

Perman's new book on productivity goes beyond the how of effectiveness to the why: *Why do anything well?* The answer is found in our theology. Excellence, attention, and care are all ways that we leaders love our God and our neighbors. Drawing on the wisdom of business gurus, neuroscientists, and pastors, Perman has provided a resource for all of us who desire to steward our time, talents, and resources better so that we can live out the gospel more faithfully and fully in the time we've been given.

**KATELYN BEATY**, author of *A Woman's Place: A Christian Vision for Your Calling in the Office, the Home, and the World*, and former managing editor, *Christianity Today*

Getting stuck is frustrating, disruptive, and unavoidable. Getting stuck is also not the way it is supposed to be, suggests Matt Perman in his new book, *How to Get Unstuck*. Gleaning the wisdom from the best of the personal-effectiveness gurus, Perman combines common sense and biblical principles to help you get out of the rut that may have become your new normal. This book will help you joyfully bring more flourishing to the communities God has called you to serve.

**HUGH WHELCHER**, executive director, Institute for Faith, Work & Economics, and author of *How Then Should We Work? Rediscovering the Biblical Doctrine of Work*

I'm a big fan of Matt Perman's work. If you can imagine a cross between theologian Jonathan Edwards and *Getting Things Done* guru David Allen, then you have in your head a picture of Matt Perman. No one combines theological substance with practical and transformative self-management insights like Matt. His *What's Best Next* was hugely helpful—and I couldn't be more excited about his thoughtful and imminently practical new book *How to Get Unstuck*. Nothing faddish or superficial here. This is God-centered and gospel-driven wisdom—the best of self-management insights set within a genuinely Christian framework of flourishing in Christ. Highly recommended!

**TODD WILSON**, senior pastor, Calvary Memorial Church, and author of *Real Christian: Bearing the Marks of Authentic Faith*

Christians today need to understand how to live healthy and productive lives, not only in the home but especially in the workplace. Productivity is hardwired into our DNA by God, who created man in his image and likeness. This is why I'm so excited about *How to Get Unstuck* by Matt Perman. I encourage you to pick up a copy of this book and learn how to become even more productive via a Christian worldview.

**DAVE JENKINS**, executive director, Servants of Grace Ministries, and executive editor, *Theology for Life* magazine

HOW TO GET  
**UNSTUCK**



# HOW TO GET **UNSTUCK**

BREAKING FREE FROM BARRIERS  
TO YOUR PRODUCTIVITY

**MATT PERMAN**



ZONDERVAN

*How to Get Unstuck*

Copyright © 2018 by Matthew Perman

This title is also available as a Zondervan ebook.

This title is also available as a Zondervan audio book.

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

ISBN 978-0-310-52681-0

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation. © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Any internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Published in association with Andrew Wolgemuth of Wolgemuth & Associates, Inc.

*Cover design: Derek Thornton, Faceout Studio*

*Cover art: Shutterstock*

*Interior design: Kait Lamphere*

*Printed in the United States of America*

---

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 /DHV/ 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To everyone out there who is trying to  
make a difference. You can do it.*

*If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

JOHN 8:36

*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*

JOHN 8:12

*Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt . . . even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.*

MATTHEW 21:21-22

*For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.*

2 CORINTHIANS 1:8-10



# CONTENTS

*Introduction: We All Get Stuck in Some Way* ..... 11

## PART 1. THE PROBLEM AND THE PRINCIPLES:

### Foundations

1. How We Get Stuck. .... 29
2. Flourishing: What It Means to Be Unstuck. .... 35
3. The Unstuck Cycle. .... 47
4. Recovering Personal Effectiveness as a Force for Good. .... 54
5. Understanding Urgency and Importance (for Real) ..... 63
6. Character: The Great Unsticking Force ..... 74

## PART 2. PERSONAL LEADERSHIP:

### The Compass

7. Understand the Power of Vision ..... 93
8. Be Missional: Understand How Your Faith and  
Work Relate ..... 112
9. See Yourself as a Professional (... Sort of) ..... 120
10. Preparation: Get the Knowledge You Need ..... 133

**PART 3. PERSONAL MANAGEMENT:  
The Clock**

11. Start with Your Time, Not with Your Tasks . . . . . 163  
12. Set Your Priorities: Make Importance Truly Work . . . . . 175  
13. Deep Work, Part 1: The New Superpower of  
Knowledge Work . . . . . 189  
14. Deep Work, Part 2: Put Deep Work into Your Schedule  
and Overcome Distractions . . . . . 198  
15. Renewal: The Power of Preaching to Yourself. . . . . 217

**PART 4. SPECIAL OBSTACLES:  
The Laser**

16. A Basic Approach to Getting Unstuck from Problems . . . . . 225  
17. Taking an Adaptive Time-Management Approach . . . . . 227  
18. Building Your Willpower and Growing Discipline . . . . . 231  
19. Making Your Workspace Clutter-Free. . . . . 234  
20. Getting Projects Unstuck . . . . . 238  
21. Overcoming the Number One Sticking Point for  
New Leaders. . . . . 241  
  
*Join the Movement.* . . . . . 253  
*Learn More and Pass This On* . . . . . 255  
*Acknowledgments.* . . . . . 257  
*Notes* . . . . . 259

---

# INTRODUCTION

## *We All Get Stuck in Some Way*

It's okay to be stuck,  
but we don't want to stay stuck

---

*So, if money and access and organizational might aren't the foundation of the connected economy, what is? Initiative.*

SETH GODIN<sup>1</sup>

If you've ever been stuck, you are in good company. Mark Twain got stuck when writing *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Einstein got stuck when developing the general theory of relativity, and Martin Luther got stuck trying to grasp the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Even the apostle Paul got stuck on his missionary journeys (Acts 27:20; 1 Thessalonians 2:17–18).

We all hate being stuck. But it happens to everyone in various ways—sometimes in big ways and very often in smaller ways. You can even be stuck in multiple ways at once.

You likely are stuck in some way right now. You might feel like you don't know where you are headed in life, which is certainly one major type of being stuck. Or you might know where you want to go but keep running into obstacles—another way of being stuck.

You might be trying to do something large and important that you just can't push forward. Or the ride to accomplishing your goals

is just plain bumpier than it ought to be because of various “sticking points” in your productivity approach, workplace environment, or time-management tools. You know there are ways to do things more effectively, but you just aren’t sure what they are.

The encouraging and surprising truth is that it’s okay to be stuck. Being stuck can be a mark that you are doing important things, because important things are often hard. And when things are hard, we are likely to get stuck.

Further, God meets us where we are stuck. In fact, it’s when we are stuck that he often meets us most deeply. David often prayed things like,

Rescue me from the mud;  
don’t let me sink any deeper!  
Save me from those who hate me,  
and pull me from these deep waters.  
(Ps. 69:14 NLT)

Now that’s being stuck.

We’ve all been there, and all is not lost when we are. It’s okay to be stuck. But we don’t want to stay stuck.

None of us enjoys being stuck. And it sometimes puts crucial, important things at risk. There are things we want to do, things we need to do, and things that make a difference in the world that won’t get done if we stay stuck.

The good news is that it is possible to get unstuck and overcome the obstacles to doing great work and getting the right things done. David prayed for deliverance and got unstuck. Paul never became passive, in spite of his many obstacles. Mark Twain finished *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* after taking a year off to replenish. And Einstein got the help he needed with the math to bring the theory of relativity all the way through to completion. (Yes, Einstein needed help with math!—of a very advanced sort, of course.)

## STUCK IN OUR PRODUCTIVITY

We get stuck in lots of ways. We can get stuck in traffic, stuck in line, even stuck in the mud. You might be stuck in a job you don't like, stuck in your attempt to lose weight, or just plain stuck in a rut.

At root, we are stuck when we really want to do, change, or accomplish something, but something prevents or blocks us from doing it. Those things can be internal (sometimes we are the reason we are stuck!), or they can be external.

One of the biggest ways we get stuck is in our productivity. We'll focus on that in this book because productivity has such an impact on everything we do every day. And it's getting worse. More and more people are noting that being frustrated and stuck in their productivity is one of their biggest pain points in work and life.

It's no surprise that we feel this way. Obstacles to our productivity are everywhere. We often feel frustrated, like we are floundering. We feel overrun with distractions, overloaded with input, stretched by multiple competing demands, exasperated by unrealistic expectations, thrown off track by interruptions, annoyed by incomprehensible snags in the systems we use, trapped by other people's bad productivity, and more and more.

In a nutshell, many of us feel like we are not getting done what really matters to us and what we are truly capable of doing. And even when we are accomplishing things, doing so is a battle that surely must be harder than it really has to be.

## THE GOAL OF THIS BOOK

The goal of this book is to get you *unstuck* in your productivity in work and life, do it in the right way—a God-centered, gospel-driven way—and enable you to stay unstuck through obstacles.

In other words, this book is about more than just meeting your own needs. It is about getting unstuck so that you can accomplish

*God's purposes* more effectively. Getting unstuck from things that don't matter so you can accomplish the things that really do. Ultimately, this is a book about conquering busyness, doing great work, and escaping average for a cause greater than yourself—and doing all this in a holistic way that doesn't sacrifice one area of life for another (such as sacrificing your family for your career).

## YOU CAN GET UNSTUCK

One might ask, is getting unstuck really possible? Yes, it is. Since our goal is to get unstuck in our productivity—defining productivity holistically as living a flourishing life, not just doing better at work—we are specifically going to utilize the principles of *personal effectiveness* to get unstuck. We will see a bit more what this means shortly, but for now it is helpful to know that the discipline of personal effectiveness has been shown to, well, be effective.

For example, recent studies have shown that effort and skill trump innate talent.<sup>2</sup> Seth Godin wisely notes: “The myth seems to be that you're born with some magic combination of parents, DNA, and lucky breaks, and they conspire to determine what you accomplish in life. Nonsense. And a good thing, too, because it means that for all of us, there's a wide-open path—if we choose to do something about it.”<sup>3</sup>

Even more than this, Stephen Covey notes in *Principle-Centered Leadership* that many managers who have implemented the principles of personal effectiveness that go to the root (addressing paradigms) have seen “gains in human performance of 500 percent.”<sup>4</sup> He points out that “quantum change” in performance comes from true personal effectiveness that addresses your paradigms, not just behaviors or even attitudes (which is the kind of effectiveness we will be looking at). And then what really moves the fulcrum is moving from individual contribution to leadership.

And Charles Duhigg, author of the now almost classic *Power of Habit*, writes in his follow-up book on productivity:

There are some people, however, who have figured out how to master this changing world. There are some companies that have discovered how to find advantages amid these rapid shifts. We now know how productivity really functions. We know which choices matter most and bring success within closer reach. We know how to set goals that make the audacious achievable; how to reframe situations so that instead of seeing problems, we notice hidden opportunities; how to open our minds to new, creative connections; how to learn faster by slowing down the data that is speeding past us.<sup>5</sup>

So it is possible to get unstuck. Now, what is our process for doing so?

## USING PERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS TO GET UNSTUCK

The following principles can help you get unstuck. They can be organized within the framework of the discipline of personal effectiveness, which will enable you to remember them better and use them more effectively.

### *What Is Personal Effectiveness?*

First, we need to ask: What is personal effectiveness? You may have heard of the term “personal effectiveness,” although it isn’t often used today. Today it is often just called “productivity.” If you are a fan of David Allen’s *Getting Things Done*, when you implement your Getting Things Done (GTD) system, you are dealing with personal effectiveness.<sup>6</sup> If, like me, you love the work of 99U, which originates from Scott Branson’s great *Making Ideas Happen* and helps the creative world be more productive, when you read their books and articles, you are reading about personal effectiveness.

The discipline of personal effectiveness was most fully developed

by Stephen Covey in the 1980s and '90s. He played a key role in popularizing ideas like “urgency and importance,” goals and roles, and mission statements.

*Getting Things Done* and other more recent productivity approaches and resources are more contemporary versions of this quest for improved productivity. They are very helpful, but what is interesting is that they leave behind some of Covey’s key concepts. They don’t reject them but leave them in the background.

Personal effectiveness in its best form brings together these two main angles from David Allen and Stephen Covey. It shows you how to process and manage your work across all levels (where GTD excels), but also shows you how to do this from within a center of *correct principles*, reflected in your mission and values. So ultimately principles are central, not methods and tactics. Finally, we then need to add to this explicit God-centeredness, as we’ve seen, as these principles come ultimately from God and his Word. And so God is at the center of our productivity and gives us the power and direction to do the right things in the right way and for the right reasons.

### ***How Does Unstuck Relate to What’s Best Next?***

In *What’s Best Next*, I presented my recommended process for personal effectiveness.<sup>7</sup> I call this process “gospel-driven productivity” (GDP). *What’s Best Next* gives the full statement of GDP.

Here in *Unstuck* my aim is not to give the full process but to provide brief insights on how to get unstuck from specific issues surrounding personal effectiveness. All of these principles can be used together very effectively. You may opt to turn to whichever ones seem most relevant to your particular current challenges.

Further, I present some principles that are crucial for effectiveness but that did not fit into *What’s Best Next* or that can benefit from an expanded treatment of what I was able to give there.

*Unstuck* therefore gives you new material focused especially on breaking free from productivity obstacles. But this new material fits



with and integrates completely with *What's Best Next*, enabling you to begin with either book.

## THE PROCESS FOR GETTING UNSTUCK

The process of personal effectiveness has four parts, and our principles for getting unstuck group into these four areas. As I mentioned, I won't seek to give you a comprehensive system, as the goal here is to get you unstuck as quickly as possible (and I've already outlined a full system in *What's Best Next*). Rather, I will provide brief windows into some especially successful practices for getting unstuck and within those windows focus especially on some powerful but overlooked aspects.

One of the greatest ironies is that sometimes we get stuck in implementing the very systems of productivity that are supposed to help us get unstuck! For example, one aspect of personal effectiveness is to identify our mission. But this can be hard to do, and we often get stuck doing it. Or in setting up our to-do lists, we may find that they end up being complicated or that we never look at them. We will discuss some of these aspects of being stuck as we look at our snapshots.

Here are the four sections of the book that bring together the principles we will look at for getting unstuck.

### ***Part 1. The Problem and the Principles: Foundations***

First we will examine the chief problem that gets us stuck in our productivity—busyness—and its roots in the urgency addiction. We will see that urgency versus importance is the fundamental issue in time management. This problem is the root of all the others.

We will see that to be truly effective, you cannot just focus on behaviors. You have to change at the root, which means changing your mind-set and paradigm. That is, you need an entirely different approach to effectiveness that is not based on urgency but is rather based on importance.

As a result, you also will likely find that this is a new approach to personal effectiveness from what you are used to, with these distinctives:

- It is based in the importance paradigm rather than just prioritizing what is urgent.
- It is geared to the knowledge work era rather than the industrial model of work.
- It is God-centered rather than leaving God out and then leaving it to you to integrate the process with your faith on your own.
- It affirms the place of work in your life and finds it exciting rather than something to avoid.

Personal effectiveness in a nutshell is this: operate from a center of sound principles. Use those principles to set your priorities. And then organize and execute your life around those priorities. This section gives you the center of sound principles that you can then use to create your priorities and organize and execute around them.

### ***Part 2. Personal Leadership: The Compass***

Part 1 shows that you can't go straight to setting priorities (which most time-management books do); instead, you have to start with what is behind priorities. Otherwise you will not set the right priorities, and you will get stuck.

With that understanding in place, in part 2 you can now begin to develop a vision for your life and determine your priorities. This section touches on the key concept of life planning, which is being discussed more and more. It is about designing your life—but with a twist: doing it in a *God-centered way*.

I call this part “the compass”<sup>8</sup> because it's something that has to precede even having a plan. Your compass is how you find your way even when the map isn't clear. Having a compass by which you can detect “true north” enables you to adapt and create your own maps—which is at the heart of true personal leadership.

### ***Part 3. Personal Management: The Clock***

Then you need to be able to implement your vision. You do this by applying discipline, or focus. This step is twofold: saying no to things outside of the vision (and recognizing them as such—a key component of focus) and staying focused on the tasks you select. It involves organizing yourself, motivating yourself, and actually carrying out your plan as well as *controlling to plan* by identifying deviations and correcting them.

The key to time management at the end of the day is simple: you need to know where you are going, and you need to focus on the things that will get you there. The reason it is so hard is that we often don't have a clear vision, and when we do, we aren't aware of how to stay focused on it. By learning these skills, you will gain the ability to manage your life, make change, and get from where you are to where you want to be—that is, to get unstuck.

For readers of *What's Best Next*, you will notice that this strategy aligns with the DARE model. "Define" covers personal leadership. Then "Architect," "Review," and "Execute" focus on personal management.

### ***Part 4. Special Obstacles: The Laser***

Finally, I will give quick but powerful solutions to getting unstuck from some of our most common sticking points.

Note that getting unstuck is not just about the laser. It can't be, since we've seen that everything we do needs to be based on a vision, which in turn needs to be based on correct principles. Many people want to go right to the laser, but that won't work. The laser needs to be plugged in to the other components. Then it becomes very powerful.

Use this book to quickly get unstuck from the pitfalls of common challenges, such as developing a vision for your life or organizing your time, and also to find the basic process for productivity. In sum, *Unstuck* is about how to accomplish God's priorities using quick tips for getting unstuck in common time-management dilemmas.

## HOW I'VE BEEN STUCK

I've been stuck numerous times in both literal and metaphorical ways.

One time I was stuck in a canyon with my brother after a mountain bike journey gone wrong, and we had to hike up a one-thousand-foot vertical rise to get out—carrying our bikes.

Another time I got my car got stuck in the mud in the middle of nowhere. I was with my two sons and had taken a wrong turn in the country, and the dirt road turned into pure mud at the bottom of a hill. We couldn't gain traction to drive out and had to call a towing company with a large tractor to pull us out. (They were prepared—this apparently happened a lot.)

And I've been stuck in my productivity. Stuck in projects redesigning large websites and in learning large chunks of material for new roles I'd been given. Perhaps most of all, I've been stuck in writing my books. I got stuck writing *What's Best Next* and have heard the joke hundreds of times about how ironic it was that I got stuck writing a book on productivity. (I still find it funny, and I don't begrudge the teasing.) I even got stuck writing this book—the biggest irony of all, stuck in writing a book on getting unstuck!

But writing hasn't been my only, or biggest, area of getting stuck. A few years ago, I encountered a special challenge: something went wrong with my health, and I did not know what it was. I began to have extreme fatigue and muscle pain. My legs and lower back felt heavy and had a throbbing type of pain. I could no longer do what I normally could do, which really threw me off. I would make time estimates and design my workload based on what I could normally do, because that is what I was used to. But when it came time to do these things, the energy just wasn't there. And I didn't know why. At night I often could not fall asleep. Doing anything was so difficult. It felt like I was constantly carrying a fifty-pound weight with me.

I went to doctors and tried all sorts of things. Blood tests came

back normal. We could not figure it out. Physically nothing was wrong with me. Nevertheless, I was feeling real physical pain. But when you can't figure out what is causing the pain, how can you fix it? I looked into fibromyalgia, which is a diagnosis of exclusion—basically, if doctors can't figure out anything else, and a few other criteria are met, it might be this.

We finally discovered that what I had was depression. I had battled depression before, but for some reason this time it caught me off guard. At one point, I met with a group of people who wanted to know more about what my depression was like, so I brought part of my weight set from home with me. I had a volunteer carry a bunch of things across the room while also carrying two twenty-five-pound weights. I said, "This is what even the simplest tasks are like for me—returning a voice mail, mowing the lawn, taking a shower. Anything I do is that much harder."

How I got unstuck from depression is somewhat surprising. I share this with you to let you know that while I've read and studied a great deal about personal productivity and time management, I've been stuck myself. And I understand that the reasons why we get stuck can vary, depending on our circumstances. My experiences have taught me that anyone can get stuck for any reason. Even when you are equipped with the latest productivity insights, it can happen. Because I've been stuck so often in my life, I've had to learn how to get unstuck as well. And over the past few years, after much trial and error—as well as help from the latest productivity research—I've become something of an expert at getting unstuck. And fortunately at getting stuck less often.

## WHO THIS IS FOR

I've written this book for anyone who is passionate about what they are doing and wants to make change. I want to help you do more of what God calls you to do, and do it better. I want to help you avoid the paths that will get you stuck in the first place and to overcome

the barriers that get in your way. And when you do get stuck, I want to help you get unstuck.

Specifically, I hope this book can help both non-Christians and Christians.

### *This Book Is for Non-Christians*

C. S. Lewis said that the most effective books in helping non-Christians come to faith are often those that are not explicitly Christian. I'm breaking that rule. This book is explicitly Christian. There are now many Christians in the field of productivity and leadership that are true experts and are writing for general audiences. What we now also need is an explicitly Christian view—even for non-Christians. I say this because, as Christians, we have useful things to say to the world in general—even when speaking explicitly from our Christian worldview. The things we have to say can be of benefit even to those who don't accept our faith beliefs. Further, they can also help overcome the stereotype that the Christian worldview is superficial.

I want to show that the Christian solution is truly useful and good. I want to show that it provides something essential and doesn't go light and superficial on the best practices and latest research. And I want to present the Christian vision of productivity, but not as an outsider. I am doing it as a participant in the common culture. I have learned from the best secular thinking (that is, thinking that isn't explicitly faith based) and am building on those ideas—not looking down on them or dismissing them because they aren't explicitly Christian. I am living in the same world as the most productive non-Christians, and many of the same things help us both. As Christians, we need to affirm that truth. We also need to show how this truth integrates with a biblical perspective, and how non-Christians can follow biblical principles in their lives that will transform as well as improve many of the things they are already doing and the goals they already have. Thus I believe this book will be of benefit even to those who do not share the faith of Christianity.

***This Book Is for Christians: The Growing Movement***

And this book is especially for Christians who are passionate about what they are doing and want to make change.

The Christian world has been doing an amazing job of thinking about almost every aspect of life from a gospel-centered perspective. But time management has been frequently neglected—or treated superficially. Now, however, this is changing. There is a growing movement among Christians who care much about getting things done and doing an amazing job. They are especially excited about doing good work and are endowed with remarkable creativity and initiative to make it happen. They are people in both ordinary and extraordinary circumstances who simply have the desire to make something significant happen.

More than ever before, Christians are starting organizations, making a difference where they are, and impacting the world. They are starting churches, getting involved in their communities, and loving their families. This is an extraordinary worldwide movement, and we need to equip it and fuel it. We can see it in the many great conferences that are happening: the Global Leadership Summit, Catalyst, Q, and so many more. And we can see it in the great churches and organizations like Austin Stone, Redeemer NYC, Sojourn Louisville, and so many more.

Yet, sometimes, we get stuck.

I want to help you turn your desire to make a difference and even change the world into real action—and do it in a God-centered way, a way that honors him and is empowered by him.

This book is about accomplishing God's purposes without getting stuck.

**THE RESULTS: What Will Happen  
If You Can Get Unstuck**

We already know that by learning personal effectiveness, you will be able to manage your time deliberately; you will have more time,

more energy, and more momentum; and you will be able to apply it to accomplish great work.

But there is something beyond these things that for many of us is even more exciting: as we get unstuck, we can change the world. We can advance the common good, tackle large global problems like extreme poverty more effectively, and further the spread of the gospel.

And so, at the end of the day, this book will equip you to make a difference in the world. It starts with the most central, but often overlooked, factor in doing that: learning how to lead yourself. Let's go.

## THE UNSTUCK CLINIC

### *Core Point*

We all get stuck at some point, and this is normal. The discipline of personal effectiveness can help us get unstuck from productivity obstacles, but the most important thing is that we do this in a God-centered way.

### *Exercise*

Write out a description of your vision of what it looks like to be unstuck.

### *Resources That Address Getting Unstuck*

Applying scientific research and neuroscience to productivity challenges:

- Charles Duhigg, *Smarter Faster Better: The Transformative Power of Real Productivity*
- David Rock, *Your Brain at Work: Strategies for Overcoming Distraction, Regaining Focus, and Working Smarter All Day Long*



New and great all-around books on productivity and focusing on the core:

- Greg McKeown, *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*
- Cal Newport: *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*

Getting unstuck emotionally:

- Jennie Allen, *Stuck* (DVD-based study)
- Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*
- Christine Jeske and Adam Jeske, *This Ordinary Adventure: Settling Down without Settling*

Taking responsibility and initiative:

- Stephen Covey, “Habit One: Be Proactive,” in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*
- Seth Godin, *Poke the Box*

Flourishing:

- Tom Rath and Jim Harter, *Wellbeing: The Five Essential Elements*
- Martin Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*

Virtue and flourishing:

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*
- Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*

Career:

- Jon Acuff, *Do Over: Make Today the First Day of Your New Career*
- Emma Seppälä, *The Happiness Track: How to Apply the Science of Happiness to Accelerate Your Success*

Keeping your faith real:

- Todd Wilson, *Real Christian: Bearing the Marks of Authentic Faith*
- Francis Chan, *Crazy Love*

— PART 1 —

**THE PROBLEM  
AND THE  
PRINCIPLES**

*Foundations*



## HOW WE GET STUCK

There are three ways we get stuck in our productivity

---

*Almost all of us feel torn by the things we want to do, by the demands placed on us, by the many responsibilities we have.*

STEPHEN COVEY<sup>1</sup>

I love that Dr. Seuss book *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* The main character is off to great places and doing great things. He has incredible potential, and he is using it. It's an inspiring book, often given to graduates:

You'll be on your way up!  
You'll be seeing great sights!  
You'll join the high fliers  
Who soar to high heights.

The reason I like this book so much is because it's realistic. It presents both the highs and the lows. For shortly after this, we read:

Wherever you fly, you'll be best of the best.  
Wherever you go, you will top all the rest.  
Except when you *don't*.  
Because, sometimes, you *won't*.

It goes on:

I'm sorry to say so  
but, sadly, it's true  
that Bang-ups  
and Hang-ups  
*can* happen to you.<sup>2</sup>

That is, we get stuck. Things might be going great. We might be flying high, accomplishing our goals, and doing amazing things. Everything is going our way. But then, suddenly, it isn't. Things that worked for us before stop working. All of a sudden, none of the options before us are appealing. We aren't sure what to do. Nothing we try pans out.

What do we do when that happens? And is there a way to avoid it—or at least make it happen less? Is there a way to get unstuck and maybe even get stuck less?

Here's another angle from which to look at it. The world of work keeps getting more exciting. We have more opportunity than ever now to make an impact because, thanks to the internet, we are all empowered. We don't need to get the approval of gatekeepers (sometimes overly restrictive!) to get our work out to the world. Everyone can speak up, and everyone can get their work out there.

Our aim in this is not to feel good about ourselves but to serve. We want to do work that brings benefit to people in the best way we can. Doing so is important and it matters. It matters because it's part of the most fulfilling life; it's part of God's plan for us for reflecting him in the world; and it's the way he renews our cities socially, economically, and spiritually.

But there is something in the way of doing this kind of work.

Sometimes we get stuck.

Why does that happen? And what can we do to prevent it? To answer these questions and to know what to do when we get stuck, we need to understand a bit more about what it means to be stuck.

## WHAT IT MEANS TO BE STUCK

We are stuck when we don't know how to move forward. Or when we try to move forward and our efforts are ineffective. We spin our wheels, and we just can't move ahead. We are stuck when we are not making the impact we are supposed to be making. We are also stuck when our work lives are taking up more of our life than they ought—when work is reducing the amount of time our families deserve, reducing church involvement, reducing our time to recharge, hindering our relationships, and having other ill effects. That is, being *out of balance* is also part of being stuck.

Here's how we talk when we are stuck:

*Stuck:* "I don't know what to do."

*Stuck:* "I'm trying to do X, and A keeps getting in the way."

*Stuck:* "I'm making progress, but the road is bumpy—way bumpier than it should be."

Getting stuck happens to all of us to varying degrees and in multiple ways. We get stuck in our attempts to make change, stuck in our productivity, and stuck in our attempt to get important things done in a balanced way.

## BEING STUCK COMES DOWN TO THREE MAIN THINGS

How do we break free from the productivity obstacles that get us stuck? First, we need to understand the causes better. At root, we get stuck in our productivity in three chief ways:

1. We don't know what God wants us to do.
2. We know what God wants us to do, but we don't know how to make it happen.
3. Obstacles in our way are preventing us from doing it.

### ***We Don't Know What God Wants Us to Do***

Sometimes we aren't sure what we need to do or want to do at all—with our lives, with our career, with the next project, or even with the next hour. When this happens we may feel disoriented, lacking direction, or just confused (that is, stuck!).

Lack of direction is a very significant—and much overlooked—source of being stuck. For you can't get where you are going if you don't know where you are going!

The problem here is *lack of vision*.

### ***We Don't Know How to Make It Happen***

Very often, even when we do know what we need or want to do, we aren't sure how to do it. We aren't sure what the path is—or how to chart the path and move along it. This is like being in the water and seeing your destination, but not knowing how to swim. You know where you want to go but can't move yourself there. This, also, is a much-overlooked cause of being stuck.

Here you can feel trapped, stuck in the most literal sense. Stuck in the mud and immobilized.

The problem here is *lack of planning and execution*.

### ***Obstacles Are in Our Way***

Beyond that, even when we do start on the path, obstacles threaten to throw us off. These obstacles often take the form of our being overscheduled, overbusy, and overwhelmed. And, interestingly, sometimes fear is an obstacle. One of the biggest obstacles is fear of risk—or even fear of success.

This is the problem of *obstacles in the way*. We know how to execute and may even be pretty good at it, but our execution has holes. We are more vulnerable to obstacles than we need to be. This is the most recognized cause of getting stuck, and it needs to be addressed. But it can't be addressed first, because often the obstacles are actually symptoms of being stuck in one of the first two ways.



## SUMMING IT UP

We are stuck when we don't know what we want or can't accomplish what we want. Not knowing what we want is the problem of lack of vision. Not being able to accomplish what we want breaks down into two subproblems: we don't know how to execute, and obstacles are in the way.

Lack of vision, lack of execution, and obstacles—those are what get us stuck.

### THE UNSTUCK CLINIC

#### *Core Point*

We get stuck in our productivity when we don't know where we should be going, don't know how to get there, or keep encountering obstacles.

#### *Exercise*

What are the biggest ways you are stuck right now? Take a few minutes to reflect, and write them down.

#### *Taking It Deeper: A Quick Survey to Identify If You Are Stuck*

##### VISION

- Are you accomplishing what God wants you to accomplish?
- Do you know what God wants you to accomplish?
- When you accomplish your goals, do you feel they were the right goals?

##### EXECUTION

- Do you feel prepared for each day?

- Are you completing things on time?
- Are you unhurried?
- Are you making progress toward your goals?
- Do you like the approach you have for managing your work?
- Are you able to get from where you are to where you want to be?
- Are you able to accomplish the things that matter most to you?

#### OBSTACLES

- How often do you get in the zone in a typical workweek?
- In your work, are you able to do what you do best every day?