress.
4. **Ask for help.** When lack of clarity causes procrastination, sometimes asking for help is all you need to do.
5. **Break it down.** Break down large projects into actionable steps. Huge assignments don't look as big broken down into the smallest steps possible.
6. **Follow the 25-minute rule.** To reduce the tempta-

tion of procrastination, each actionable step on a project should take no more than 25 minutes to complete.

7. **Give yourself a reward.** Celebrate the completion of project milestones, and reward yourself for getting projects done on time.
8. **Set and respect deadlines.** If you haven't been given a deadline for a project, ask for one or assign yourself a deadline, and write it down in your calendar.
9. **Remove distractions.** You need to establish a positive work environment that is conducive to productivity. Remove any distractions.
10. **Be accountable.** Having an accountability partner is one of the best ways to stay on track with tasks and projects.

Multitasking. Brain scan studies reveal that if we perform two tasks at the same time, we only have half of our usual brainpower devoted to each task. So when we multitask, we're only half there for each activity. The truth is, we can't do two jobs simultaneously. Our brains aren't capable of focusing on two separate things at the same time.

Instead, the brain switches rapidly between one task and another, which causes us stress and to lose concentration, as it takes time for the brain to refocus and concentrate on one task and then the other. Multitasking becomes ineffective and ultimately counterproductive.

Level 4: Activity-Goal Alignment

When you hone your skills at the bottom of the Peak Productivity Pyramid, you become organized and you create the systems you need to help you to manage your environment better. Then you work to achieve time management, and you operate more efficiently.

All of these skills change how you manage your day, and you fall into control. But it's not until you develop goals and align them with what you choose to accomplish every day that you start making big changes in your life. You will find yourself living your life with purpose.

Why Goals Are Important

Living a life with purpose means living each day thinking about the desired outcome. To do that you need to take a step back from the chaos of everyday life and see the bigger picture. What do you want to be when you grow up?

Setting goals doesn't have to be overwhelming. What if the day-to-day tasks that you do actually move you toward your goals? Sometimes, becoming aware of how setting goals helps to move you toward a better situation opens the doors for change.

Developing Your Vision

To create an environment where you are working toward goals, you need to develop your vision, how you see yourself in the future, both in the short term and the long term. Think about who you want to become in all the different aspects of your life: work, family, spiritual, fitness, romance, and so on. Your goals have to take into account your entire life, not just a portion of it. After all, every choice has consequences, and in order for your goals to be realistic, something you really believe in, you must consider the entire picture.

Six Steps to Goal Setting

Each goal should be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and timely (SMART). If you've never used a SMART goals system, here are some simple steps to get you started:

- Commit by establishing goals that you want to achieve.
- Understand why this change is important to you.
- Set time aside to create your SMART goals.
- Break down tasks into specific activities that will lead you to fulfilling your goal.
- Schedule the time frame in which the goal will be accomplished.
- Assess and reassess whether each goal is still important to you. No goal is set in stone. Goals help you set the direction and keep you moving toward your vision.

Paving the Way to Possibility

The first four levels of the Peak Productivity Pyramid focus on implementing changes in your environment and processes. They are all about the tangible things you can do to improve your productivity. There are also some intangibles that contribute to success and increased productivity.

The two most important attributes are **discipline** and **attitude**. Even if you have the best time-management system set up, your life will only change if you have the discipline to implement the practices. Attitude is another contributing factor.

If you have a picture of your success, whatever that means to you, there is a greater likelihood that you will achieve it.

Level 5: Possibility

Within the context of the Peak Productivity Pyramid System, a *possibilist* is someone who embraces the emotion associated with change; someone who is aware that there are new possibilities out there and looks for the next one. A possibilist is constantly evolving to a new stage or state in life, always with a vision of living to their full potential.

In the previous level, you worked on setting goals to give your life direction and then learned how to break those goals into actionable steps, to ensure that what you do every day is moving you closer to achieving your goals.

The possibility level is not merely about setting goals but helping you look at your purpose. It gives you permission to dream, to pursue things that you never imagined before. It pushes you to strive for a life lived to your fullest potential.

The Five Es of Possibility

One of the most frequently asked questions when faced with an open-ended vision of possibility is, "What is it that I really want to do or be? What is that big picture to me?" There are entire books devoted to helping people determine their life's purpose, develop life goals, create visions for a bigger purpose and so on. Yet there are some steps you can take to start the process for figuring out what you want to become:

1. **Enjoy**. Go back to something you used to enjoy doing but left behind.
2. **Engage**. Spend more time with people, friends, family, in your spiritual community, or in public service.
3. **Enable**. Spend more time paying attention to your health, home, and welfare.
4. **Evolve**. Spend more time and effort doing something you enjoy doing now, and take it to the next level.
5. **Explore**. Look for new challenges, something that you never dared to attempt, something that requires major changes in your outlook.

These five steps to fulfilling your possibility goals will ensure that as your productivity increases, your efforts will result in something that is more meaningful to you. Unless you make time to think about what if and what's next, you might never set the goals or make something new or different happen. Remember, possibility is about making things happen for you rather than waiting for them to happen to you.

Before you can start making changes, it is critical that you shift your perception of time. The truth is that we all have time. Time is the greatest common denominator because regardless of gender, social class, or race, we all have the exact same amount of time. Remember, time management is choice management.

Here's to a more productive you!

IF YOU LIKED THIS SUMMARY, YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE:

- ***Extreme Productivity: Boost Your Results, Reduce Your Hours*** by Robert C. Pozen.
- ***Brief: Make a Bigger Impact by Saying Less*** by Joseph McCormack.

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