

Paul Rulkens's

HIGH-PERFORMANCE HERO BLUEPRINT

How to apply Strategic Quitting
to take back control in turbulent times



Paul Rulkens's High-Performance Hero Blueprint

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to take back control in turbulent times**

” Your ability to **strategically quit**, equals your ability to massively succeed



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The High-Performance Hero

Let me start with a confession: I love Mr. Winston “The Wolf” Wolfe. He is the hero of the iconic movie “Pulp Fiction.” His job is to deal with the big mess created by the two main characters:

It involves a dead body, an upset wife, and a blood-covered car. Yet, Mr. Wolf doesn’t lift a finger. He is very effective by calmly explaining to others what to do.

He refuses to become a more-better-faster individual. Instead, he systematically solves big problems with the least amount of energy. He is a High-Performance Hero.

I am convinced that every executive, professional and business owner should aspire to be like Mr. Wolf – to strategically solve complicated problems and achieve big goals, without falling into the more-better-faster trap.

This short book reveals the big secret – how you can become a High-Performance Hero too.

The pitfall of more-better-faster

I was originally trained as a chemical engineer. When I started work at a big manufacturing company, I was convinced that I knew almost everything required to achieve stunning success.

I worked internationally, managed a large group of other professionals and had various global leadership roles. Yet, climbing the corporate ladder and advancing my career was a slow and tedious process. It felt like hard work, and I didn't have as much fun as I expected.

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High performance through more-better-faster is the most difficult approach for climbing the steep ladder of success.

After struggling for several years, I stumbled upon an eye-opening insight (or blinding flash of the obvious, if you will): If you do what successful people do, you get the results that successful people get. So, I studied what successful people did, applied their ideas, kept what was working, let go of what was not working, and rapidly reinvented myself. That was more than a decade ago.

My magnificent obsession is high performance: the art and science of making successful people even more successful with the least amount of effort.

In this book, I will share my best ideas to become a High-Performance Hero. It begins with the fact that high performance through more-better-faster is the most difficult approach for climbing the steep ladder of success. It involves unnecessary hard work, tedious labor, and uncontrolled risk.

I have found that it's much easier to build your own elevator instead.

This may sound like an abstract, cute or even simple idea, but it will become clear and very applicable after reading this book. Keep in mind, though, that simple does not equal simplistic:

Applying this information requires a good deal of deep thinking, yet I guarantee that your results will be stunning.

Why is this information being shared?

In the past decade, I have worked with thousands of executives, professionals and business owners to help them apply the best ideas to accelerate their success. Usually, it involved a seminar or training, after which I committed to coach and consult with those who wanted to fast track its application. I even wrote two books to help my clients maintain momentum.

The requests for training, consulting and coaching continue to grow. So now it's time for a different approach: to distribute this information in such a way that everyone can benefit.

I wrote this book to reach even more people with condensed and useful information and, at the same time, scale back my time commitments.

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It's much easier to work on doubling your strengths than it is to incrementally try to improve your weaknesses.

The reason why many of us struggle

More-better-faster is no longer a recipe for success. A recent Gallup study found that 23% of employees were feeling burned out at work very often. An additional 44% were feeling burned out sometimes. Those are shocking statistics.



If you focus your entire life on compensating for your weaknesses, you will end up with a large set of strong weaknesses.

The favorite method, by far, to accelerate success has always been to simply learn more. Often, with a combination of soft skills training (such as servant leadership, active listening or public speaking) and business skills training (such as an MBA, productivity or lean six sigma). This slowly turns you into a more-better-faster individual.

The problem with this approach is that it rarely builds on personal strengths — it tries to compensate for weaknesses instead. (And we have many more weaknesses than strengths.) If you focus your entire life on compensating for your weaknesses, you will end up with a large set of strong weaknesses — hardly a recipe for high performance.

The sad part is that I have seen many bright individuals struggling to get ahead. What they all have in common is that they have bought into the mindset of more-better-faster. I'm philosophically, ethically and intellectually opposed to this senseless approach to getting results. It's much easier to work on doubling your strengths than it is to incrementally try to improve your weaknesses.

This is the core of my work: Expand your strengths, instead of implementing the more-better-faster approach and trying to run faster on the treadmill.

Putting your professional success into perspective

Supercharging professional success has many advantages. One advantage is financial. If you structurally increase your annual income by an additional 5%, you increase your wealth by ten times your current income after 18 years (read the previous line again and ponder the consequences. Even if building a strong financial future is not your main objective at this point, it's still important to understand the financial consequences of the awesome power of the eighth wonder of the world: compound interest.)

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**The best work
doesn't feel like work.**

Yet, maybe the most powerful advantage of supercharging professional success through the ideas I will share, is that it enables you to do more and more of what you love to do, and be generously compensated in the process. The best work doesn't feel like work. Remember Mr. Wolf? He had fun.

Obstacles to high performance

What's the one big obstacle to high performance? It's the belief that success will come automatically when you work hard and do a good job. However, both of those will only be useful if you elevate your thinking from operational to strategic. Let me use a metaphor to explain.

Imagine you're a little hamster in a cage, and one day you decide that your goal in life is to spin your little hamster wheel as fast possible. You go on a diet, exercise well, and practice day in and day out to run your wheel as quickly as possible. At a certain moment, you reach a plateau where further improvements are small and difficult to achieve. We know this process as working in your business. You become better, faster, and more efficient at the work which you're already doing. This operational attitude, however, involves a lot of effort, and this is how you get stuck.

The concept of working on your business is very different. Imagine you are the same hamster, with the same goal of spinning your hamster wheel as fast as possible. However, you take time to think, and decide to become more strategic. You go online and order a little electrical motor. When the motor arrives, you connect it to your hamster wheel. Suddenly, it spins ten times faster than you could ever achieve before; this is working on your business. It requires a lot of deep thinking, and it's the antidote to more-better-faster.

When I first encountered this idea, it hit like a depth charge in my life.

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This is working on your business. It requires a lot of deep thinking, and it's the antidote to more-better-faster.

Poor design leads to you doing all the work

The heart surgeon does not clean her own instruments, mop the floor or iron the laundry from the emergency room, that would be a waste of her time and talents. So why is it that you waste so much of your professional energy doing menial, unimportant and repetitive tasks?

If we do not consciously move our thinking from operational to strategic, we will end up wasting our talents and time doing things we are not meant to do anyway. This leads to frustration, hard work and marginal results.

To grow, we need to build on, apply and leverage our strengths. Unfortunately, few of us have ever heard this very important piece of information.

When people hit a wall, they tend to do more of the same things, or less of the same things. Only the successful people start to do different things instead.

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If we do not consciously move our thinking from operational to strategic, we will end up wasting our talents and time doing things we are not meant to do anyway.

More-better-faster is not the solution to too much to do.

It's time to focus on the few things that matter, and say goodbye to the rest.

How? By adopting the three ideas that are common to all High-Performance Heroes: breaking the illusion of control, leveraging the magic of Power Laws and ruthlessly applying Strategic Quitting.

The illusion of control

Let me share a story. Not long ago, a senior executive management team enthusiastically told me that their massive success was the result of an excellent strategy and a culture of getting things done. They were right about the nature of their excellent results, but they were wrong about the reason for their excellent results. Within two years, the business came to a grinding and unexpected halt. After a painful restructuring, the business was sold, the workforce reduced and profitability plummeted.

This tragic story is a sad illustration of the illusion of control. It happens when you assign too much credit for your success to your own skills, while underestimating the significant role of luck.

Let me explain.

The formula for achievement is both profound and simple:

Achievement = Skill + Luck

A skill is applied knowledge or ability that leads to a predictable result. Think of project management, mathematics or origami. Usually, those require a combination of experience and training. A skill is therefore learnable.

Luck is the happy circumstance in which your skills might bloom. For example, the gains of a roulette player completely depend on luck. His required skills are limited: choose a number or a color, move a pile of chips, wait for the feedback and then repeat the process. It's as simple as that. His results are driven by luck.

Now, take a closer look at the achievement of a chess master: It's mostly determined by skill. Yet, even during a chess match, luck can still play a significant role: A spicy Thai meal from the evening before may upset your opponent's stomach and prevent deep thinking. Or, you have trouble maintaining your own focus, because of the annoying paper cut caused by the breakfast menu.

You can't control luck. The only variable you can control to achieve extraordinary results is the development of skill.

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Why we overestimate our own skill

The most important reason you habitually overestimate your skill and underestimate the role of luck is the Dunning-Kruger effect — a cognitive bias in which unskilled individuals suffer from illusory superiority, mistakenly rating their abilities much higher than average. It simply means that if you are completely ignorant and unskilled in a certain area, you may overestimate how well you will perform in this area.

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Our quest to become a High-Performance Hero is therefore straight forward: You need to choose an environment where the impact of your skill massively trumps your reliance on luck.

I come across the Dunning-Kruger effect all the time, even in myself. I was recently watching a cooking program where the master chef made the task of chopping carrots look easy. I can do that, I thought.

Only when he explained that it requires a full year of advanced training to learn how to properly chop vegetables did I realize there's much more to chopping than meets the eye. This is the Dunning-Kruger effect in action. Most people have no problem recognizing this effect in others, to recognize it in ourselves is a different matter. Yet, it's essential if you want to become a High-Performance Hero.

Think of surveys where more than 50 percent of drivers consistently believe they are within the top 10 percent of safe drivers. You think you're skilled, but in reality, you're simply lucky.

Our quest to become a High-Performance Hero is therefore straight forward: You need to choose an environment where the impact of your skill massively trumps your reliance on luck. This is the first big idea of this book.

How do we make this shift? We turn to the second big idea I want to share with you: the Power Laws.

The magic of Power Laws

Nature is unbalanced, and therefore output isn't necessarily determined by the amount of input. For example, in the English language, fewer than 3,000 words are used more than 80 percent of the time. We know this law as the 80/20 rule, Pareto rule or vital few – only small chunks matter.

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**If you think
deeply about this,
you'll realize that
Power Laws are
the total opposite of
more-better-faster.**

This is the definition of a Power Law:
Small differences yield exponential results.
If you think deeply about this, you'll realize
that Power Laws are the total opposite
of more-better-faster.

So, how can we use Power Laws to maximize
the impact of our skills? We need to take a
closer look at three crucial areas that drive
high-performance: creating Success
Environments, using Prime Time, and
developing Unique Talents.

How to create Success Environments

On January 12, 2007, the world-class violinist Joshua Bell played for an audience of more than 1,000 people. Interestingly enough, he played while dressed as a common street artist in a Washington D.C. subway station. Mostly ignored by the apathetic and hurrying crowds, it took him almost 45 minutes to earn a meager 30 dollars.

A few weeks later, Bell played again, but in Carnegie Hall which was packed with ecstatic listeners who loved his work. In both cases, his skills were identical, yet the results were vastly different – when he played Carnegie Hall he made thousands of dollars a minute.

What changed? The influence of luck. The crowd at Carnegie Hall was self-selecting, yet the chance that the subway crowd would recognize and value Bell's work was limited, at best. By choosing a different venue and creating a Success Environment, Joshua Bell's reliance on luck to achieve success became much smaller. This is an example of the Power Law of Success Environments in action.

How to use Prime Time

An airplane pilot's skills are a great way to understand the Power Law of Prime Time. The most important situations when flying are landing, take off, and emergencies. An airplane pilot who crosses the Atlantic Ocean will spend less than 10 percent of his or her time doing these three activities. The remaining time will be spent on routine activities like monitoring the autopilot.



The Power Law of Prime Time is about becoming better at those activities that expand your skills to create extraordinary results.

A pilot who wants to step up the game and become vastly better will need to focus on improving skills in landing, take off, and emergencies. Case in point: On January 15, 2009, US Airways pilot Chesley Sullenberger managed to make a successful emergency landing with his Airbus A-320 on the Hudson River. Pulling off this feat required incredible skill, and fortunately, Sullenberger had recently trained for peak performance for such a scenario. He understood the value of Prime Time, and was able to reduce his reliance on luck to deal with this unexpected emergency.

The Power Law of Prime Time is about becoming better at those activities that expand your skills to create extraordinary results.

How to develop Unique Talents

Finally, the Power Law of Unique Talents is about building on your unique strengths. Bill Gates once remarked that a great writer of software code is worth 10,000 times the price of an average software writer. This means that the impact of your talent is subject to Power Laws as well: By solely focusing on expanding the skills that are in line with his or her unique talent, a great software writer doesn't need much luck to command a high salary and achieve extraordinary results.

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By solely focusing on expanding the skills that are in line with his or her unique talent, a great software writer doesn't need much luck to command a high salary and achieve extraordinary results.

Why small differences create extraordinary achievements

Joshua Bell and, of course, Bill Gates are at the top of their games. They refuse to be more-better-faster individuals. The applications of the Power Laws to expand the impact of skills and reduce the impact of luck, result in a huge disparity in results and compensation between the absolute top performers and the muddling middle. First prize: a Ferrari. Second prize: a set of steak knives.

The Power Laws therefore open paths to remarkable achievement. This phenomenon is called the razor's edge: It means that small differences consistently applied will have a huge impact on your results.

These small differences are driven by expanding skills and building on unique strengths. The expert software code writer who is paid 10 times more than the average code writer, doesn't have 10 times more skill, but is slightly better in the areas that truly matter.

Here lies the heart of extraordinary achievement, the second big idea of this book: If you want to double your results you don't have to double your skills, but you do need to apply the magic of Power Laws to become slightly better at the skills which matter most.

How can you become slightly better at the few things that really matter? To answer this question, we need to understand the third big idea of this book: Strategic Quitting.

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This phenomenon is called the razor's edge: It means that small differences consistently applied will have a huge impact on your results.

Strategic Quitting as the antidote to more-better-faster

After creating the statue of David, the great artist Michelangelo was asked how he had accomplished this masterpiece. Michelangelo answered that he looked at the original block of uncut marble, imagined David hidden in there, and simply took out everything which wasn't David.

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The strategy of taking out things, instead of the more-better-faster method of adding things, is the greatest insight of a High-Performance Hero.

The strategy of taking out things, instead of the more-better-faster method of adding things, is the greatest insight of a High-Performance Hero.

Some time ago, my wife and I had lunch at one of our favorite restaurants and discussed what set our favorites apart from the others. My wife noticed something interesting: The best places all have a limited menu, with popular dishes done consistently well.

If you want to improve your restaurant business, this approach can feel counterintuitive: Don't try to expand and create new dishes, but simplify and focus on the few things you do very well.

Improving your business, organizational results or professional performance by ruthlessly removing elements is called Strategic Quitting. It's the key to becoming better at the few things that matter most.

Why Strategic Quitting is the superior approach

Strategic Quitting is a highly effective and superior approach because it offers three unique advantages when compared to adding new elements. Take our restaurant example:

1. It **reduces volatility**: The probability of bad outcomes caused by significant changes in your environment become less likely. For example, when an economic recession occurs, a simple and trusted meal with consistent, high quality will continue to be in high demand.
2. It creates **new opportunities**: A limited, high-quality menu reduces preparation complexity, increases the speed of service and fosters consistency. This, in turn, will boost the table turnover rate, growth and margin.
3. It's **much easier**: Getting rid of ballast on your menu takes much less effort than a complete redesign to add new dishes which might require buying new kitchen facilities, teaching new cooking skills, setting up new suppliers, etc.

The awesome power of Strategic Quitting is not limited to improving business performance; it has applications in many

other areas, as well. Imagine you're leading a high-performance team that has one individual whose behavior with other team members is toxic.

Now, you have two choices.

The first choice is more-better-faster. You embark on a long quest to coach, support, and retrain your toxic individual until he changes his behavior.

The second choice is to apply Strategic Quitting and let go of this disruptive employee. I will argue that the second choice is superior:

1. It **reduces volatility**: When the team needs to come together in the next crisis, people tend to fall back into their default behavior. A toxic mindset of one individual compromises the performance of the entire team.
2. It creates **new opportunities**: A large amount of management attention typically goes to the underperforming individual. If he is no longer part of the team, you can focus your time and energy on different and better opportunities.
3. It's **much easier**: Getting rid of the toxic worker is much easier than entering a long, uncertain and arduous coaching and improvement cycle.

Strategic Quitting improves the impact of Power Laws

We have finally arrived at the big secret of high performance: Your ability to strategically quit equals your ability to massively succeed. Success is not about starting new things with the gung-ho default approach of more-better-faster. Success is about ruthlessly cutting away everything in your life which is not high performance.

If you want to use the Power Law of Success Environments, strategically quit everything that prevents you from doing your best work for people who love your work.

If you want to use the Power Law of Prime Time, strategically quit all activities that are not your highest and best use of time.

If you want to use the Power Law of Unique Talent, strategically quit all efforts to build skills which simply do not play to your strengths.

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**Success is about
ruthlessly cutting away
everything in your life
which is not high
performance.**

The High-Performance Hero Blueprint

We have arrived at the final chapter. My goal was to share with you how to break the habit of more-better-faster and focus on the essential components that make you a High-Performance Hero.

I have shown that there is a better method to the madness — the High-Performance Hero blueprint.

The High-Performance Hero blueprint requires that you live according to the following three High-Performance Hero principles:

High-Performance Hero Principle 1: Break the illusion of control

Achievement is determined by skill and luck. Focus only on those activities where the impact of your skill is maximized, and the impact of luck is minimized.

High-Performance Hero Principle 2: Leverage the stunning impact of Power Laws

Small differences, consistently applied, will have a huge impact on your results. This is the essence of a Power Law. If you want to leverage the magic of Power Laws, focus only on becoming better at the three things that truly matter: expanding your Unique Talents, using Prime Time and creating Success Environments.

High-Performance Hero Principle 3: Apply Strategic Quitting

Your ability to strategically quit equals your ability to massively succeed. Success is not about doing more stuff, but strategically quitting everything that is not associated with high performance. So ruthlessly eliminate everything that is not associated with:

- building on your talents
- your highest and best use of time
- operating in a Success Environment.

We all have a choice. You can either continue to chase a more-better-faster life, or you can apply Strategic Quitting to achieve extraordinary results and become a High-Performance Hero.

The choice is yours.

About Paul Rulkens

As an international professional speaker, my magnificent obsession is to help organizations turn their big ideas into massive action.

This ensures that my global clients, such as McKinsey, UBER, Siemens, Johnson&Johnson, Novartis, and Nestlé, make most out of their corporate events.

Watch my TED talks and see me in action: Over 6 million people have already done this.

My expertise is high-performance: the ability to consistently achieve big goals with less effort.

I especially focus on building high-performance teams, driving innovation, and accelerating execution power.

I'm originally trained as a chemical engineer with more than 20 years of corporate experience at the frontlines of global business.

My work is based on deep knowledge and extensive experience in the practical business applications of behavioral psychology, neuroscience and, especially, common sense.

I have also written two business books.

Read my blog and subscribe to my free weekly newsletter to get more practical ideas for high performance

My clients call my keynotes thought-provoking, substantive, and hilarious. The reason may be that I once was trained as a standup comedian, receiving critical acclaim for my Arnold Schwarzenegger impersonation. However, the miserable failure of my ensuing 'pumping iron' muscle development project prevented me from pursuing my true calling in life: a career as a credible Arnold Schwarzenegger body double...

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