



## The Social Capitalist: Heidi Grant Halvorson

*Never Eat Alone* co-author Tahl Raz interviewed Heidi Grant Halvorson, Ph.D. a motivational psychologist, and author of *Succeed: How We Can Reach Our Goals*. The focus of the interview was Halvorson's explosive article, *Nine Things Successful People Do Differently*, that became the most popular and commented on *Harvard Business Review* blog post in 2011.

This is an edited transcript from a Social Capitalist Skills Session. The Social Capitalist is sponsored programming of myGreenlight, the only comprehensive online learning platform for critical relationship development skills.

Skills Sessions are 30-minute recorded chats focused on helping listeners master specific disciplines in the relational and social arts. You can also check out Social Capitalist Events, our live, interactive interview series dedicated to delivering in-depth discussion on relationship science with the best and brightest thought leaders in business and academia.

**Tahl Raz:** This is Tahl Raz. I'm the co-founder of myGreenlight and host of the Social Capitalist, bringing you analysis and advice from thought leaders in this new era of social business. I'm very excited about the show today. With popular blog columns in *Harvard Business Review*, *Fast Company* and *Psychology Today*, and a new book entitled *Succeed: How We Can All Reach Our Goals*, Heidi Grant Halvorson is a motivational psychologist to whom the business community is increasingly turning to understand what she calls "the science of success." Heidi, welcome!

**Heidi H. :** Thank you.

**Tahl Raz:** So, first, the basics. What do you mean by success and what do you mean by science?

**Heidi H. :** Those are good questions. I think the terms of success are so personal that different people, according to their values and desires, will have different ideas about what constitutes success.

When I talk about success, I'm generally talking about it in the sense of achieving your goals. I'm talking about whatever it is that you're hoping to get out of your personal life, out of your professional life, and how can you be more effective in getting to that place of realizing your wishes, your dreams, and your desires.

Now, having said that, it's true that there are some kinds of goals that we pursue that seem more likely to lead to the lasting sense of wellbeing and satisfaction that we all associate with success. I think (and the research suggests) that those tend to be goals having to do with things such as acquiring new skills and knowledge and developing our abilities.

When our goals are about connecting with other people, with the people in our personal lives and with our community, or when our goals are authentic to ourselves and are about doing things that we find interesting and enjoyable, that speak to something about us, these kinds of goals seem to lead to kind of an authentic happiness.

We don't seem to get this happiness from pursuing goals that are more related to receiving validation from other people, or accumulating power or wealth for the sake of wealth. You can be

happy when you reach those goals, but you don't get that sense of lasting wellbeing.

So I try, in the work that I do, not only to give people tools for how to be more effective in reaching their goals, but also give them some guidance as to what kind of goals they really should be devoting themselves to. I try to help determine which goals are the best ones to pursue.

I think that since I use a scientific approach, my method is different from many people who work in this motivational space. Much of the advice you read from people who are writing about motivation comes from their personal experiences, anecdotes, and individual success stories.

While that can be valuable, in many instances the advice is not very practical, useful and it's often difficult to implement in your own life. Sometimes it's actually just wrong. Often our intuitions let us down when it comes to what makes us successful and why we reach or fail to reach our goals.

I think because my background is in research – my training is as an experimental scientist – I take the approach of not just looking at individual stories, but also looking at hundreds of people at a time. People in motivational research observe people in the workspace, classroom, on the playing field, and at home. We ask them about what kinds of things they did, and look to see whether or not that made them successful.

By taking a step back you're able to see, far more objectively what works, what doesn't, and why, when observing lots of people trying to achieve a particular goal at the same time.

The advice I try to focus on has come from decades of motivational research. People feel they can trust it because they know it works.

**Tahl Raz:**

So within the application of all of these new, and when I say “new,” I mean last 30 years of social science’s focus on the science of success or achievement, you said something incredibly provocative. You make suggestions in your book, and you have implied that you have the answer. So what are the best goals to pursue, as in, what goals create the most wellbeing, the most fulfillment, the most authentic experience?

**Heidi H. :**

Well, it's not like there are three specific things that you need to do. It's a broad class of goals. It all comes down to why you're pursuing the goals that you are pursuing. For example, if you are trying to get ahead at work, which many of us are, are you climbing the ladder because you find it personally challenging and rewarding, or are you doing it in order to seek the approval of other people? Often it's not necessarily about *what* the goal is, but the *why*, that really matters.

We choose goals in our lives that satisfy our basic human needs, and people have been arguing for thousands of years about what those needs are. The consensus is that psychology has basically focused on three in particular.

The first universal and cross-cultural need is the need for *belonging*. This is the basic need to relate to other people, to be part of meaningful groups, and to contribute to their communities.

The second need is the need for what psychologists call *competence*. This need has to do with growing our abilities, working on new skills, acquiring knowledge, and being able to impact our environment in meaningful ways.

The third basic human need concerns *autonomy*, the idea that we do things because we are intrinsically motivated to do them. Autonomous needs reflect something about our values and who we are as unique individuals. Here it's really the "why" that matters. Why are you deciding to go to medical school? Why are you doing what you're doing at work? Why are you in a particular relationship? If the answer is to satisfy these basic needs, and they're going to bring you authentic lasting happiness, then that's success.

It's when our actions and our goals are motivated by things outside ourselves, such as the approval of others, or by seeking power and fame for their own sake, rather than to use them to do something positive, that our happiness is more likely to be fleeting.

If your goals really satisfy these basic human needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy, then it's likely that your happiness is going to last longer and be deeper than you would have had otherwise. While achieving goals is always a good thing, it's when we pursue what really satisfies us as human beings, that we achieve a more meaningful level of happiness.

**Tahl Raz:** As the correlation between happiness and achievement is one of the things we're talking about, here's what fascinates me. Since you've been immersed in these 30 or 40 years of research and personally conducted much of this social science research, which distinguishes you from so many others in this field, do you have a different view of human potential? Has it changed?

**Heidi H. :** Oh, yes.

**Tahl Raz:** And is there a consensus now on our ability to change and tap into that? Tell me about that.

**Heidi H. :** Personally, learning about this science as a graduate student, researcher, then a professor, has really changed me. I entered graduate school thinking, as many Americans do, that I was smart because I was born that way. I also thought that there were many things I *wasn't* good at, because again, I was born that way. I believed that being successful in the different domains of your life had everything to do with your DNA. I thought that abilities were more or less innate qualities.

I discovered that that was wrong. I think now that there really is a great deal of consensus about the malleability of human abilities. In other words, even things that we tend to think of as very much innate, like intelligence, willpower, creativity, conscientiousness, things that we think people are born with, turn out to not be the case at all.

Now, having said that, of course it's true that your DNA matters to the extent that you may have certain predispositions. You may be born with a temperament that lends itself to the study of certain

kinds of things, or to excel in certain domains. But nobody ever really gets to be very good at anything without tremendous effort and persistence and practice.

That's something that was very eye opening for me. It was also eye opening for me to realize that the story I had been telling myself my whole life, about why I was good at some things and not at others, was wrong.

This realization showed me two very important things. One, human abilities of all kinds, whether you are talking about intelligence, social skills, or leadership abilities, are all very malleable, so we can, with persistence, patience, and the right expertise, get better at just about anything that we set our mind to. There is really a tremendous amount of evidence for this now, particularly in domains like intelligence, which we used to think of as genetically determined.

The second thing that I think is really important, and again I know this from first-hand experience, is that we're often surprisingly wrong in the stories we tell ourselves about our successes and our failures. This is one of the reasons why I think you have to be a little bit careful when you pick up the biography or autobiography of some tremendously successful famous person telling you about the secrets of their success. They might be right, but they might be wrong. They might be attributing their success to things that weren't actually the things that made them successful. It's really amazing how we can sometimes latch on to stories about ourselves that seem perfectly plausible, that are, in fact, wrong.

I think, especially in the American culture, that there is a tremendous emphasis on ability. We love and are fascinated by stories about prodigies and child geniuses. When we look at successful people, we tend to say, “Wow, that person is so smart. They’re different to me because they were born with something that I don’t have.” When we look at our own difficulties, we tend to blame it on a lack of some ability we don’t think we can get our hands on.

That really isn’t the way success or achievement works and I think that by believing this, we’re doing ourselves a considerable disservice.

**Tahl Raz:**

Heidi, let me push you on that. The ideas that “achievement is not innate,” “we are not our genetic destiny,” “deliberate practice,” “10,000 hours”, and so on, are such sellable ones and there’s so much literature on them that I’d like to take the position of devil’s advocate.

Say, for example, that we read the autobiographies of these prodigies and these people who have achieved great success. We even follow their “ten-point plan” even though it seems somewhat unachievable. Then you and other people come along and say, “Look, there’s a science to success, it’s not innate.” This brings great hope for real transformation, hope that even unsuccessful adults can actually transform themselves into successes. However, I would contend that the culture isn’t focusing on that. We’re actually focusing on Oprah not being able to lose the weight, or President Obama continuing to smoke cigarettes.

So where are those examples? Have you run into them? Have you seen that in applying this knowledge you speak of, that transformation can happen and sustain itself in real examples?

**Heidi H. :**

I think that's a great question. Certainly there are people who turn their lives around, but often we only know of them later in life. You only meet them once they're quite successful, but if you probe into the past, you find that there was a time when they really didn't have their act together.

It's also true that sometimes you just don't see the things that very successful people struggle with. In the book, I often use myself as an example, because although I always did well at school (I was just that kind of kid) and school really mattered to me, there were many, many areas of my life where I didn't do so well. I can tell you, for instance, that in the course of writing this book, I lost 50 pounds. It's like finding medical doctors who smoke cigarettes even though they know they shouldn't or psychologists, especially research psychologists, who work in areas and don't actually apply the lessons of what they're doing to their own lives. I was definitely guilty of that.

I had gained about 50 pounds from having two children, and it wasn't going anywhere. But I wasn't actually approaching it in a way that was strategic. I wasn't using my motivational knowledge that I had learned from my research. I had been telling myself, *Oh, I just don't have the willpower to lose this weight.* Then I thought, *Wait a minute! Here I am telling everybody else that's not the way willpower works. I can start using it.*

When academics and researchers write things up, we write in this terrible jargon that is so dense no one can read it, so it wasn't really until I sat down to write the book and said, *How can I translate all of these decades of research into usable strategies that people can use in their everyday lives?* Or in other words, *How can I write this in English and say, "Here's the practical take-home message?"* that I realized for the first time, hey, you know, that's something I should be doing.

So I started using some of the techniques that I talk about in the book, techniques that you can really apply to any goal. I started applying them to my weight loss goal, things like *if-then* planning. I started thinking about when my low-willpower moments would be. I set myself the goal of losing the weight but losing it in a slow way. I was going to do it through steady changes over time, as I talk about in the book, the sort of "get-better" mindset rather than the "be-good" mindset. I started thinking about it in terms of making progress over time. It took, probably, from start to finish, about two or three years, but the weight came off.

I think there are a lot of people who are very successful in some areas of their lives and less successful in other areas of their lives. And they don't necessarily realize this because they are doing the right things in one area and failing to do them in the other. I can tell you certainly that was true in my case. When it came to my work, I was very good about planning. I was very organized. I used many of the strategies intuitively when it came to my work, but I had just never applied them to losing weight before.

**Tahl Raz:**

This is actually a terrific segue into the nitty-gritty section of the interview. Can you go into a little bit of detail about planning? You

just mentioned it as one of the keys to losing 50 pounds, which is, by the way, unbelievable. Congratulations! You look fantastic!

**Heidi H. :** It was good!

**Tahl Raz:** If planning is indeed one of the key success tactics that you started applying to your health and weight loss, can you talk more about this?

**Heidi H. :** Planning is an extraordinary tool. I've often joked to colleagues that if we could take every life management book, every motivation book, every diet book on the market, and just slide a little pamphlet in the back about how to do if-then planning, and use it with respect to whatever the course that's recommended in the book, people would be extraordinarily more successful.

There have been, at this point, about 200 published studies at least looking at if-then planning as a tool. It's a particular way to go about planning how you will achieve a goal. It's so effective that on average the success rates double or triple.

Let's use the example of exercise. We find that people who use this technique and who have a goal of introducing a regular exercise routine into their lives, go from success rates of around 32 percent on average to 91 percent on average. That's a very typical result.

Usually when we think about planning, we normally just think about listing the steps we need to take in order to reach the goal but the way if-then planning works is very simple. You decide in advance when you're going to try achieving any goal, and where

and when you're going to take particular actions in order to reach the goal.

Using weight loss as an example, we'll tend to make plans such as, "I'll exercise more and I'll eat less." That may *sound* like a plan, but it's really not a good plan for several reasons. First of all, we're not getting nearly specific enough about the actions we need to take in order to reach the goal.

This is a problem people have all the time. They don't realize it but they're not getting to the level of very concrete actions that need to be taken. They're also not thinking about where and when they will actually take these actions. So, it's great to say, "I want to exercise more." But where and when are you actually going to exercise more? And in what way are you going to exercise?

We find that when people say, "Well, okay, Monday and Wednesday and Friday at 8:00 a.m. before I go to work, I'll go to the gym for 45 minutes," and make that very simple plan in which they've decided exactly what action they're going to take, and where and when they're going to take it, their chances for success go up from about 2 to 300 percent.

This really works for two reasons. One, we don't often get to that really specific level. The planning forces you to get specific about the actions you need to take, not just think, *I'll eat less*, but think about what you'll eat less of, and how much less. You're forced to think about the specific things you're going to do to reach your goal, and then when and where you're going to do them.

The second thing is that we miss opportunities to act on our goals. We had a moment that would have been good to act on the goal. We weren't really doing anything at 8:00 on Monday, and that would have been the moment to seize and get to the gym, but because we didn't think about it in advance, we didn't seize that moment.

So if-then plans really help us to identify the situations where we could be acting on our goals before they slip through our fingers. Once we identify them we can seize those opportunities and take the actions we need to take in order to reach the goal. That's the basic idea.

**Tahl Raz:** It sounds somewhat similar to the framework of SMART goals. How does it depart from that? Why is the success of if-then planning so much higher than smart goals? How is it different?

**Heidi H. :** I think that's a great question. With SMART goals, the elements are all there, but they're not necessarily connected in a way that makes them really easy for your brain to use. What's nice about if-then plans are that, by taking the *if* (the situation you're going to act on) and the *then* (the specific action you're going to take) and connecting them, you link those two concepts together in your mind. This forms what psychologists call a contingency, an "if z, then y," and the wonderful thing about contingencies is that they're basically the language of the brain.

Your brain likes to process information and store information in terms of contingencies. "If x happens, then I'll do y." An if-then plan is putting the plan in your brain's natural language. You can

take advantage of your unconscious mind's processing power with if-then plans, and this doesn't really happen with SMART goals.

Our brains are incredibly active and have enormous processing capacity, but since most of our daily goal pursuit is happening on an unconscious level, we're only conscious of the tiniest fraction of what's really going on. Our brain is taking actions and doing things in order to reach goals, and we may not even be aware of it.

So the if-then plan is really acting often on an unconscious level in your mind. If you say, "I will go to the gym 8:00 a.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays," your brain, without you realizing it, is scanning the environment for 8:00 on Monday to occur. It's actively looking for it, and when that moment occurs, it says, "Bing, bing, bing! You're supposed to go to the gym right now!" The thought, *oh, I'm supposed to go to the gym*, will pop into your mind. By putting the information into this kind of language, you're getting to take advantage of more of your processing power and more of your potential.

I think the SMART goal system is great for identifying the critical steps you need to take when you're setting goals for yourself, but the if-then plan is really about *implementing* those goals. It's about going from committing to the goal to taking the action you need to take. That's where I think it has the advantage and brings something new to the picture.

**Tahl Raz:**

So how have you implemented this in your day-to-day planning?  
Does if-then planning shape and design your to-do list?

**Heidi H. :** It does, and it's interesting that you'd say that, because once you get in the habit of if-then planning, it becomes automatic. Once you've written down something that you're going to do, your next thought becomes, "When and where am I going to do this?" It becomes a habit surprisingly quickly.

If I'm writing, I actually do two things. One, I have a to-do list, sort of like a scrap of paper where I often jot things down – but now when I write something down, I also write next to it the *when* and *where*. Two, I use my calendar a lot more. I actually put the to-do list into the calendar, so I've got the *when* nailed down in addition to the *what*. Thinking in these terms becomes a habit quickly.

Incidentally though, we find that it's really not necessary to write it down. I often tell people that generally speaking it's useful to write things down to clarify your thoughts, but if-then plans actually work without writing them down. In fact, most of the 200 studies of if-then planning don't involve either writing down the plans or any repetition of the plan at all. This seems to be because the plan is created in this contingency language that your brain really likes. It just sticks without repetition or reminders. It's really incredible. I would say, without exaggeration, that it's the single most effective strategy we've discovered in 40 years of studying motivation and achievement for radically improving people's chances of success.

I should also say that if-plans only work when you're actually committed to the goal. Sometimes I'll hear from people who say, "Well, I tried if-then planning and it didn't work." When I probe I find that there are two reasons as to why it's not working.

One, you weren't really committed to the goal to begin with. It wasn't really something you wanted to do and if you don't really want to achieve this goal, then if-then planning won't work, because that initial phase of scanning won't happen. Your brain is sensitive to how committed you are to a goal. It's only when you have a lot of commitment that your unconscious mind kicks in to try to help you to reach it. You have to have commitment.

Two, if-then plans don't work you're not being specific enough. Saying something like, "When I go out to dinner, I'll order something that isn't so bad for me," is a terrible if-then plan because the "something that isn't so bad for me" is very subjective, and when you're looking at that menu, you're going to want to convince yourself that a cheeseburger "isn't so bad" for you.

You really need to make your if-then plans very specific. Instead of saying, "I'll order something that isn't so bad for me," your if-then should be "I'll order a salad." That's the kind of specificity that's needed in order for these plans to be effective.

**Tahl Raz:** Do these goals for if-plans need to be in the not-too-distant future for them to work? Or because the language is processed and retained in the way that you've talked about, by simply going through the process, are you tapping into the effectiveness of the whole scenario?

**Heidi H. :** I think that if you pushed it too far, if you made an "if-then" plan, for example, for next year, I wouldn't be so sure that it would work. If however, it's for something next week or even next month, you'll have a higher chance at a very good success rate.

There was a study that I did looking at sophomores in high school who were studying for the PSAT over the summer. And the PSAT actually happens in October. And so we gave them booklets of practice PSAT tests, and then we asked half of them, “Okay, when and where are you going to work on these PSATs?” We found that the kids who didn’t have a plan for when and where they would work on them, solved, on average, about 100 questions over the course of summer. The ones who did have a plan, solved, on average, about 250 problems. In terms of preparation, you could actually see that difference show up in their PSAT scores in the fall.

Admittedly that’s a single plan made at the beginning of the course of a whole summer, and these are 15-year-olds who really don’t have a lot of willpower when it comes to these sorts of things. I have to say that although we do see some plans being effective over long periods of time, like months, and yes, I still think it’s possible to get long-term benefits out of if-then plans by stretching them out, I do think there are probably limits. Frankly, we don’t know yet what they are, since the research has yet to be done to test what the time limits are on effectiveness.

**Tahl Raz:** You know, I could spend a lot more time on this but the one thing I wanted to get to, before I have to let you go, is your online phenomenon blog post, *Nine Things Successful People Do Differently*. I think I am correct in saying that while originally written for *Harvard Business Review*, since then it’s shown up on everything from the *Huffington Post* to countless other publications. I think it’s been *Harvard Business Review*’s most popular blog post of 2011. And you wrote that in February?

**Heidi H.:** Yes.

**Tahl Raz:** That's quite an accomplishment, given the crowd of other authors and experts you're working with.

**Heidi H. :** Thank you. It's been really amazing and I think it's still on the top-ten list! There's been a tremendous response and I think that has a lot to do with the combination of the nine things that I talk about, the predictors of success, and of reaching the goals that you set for yourself.

Some of these predictors seem obvious, though in fact they're not. Some people recognize them and say, "Yes, that makes sense." Others read it and say, "Wow, that's surprising. I hadn't thought of that." There's that combination of things I think that have made it a successful post. It's really a condensed version of the same things that I talk about in the book.

**Tahl Raz:** I thought we'd go through each one, and if you could, just flesh them out, and give a couple of sentences about why they're among the nine things. Also, and you touched on this when you said that some people refer to them as "obvious," I think that all really successful blog posts are created from provocative ideas and, in turn, provoke. There were a couple of predictors that caused some people to say, "What are these? Come on!" or "This is general, how do you execute this?" You can use this as a forum to reply to some of the most ardent or skeptical comments. The first predictor is "Get specific." How would you talk about this?

**Heidi H. :** It's really about thinking about what your goal is. "Get specific" is one of these strategies that I think gets the reaction of, "Well, of course you're supposed to get specific!"

I think that for many, these tips that seem obvious, whereas the surprising factor is actually how powerful they are. It's not surprising that getting specific about what you want to achieve is a good thing, what's surprising is how good it is. There have now been over 1000 studies looking at the impact of people getting very specific about their goals versus being very vague or somewhat vague. Instead of saying, "I want to get ahead at work," say, "I want a promotion to this level by this date," because that's specific. It turns out that you're multiple times more likely to reach your goal if you get very specific about it.

There's lots of good reason for that. One is that when our goals are vague, we keep them in the abstract. "I want to be more successful. I want to have more work/life balance. I want to lose more weight, or have more healthy living habits." When we keep it vague, it's really not clear what the next step should be. There are many, many ways to be more successful at work and there are many, many ways to live a healthier life but when our goals don't give us direction about what actions we should take, then we tend to not take them.

Get specific about what you want. Instead of just saying, "I want to be more successful," say, "I want to be at this level by this time." Instead of saying, "I want to lose weight," say "I want to lose \_\_ pounds and I want to lose it by \_\_." Instead of saying, "I want to live a healthier life," say, "I want to change such and such new health

habits,” and be specific about what bad health habits you want to get rid of.

If we get specific about it, then it becomes clear, *I need to do x, y, and z in order to reach that goal*. We often tend to be abstract about our goals because that way we often feel a little bit more connected to our dreams like “I want to be successful.” The problem is that this is not a really practical way to think about what it is that you want to achieve.

Getting specific, while obviously a good thing, is actually much more powerful than people realize. It has this chain reaction of clarifying what steps you need to take, and then working your way from there. It’s really essential for figuring out exactly what you need to do and actually doing it. It’s a very powerful strategy even if it seems a little bit obvious.

**Tahl Raz:** Okay. The second one I now see in a completely different light, just following on our conversation of if-then planning. You make a reference to it, but certainly not as robust as the one that you hit in your book or even just in this conversation. Now it makes perfect sense: *Seize the moment to act on your goals*.

**Heidi H. :** Yes, why do we fail to reach our goals? There are many reasons, but the top two, just in terms of looking over the research concerning people pursuing their goals in all domains of life, we come up against, again and again. One, not getting specific about the actions you need to take, and, two, not seizing opportunities to act on the goal and letting those moments pass you by.

You know, we say to ourselves at the end of a long day, “I didn’t have time to do x, y, and z.” That is literally almost never true. The truth is that you made your choices. You had a moment where you could have worked on that goal, and you chose to do something else. Maybe you chose to do something else for a very good reason, but you won’t take actions without thinking in advance about when and under what circumstances you’re going to do it.

We find, if you look across the literature on goal pursuit, that there is an extraordinary gap between goal commitment and achieving goals. We tend to think that being committed to something, “to really want it,” is what really matters. It does matter, it just doesn’t matter nearly as much as we think it does. It’s a necessary condition, but it’s not even close to sufficient.

For example, we find across studies in the health domain that people who are highly committed to their goals, who really want to change their behavior and do the right thing, end up failing more than 50 percent of the time. In fact, across all areas of life, it’s more like failing about 70 to 80 percent of the time. They have the commitment, but they don’t take the actions they need to take.

My book, and in many ways this blog post, is all about trying to get people to see what the obstacles are between *wanting* something and actually making it happen. Seizing opportunities is the other big problem we have when we’re trying to bridge that gap.

**Tahl Raz:**

I tend to group the third and fourth things that successful people do together: *Know exactly how far you have left to go in terms of monitoring* and *be a realistic optimist*.

I took this as being about feedback, such as knowing where you are, having the right kind of process, and, since this is The Social Capitalist, having the right people in place to self-regulate and to give you the information. Is that correct?

**Heidi H. :**

I think that's absolutely right. The third thing about monitoring and getting feedback is really essential. Nobody stays motivated in a vacuum. Nobody continues to work hard when they don't know how well they're doing. Nobody improves without having access to resources that can help them improve, and that can give them guidance about where they're going wrong.

Having the right people in place to give the necessary feedback is essential. That fourth thing, the realistic optimism part, has a lot to do with the necessity for honest feedback. While it's important that the feedback always be optimistic, in the sense that you're always given the message that you can improve and improvement is possible, it also needs to be honest.

I think that very often we shy away from telling people what they need to hear because we are too worried about protecting feelings. Although I think it's important to be tactful, it's very important to be honest. No one has ever improved without understanding what they were doing wrong and what they can do to fix it. I think that when part of your role is to give feedback, giving honest information about what you're doing right, what you're doing wrong and guidance about how to move forward, truly matters.

I think those two things speak to those three critical elements for getting people motivated, helping them stay motivated, and continuing on a course of improvement.

**Tahl Raz:** Again, I also group five and six together. Number five is *focus on getting better rather than being good*. I think that this taps into Carol Dweck's research on mindset.

**Heidi H. :** Right.

**Tahl Raz:** Number six is *have grit*. It seems like the two really work well together.

**Heidi H. :** They do, because, in fact, one turns out to be a necessary ingredient for the other. The idea, as you say, comes from my mentor Carol Dweck, who wrote the book *Mindset*. This is when we think about what we're doing in terms of making progress over time rather than being perfect right from the get-go. We benefit tremendously from thinking this way because people experience less anxiety, and they stay motivated even in the face of difficulty. They enjoy what they're doing more, they find it more interesting, and they're able to handle negativity, negative feedback, and negative emotions in a much more positive way.

You find that over time, those with the get-better mindset are absolutely the top performers. It's an irony that allowing yourself to make mistakes means that you'll end up making less of them, because you won't be quite so anxious, and you'll be able to really focus on the task at hand. So that's the get-better mindset.

The sixth thing, *have grit*, has to do with the fact that over and over again we find that persistence really matters in terms of any graded achievement. Grit is this quality that has to do with a person's ability to commit to long-term goals and really persist in

the face of difficulty. Interestingly, we find that grit out-performs even IQ scores when looking at performance in school. One of the key predictors of grit, of being able to persist over the long haul, turns out to be having this get-better mindset.

People who see their abilities as malleable, who think, “If I’m not good at this now, I can become good at it later,” naturally seem to have a mindset that allows them to be gritty in the pursuit of their goals, and really persist over the long haul.

**Tahl Raz:** The seventh thing is *build your willpower muscle*. I was surprised that you put this seventh, just because this idea of self-control was so important to you that it was almost the preface of your book. Could you talk about that?

**Heidi H. :** Well, I’ll tell you from the get-go that these predictors are not in order of importance. The willpower muscle is a really important idea. You know, many of us think of intelligence and willpower as “something that we’re born with.” We believe that there are just people who seem to have a lot of willpower and people who don’t. It turns out that this is not true. There’s a lot of research now suggesting that willpower is very much like a muscle. It’s like a biceps or triceps, in three important ways.

One, *it gets tired with use*. No matter how strong your muscles are, if you really tax them, they’re going to feel like jelly after a long workout. Willpower is like that. When you spend all day putting out fires at work and dealing with stresses, you’ve used up a lot of your willpower and your self-control just coping with the day. You don’t have a lot left for things like sticking to your diet. This is why there are so many successful people who have a famous weakness for

something. They spend all of their willpower in the successful areas of their lives and really don't have much left over for coping with that temptation or weakness. Everybody, no matter how much willpower they have, will have moments of low willpower after they've taxed it a lot.

The second way in which willpower is like a muscle is that it will actually bounce back after a rest. If you give yourself a break and try to protect yourself from temptation in the moments that you know you'll be weakest, you'll find that your willpower and your self-control does bounce back, and you'll actually have more of it later.

The third and I think the most important way in which willpower is like a muscle, is that it builds with exercise. The more the more you do things in your life that require willpower, the stronger your willpower muscle becomes. The longer you don't use it and just let it atrophy, the weaker your willpower becomes.

One of the things I talk about a lot in the book is this: Before you tackle a really large willpower challenge that will involve a great deal of resisting temptation, like quitting smoking or going on a radical dietary change, it's better to start with some smaller exercises.

These are little routines you can add to your life that involve using smaller amounts of willpower such as making your bed every day, doing 25 sit-ups every morning, or sitting up straight every time you catch yourself slouching.

There's actually a great deal of research showing these simple little exercises have significant impact on your self-control over time. So even after just two weeks of sitting up straight every time you think of it, you'll have measurably more self-control. Again, it's a very positive message, because it suggests to people that you really can get more of this very valuable resource, if you want it. The great news is that it's a message that's also very much grounded in science. It's not just a "feel-good" message. It actually turns out to be true, and this is the way willpower works.

**Tahl Raz:** So now quickly on to the last two and I'd rather spend more time on nine than eight. Eight of the nine things successful people do is that they *don't tempt fate*. They don't sabotage themselves by taking on too much. Is that really what that's about?

**Heidi H. :** Again, I think that it's very much a part of this whole willpower idea. Once you understand that willpower is limited, that no matter how much you have, there will be times when it's low, you understand the need for protecting yourself from temptation, and not putting yourself in harm's way. It's part of the willpower story, but it's an important point.

**Tahl Raz:** And number nine is, and again our conversation has changed the way I read it, *Focus on what you will do, not what you won't do*. That seems to tap into this incredibly powerful strategy and process of if-then planning, is that right?

**Heidi H. :** That's right. This tip comes directly from some research on if-then planning, which compared different kinds of plans, and how effective they were.

They compared people who made if-then plans that were about what they wouldn't do, for example, "I *won't* smoke," "I *won't* send a nasty email to my boss," then compared those to plans that tackled the same issue, but which focused on what you *would do*. "If I feel the urge to smoke, then I *will* step outside and take a deep breath." Or "if I feel the urge to smoke, then I *will* chew some gum." Or "if I feel the urge to tell off my boss, then I *will* call my friend and complain instead."

They found that not only were the "what-will-you-do-instead" plans much more effective, but in fact, the negation plans, the "I won't" ones, actually tended to backfire. There were even some results that suggested that when you just focus on what you won't do, you end up doing more of it. It has to do with the ironic processes in the brain. When we try to suppress something, we actually build it up, and when we're not focused on suppressing it, there's a release, and we think about it more.

It's the classic, "Don't think about white bears." When you tell someone not to think about white bears, all they want to do is think about white bears. It's called an *ironic monitoring rebound effect*, and it applies to planning. It's very important to not say, "I'm *not* going to do x anymore," but to talk about what you *will* do instead. When you're going to try to get rid of a bad habit, what good habit are you going to replace it with?

This way of thinking turns out to be the most effective way to change habits and to take a step towards reaching a goal.

**Tahl Raz:**

If this half hour wasn't enough, then I include this inducement to our listeners. Heidi Grant Halvorson's new book, *Succeed: How We*

*Can Reach Our Goals* was one of the best, if not *the* best book I've read on goals and goal achievement, and trust me when I tell you that I have read way too many of them! Everyone should really go out and buy this book, especially young people.

**Heidi H. :** Thank you!

**Tahl Raz:** And I want to thank you so much for spending the time with us. It's been a great, great interview. I hope we get another chance and that I get another chance to talk to you about the work that you'll be doing in the next couple of years.

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