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The Achievement Habit

Stop Wishing, Start Doing and Take Command of Your Life

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

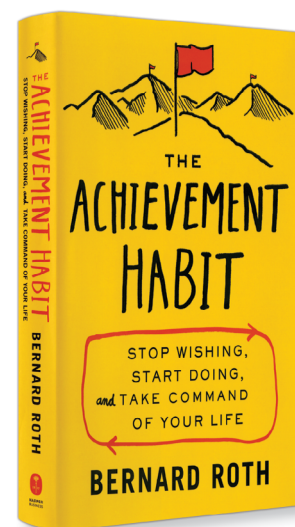
Co-founder of the Stanford d.school Bernard Roth introduces the power of design thinking to help you achieve goals you never thought possible. Achievement can be learned. It's a muscle, and once you learn how to flex it, you'll be able to meet life's challenges and fulfill your goals.

In *The Achievement Habit*, Roth applies the remarkable insights that stem from design thinking — previously used to solve large-scale projects — to help us realize the power for positive change we all have within us. Roth leads us through a series of discussions, stories, recommendations and exercises designed to help us create a different experience in our lives. He shares invaluable insights we can use to gain confidence to do what we've always wanted and overcome obstacles that hamper us from reaching our potential, including don't try — DO; excuses are self-defeating; believe you are a doer and achiever, and you'll become one; become open to learning from your own experience and from those around you; and more.

The brain is complex and is always working with our egos to sabotage our best intentions. But we can be mindful; we can create habits that make our lives better. Thoughtful and powerful, *The Achievement Habit* shows you how.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How you define the meaning of everything in your life.
- Why reasons can sabotage your achievement goals.
- The difference between trying and doing.
- Strategies for getting unstuck and finding assistance.
- The assumptions underlying your self-image and how to redesign it.



by Bernard Roth

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: THE ACHIEVEMENT HABIT

by Bernard Roth

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The Achievement Habit: Stop Wishing, Start Doing and Take Command of Your Life by Bernard Roth. Copyright © 2015 by Bernard Roth. Summarized by permission of the publisher, HarperCollins Publishers, 288 pages, \$27.99, ISBN: 978-0-06235-610-9. To purchase this book, go to www.amazon.com or www.bn.com.

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Introduction

Ask people to think about who stops them from accomplishing the things they want. It's always entertaining to listen to them explain how their parents, spouses, children, colleagues, bosses — you name it — prevent them from reaching their goals. These perceived obstacles are simply excuses; in almost every case, when you really dig down, it's you who are sabotaging yourself. Yes, sometimes there are real external obstacles, and most people don't realize that they have the power to overcome them.

When you *do*, you are using *power*; when you *try*, you are using *force*. In life, if you want to get things done, it is much better to be powerful than to be forceful.

Of course the switch isn't so easy to make in real life. We've all had the experience of making up our minds to do something and then not doing it. In order to make the switch we must understand our behavior. The classic model (and popular wisdom) says that we think things through first and then act on our thoughts. Interestingly, this does not hold up in clinical testing. Most of our action is more the result of habit than reasoning.

So that leads to a question: How do you bridge the gap between trying and doing, between talking about something and acting on it, and ultimately between failure and success?

Design thinking is a set of general practices developed over the years that are effective in solving design challenges. A design challenge can apply to just about any kind of product or experience. It's not just about how to build a better mousetrap (though that's part of it); it's also about things that are not physical objects: how to improve the wait time at a popular amusement park, how to clean up a highway, how to more efficiently get food to needy people, how to improve online dating and so on.

Design thinking is normally applied outward — toward building solutions for other people's problems in a business or school setting. Here it is used toward improving your own life and interpersonal relationships, designing the best version of yourself. ●

Nothing Is What You Think It Is

Let's first acknowledge that the meaning we find in people, objects and our own circumstances is subjective. These things have no inherent meaning. Functional and dysfunctional behavior both result from choices people make based on meanings they create. This also means that we have the power to alter our perceptions, revising perceptions that bring us down and enhancing those that help us. To learn how to get a better handle on your perceptions, emotions and behavior, it is useful to look at how you think.

Take a few deep breaths. Close your eyes for a few minutes. Then open them and move your attention around the room from one object to another. Each time you notice an object, say it has no meaning (as in, "The chair has no meaning"). Then think of people in your family and in your life and things you hold dear, such as your biggest accomplishments and most prized possessions. Name each, saying it has no meaning. When you are finished, sit quietly for a few minutes and then reflect on your experience.

The point of the exercise is not to get you to change any of your relationships. Rather, it is to empower you with the realization that you have chosen the meanings you give to all of your relationships. People who do this exercise often become more aware of how important a



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person or item is to them, and they realize that they have the ability to change the meaning something has to them.

The Familiar Unfamiliar

To forge a new attitude toward the events and relationships in your life, you must learn to look at them with a fresh perspective.

Most people have a cognitive bias called functional fixedness that causes them to see objects only in their normal context. There are creativity exercises structured so that the use of the materials and tools in their ordinary way will generally lead to no workable solutions or, at the very most, mundane ones. The really exciting solutions come from overcoming functional fixedness and using these everyday items in new ways. To see the possibilities it is helpful to take the viewpoint that *nothing is what you think it is*. You need to make the familiar unfamiliar.

Just as things in the material world can be transformed from their common use into something different, so too can behavior and relationships. It's difficult at first to break through preconceived notions; however, once you do it, you'll find it opens the world up to you. Stop labeling things in their usual way. You are not a loser because you lost your job. Make the familiar into the unfamiliar, and the result can be amazing and delightful, as opposed to dull, nonfunctional and ordinary.

You can remove labels entirely; you can also re-label to great effect. Recent studies reinforce the idea that relabeling can change behavior. Experimenters have found statistical evidence that, for instance, if you ask people to be voters, you get more voter turnout than if you simply ask people to vote. Similarly, if you ask people not to be cheaters, there is less cheating than if you just ask people not to cheat. The inference is that people are more concerned with reinforcing their self-image than with their actions; thus, to change behavior, you first change self-image.

Once you learn that it is possible to change your habits and develop new attitudes about things, you have a new tool to use in both your professional and your personal life. For most people it is probably easier to change their attitude toward dishwashing than their attitude toward depression. Yet if you start with the small stuff, you will find it easier to tackle the harder stuff in life. ●

Reasons Are Bullshit

The problem with reasons is that they're just excuses prettied up. Our society loves reasons. Perhaps the

illusion that there is a single known reason for each thing we do is comforting. Unfortunately, the world doesn't work that way.

Reasons exist because if people didn't explain their behavior, they would seem unreasonable. So we are faced with a paradox: We need reasons so we appear reasonable, yet when we use reasons we are not taking full responsibility for our behavior. We use them to hide our shortcomings from ourselves. When we stop using reasons to justify ourselves, we increase our chances of changing behavior, gaining a realistic self-image and living a more satisfying and productive life.

Letting go of the need for reasons to justify your behavior is useful in every part of the design-thinking process. It can get you unstuck from dead ends and lead to new approaches and insights.

Many reasons are simply excuses to hide the fact that we are not willing to give something a high enough priority in our lives. But not having reasons would lead to a strange existence. Without reasons, you would look like an unreasonable person to everyone else. So where does this leave us?

There is a twofold approach to the problem: one for the external persona and one for the internal self. *Externally* you use reasons in everyday conversation when you need to, and thus appear to be perfectly normal and reasonable. *Internally* you look at the reasons your external self offers, and question each of them. The internal self also looks at the reasons given by the people you are interacting with. Simply by noticing how reasons are used, you can gain insight into your own behavior and your relationships with others. ●

Getting Unstuck

Once we see an obstacle in our path, we walk around that obstacle. Unfortunately we sometimes have difficulty. We often think we're surrounded. How do you walk around obstacles? The answer lies in changing the way you think about the problem.

Design thinking emphasizes that you always make sure you are working on the real problem. When you can't find the answer, it is often because you are not asking the correct question.

One of the main causes of losing sleep over a problem is that we think we are dealing with a question when in fact we are dealing with an answer (a solution) that turns out not to be a good fit to our actual problem.

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A way around this dilemma is to ask, “What would it do for me if I solved this problem?” The answer to this can then be converted into a new, more generative question.

By changing the question, you alter your point of view and dramatically expand the number of possible solutions.

Changing the question is often enough to lead to a satisfactory resolution and to make the original difficulty disappear.

Ways to Get Unstuck

Once you have a problem statement, there are many formal methods that can assist you in generating solutions.

- Hard work
- Create a supportive environment
- Relax
- Brainstorming
- Lists
- Meta-lists: lists that contain the names of things from which to make more detailed lists.
- Idea logs
- Humor
- Conversation
- Forced transformations: purposefully modifying your ideas to make the conventional into the unconventional.
- “What if?”: a great way to start a question during idea generation. What if there was no gravity? What if there was blast-off house paint?
- Working backward: Imagine that the problem has been solved, and then work back to the beginning. This way you can see what all the milestones are.
- Storyboards
- Mind maps: Mind maps are great for providing a broad understanding of how diverse parts relate to the whole.
- Diagram yourself: In this method you examine your own problem-solving process and strive to make it ambidextrous, meaning that you use both right-brain and left-brain activities equally. ●

Finding Assistance

When it comes to achieving what you want in life, it's rare that you can do it entirely on your own. Often you'll need a little assistance from your friends. We are all better off when we assist each other to figure things out.

It's okay to ask for assistance. Look for people in your life who have accomplished things that you want to

accomplish, and talk to them about how they did it and what they would do differently if they had to do it over. Get feedback from as many people as you can. You don't need to follow all or even most of it. Keep in mind that the more input you get, the more you have to sift through for gems.

Good Artists Copy; Great Artists Steal

Steve Jobs often mentioned that he believed “good artists copy; great artists steal,” a quote he attributed to Pablo Picasso. The truth is, there's very little new under the sun. Everything you can think of has, at least in part, been thought of before, and it would be stupid to ignore the wisdom of the people who've preceded you.

So don't be too concerned about “stealing.” Of course, don't take credit for someone else's work or simply copy something outright without improving it or putting your own spin on it. Understand that it's okay to build off others' ideas, and don't be too possessive of your own. Some people are fiercely protective of their own data and ideas, often for years, until they can publish their work. The public good would be much better served if people worked more collaboratively. Commit yourself to radical collaboration.

The Curse of Networking

You've undoubtedly been told about the power of networking — handing out your business card at social luncheons, showing up at key events and promoting yourself.

But if what you're really doing is trying to buddy up to people you think are on a higher plane than you are to get help from them, it's a lecherous relationship and it's not genuine. Never pretend that you have a relationship with someone that goes beyond what's really there. Don't assume it's okay to use someone's name to get in the door, even if you consider that person a friend. Ask first, or it's likely to backfire. Life is not about using other people as you climb to the top.

Stay real, instead, and build friendships. When you forge real relationships, the word networking doesn't even come into play. You naturally think of each other when opportunities arise. You ask for assistance and they show up, because they are friends and that's what friends do, not because you gave them a fake smile and a firm handshake at a luncheon. Let people see you as human. Be real. Be proactive in making friendships wherever you land. Invite people out to eat or over to your house. When you hear that a loved one of theirs is sick, follow up and ask about it the next day.

What it comes down to is that if you want people to assist you, you should (a) ask them, because not everyone

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is that attuned to what you need, and (b) be a decent human being. Do not pretend you know more than you do. Most people are flattered when you have a genuine need and ask for their expertise. When you're offered assistance, respect others' time constraints — don't call every day or expect them to write responses to a hundred questions — and be appreciative. ●

Doing Is Everything

There is a big difference between *trying* to do something and actually *doing* it. They're two totally different actions. The difficulty arises when people conflate them. If you *try* to do something, it may or may not happen. If it does not happen, you might try using an altered strategy, and again it may not happen. Although this could go on indefinitely, usually it lasts until you luck out and succeed, get tired of trying or get distracted by something else. Clearly this is a very unproductive way to go about your life.

If you are *doing* something, then no matter how many times you hit a barrier or how frustrated your original strategy becomes, you intend to get the job done, and you bring to bear on it the inner resolve and attention necessary to fulfill your intention. Doing takes *intention* and *attention*.

Do — don't *try* — this: List as many of your core beliefs as possible, and then ask yourself what basis you have for each belief. Unsurprisingly, a large number of core beliefs come from parents, the social and physical environment we grew up in and various peer groups.

The next question to ask is, "Which of your beliefs still serve you, and which have become dysfunctional and are best discarded?"

When you make decisions based on "the research," you can easily be led astray by researchers' biases. Even when the data is sound — like the fact that half of all marriages end in divorce — does that mean that you should give up the idea of getting married because it has too high a potential failure rate? Statistics can show you trends; they can't predict your life.

Likewise, consider that the odds have *always* been against greatness. If one were to decide on a career path just by the odds of financial success, we would have no movie stars, authors, poets or musicians. The odds were against the Beatles, Elvis and the Grateful Dead, too. They could have been "scientific" about the whole thing and chosen more reasonable career paths, and what a loss for the world that would have been! If you succeed, the odds are meaningless. Any path may have a 2 percent

success rate, yet if you're in that 2 percent, there's a 100 percent chance of success for you. The long shots are often the most rewarding.

The Gift of Failure

Almost without exception, people who have done great things have also experienced great failures — and in many cases, getting fired or a similar devastating failure turned out to be a gift that allowed them to ultimately find great success.

At the d.school, one of the basic principles is a *bias toward action*: that is, it is better to start to do something and fail than it is to do nothing and wait for the correct path of action to appear. Failure is part of the result to expect if you have a bias toward action. The idea is not to be paralyzed in the face of uncertainty. If you do something and it works, great! If you do something and it fails, maybe even better. You do, you fail and you learn. You do again, you fail again and you learn some more.

If you are mindful about what you have done, failure is a teacher. With a little luck, after enough failures you will succeed. In many cases this is a much better approach than a long, drawn-out investigation into the right way to proceed.

Nobody wants to fail, and yet we all do. Don't be afraid of failure. It is part of the price you pay for action; there's no need to sweep it under the rug and pretend it does not exist. The most liberating way to acknowledge failure is to celebrate it. ●

Watch Your Language

The way we communicate with people has a significant effect on their opinions of us. It's not just about what we say but about how we say it. Becoming better communicators can heal relationships, lead to better job opportunities and enable us to reach wider audiences with whatever messages we want to share.

Language influences the way we see things. It has long been known that using different labels for the same thing will promote different behaviors. For our purposes it is important to understand what we do to ourselves with our own choice of words and use of language. Once we are aware of our usage, we can adjust our language to be more in keeping with our true intentions and the existential situations we are describing.

Have to/Want to

On the list of words to be used as little as possible is the phrase "I have to." The true situation is usually best

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described instead by “I want to.” To get the flavor of this, change *have* into *want* in your mind the next few times you say “I have to.” Do this silently, simply repeating to yourself the sentence that you just said out loud, with just the one word changed. This exercise is very effective in getting people to realize that what they do in their lives — even the things they find unpleasant — is in fact what they have chosen.

Next let’s look at “I can’t” and test it against “I won’t.” A good way to make the test is to use the same procedure as in the previous exercise. So, for example, if you said out loud, “I can’t stop breathing,” you would then say to yourself, “I won’t stop breathing.” The simple change of *can’t* to *won’t* is often empowering. *Can’t* implies helplessness; *won’t* signifies volition and choice.

Conversations

The question of intention lies behind all communication. What is it that you intend to communicate? Simply saying something does not mean it has been actually communicated. Even if all parties agree on what has been said or even if there is a signed, written agreement, it does not mean that everyone is really agreeing to the same thing. There are often honest misunderstandings.

These take place largely because people do not make sure their meanings — not only their words — are shared. Remember, successful communication takes both *intention* and *attention*. It requires the explicit intention that the meaning be shared, and it also takes the explicit attention to be sure it has been shared.

Suggestions for good interpersonal communications:

- Speak for yourself. Say “I know,” “I think,” “My reaction is,” not “Everyone knows,” “We all feel.”
- Don’t be judgmental.
- Acknowledge other people’s issues. People want to know that you’ve heard them.
- Don’t ask *why* questions. Asking people why they do things puts them on the defensive.
- Really listen. Even if you think you know what they will be saying or you have heard it before.
- When you are telling a story, be clear what your point is. Be prepared to be misunderstood.
- Make sure your communication is heard as intended.
- Make sure you understand what is being communicated to you.

When another person feels understood, you’ve given him a great gift. ●

Group Habits

Belonging to groups gives us an important way to express our humanity. Most of us are affiliated with many groups: In addition to family, we have groups of friends; professional, political, health and school groups; and so on. The way you interact within those groups can change the way you feel about each situation and can enrich (or screw up) your life.

Constructive Criticism

The d.school workshops have adopted a system for criticism originally learned from the late George M. Prince in a Synectics workshop. The idea is to give criticism in a supportive way that promotes positive evolution of the students’ work, by saying two “I like” statements followed by one “I wish” statement. For example, I might say, “I like the way you took into account concerns about safety, and I like the way it looks.” Then, after a short pause, I would continue, “I wish we could find a way to make it smaller.”

The first thing to notice about this feedback is that there is no “but” between the “I like” and the “I wish.” They are separated by only a short pause, nothing else. The second thing to notice is that “I wish” is said in a way that encourages further refinement in a positive way. It enlists everyone who hears the comment, including the commentator, to work on figuring out a solution.

Minimizing Competition

Whenever there is a hierarchy of positions and pay scales, it’s likely that you’ll also encounter some people who will step on each other as they attempt to climb the ladder. You’ll know them as the office gossips, the backstabbers, the users, the phonies. Steer clear of this entire culture. It is important to ask yourself what kind of satisfaction you’ll derive from being that kind of person, even if it does mean you get the title you want. Don’t lose sight of your humanity in the pursuit of a fancier car.

Many businesses and academic organizations use competition as a means of encouraging people to do their best — they literally have contests (sales contests, design contests, etc.) pitting people against each other. Our culture is habituated to winner-take-all athletics and other zero-sum games. While it can have a strong upside for the winner, it has a strong downside for everyone else. It can lower morale, foster jealousy and hurt relationships.

It’s important to learn to be motivated to do your personal best, regardless of what happens around you. Look for ways to be inclusive rather than competitive — for ways to help the whole team win rather than just one

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individual. As much as possible, it behooves you to erase the idea of competition in the workplace from your mind. You have to be satisfied only with yourself — not worried about what the Joneses are up to. ●

Self-Image by Design

What you can achieve in life has a lot to do with your self-image. If you see yourself as a risk taker and a doer, you're more likely to take risks and do! If you see yourself as cautious and scared, it may make the road to achieving your goals a lot more protracted and difficult. You may not even know for sure how you define yourself, so let's figure out where your self-image comes from and if it suits where you want to be.

Examine Your Role Models

When we are young, we learn from those around us. Naturally, our parents and siblings have a strong influence on who we become as we start to mature. We may be very fortunate and start life in a warm, supporting environment. We may be less fortunate and start in a harsh, threatening environment. Whether we grow up feeling accepted and loved by our family or harshly judged and rejected, it is almost impossible to escape those imprints.

Examine your family's viewpoints and how they have affected your adult life.

- What do they think about money?
- What do they think is a suitable life path for you?
- What are their views on authority?
- What are their views on hard work? Grades? Blue-collar versus white-collar work? Getting ahead in life? Work versus play? Hobbies? Taking risks professionally and personally? Personal fulfillment?
- Which of their views do you agree with, and which don't you? Have you tailored your life in response to their views? Is it helpful to you, harmful or neutral? Which influences of theirs are better off discarded? Which can you learn from?

If we realize we have a unique persona and a history different from that of our teachers and parents, we can end up being creators of a new synthesis that honors our influences yet is also a true expression of our very being. It is important that we look at our life and work not only from the point of view of its content but also from the question of what our actual intentions are.

Create a list of all the things you intend to accomplish with your work. You can get there by asking yourself a series of questions: What is my intention? Is it simply to get through the day? Is it to get a specific task done? Is it to

have a good time? Is it to bolster my ego? Is it to delight? Is it to inspire? Is it to motivate? Is it to escape?

Then, once it is clear what your basic intentions are, the next issue is how to accomplish them. Before you get to that, it is important to be sure your intentions are real and not simply a series of clichés that you have been programmed to recite or have created to appease your self-image. Once you have your basic intentions clear, you can view the method of implementing them as a creative problem-solving activity that will get you unshackled from past practices and mimicked constraints. ●

The Big Picture

Life on every level is full of complexity and uncertainty. As individuals we face a life of unknown duration, during which we are likely to go through periods of family, career or personal crisis. The world around us is even more unpredictable. It's a very good idea to have a general sense of your goals in life and an equally good idea not to get too rigid about your path. Stay open to possibility: Let other people in, and listen when new opportunities present themselves.

The Blessing of Work

In his classic essay "Buddhist Economics," E.F. Schumacher points out that work serves to feed our basic need for association with other people. In fact, work supplies several of our basic human needs: 1. It gives people a chance to utilize and develop their faculties. 2. It enables people to overcome their ego-centeredness by joining with others in a common task. 3. It brings forth the goods and services for a becoming existence.

With this in mind, Schumacher points out that work is a basic human function that transcends the usual economic meanings associated with it: "To organize work in such a manner that it becomes meaningless, boring, stultifying or nerve wracking for the worker would be little short of criminal; it would indicate a greater concern with goods than with people, an evil lack of compassion and a soul-destroying degree of attachment to the most primitive side of this worldly existence. Equally, to strive for leisure as an alternative to work would be a complete misunderstanding of one of the basic truths of human existence, namely that work and leisure are complementary parts of the same living process and cannot be separated without destroying the joy of work and the bliss of leisure."

The constraints on our career paths tend to be self-imposed. We tend to *rise without thinking*. There is a ladder

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that exists in many career paths, and society brainwashes people to think they are supposed to climb it. Not every new award, degree or promotion is a good thing for the individual. Keep asking “What do I *really* want?” over and over, until you feel you have gained insight into your own desires so you’re no longer at the mercy of society’s ideas of what is good for you. ●

Make Achievement Your Habit

The word *problem* has negative connotations. It implies there is something wrong that needs fixing. However, if a problem is reframed as an opportunity to make things in our life better, then it becomes a positive, and problem solving can be recognized as one of our basic life forces.

So what are problems? The word *problem* describes any situation that we want to change. Usually problems are stated as questions (“How do I get a job?”) or statements (“I cannot afford college”). Generally we want to deal with problems in order to effect a positive change in some situation. Life consists of solving a series of problems. We all have unsolved issues in our lives. There are situations and people that bug us, and there are vexing personal and professional problems.

If you reframe your problem, many possible options become apparent, and the path to a solution often becomes obvious.

Prototype Your Way to Success

A *prototype* is a sample or model created to show or test a concept — something to be learned from. In solving problems, an excellent way to move forward is to incorporate prototyping into your process.

Early in the problem-solving process it is best to think of prototypes as simply trial balloons — ideas or statements sent out to gauge people’s reactions to your ideas. Prototypes do not necessarily have to resemble a physical object. They can take any form. They could be conversations, written drafts, short movies, skits, physical embodiments of social or personal problems or actual physical models of objects. Prototypes can be in any form that gives information. They do not need to *look like* or *work like* the final solution, and they certainly do not need to do both.

The road to a final solution is strewn with ideas that have been prototyped as ways to get information, directions to take, ideas to modify and ideas to abandon. Prototyping is a great way to show people what you have in mind, so you can elicit their feedback.

The next time you are asked to do something, don’t spend too much time thinking. Simply charge ahead. Do this by taking the first idea that comes into your head and make a quick prototype. Then think about what you have learned from this. If you are brave enough, try it out on some people and get their thoughts.

Be the Cause in the Matter

Being the “cause in the matter” means taking full responsibility for whatever you’re dealing with and whatever happens in your life, even when it seems that things are not totally in your control. It’s a declaration of choice: Instead of playing the role of passive protagonist in your life, choose to take charge of your future. Resolve to get things done, whatever it takes, and no matter how many valid “reasons” pop up.

Adopt an attitude of willingness to give things a chance; allow yourself to test things out and see what happens without thinking you know the outcome. To test things, you need to give them your attention. Attention begins with noticing your behaviors and interactions. Notice both yourself and the people you interact with. What works and what doesn’t? What could work better? Then test the various tools and exercises by inserting them into your everyday interactions.

Realize that your mind is trickier than you think and is always working with your ego to make you believe you are doing better than you really are. That’s the human condition. What you have going for yourself is that, if you choose to, you can be mindful about controlling both your intentions and your attention to make your life better for yourself and for those around you. You can choose to be the *cause in the matter* of the circumstances of your life, and you can instill in yourself the habit of achievement for a more functional and satisfying life. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *The Achievement Habit*, you’ll also like:

1. ***The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg.** Duhigg brings to life a whole new understanding of human nature and its potential for transformation.
2. ***Triggers* by Marshall Goldsmith.** Goldsmith details six engaging questions that can help us enact meaningful and lasting change in order to become the person we want to be.
3. ***Springboard* by G. Richard Shell.** *Springboard* will help you re-evaluate your future and envision success on your own terms. It may even change your life.