

GET A

"If you are serious about work/life balance, read this book"

Dr Philip Unwin, Director, Wellness Centre, Microsoft UK

LIFE

Setting Your 'Life Compass' for Success



CAREER



MIND/BODY



FINANCE



RELATIONSHIPS



FUN



CONTRIBUTION



NICHOLAS BATE

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Get a Life

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Get a Life

Setting your LifeCompass for success

Nicholas Bate

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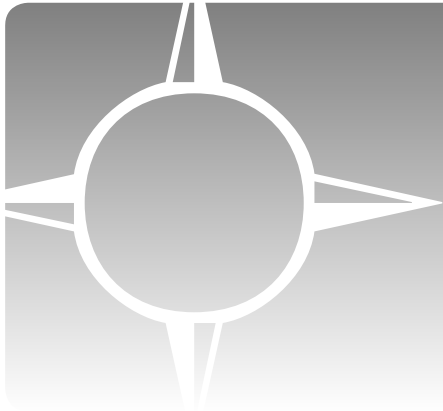


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Chapter 1

Get a Life?

Get a life!

The desire to get a life, to restore work/life balance, to 'come alive' (but without the aid of Pepsi) has never been stronger.

Our lives are pressured: it appears that while anybody and everyone can communicate with us at all times, we rarely have the time to communicate with ourselves or our loved ones. Our lives often appear to be one-dimensional: work, and only work, be that managing the household or managing the team. It's not, of course, that ours is the first generation to be under pressure, but maybe we truly are the first generation where the pressure is all-pervading, where our coping strategies have reached their natural limits and the ability to think has become the slowest process in the melée of our busy lives. A process which competes poorly against the likes of the internet, globalization, dual-parent working. We are on the critical path. The pressure is thus relentless: even if we are not working 24/7, we certainly think we are. Constant fatigue is kept at bay through the drip-feeding of caffeine, anxiety and fear-induced adrenalin.

Yet deep down we each know that we have more potential: there's so much more we want to do and be. We have dreams and visions which unfortunately all too often seem



to be dependent upon winning the lottery. Perhaps more frustratingly, there seems to be little way out of the chaos of everyday life and no simple way of stepping up to the life we would really like to live. It's all too easy to lose sight, in the apparent chaos of downsized/rightsized organizations, growing families and work/life balance uncertainties, of what we really want.

That is the reality of life for many people that I meet in my workshops. Certainly there are many, many high points, but too much is only 'OK' and some of it, frankly, is just 'grim'. Of course, compared to the lives of many on this planet these people know, deep down, that their existence is not that bad: compared to some, it is downright fantastic. But unfortunately for them it doesn't feel that good, in fact it forever feels as if a much better way of running their life is 'so close' but out of reach.

There is a way out

There is a way out, though, and it is straightforward. It doesn't require you to escape to Tuscany, give it all up and retire to Wales, downsize/rightsize (unless you feel those options really will help, of course) or do anything at all complicated. The way out is simply to adjust your way of thinking and act in some very specific ways that you can customize to fit your own situation, and then to follow them through with some reflection and straightforward actions. For many of us, the biggest challenge of the situation in which we find ourselves is the lost ability to use our 'reflective' intelligence: that powerful thought process which allows us to resolve many of the challenges in our lives. But before we explore this approach, let's be clear on a few of the tempting methods that do not work. You may be using one of them at the moment and, as it's not working, it's always nice to know that it's not just you and that now would be a good time to ditch that particular approach.

Crazy, no-return, doomed-to-failure strategies

There are plenty of these. We've all tried them (me too, of course). I encounter people using them on my workshops; they are usually mentioned when I'm coaching and I often find that new corporate clients have them embedded into their infrastructure.



But the truth is that they simply don't work. I've seen some people try and use them for years; it's not about lack of persistence with any of these. They are the wrong strategies in the first place.

False strategy number 1: 'It's just a stage in my life'

(The one where we tell ourselves 'it's just a phase and it'll get easier'.)

Well, it's true – of course – that we do have different stages in our lives such as the lots-of-exams stage, the house-full-of-toddlers stage, promotion-on-the-horizon stage, house-purchase stage, just-going-through-a-sticky-patch stage, etc. So perhaps the best thing for you is just to hang on and it will sort itself out . . . Possibly: a bit of that is fine. But think about it, reflect back over your life to date. Things don't necessarily seem to be getting any easier, do they? Once you have completed one stage another is on the way. Call it entropy, call it chaos: your life – or perhaps more strictly, the environment around your life – is just becoming more demanding. Now is the time to start managing it a little better. And that is the most important indicator that this strategy of 'just go with the flow, it'll work itself through' is not an ideal one. You know when it's working and you certainly know when it's not.

In fact, apart possibly from retirement – when for many perhaps too much grinds to a halt – there are no naturally easy stages; every stage has its particular challenges. That's the elegance of the approach we are going to look at: it is customizable to you, the situation and your particular challenge. You have to make them easy: I'm going to show you how.

False strategy number 2: 'I simply need to get more efficient'

(The one where you simply feel there's a magic technique which you are missing and you only need to discover it for everything to improve.)

A dangerous and commonly employed strategy: this is the 'I simply need to work longer and/or harder and that will sort the problem' strategy. This does at least have some



historical precedence. There was a time – both historically and for some of us, particularly if we are over thirty, in our own individual careers – when our days were not so loaded and when, therefore, there was some capacity for upping the workload. Consequently, an initial response to the challenges we are discussing was better time management (you’ll have noticed that there is always a new book or new system available on time management) or working harder (getting up half an hour earlier – that’s two and a half hours per week just for doing email) or outsourcing (ironing, children, fun). But thresholds are soon met. There is simply a limit to how much stuff anyone can do, even to how much we can outsource. Can you really cope with three inter-scheduled nannies? (No, honestly – this was cited to me on a recent workshop.)

At the same time too much efficiency, too much working and too much outsourcing all cause their own problems. Too much efficiency means no slack or downtime. Slack is part of the process of being human: it allows us to use our reflective intelligence, to just think ‘how am I doing?’ and enjoy life. Too much working means that we are not playing. Play is a particularly human attribute: it energizes us and allows us to remain authentic. Too much outsourcing means that we lose touch with what is happening: ironically, we often lose touch with those very people that outsourcing was meant to help. Many people are at their efficiency threshold and many hit it a long time ago. Remember there was a time when the rate of delivery of post to the in-tray was a limiting factor? Now, in an ‘instant’ world, we are the slowest factor around.

False strategy number 3: Escapism

(This is the one where we employ rationalization and defensiveness, and are simply not honest with ourselves.)

This is perhaps the most worrying false strategy: simply believing that something is not happening. Drown the pain. Watch more TV, drink more. Change your job. Blame others: the boss, your partner. Enough said. Not a great strategy and certainly one which only leads to more chaos in life. Be very careful about adopting a ‘victim’ mentality,



about blaming others. That is not to say that we should let a poorly run organization or a bullying manager off the hook. But, whatever the problem, the first step is to take responsibility for our own life, to decide: victim or volunteer?

A way out of this chaos

Yes, well, stuff happens. And it's history. Learn and move on.

There really is a way out: to set your 'personal compass' or LifeCompass. This alternative response, and the one with which we are concerned, is to examine our lives a little more closely. To reconsider (or consider for the first time) what we really want. And how we are working. Nothing heavy, all very straightforward. But, despite that, to make some fundamental shifts, perhaps break some limiting patterns, such as some ways of working which currently hinder us. Some examples might be:

- *Creating an integrated life. Instead of fighting the individual components – work, family, money – bring them together so that they support each other. They need not be at odds with each other. Simply imagine how much time would be saved if each aspect of your life supported the others, as opposed to being in conflict with them.*
- *Creating some true motivators beyond money, pressure, adrenalin and caffeine. Hey, money is a great motivator – but usually for what people believe it can do for them or get them, things like freedom, fun, love. How about if you went straight for what you really wanted? I'll look at the fast-track approach to such desires later.*
- *Regularly investing in ourselves. I know, it does seem a little odd. But think about it. You are organic and fragile. You're working long hours, your diet is not as good as it should be and you're getting too little appreciation. Crikey, no wonder you are on a low par.*
- *Realizing how much mindset dictates results. It's OK. I did promise that it wouldn't be heavy. But how about if you found a very fast way to get even*



better results, and how about if this was easy to do?

- *An ongoing approach. One which allowed you to keep on track for the life you wanted, whatever changes might come your way.*
- *And of course, happiness and contentment. You'll no doubt have realized by now that many of the generators of happiness – such as more money, chocolate, a great film or book, conversation, sex or a holiday, whilst all being great fun and certainly not being underrated, tend not to last until the next event. And even some of those can have diminishing returns (there are only so many films we want to see in a day) or reverse effects (too much chocolate ...). The one proven reliable source of happiness is living a life which both realizes and releases your talents. And that is what the LifeCompass is about.*

That, and a whole lot more, is exactly what we are going to be achieving in the rest of this book.

A life unexamined ... is a life not fully lived.

The Dalai Lama



Let's back-up for a moment and put this in context to help you to an even better understanding. Way back in 1988, when I started the personal development consultancy I run, Strategic Edge, a compass was a natural choice for our logo. We were after all about supporting the development of individuals, helping them 'find their way', helping them realize and release their potential.

Now, a decade and a half later, our logo has metamorphosed but its message is the same, as is our purpose: we all have enormous potential and increasingly each and every one of us wants to get at it. Many of us have already started and want to accelerate and build momentum. Whatever your current stage of work on your personal plans, wherever you are with your career and personal development, this book will help you to be successful, however you might define that ubiquitous word.

In all my experience of teaching those people whose goal is to do more and to be more, whatever their position or background, I've discovered that the real breakthrough comes when they understand their personal compass or LifeCompass. This is a concept which we have developed at Strategic Edge over our fifteen years of research and teaching to help individuals decide, firstly, what is important to them and, secondly, how to achieve



it. The keys are decision and action. Decision on its own is not enough. Action completes the change. But action without clarity can be futile.

Never has this kind of thinking, reflection and action been more important. As our way of life becomes increasingly more complex, we find it increasingly difficult as individuals to reserve our own time and the space we need to restore simplicity to our quest. This book will give clear indications on how to do that: to get simplicity without being simplistic, to get depth without jargon and above all to get results which are pragmatic, sustainable and compatible with you, with both your personality (quiet, loud, intellectual, practical ...) and your lifestyle (on a strict budget, made it all?). The LifeCompass will allow you to get success with balance and be authentic.

Authenticity

Authenticity? What does that mean? Being who you truly are. Allowing yourself to live to your full potential. To remove the blockers. To grow. To live with passion, to have fun, to contribute, to make a difference: that's being authentic.

The Strategic Edge LifeCompass

Few of us would deliberately set out into uncharted territory without a compass, be it a traditional 'boy scout' dial compass or a more sophisticated GPS device. At worst we'd get lost and never achieve what we had set out to do, but equally we might take an unnecessarily long time to get there – and with no one to blame but ourselves.

That's the challenge for life. There's clearly so much opportunity out there: fascinating, interesting and rewarding work; perfect health; fantastic relationships; financial independence; a world to explore; people to help; amazing children to support to adulthood; new ways to cook; learning to unicycle ... but how do we get to it? Some people seem to get there but then lose it ('... she has an amazing job but has become ill because of stress'). Some seem to get there but at an inappropriate cost ('... he's the MD of a prestigious company, but never saw his children while they were growing up'). Some