

# The Secret to Self-Discipline [Rory Vaden](#)

Today's work environment has been dubbed everything from the Age of Distraction and the Age of Inattention to The Multitasking Generation.

The bottom line is this: **regardless of your job title, we are all trying to accomplish increasingly more with increasingly less resources—whether those resources are money, time, focus, or energy.** How can we achieve success—however you define it—given these constraints?

I study successful people for a living, and I believe the answer can be boiled down to one word: **self-discipline**. It's not a breakthrough idea, and it's certainly not popular. It's an old-school way of thinking that has unfortunately fallen out of vogue, but one that can yield measurable results when applied to the challenges of working in modern business.

Self-discipline can take many forms: the discipline to tackle problems head-on, to manage and protect your schedule, or to stop avoiding the major projects by filling your time with easier tasks. It can also mean simply saying “no” to certain things, in order to free up valuable time and mental space to focus on the things that truly matter.

We can all look at our own situations and identify places where better self-discipline could help us improve the way we work and live. But it doesn't sound easy, and it sure doesn't sound fun.

So, what have these uber-successful, self-disciplined people figured out that we haven't?

I've worked with these people one-on-one, and I can assure you they don't enjoy self-discipline any more than the rest of us. It's not that they find it easier to do things that most people don't like doing; it's that they think differently about it. Self-discipline is not about chores, or punishment, or doing things the hardest way possible. It's simply about doing the hard things you know you should do, even when you don't feel like doing them—and then doing them as early on as possible, to boot.

To help others develop the habit of self-discipline, I offer seven principles—truths that, in our work at Southwestern Consulting, we've gleaned from successful people around the world. Self-disciplined ultra performers are distinct in the ways they think and evaluate choices. They use a different set of criteria than most people when they make decisions, and it is their decision making process—not sheer iron will—that enables them to choose a path that is different from most. They often choose to “Take the Stairs” while the rest of us stand around looking for an escalator. These principles of self-discipline worked for them, they worked for me, and they will work for you.

## 1. **Sacrifice:** The Paradox Principle

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**Do the difficult things now, and things will be easier in the long-term.**

To begin to develop the habit of self-discipline, we would all be wise to adopt a buffalo mentality. Let me explain.

I grew up in central Colorado. With the Rocky Mountains in the west, and the great Kansas plains in the east, we are one of the only places in the world that has both buffalo and cows. One of my favorite places that I look to for principles of success and the way the world works is in nature,

and the way these two creatures, buffalo and cows, respond in nature has some really powerful lessons for us.

When a storm approaches from the west, as storms almost always do out there, cows respond in a very predictable way. They know the storm is coming from the west, so they head east to try to outrun the storm.

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The only problem is that, as you may know, cows are not real fast. Before long, the storm catches up to them—and the cows, not knowing any better, keep on running. Instead of outrunning the storm, they actually run with the storm, maximizing their exposure to it. Isn’t that stupid?

Many of us humans do the same thing every day.

We try to avoid conflict that is inevitable. So often, we try to “ignore” problems, pretending that they aren’t that big of a deal, and then we try to run away at the last minute as they’re fast approaching. Unfortunately, as most of us have learned the hard way, problems tend to com-

pound when we ignore them, and we end up being exposed to something longer and/or worse than what might have been.

What buffalo do, on the other hand, is truly unique. They wait for the storm to cross right over the crest of the peak of the mountaintop, and as it arrives, they turn and charge directly into the storm. By running at the storm, they run straight through it as the storm passes overhead, which minimizes the amount of pain they experience.

If only more of us would tackle life's inevitable, unavoidable problems the way the buffalo do—head-on. The key insight that ultra performers have is that problems that are procrastinated on are only amplified, and we're the ones who pay the price. There's a great deal of strength—and strategic payoff—in charging at our most challenging circumstances head-on.

## 2. **Commitment:** The Buy-In Principle

The more we have invested into something, the less likely we are to let it fail.

A man named Bob is in a restroom, standing in front of a urinal—and he is suddenly in a bit of a predicament. Somehow he's managed to drop a \$5 bill into the urinal. Just as Bob is looking down thinking about what he's going to do, another gentleman named Dave happens to walk

into the restroom. Dave sees the \$5 in the urinal, assesses the situation with an empathetic sigh, and then says, “Oh, that’s a tough decision. What are you going to do?”

Bob thinks about it for a moment. Looks at the urinal, and then looks back at Dave. A split second later Bob pulls out his wallet, and out of nowhere grabs a \$50 bill and throws it into the urinal.

In shock, Dave exclaims, “Man, what are you doing? I can’t believe you just did that. That’s fifty dollars!” Bob looks back at Dave, cracks a smile, and replies, “Well, c’mon, you don’t think I’d stick my hand in there for just five dollars, do you?”

This is an old story, but it illustrates something that is critical in your ability to be more self-disciplined.

I call it the Buy-In Principle of Commitment, and it simply states that the more we have invested in something, the less likely we are to let it fail.

Think about something you’re trying to achieve—how committed are you? How invested are you in achieving that goal? What’s the cost of failure? By investing more time, energy, money, and focus into your commitments, when things get tough you will ask yourself “how can I pull this off?” rather than relenting to the question “should I try to pull this off?”

Increasing your investment into your dream increases the likelihood of your success. So where do you need to be throwing that \$50 bill?

### 3. **Focus:** The Magnification Principle

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When we have diluted focus, we get diluted results.

If you were to lay a piece of paper down on the asphalt on a hot summer day, nothing would happen to it, but if you held a magnifying glass between the piece of paper and the sun, the paper would catch on fire. Why? Because focus is literally power. Sunlight focused enough creates enough energy to set a piece of paper on fire. Water focused enough, or streamlined enough, can cut through steel. The Magnification Principle of Focus simply states one of life's most important truths: that Focus Is Power.

To achieve focus, we must minimize the amount of distraction that occurs in life. And distraction typically manifests itself as procrastination. There are three basic types of procrastination. The first is classic procrastination. This is consciously delaying what we know we should be doing. You may or may not be willing to admit that you struggle with this problem, but most of us do in at least one area of our life.



There is, however, a more dangerous type of procrastination that's increasingly prevalent in the workplace today. It's dangerous because it is unconscious, subtle, and invisible, yet all too real in terms of the damage it wreaks. It's a pattern of behavior I first diagnosed in myself, and I call it creative avoidance.

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Creative avoidance is unconsciously filling the day with menial work to the point where we end up getting busy just being busy! When I discovered this problem for myself, I realized that all day long I would be answering emails, pushing paper, chitchatting with coworkers, spacing out, running personal errands, and so on. At the end of the day I had “worked” all day long, but didn't have much to show for it.

I was engaged in activities all day, but I wasn't making progress. I was being efficient, but I wasn't being effective. I was doing things right, but I wasn't doing the right things. As the old quote goes, “In the absence of disciplined focus, we become strangely loyal to performing daily acts of trivia.”

If there isn't a defined objective or outcome for the activities you're engaged in, stop doing them.

The third type of procrastination is another one that often goes unnoticed—and it tends to affect the very people who aim to achieve. It's called “priority dilution.” Priority dilution is most commonly found in high-performing people—the ones who are the most busy, competent, and overwhelmed. They have so many emails, meetings, objectives, family matters, and other responsibilities on their plate that they can start to lose control of their effectiveness.

While Priority Dilution has nothing to do with being lazy, apathetic or disengaged, the result is the same: we delay on the day's most important activities by allowing our attention to shift to less important but perhaps more urgent tasks. As my friend the author David Allen describes, “Rather than doing what we know needs to be done, we're constantly falling victim to whatever is latest and loudest.”

Our experience coaching hundreds of clients is that, for today's intellectual workforce, discipline is about focusing on what's most important, learning to let go of minutiae, and being okay with delaying the less important tasks to an appropriate time. As it turns out, the most important skill for the next generation of knowledge worker is not learning what to do but rather determining what not to do, and instead focusing on key objectives. It's only as we embrace the incredible volume of noise in our work and our lives that we can silence it—or at least reduce it to a dull roar. Ignore the noise. Conquer the critical. Manage the minutiae.

## 4. Integrity: The Creation Principle

You think it, you speak it, you act it, it happens.

One of the major causes of pain in today's escalator world is that most people don't realize the impact of their words on themselves and others. Words have power—the power to add meaning, and the power to diminish meaning.

The Creation Principle of Integrity states that all of creation follows a simple and powerful pattern: You THINK it, you SPEAK it, you ACT, it HAPPENS.

Words are the first manifestation of ideas or thoughts into the real world. At their origin, those ideas exist only in your mind, but once they have been spoken or written, then they exist and have the power to shape the world around us. The moment we galvanize our thoughts into words marks the onset of creation.

Unfortunately, we don't recognize the simplicity of initiating the creation process, and so we often don't place appropriate value on the use of our words.

Here is a checklist of seven basic guidelines for preserving and harnessing the power of your word.

1. Think before you speak.
2. Choose your words carefully.
3. Do what you say you will.
4. Be where you promise you will.
5. Resist the urge to use emotionally charged, untamed language.
6. Assume the “mic is always on” and that everyone will hear everything you say.
7. Use empowering language when speaking about yourself and others.

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## 5. **Schedule:** The Harvest Principle

Focused effort is amplified by appropriate timing and regimented routine.

Farmers have a harvest each and every year. It's one period of the year when all of their crops must be taken up at just the right time in order for their survival. Do you know how many hours the average farmer works per day during harvest season?

About eighteen.

They work so hard because there is a short window of opportunity when the harvest must be captured. It doesn't matter if the farmer would rather work eighteen hours a day at some other time of the year, because the harvest is the only time of the year that will produce the type of results needed to make life work. Instead of evaluating, in the "heat of the moment," whether or not he feels like working, the farmer instead sets up his life in a way that allows him to prepare for the coming harvest time so as to maximize the reap.

Whether or not you've ever stepped foot on a farm, the law of the harvest is one you need to become intimately acquainted with if you are committed to developing the habit of self-discipline.

The Law of the Harvest says: Focused effort is amplified by appropriate timing and regimented routine.

Why are we talking about farming? Because within this law of the harvest lies the best available solution to the modern world's number one problem: time.

With an infinite number of options vying for our attention, just deciding how best to spend our time and fit everything in is a major cause of stress today. The simple solution to the problem is not doing everything that we can do in a day, but rather to do everything we should do in a day. Instead of asking, "Am I spending enough time on this activity?" we should really be asking, "When is the best time to be focused on this activity?"

The world we live in is constantly changing, and therefore requires a more nuanced approach than the work/life balance mantra that's become ingrained in our culture. Life's tragedies and triumphs, tasks and trivialities seem to follow ebb and flow of up and down, more and less. Life, like nature, operates in seasonal periods of intensity and decline much more like a harvest. This is where the farmer's law of harvest comes in.

There are all kinds of seasons in life. We have seasons of education, seasons of independence, seasons of love, seasons of growth, seasons of new beginnings, seasons of sickness, and seasons

of health. A “season” as I am describing it here could be as long as a few years or as short as a few minutes. Much of the anxiety I’ve noticed in the lives of our coaching clients is due to the fact that they are trying to take on too many seasons at once, and some of them are naturally conflicting.

We need to be more intentional in planning and aligning our seasons in a realistic fashion. Instead of asking ourselves, “How can I fit more in?” we should be asking, “What season(s) is my life (or my day) in right now, when is the right time to be completing its associated activities, and what are the right things I need to do to maximize my harvest of this season?” Instead of asking, “How much can I get done today?” we should be asking, “What is the most effective thing I can be doing right now with the time I have available?” When we are aware of the season we are in and focused on maximizing the results of that season, we have natural clarity about our priorities, and as a byproduct we get amplified synergy of our results. This small shift can yield massive results.

## 6. **Faith:** The Perspective Principle

Our ability to have peace about failures, setbacks, and tragedies is directly proportionate to the term of our perspective.

I once had the good fortune of listening to a guest speaker who is one of the world's most renowned motivators and youth experts, Eric Chester. Eric performed a physical demonstration that has permanently etched itself into my memory and into my life philosophy on perspective.

Eric had two student volunteers hold either end of an 80-foot-long tape measure.

“The average male life span is about eighty years,” said Eric. “Since there are twelve inches in a foot and there are twelve months in a year, then each foot on this tape measure represents one year of your life. And each inch on this tape measure represents one month of your life. So here now, stretched out in front of you, is the appropriate to-scale view of your entire life.”

According to Eric's tape measure timeline, a “bad day” wasn't even visible. It was approximately one-thirtieth of one inch.

With enough perspective, all of our failures—and successes—are reduced to their appropriate size. Every day our frustrations are so big, our losses are so big, and our problems are so big; if we view them only with the limited perspective of how it affected our day. But when you look at your



life with the perspective of the entire 80 feet, the challenges of today are often a speck of unnoticeable dust on the timeline of our life.

If we have enough faith to believe that there is a future coming and we take appropriate account of it, then we would also have a basis for a more appropriate perspective relating to today's issues and today's struggles. When we lose faith in the future and we lose focus of where today fits into the greater timeline of the history of our lives, then we have no basis for perspective. The size of today's challenges is measured only against the shortness of today.

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The extent of our faith determines the term of our perspective, and the term of our perspective determines the size of our problems.

A challenge in respect to today is a big problem.

A challenge in respect to our lifespan is a small problem.

A challenge in respect to eternity is no problem.

Having this faith, this long-term perspective, enables us to make better decisions. It gives us the strength to endure short-term sacrifices. It empowers you with the conviction of knowing that things will work out for the better if you put in the work.

## 7. **Action:** The Pendulum Principle

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Be relentless about making progress while freeing yourself from the demand for perfection.

You can understand everything that we've talked about in this Manifesto, but not believe in it. The only way that we will know if you believe in any of what you've read is if it actually causes you to make different decisions and take different actions.

Having a self-disciplined mindset means that you don't just recognize your inadequacies; you resolve them. You don't just identify changes you need to make; you make them. Being a successful person requires you to take action. But no one can tell you what you should do.

Not only because it's not their right, but because I believe most of us already know what we should do. The problem is that we don't do it.

In our work with clients, we consistently find that people who are struggling with inaction invariably have one of the following three deep-rooted attitudes:

- Fear: "I'm scared to do it."
- Entitlement: "I shouldn't have to do it."
- Perfectionism: "I won't try to do it if I can't do it right."

These all-too-common problems affect people across all professions, ages, and endeavors. You show me a person who is not achieving life at the level they want to be and I'll show you one of these diagnoses. The good news is that they don't need to hold us back.

## **Fear**

Why do so many of us succumb to fear? Because it's more convenient and more comfortable for us to let our dreams disappear than to muster up the discipline and the work ethic to go out and transform them into reality. The payoff of fear is that we don't have to try, we don't have to work, and we don't have to challenge ourselves to test our limits. In other words, when we allow our fears to thrive, we let ourselves off the hook from the work required to achieve our goals.

In contrast, the self-disciplined mindset demolishes our fears so that the only option is to work to make our dreams come true. Action is the cure for fear.

Don't you have times in your life when you know what you should do, but you allow fear to hold you back? It's okay to be scared—do it scared. It's okay to be unsure—do it unsure. It's okay to be uncomfortable—do it uncomfortable. Just get started where you are. That is the attitude of the most disciplined and successful people on the planet.

## **Entitlement**

So many of us are frustrated because, somehow, we believe that we are entitled to a life that is supposed to be easier. We want someone else to work the long hours for us, someone else to solve our problems, someone else to teach us, someone else to get us out of debt, someone else to pay for our retirement, someone else to take care of our kids, someone else to make us feel good about ourselves, someone else to give us what we want. These beliefs are so ingrained and ubiquitous that we don't even notice them anymore.

Entitlement gets us nothing; only action does. I'm not saying I don't want your life to be easy. I do! But ease, comfort, and true satisfaction come through action. They come through working harder than you ever have before. They come from making more sacrifices, getting more done,

being more focused, being more frugal, being more prudent, and being more committed. If you don't believe me, find the nearest successful person and ask them!

## **Perfectionism**

Psychologists say that the number one cause of all procrastination is self-criticism. It can feel safer not to begin a daunting journey or not to take on a challenging task because at least we know we won't fail.

So instead of working, we wait. We wait for the perfect plan, the perfect time, and the perfect resources. The problem is, the perfect circumstances never show up. What was once a harmless decision of opting for safety soon becomes a limiting, even debilitating lifestyle of inaction.

The irony of this crippling fear of making mistakes is that mistakes can be our greatest teachers. No one has all the answers before they start. Successful people take action despite not knowing how it will turn out, and they embrace the idea that success is messy along the way. They choose to move forward without knowing exactly where their path will lead, and they become comfortable with imperfection for the short term. They move. They go. They act.

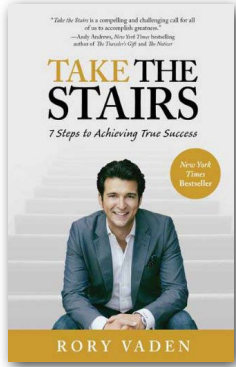
Is perfectionism holding you back? Cultivate the habit of action in your life by being relentless about making progress, while letting go of the demand for perfection. You overcome perfection-

ism by insisting not on stellar results, but on stellar effort. Hold yourself to those standards, and your success is guaranteed.

The truth about success may not be popular, but it is certain. It may not be easy, but it is simple. In fact, it's so obvious that it can be elusive. And while it may not be what we want to hear about success, it is the only guaranteed method of high performance in any endeavor. It can all be summed up in one simple word... discipline.

The challenges we face today are not a matter of skill, but a matter of will. Our problem isn't time management; it is self management. And we're not losing to poor circumstances as much as we're losing to a lack of self-discipline. Self-discipline is the simplest and fastest way to make life as easy possible. Discipline creates freedom—the freedom to do anything! And that freedom is the secret to being successful, however you define it, in today's world. 📖

# Info



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | Rory Vaden, M.B.A., is co-founder of Southwestern Consulting, a self-discipline strategist and keynote speaker, and author of the New York Times bestseller *Take the Stairs: 7 Steps to Achieving True Success* (Perigee).

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