

BEYOND OVERLOAD AND STRESS

The 3 Skills Every Professional Needs

By Mike Kavanagh

Your calendar is filled to the brim. Your inbox is overflowing. Everyone needs more of your time. Your nights and weekends are your only hope to catch up.

You're *overloaded* and you're *stressed*. Is there a way out?

The Tale of the POD-Spawner

Take a moment to think about your most pressing problem or task at work right now. What's consuming your energy or keeping you up at night? We'll call that your *problem of the day*, or *POD*. You probably have multiple PODs right now.

Imagine a person whose job is to read and summarize hundreds of articles per day. Day after day they move from article to article, but they're falling behind and feeling more stressed. Then a colleague quits, and they're given even more articles to summarize. They start using their weekends to catch up. This helps them get more done and eases their anxiety at first, but over time it starts taking a mental toll. The sense of overload and stress builds.

Then somebody comes along and asks, "Have you ever learned how to speed-read? You can probably cut your reading time in half."

Most professionals are like the person in this analogy. They spend the bulk of their time moving from POD to POD. But the PODs respawn endlessly. So, they never have time to step back

and consider the game changers lying beneath the surface – things that cut POD-solving time in half, or things that uproot the POD-spawners so PODs don't arise in the first place.

But this is precisely what is required to move beyond overloaded and stressed and into an optimal state of performance and well-being where you're relaxed, in-control, and even more effective than you are right now.

The Peak Performance Equation

Jim Loehr, who has trained some of the world's top athletes, special forces, and high performers, says that "Energy is the fundamental currency of high performance." The foundational importance of energy isn't limited to athletics or elite military. Study anybody at the top of their game *in any domain* and you'll see a key principle at work:

Peak performers channel as much of their energy as possible into what matters most.

The words seem simple, but very few people truly live by them. Buried within this principle are many difficult-to-master skills that separate the top percentile of performers from everyone else. My work with teams and individuals focuses on training 10 to 12 of the most essential skills for driving significant gains in performance and well-being. This article introduces three of the most foundational of these skills.

Skill #1

Re-read the peak performance principle and you see the words *“what matters most.”* The words are straightforward. But uncovering what the words point to is a potent skill.

Here’s a simple test: At the end of each day for the next week, ask yourself, “Did I accomplish everything I hoped to get done today?”

If the answer is “no” on half or more of your days, you have work to do on mastering Skill #1.

Regardless of the outcome you want, there are always certain actions or behaviors that are substantially more important to focus on than everything else. Peak performers become masters at identifying what those are, and they go to incredible lengths to maximally direct their time, effort, and focus into those things. They are ruthless about shedding the extraneous and stripping away the noise.

Failing to master this foundational skill is one of the leading causes of underperformance and stress for individuals, teams, and organizations.

Nearly everyone suffers from trying to do too many things.

It’s not simply that people are drowning in trivial, unimportant things, although that is common. The real challenge is that lots of things seem smart, important, or even necessary. But if they aren’t the one or two critical needle-movers, they’re distractions diverting your energy from what matters most.

This is the skill of **true focus**, and it’s at the heart of moving beyond overload and stress and into peak performance and well-being. True focus involves the process of learning to discern the difference between the absolute essentials and everything else, and of building the courage to say “no” to the non-essentials. It takes boldness because it feels risky to substantially narrow our focus. There is comfort in hedging and spreading our bets across a wider set of goals and actions.

So, how do you hone this skill? There are many tactics and practices. Consider the following as a starting point to build the muscle.

Take out your personal to-do list and cross off 10 percent of it. If that’s too big of a leap, even crossing off one “nice-to-have” is a fine starting point. I have yet to work with somebody whose list of actions does not contain at least one thing that they can eliminate without meaningful negative consequences.

Then repeat this process at least once per week. Gradually, you learn how common it is to have non-essential things masquerading as important that slip past your defenses and pull your focus away from what matters most. Through repetition, you gain confidence that this process of elimination does not lead to the negative consequences you fear, nor is it an acceptance of mediocrity. You see clearly that all the time and mental energy you save through consistent elimination is now freed and can be redistributed into executing what truly matters.

Skill #2

The other half of the peak performance principle says to “channel as much energy as possible” into the needle-movers you identify through consistent application of the first skill.

What is energy? It’s your time, your effort, and your psychological resources.

The brute force way to channel more time and effort into what matters is to work harder. Put in more hours. Work through lunch. Catch up on evenings and weekends. But this isn’t a sustainable approach. The better approach is to dramatically increase your throughput.

If you followed any individual and watched how they went about their working hours, you would spot dozens of productivity drains: Workflow issues. Unproductive meetings. Distractions. Energy slumps. Failures of willpower.

In my work with individuals and teams, the problem usually isn’t that people don’t know

what they need to do. The problem is there is a gap between what they know they should do and what actually gets done.

Think of it this way. If you followed through with every behavior or action you knew you should do – exercise, eating well, ditching unhealthy habits, embracing good habits, tackling uncomfortable tasks you tend to avoid, and so forth – you would be a downright superhero, would you not?

The gap between you and that person isn't a knowledge gap. It's an execution gap.

There are several peak performance skills that address this execution gap. They range from practices centered on building your energy capacity, to eliminating energy leakage, to more effectively channeling the various forms of energy into critical actions.

Skill #2 is one of the most powerful ways to fix the execution gap:

Master your personal systems.

Author James Clear makes the astute observation that “You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.”

Most people's “system” is willpower-based – they go through their day making real-time decisions heavily influenced by how they feel in the moment. *Should I make that sales call now or later? Should I eat a salad for lunch or what I really feel like having?* Invariably, the sum of these real-time decisions adds up to far less than a maximal channeling of time and effort into what matters most. Performance and well-being both suffer.

This is one of the core insights that led to the system I detail in the book [Coach's Plan: The Personal Productivity System That Changed My Life](#). Think of yourself as both a coach and a player. The coach in you is the one who sets plans and makes decisions about how you use your time. The player in you is the one on the field executing on those plans and decisions.

The problem is that most people act as the equivalent of a “player-coach” throughout the day – at any moment, they're part player, part coach. When they make a decision in the moment, the decision is colored by how the player feels and what the player wants. When they're executing, they never achieve true flow because they're constantly stepping back from the moment to put on the coach's hat and question their decisions, adjust plans, and reflect on what's happening.

But what is the outcome when you create clear separation between the *you* who knows what's best and the *you* who is capable of optimal execution and flow and you build a system around those distinct coach and player roles?

Your performance skyrockets, and it keeps improving over time because the system itself is adaptive. Your coach gets better building plans that align best with your biology and your unique nature to maximize your flow, your output, and your well-being. Your player becomes an all-star executor because they're no longer splitting attention between coaching and playing, the plans they execute are better, and their success begets more success.

The truth is you already know so much of what you need to do to operate at your full potential. What if you were capable of actually following through with all those things?

It turns out you already are capable. You just need to master the right personal system.

Skill #3

Maximizing the time and effort you channel into what matters most puts you ahead of most professionals. Maximizing the degree to which your **psychological energy** is channeled into what matters most moves you into the territory of true peak performance and well-being.

Think about one of the top hitters in professional baseball stepping up to the plate in Game 7 of the World Series. If that player is distracted by the noise of the stadium, or by

excessive nerves, or they're thinking "Please don't strike out, please don't strike out..." the likelihood they make good contact when swinging at a 100 mile per hour fastball goes way down. Their ability to not become distracted by the environment and to control their mind and emotions is a huge part of why they're playing at the high level they are.

This is what Skill #3 is all about.

Think about how much of our mental and emotional energy is typically expended on things that don't serve us: Attention getting pulled into distraction. The unnecessary time we spend replaying past conversations and events or projecting ourselves into imaginary futures. The emotional energy we expend on worry, stress, or trying to control things that are uncontrollable.

The more we can focus our mind and emotions squarely on the goals, actions, and tasks that serve our performance goals and our well-being, the greater our results and our success in maximizing our potential as individuals.

There are many different practices that help us do this, ranging from approaches to how we schedule our day, to mental and emotional techniques for building concentration, eliminating stress, and tapping into flow states.

One specific tactic you can employ focuses on eliminating sources of psychological energy drain and adding more sources of energy expansion. Energy drains are everywhere, and they come in many forms.

There are external drains, like the environmental distractions of technology, sub-optimal working spaces, or a disjointed schedule. External drains take other forms as well, like interpersonal dynamics and relationship challenges, or sub-optimal aspects of a workplace culture.

Then there are the internal drains of psychological energy, like a lack of mental focus and concentration, persistent negative emotions, mental narratives that pull focus away from the moment, or low energy levels.

External and internal energy expanders are equally varied.

A simple starting point is to keep a running list of energy drains and energy expanders through your day. Each time you notice something that causes you to feel low energy (e.g., tired, deflated, etc.) or any form of negative energy (e.g., stressed, frustrated, angry, etc.), jot down what caused it and the precise feeling in real-time.

Repeat this process for the things that leave you feeling energized, enthusiastic, inspired, motivated, or any other lift to the quality or quantity of your energy. Write down what causes it and how it makes you feel in real-time.

Over time, you build a map of the causes and conditions that pull your psychological energy away from peak performance and well-being. As you identify patterns and themes, you can go to work on making changes to address the energy drains and build more of what boosts you into your day. Marry these insights with Skill #2 and build the changes right into your personal system.

Next Level

What if you doubled your productivity? What if you cut stress in half? What if you moved so far beyond overloaded and stressed that your typical day was characterized by tremendous energy, enthusiasm, and effectiveness?

Most people dismiss these possibilities as unrealistic. They give up before even trying.

This means the next-level version of themselves never comes to fruition.

Is there any downside to staying open to the possibility? Is there any risk in experimenting with new approaches to see what next-level version of you lies dormant within?

I'd like to meet that next-level version of you. I'd like to see what that version of you is capable of accomplishing. What do you have to lose?



About the Author

Mike Kavanagh is a best-selling author, speaker, consultant, and coach specializing in human and organizational well-being and performance. He has 17 years of experience as a C-level corporate executive and advisor to Fortune 500 companies.

Kavanagh also has two decades of experience coaching individuals and teams in a variety of mental and physical training disciplines at the heart of outer and inner success. He is the author of several books, including the #1 Amazon Bestseller [Coach's Plan: The Personal Productivity System That Changed My Life](#), and the internationally acclaimed bestseller [The Successful Manager: A Guide to Building and Leading High-Performing Teams](#). For more about his work with individuals, teams and organizations, or to contact him directly, visit www.mikekav.com.