

# How To Change Your Life

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a starting point on how individuals can improve the way they think, plan and act when they want to make a change in their lives.

### 1. It all starts with the ideas in your mind

*Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. — John Maynard Keynes*

Ideas are important. How often do you ask where the ideas you hold came from? Why you think the way you do, believe the things you believe and have a view on the best way to do something? Many people use ideas that are decades old. Herbert A. Simon, for example, was a Nobel Prize winning economist who worked on ideas in the 1950s on rational decision making — finding ways to make decisions given alternative choices and uncertain outcomes that we take for granted today. An older book, Napoleon Hill's classic, *Think And Grow Rich*, popularised the idea that if you visualise what you want and write it down the universe will arrange to get it for you.

We've all been taught that having clear goals is the key to success — SMART goals in particular: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound goals. A more sophisticated version of goal attainment says you need three things: goals, resources and monitoring. In addition to the goals you write down, you need to have the ability and resources to achieve them and make sure you're on track over time to check that you're making progress in the right direction.

All these ideas are examples of mental models — ideas that we are told, learn or absorb over time. They play a powerful part in how we think about and respond to life's challenges and much of the conflict that happens in situations can be traced back to the conflict between different ideas that are strongly held by people; something you can see played out every day in the world of politics.

It follows, therefore, that if you want to change you need to understand the ideas you have — the mental models you hold — and figure out how they can help you change or whether you need new or improved models.

### 2. Where should we begin?

*"Begin at the beginning," the King said, very gravely, "and go on till you come to the end: then stop." — Lewis Carroll*

To be the kind of person that would read a paper like this you must be interested in self-improvement. That means you have already come across much of the popular literature and the gurus of the current age. Gurus like Brian Tracy, for example. I devoured his books and videos, taking in his simple but clear ideas on motivation, goal setting and achievement. The benefit of technology like YouTube is that we can see the evolution of a performer like Brian Tracy from his early days as a relatively wooden speaker to a modern, professional and polished presenter of well-rehearsed material.

But, do their ideas work? Take the idea of writing goals at the start of the new year. If it's good to set goals once a year, wouldn't it be better to do them more often — perhaps monthly or even daily. Write down your top ten goals every day for six months and you'll see two things happen.

First, some goals will persist on that list over time, bubbling up to the surface as others fall away. This tells you which ones you truly value and which ones you don't. The second is that focusing on your

goals every day activates your reticular activating system — that part of your brain that focuses on things. The example always used here is what happens when you think of buying a new car. Suddenly you see that make and model everywhere — because your brain is now actively looking for that because of your situation. The same thing, in theory, happens when you focus on your goals as your brain starts to look for opportunities to achieve them.

As you read this, you're probably thinking to yourself, "There's nothing wrong about any of these approaches." And you would be right because there's an important thing to keep in mind about ideas and models such as these. **You can't prove they're correct.**

This is something worth understanding from the start. Let's say I say to you, "Write down SMART goals and make plans to achieve them." You do as I say, make a list, and do things that help you succeed and tick off that list. Does that prove my method works? No, because I can't say if the same results or better would have been achieved by any other method such as beginning each day with ten minutes of meditation and starting work by focusing on the most urgent thing on your mind right now. If, on the other hand, you fail — it's not possible to say if that was because the advice was wrong or because you didn't do it correctly.

The point is that there is no way to be absolutely certain that a particular way is the right one when it comes to how people act, individually or in groups. That's a hard thing to accept, especially if you're someone who believes in **solutions** but it's something that needs to be accepted if you want to become better at using ideas. The ideas and models you use are not going to be right or wrong — they are going to be **convenient**, helping you make sense of the situation you are trying to change or improve.

### 3. The way to change is to start by asking good questions

This paper argues that the way you change your life is by using ideas and mental models more effectively. You do this not by having the **right models** but by using models **in the right way**. In practice what this means is that mental models are just that — mental. They exist only in your mind. They aren't a schematic or map or engineering drawing of reality. They are, instead, a model that can help you understand reality by asking better questions. The fact is that reality is complicated and messy. It's not neat and engineered, with sharp lines and edges. It's fuzzy and incomplete and organic and chaotic. You're going to struggle to have a model that says if you do X and Y people will act in Z way in a predictable and repeatable manner — other than in the simplest of situations.

The models you use, then, are best thought of as intellectual devices, as tools that help you ask better questions about the situation you are trying to improve. The more models you have, the more options there are to look at a situation from different points of view and ask better questions about what you can do to improve it.

### 4. Conclusion

This short paper is a starting point in trying to pull together hundreds of ideas and models that I have written about in my blog [www.handcraftedinsight.com](http://www.handcraftedinsight.com). It's clear that we can't just jump from one way of thinking about the world to another. We need a way to bridge the gap, to consider the ideas we have, consider alternative ideas and see if we can reconcile the two.

For some people it's obvious that goal-setting and a focus on drive, motivation and an uncompromising drive for success — to win at all costs — is the only way to live. You won't get to be wealthy and be able to provide everything you want for your family without hitting your targets. For others, that is a barren and desolate way of living — a vision of a world where you get what you want and lose what you need. It's like the story of a person juggling balls. The balls are labelled health, family, relationships and work. Three are made of glass and one of rubber. You can let one drop, but not the other three. And, of course, there are options between the two — and you'll know where you stand.

The thinking challenge is stepping away from those views that you hold and seeing them for what they are: ghosts in your mind. They are beliefs, just like a belief in spirits or astrology or science. They are models in your mind that help you make sense of reality. That help you ask better questions and it is that process of asking questions that will help you change your life for the better.