

# Managing the Self

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## The Power of Rest

How to manage the self in today's over-complex, ever-changing business world with its inexorably increasing work-load? To begin, I suggest we address two questions: First, how do we live? And second, who are we?

### How do we live?

As keynote speaker and coach of executives I have gleaned intimate insights into modern-day business environment: I observe calendars stuffed with meetings often a year in advance. I see that, thanks to first the advent of the Internet, and then, for the last 10 years, smartphones, availability of the individual spans almost every waking hour. Change, restructuring and the ubiquitous "Next Level" programs have ceased to be a passing phase but have become permanent features.

I observe that digitalization, globalization, uncertainty due to politics, AI, trade sanctions and many more factors add to the pressure on the human being that is trying to give their best in today's business environment. Furthermore, and maybe worst of all but certainly a consequence of the above, most people are not getting enough sleep nor enough exercise. People sit for eight, 10, or 12 hours a day, in the office, in their cars. This is a terrible strain on their bodies. The fact that people are used to it does not make things better. Wellbeing, health and often private lives suffer. The notorious work-life balance is inevitably out of sync.

In short: business people perform under dire circumstances that certainly do not stimulate an increase in performance, creativity, or courage to try new things. When things become too much, one has to play it safe.

### Who are we?

The world we live in is not the world we are made for. Evolutionary science shows that our biology – and our brain – have not had an upgrade in some 100,000 years. The human species developed in a world with little and simple information, in a world where we could only survive because we had a healthy, hardy physique. Our ancestors walked on average 25 miles a day, which means our body is an apparatus for motion, not sitting. Our ancestors experienced situations of extreme stress when hunting much superior animals. That's why the adrenaline group of hormones developed in the human being, cortisol being in our context one of the most notable among them. These hormones increased performance, made us fearless, helped manage stress, but in those days moments of stress (hunts) never lasted long. Cortisol was worked out of the body in long, steady walks home. During these

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long, steady walks humans not only recovered from their performance (=stress), they also reinforced their immune system and their autonomous nervous system.

Our brain, by the way, only developed along the way to support our biology: as a species we did not survive because we had an IQ of 180, but because we had a strong, resilient body which was permanently in motion. Like it or not: our brain is a support function. The body rules!

### Performance and recovery – two sides of the same coin

Yes, the world and our life has changed dramatically, and keeps changing, and we are no longer hunter-gatherers – yet on a biological basis compared to our ancestors nothing has changed within us. It follows that if we want to stay healthy, balanced and able to fulfill our potential, we must abide by the laws of biology established in the course of our evolution. If we do not, we can burn, but not as bright as we could, and not for a long time. If we do not, we get sick. We will burn out.

Therefore, first and above all managing the self means taking care of ourselves and respecting the laws of biology, and one of the underlying fundamentals of biology is balance. Performance (mental or physical) is a wonderful thing, fulfilling, uplifting, exhilarating, and peak performance often pays well too, but performance always equals stress (positive or negative, the symptoms are the same), and stress produces cortisol. Cortisol is not a bad thing per se, it gets bad only when it inhabits our body permanently. Since the “hunts” in today’s business world last not minutes but up to 80% of our waking hours – at least: smartphones and computers are often consulted up to and into bedtime and both cause stress and therefore cortisol – we must take time to get rid of it in order to restore balance. How?

### Sleep is the new sex

There are only two safe and healthy ways to get rid of cortisol, and they are free: movement and sleep. Moderate, or, as we call it: intelligent movement of at least 5-6 hours per week (sorry, Madam, Sir, no marathon for you if you have a demanding job, no high-intensity gym or mountain bike sessions either), and from seven to nine hours sleep at night. That is, unless you are among the 1% of genetic exceptions that need six hours or less (my guess is that 99% of the business people I meet deem themselves a genetic exception).

Let me give you some numbers regarding the dismal consequence of sleeping less than seven hours. The ensuing loss of productivity is calculated to cost the US 411 billion dollars, Germany 60 billion, the UK 50 billion, etc. The consequences of lack of intelligent exercise are not even measured yet.

Kommentiert [1]: RAND Europe, Why sleep matters

Apart from sleep, the power of intelligent rest is utterly underestimated. Research shows that taking a 6-12-minute break every 55 minutes increases (mental) performances by up to 60% - *if people move moderately* in those breaks. Research has also shown that meditation (MBSR) is a further great tool to recover from over-performing and restore balance.

As humans, by working together we can achieve marvelous things. But we can only do that, and manage others in this way, if we function properly ourselves as men and women with

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bodies as well as brains. Respecting our own physicality is the essential first step in asserting our humanity.

