

#1 New York Times Best-Selling Author

HIGH PERFORMANCE HABITS

How Extraordinary
People Become That Way

BRENDON BURCHARD

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People Become That Way

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Dedicated to my sunshine, Denise,
the most extraordinary person I know.

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INTRODUCTION

“Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do.

Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.”

—Aristotle

“Why are you so terrified to want more?”

A large oak desk separates me from Lynn. She pulls back in her chair and stares out the window for a moment. We’re on the forty-second floor, nearly eye level with the morning mist, looking out over the ocean.

Even before I ask the question, I know she won’t like it.

Lynn is one of those people you could describe as highly effective. She’s focused and gets stuff done. She exhibits strengths for critical thinking and leading others. She’s received three big promotions in five years. People admire her. They say she’s on her way, that she’s got the “it” factor.

“Terrified” is not how most would describe her. But I know.

She glances back at me and starts to reply: “Well, I wouldn’t say that I’m . . .”

I lean in and shake my head.

She catches herself and nods, smoothing her already smooth brown hair. She knows she can’t get away with a fake story right now.

“Okay,” Lynn says. “Maybe you’re right. I’m scared to go to the next level.”

I ask why.

“Because I’m barely surviving this one.”

#

This book is about how people become extraordinary, and why others block themselves from that possibility. It will show clearly and unmistakably why some excel, others fail, and far too many never even try.

As a high performance coach, I’ve worked with a lot of people like Lynn. Achievers fight long and hard to succeed, propelling themselves forward by grit and hustle. And then, at some point they could never have anticipated, they plateau, lose passion, or burn out. To outside observers, they may appear steady and calm as they plod ahead. But deep inside, achievers often feel that they are thrashing about, lost in a sea of priorities and

opportunities. They feel unsure what to focus on or how to confidently replicate or scale their success. They've come far in life yet still have no standard operating principles for sustaining success. Even though they're capable, many live in constant fear that they will fall behind or catastrophically fail to handle the demands of the next level of success. Why the fear and hardship? And why do some people break free from this reality, keep rising higher, and enjoy the vibrant well-being and abundant long-term success that so many envy or consider out of reach?

To understand the phenomenon, this book pulls together twenty years of research, ten years of insights gained from elite-level performance coaching, and a vast data set on high performers worldwide gathered through surveys, structured interviews, and professional assessment tools. It will reveal what it takes to become not just an *achiever* but a *high performer*—someone who creates ever-increasing levels of both well-being and external success over the long term.

During the journey, I will expose many of the prevailing myths about “success,” including why grit, willpower, practice, and your “natural” strengths and talents are not enough to take you to the next level in a world that demands you add value, lead others, and manage competing priorities and complex projects. To reach high performance, you have to consider more than your individual passions and efforts, and you'll have to go well beyond what you like, prefer, or naturally do well, because, to be frank, the world cares less about your strengths and personality than about your service and meaningful contributions to others.

By the end of this book, you will never again wonder what it really takes to succeed when starting a new project at work or pursuing a bold new dream. You will be empowered with a set of reliable habits that research has shown to work with a broad range of personalities, and in a variety of situations, to create extraordinary long-term results. You'll feel a new sense of vital energy and confidence from knowing where to focus your energies and how to serve most effectively. You'll understand how to keep growing after you've enjoyed initial success. If you're ever thrown into a situation where you must work or compete with others at the highest levels of achievement, you'll know *exactly* how to think and what to do.

This isn't to say you will be superhuman, or need to be. You have flaws; we all do. Yet at the end of this book, you'll say to yourself, “I finally know *exactly* how to be consistently at my best. I'm confident in my ability to

figure things out, and fully capable of overcoming adversity on the path of success, for the rest of my life.” You will have a standard mental operating system and proven set of habits that reliably lead to long-term success across many different situations, and across multiple domains of life. In my own work as a high performance coach, I’ve seen these habits transform the effectiveness of people from all walks of life—from Fortune 50 CEOs to entertainers, from Olympians to everyday parents, from world-class experts to high school students. If you’ve ever wanted a serious field-tested and science-backed path to improving your life, you have found it, here in this book.

Armed with the information you’ll learn in the pages ahead, you will live a life in which your full potential is in play, you have a vital sense of well-being, you are capable of leading others to excellence, and you are deeply fulfilled. Assuming you bring full intention and discipline to deploying the high performance habits, you’re about to enter a very transformational period of your life and career. You’re about to become even more extraordinary.

WHY THIS BOOK? WHY NOW?

I’ve been blessed to train millions of people worldwide on personal and professional development, and I can report that it’s a palpable feeling everywhere right now: People are tremendously uncertain about how to get ahead and which decisions are right for them, their families, and their careers. People want to scale up, but they’re wiped out. They’re working so hard, but they’re just not breaking through. They are driven, but they don’t always know exactly what they want. They desire to go for their dreams, yet they’re afraid they’ll be judged crazy or fail if they try.

Add to that the unrelenting tasks, the self-doubt, the unwanted obligations, the overwhelming choices and responsibilities—it’s enough to exhaust anyone. For too many, there is a sense that things will never get better and they’ll always be swimming in a churning sea of distractions and disappointments. If that sounds dire, it is. People are hopeful and ready to

make a change, but lacking direction and the right habits they risk living unexciting, disconnected, unfulfilling lives.

Of course, many people are living happy, wonderful lives. But consistency is a problem. They may feel capable—even feel that they hit “peak performance” once in a while—but there’s always that steep cliff on the other side. And so people are tired of the ups and downs of peak performance. They’re wondering how to reach heightened and *sustained* growth and success. They don’t need just new tricks to get into better states and moods; they need real skills and methods for holistically advancing their lives and careers.

That’s not an easy order. Though everyone says they want to advance in every area of their lives, many, like Lynn, are deeply concerned that pursuing their dreams will cause collateral damage—wrecked relationships, financial ruin, social ridicule, unbearable stress. At some point, perhaps, we all worry about such things. Isn’t it true that you already know how to get stuff done, yet sometimes you limit your vision for the future because you’re *already* so busy, so stressed, so overextended?

It’s not that you’re incapable of performing better. You know that sometimes you *crush it* on one project at work, but struggle on another, similar one. You know that you can be a star in one social setting, but not in another. You know how to motivate yourself, but sometimes you hate yourself at the end of the day for having completed nothing but a three-season binge on Netflix.

Perhaps, too, you’ve noticed other people advancing more quickly than you. Maybe you’ve seen one of your peers just waltz with grace from project to project, succeeding each time no matter what gets thrown in their way. It’s as if you can put them in any context, any team, any company, any industry, and they’ll just *win*.

Who are these people, and what’s their secret? They are high performers, and their secret is their habits. The good news is you can become one of them, and you can leverage those same habits whatever your background, personality, weaknesses, or field of endeavor. With the right training and habits, anyone can become a high performer, and I can prove it. That’s why I wrote this book for you.

THE BASELINE MOVED

Many of us feel a gap between our ordinary lives and the extraordinary lives we wish to have. Fifty years ago, perhaps, it was easier to navigate the world and get ahead. The baseline for success was more straightforward: “Work hard. Play by the rules. Keep your head down. Don’t ask too many questions. Follow the leader. Take time to master something that will keep you around here.”

Then, twenty years ago, the baseline began to shift. “Work hard. Break the rules. Keep your head up—optimists win. Ask questions of the experts. You are a leader. Hurry up and figure it out.”

Today, for many, the baseline feels distant, blurred, almost unknowable. Gone are the days when our work was predictable and the expectations of those around us were “fixed.” Change accelerated. Now everything feels chaotic. Your boss, lover, or customer always wants something new, *now*. Your work isn’t as simple or siloed as it used to be. And if it is, the odds are a computer or a robot will soon replace you. To compound the stress, now *everything* is connected, so if you mess up one thing, it messes up an entire network of other things. Mistakes are no longer private affairs. They are public and global.

It’s a new world. Certainty is down, yet expectations are up. Instead of mantras about working hard, following the rules, keeping your head down or up, we have an unspoken but widely accepted norm: “Pretend you’re not working as hard, so your friends are impressed with your leisurely posts and photos at breakfast, but yes, work hard. Don’t wait for instruction, because there are no rules. Try to keep your head on, because it’s a madhouse here. Ask questions, but don’t expect anyone to know the answers. There are no leaders, because we all lead, so just find your groove for right now and add value. *You’ll never figure anything out—just keep adapting, because tomorrow everything changes again.*”

This isn’t just unsettling. Getting ahead amid the chaos feels like trying to run under ten feet of murky water. You can’t see where you’re going. You’re flailing about, but there’s no progress. You’re looking for help, an edge, a lifeline, *anything*, but you’re not finding any air or any stairs out. You had good intentions and a strong work ethic, but you don’t even know

where to apply them. You have people counting on you, but you're not sure which direction to point.

Even if you don't feel as if you are drowning, you might sense that you are plateauing. Or maybe you have the sinking feeling that you're about to be left behind. Sure, you've gotten ahead so far by sheer passion, guts, and hard work. You've climbed a few mountains. But the next questions are throwing you off: *Where to now? How to go higher? Why are others climbing more quickly than I am? When, if ever, can I relax and set down some roots? Does it always have to feel like such a grind? Am I really living my best life?*

What you need is a reliable set of practices for unleashing your greatest abilities. Study high performers and you will see that they have systems built into their days that drive their success. Systems are what separate the pro from the novice, and science from armchair philosophy. Without systems, you cannot test hypothesis, track progress, or repeatedly deliver exceptional results. In personal and professional development, these systems and procedures are, ultimately, *habits*. But which ones work?

WHAT'S NOT WORKING

When we try to deal with the difficult demands of today, what advice do we receive? The same thing we've been told for hundreds of years, perhaps with a few feel-good twists:

- Work hard.
- Be passionate.
- Focus on your strengths.
- Practice a lot.
- Stick to it.
- Be grateful.

No doubt, this is popular, positive, *useful* advice. It's solid and it's timeless. You can't go wrong with this philosophy. And it certainly makes one hell of a commencement speech.

But is this advice *adequate*?

Do you know any hardworking people who have *all* these things going for them, yet they're *still* not even close to the level of success and fulfillment they want in life?

Isn't it true that there are billions of hard workers on the bottom of the pile? Don't you know plenty of passionate people in your hometown who have plateaued? Haven't you met plenty of people who know their strengths but still struggle with clarity, don't have a clue what to do when a new project starts, and keep getting surpassed by people with lesser strengths?

Maybe all these people should practice more, right? Put in their ten thousand hours? But lots of practices happen and championships are still lost. Maybe it's their attitude? Maybe they should just be more grateful and mindful? Yet there are plenty of folks gratefully persevering themselves into dead-end jobs and relationships.

What gives?

MY SEARCH FOR A BETTER WAY

I was one of those people. As a young man, I was the one drowning. When I was nineteen, I had become despondent and suicidal after a breakup with the first woman I ever loved. It was a very dark time. Ironically, what pulled me through the emotional wreckage at that point of my life was a car accident. My friend was driving when we flipped off the highway going about eighty-five miles per hour. We both ended up bloody and terrified but alive. The incident changed my life, giving me what I call "mortality motivation."

I've written about my accident in my previous books, so I'll just share what I learned: Life is precious beyond words, and when you get a second chance—and every morning, every decision, can be that second chance—take a moment to define who you really are and what you really want. I realized I didn't want to take my life; I wanted to *live*. My heart had been broken, yes, but I still wanted to *love*. I felt I was given a second chance, so I wanted to make it *matter*, to make a difference. *Live. Love. Matter.* That became my mantra. That's when I decided to change. That's when I started

looking for answers to live a more charged, connected, and contributing life.

I did the things you would expect: I read all the self-help books. I took psychology classes. I listened to the motivational audio programs. I went to the personal development seminars, and I followed the formula they all espoused: I worked hard. I was passionate. I focused on my strengths. I practiced. I stuck to it. I was grateful on the journey.

And you know what? *It worked.*

The advice changed my life. Over a period of years, I ended up with a good job, a good girlfriend, a good set of friends, and a decent place to live. I had much to be grateful for.

But then, even while practicing all that basic good advice, I plateaued. For six or seven years, life didn't really advance that much for me. It was maddening. There's something frustrating about working hard, being passionate and grateful, and still not advancing, still not feeling it. There's also something depleting about it all: excelling sometimes but feeling exhausted too often; having grit and getting paid but not feeling rewarded; being motivated but not creating real momentum; engaging with others but not really connecting; adding value but not making a dent. That's not a vision of the life we desire.

Slowly, I realized that I'd had some success, though I couldn't say *why*. I wasn't as disciplined as I wanted to be, I was far from world-class, and I wasn't contributing at the level I desired, either. I wanted an exacting plan for what I needed to do every day, and in every new situation, so I could learn faster, contribute better, and, yes, also enjoy the journey more.

I realized that the problem with the old formula for success—work hard; be passionate; focus on your strengths; practice a lot; stick to it; be grateful—is that so much of it is geared toward *individual* results and *initial* success. These things get you in the game and keep you in the game. But what happens *after* you've gotten those first wins? What happens after you have earned those grades, found some passion, gotten that job or started that dream, developed some expertise, saved some money, fallen in love, built some momentum? What helps when you want to become world-class, to *lead*, to create lasting impact beyond yourself? How can you generate the confidence you need to reach the *next* level of success? How can you joyfully *sustain success* over the long term? How can you inspire and empower others to do the same?

Answering such questions became my personal obsession and, ultimately, my profession.

HIGH PERFORMANCE LESSONS

This book is the culmination of the intervening twenty years as I have sought answers to three fundamental questions:

1. Why do some individuals and teams succeed *more quickly* than others and *sustain* that success over the long term?
2. Of those who pull it off, why are some *miserable* and others *happy* on their journey?
3. What motivates people to reach for higher levels of success in the first place, and what kinds of habits, training, and support help them improve faster?

My work and research into these questions—what have become known as high performance studies—have led me to interview, coach, or train many of the world’s most successful and happiest people, from CEOs to celebrities, from high-level entrepreneurs to entertainers such as Oprah and Usher, from parents to professionals in dozens of industries, to more than 1.6 million students from 195 countries around the world who have taken my online courses or video series.

The adventure has taken me into tension-filled boardrooms and Super Bowl locker rooms, onto Olympic tracks, up in private helicopters with billionaires, and to dinner tables around the world, where I’ve talked with my students, research participants, and everyday people striving to improve their lives.

This work helped me create the world’s most popular online course on high performance, the most widely read newsletter related to the topic, and the largest data set on high performers’ self-reported personal characteristics. It also led to the founding of the High Performance Institute, where a team of scholars and I conduct research on how high performers

think, behave, influence others, and win. We've created the world's only validated high performance assessment as well as the first professional certification program in the field: Certified High Performance Coaching™. We have now been blessed to train, coach, and measure more high performers than any other organization in the world, and I personally certify over two hundred elite-level high performance coaches per year.

The insights from all these efforts fill this book. The research not only spans twenty years of my own personal development and self-experimentation, but also includes data from coaching interventions with thousands of clients, detailed before-and-after assessments from thousands of live-workshop attendees, structured interviews with hundreds of people at the top of their fields, insights gleaned from academic literature reviews, and hundreds of thousands of codified comments from my students and from my free online training videos, which have received over 100,000,000 views.

From this vast data set and two decades of experience, I've found habits that have been tested and proved in both personal and professional contexts. Here's what I've learned:

With the right habits, anyone can dramatically increase results and become a high performer in almost any field of endeavor.

High performance is not strongly correlated with age, education, income, race, nationality, or gender. This means that many of the excuses we use to explain why we can't succeed are simply wrong. High performance is not achieved by a specific kind of *person*, but rather by a specific set of *practices*, which I call *high performance habits*. Anyone can learn them, regardless of experience, strengths, personality, or position. People who are struggling to make new progress can use this book to revitalize their lives, get ahead, and fulfill their potential. And those who are already successful can use this to get to the next level.

Not all habits are created equal.

It turns out that there are bad, good, better, and best habits for realizing your full potential in your life and career. It matters which practices in your life come first and how they are arranged to create effective habits. If there's anything special about the work of my team of researchers, it's that we've cracked the code, figuring out *which habits matter most* and how you can set up practices that strengthen and sustain these habits. Yes, you can start a gratitude journal and that will make you happier, but is it enough to propel you toward real progress in every area of your life? Yes, you can start a new morning routine, but will that be enough to significantly improve your overall performance and happiness? (The answer is no, by the way). So where to focus? We've found that six deliberate habits move the needle most in helping you reach high performance across multiple domains of your life. We've also learned that there are habits for tactically getting ahead, and strategic habits for enjoying life. You'll learn both.

Achievement is not your problem—alignment is.

If you're reading these words, then the odds are that achievement is not the issue. You already know how to set goals, make checklists, knock off to-dos. You care about excelling in your chosen field. But odds are, you're experiencing your fair share of stress and overwhelm. You can deliver, sure, but you'll learn something every achiever must discover: Just because people want to put things on your plate because you're good doesn't mean you should let them. *What's achievable is not always what's important.* You have a lot of things you *can* do. So the central question shifts from "How do I achieve more?" to "How would I like to *live*?" This book is an escape plan from the soul-killing singular pursuit of external success for no other reason than achievement for achievement's sake. It's about realigning your thoughts and behaviors so that you can experience growth, well-being, and fulfillment as you strive.

Certainty is the enemy of growth and high performance.

Too many people want certainty amid the chaos of this world. But certainty is the fool's dream and, thus, the charlatan's selling point. Certainty ultimately blinds you, sets false or fixed limits, and creates "automatic" habits that become predictable bad thinking and openings for your competitors to surpass you. The person who is certain is most closed to learning, most vulnerable to dogma, and most likely to be blindsided and overtaken by innovators. You'll learn that high performers outgrow their youthful need for certainty and replace it with curiosity and genuine self-confidence.

Technology won't save us.

We've been sold this alluring vision of a world where new gadgets will make us smarter, faster, and better. But many of us are beginning to see behind the hype. Tools cannot replace wisdom. You can have all the gadgets in the world and dive deep into the "quantified self" movement, where every step, second of sleep, beat of your heart, and moment of your day is tracked, scored, gamified. But a lot of people are connected and tracking and remain alone and troubled. Too many are checking in to all the apps and stats and still losing touch with their real ambitions and soul. Amid all the excitement about technology improving our lives, it turns out that what does the job better than anything else are simple human habits of high performance.

WHAT IS HIGH PERFORMANCE?

For our purposes in this book, high performance refers to *succeeding beyond standard norms, consistently over the long term*.

However success is defined in any given field of endeavor, a high performer—be it a person, team, company, or culture—simply does *better for longer periods*. But high performance isn't just about never-ending improvement. Mere improvement does not always result in high performance. Lots of people are improving but not necessarily crushing it—

they're inching forward, but so is everyone else. Lots of people make progress but not real impact. High performers break the norms. They're consistently exceeding the standard expectations and results.

High performance is also very different from mere expertise development. The quest isn't just to learn a new skill or language, or become a chess master, a world-class pianist, or a CEO. A high performer in any field isn't just good at a singular task or skill—she or he has learned adjacent competencies to complement a particular expertise. They are not a one-hit wonder. They have multiple skill sets that allow them to succeed over the long term and—importantly—lead others. They practice meta-habits that enable them to excel in multiple areas of their lives. A Super Bowl-winning quarterback doesn't just know how to throw a ball. He has had to master mental toughness, nutrition, self-discipline, team leadership, strength and conditioning, contract negotiations, brand building, and so on. Someone who reaches high performance in any career must have competence in many of the areas that touch that career.

In our definition of *high performance*, “consistently” followed by “over the long term” may seem redundant. But the two are, in fact, different. For example, high performers don't “end up” successful at the very last minute of a decade's efforts. They don't come crashing across the finish line of success. They're *steady*. They regularly beat expectations. There is a consistency to their efforts that eludes their peers. That's why, when you look at them post-success, you come to realize they are *not* surprise winners.

As you will learn, meeting this definition of “succeeding beyond standard norms consistently over the long term” requires habits that protect your well-being, maintain positive relationships, and ensure that you serve others as you climb. *You simply can't beat the norms if you've driven yourself into the ground.* As it turns out, high performers' sustained success is due in large part to their healthy approach to living. It's not just about achievement in a profession or in just one area of interest. It's about creating a *high performance life*, in which you experience an ongoing feeling of full engagement, joy, and confidence that comes from being your best self.

That's why the high performance approach extends beyond such popular concepts as “focus on your strengths” and “just put in your ten thousand hours.” Lots of people have amazing personal strengths, but they destroy their health in their quest for success and, thus, can't maintain high