



“How To Get Control Of Your Time and Your Life”

Alan Lakein (Signet Classic 1974)

Summary by Bob Littell, Chief NetWeaver

Foreward – Why I believe [this work](#) is so significant – **Bob Littell, Chief NetWeaver**

To a certain extent, this month’s book is a continuation of last month when we covered Greider and Levinson’s “*Following Through – A Revolutionary New Model for Finishing Whatever You Start*”. To genuinely ‘**get control of your time and your life**’ – as Lakein discusses in his book – you must at least partly understand **WHY** most of us are so terrible about following through with our good intentions. That’s one reason we’ll be coming back to Greider and Levinson’s book quarterly because it is truly the ‘**blocking and tackling**’ skill set of planning and setting our real priorities, as well as getting our goals actually accomplished.

“*Following Through*” - equipped us with a better understanding how the ‘**survival**’ and ‘**primitive**’ part of our brain continually overrides our good intentions and that by using Greider and Levinson’s ‘**spotlighting**’ and ‘**willpower leveraging**’ techniques, they can help us more successfully accomplish what Alan Lakein describes in his book – getting control of our **time**, and that in turn helps us get in control of our **life**.

Another reason why it makes so much sense to cover this book on the heels of Greider and Levinson’s book is that without recognizing it, some of the techniques which Lakein espouses (especially ‘spotlighting’) are actually forms of what Greider and Levinson recommend as ways to actually get things done.

Why is this book **SO** important? Lakein wrote and published his book all the way back in the early 1970’s. And yet even then he says,

“In the not-too-distant past, when choices were fewer, life and its tools less complex, horizons more limited, people had less need to think about how they spent their time. For all but a privileged few, necessity dictated many actions. Other aspects of people’s lives were determined by such fixed conditions as tradition, religion, social class, or where they happened to have been born.”

Little could Lakein have imagined how the complexity would accelerate over the next quarter of a century. His work came before the internet and ‘Google’- allowing

anyone, with a little dedicated ‘time’, to become an quasi-expert on just about anything they wanted to know; before e-mail’s, 100+ TV channel options, ipods, FaceBook, MySpace, LinkedIn, PLAXO, PlayStation and gaming of all kinds, and dozens of other options today which are ALL vying for our limited amount of time.

So ‘**time management**’ is more important today than it has ever been and this book - the grand daddy of them all – still in my opinion holds many of the secrets to success.

“Drift, Drown or Decide”

Lakein first points out that we have ‘controllable’ elements to our life and ‘uncontrollable’ ones.

“There are constraints on everyone that make free choice impossible in all situations. But you are free to choose much of the time. Maybe you are kidding yourself if you believe outside factors are controlling your life. It could be you are not even doing a very good job in those areas where you do have control.”

Lakein talks about the role adjustments which are needed in our lives as we experience major changes in our lives such as going away to college, getting married, having children, changing jobs or localities, retiring. I would add another important one and that is in a ‘**job transition**’ role in which many are finding themselves today. He suggests that you should keep track of the ‘**number of hours**’ which you are spending still in your old role or way of thinking, instead of focusing on your new situation. That will help you *gradually change your habits and channel more of your time toward your new responsibilities*.

Lakein points out that our ‘time use’ is the result of hundreds of thousands of big and little choices made each year, month, week, day and minute – deciding what to do and how to do it. He provides some categories for reasons we use:

1. **Habits** – that’s the way we’ve always done it.
2. **Demands of others** – we follow them without even thinking.
3. **Escapism** – we daydream of things and ways we’d like to do things but never get around to doing them.
4. **Spur of the moment** – we just act impulsively – sometimes with good results, other times with mediocre or bad.
5. **Default** – others end up making the decision for you.
6. **Conscious Decision** – guess which one Lakein advocates?

“Control Starts with Planning”

According to Lakein, *“Planning is bringing the future into the present so that you can do something about it now.”*

But consider the ‘**occasional planner**’ who only takes time to get a fuzzy picture of his goal and consequently misses his mark, and concludes that he’s just not good at it. Contrast that with the ‘**serious planner**’ who recognizes his first take may be very fuzzy,

and ill-defined, but by consistently refining the more important aspects of the plan, more meaning is built into it. Then he looks for problems, false assumptions, hang-ups and difficulties, and makes corrections where he has to.

Lakein also makes an important point when he says that, “*Many people seem to have difficulty planning because they regard it only as “thinking” – which all too often translates into ‘staring into space’ or ‘daydreaming’.*” . . . “*From experience with thousands of people, I have concluded that it is much better to conceive of planning as ‘writing’ than as ‘thinking’.*”

He calls this “*Decision Time*” because planning is all about making decisions as to **what** and **when** and if necessary, **how**.

Lakein says this about planning: “*In all planning, long-range, middle-range, or short-range, you 1) make a list, and 2) set priorities. . .In my opinion, no list is complete until it shows priorities.*”

“It’s as Basic as ABC”

The ABC priority system.

A - **High value** -You get the most out of your time by doing the A’s first.

B - **Medium value.**

C - **Low value.**

Prioritize the A’s as A-1, A-2, A-3, A-4,etc.

“ABC’s may change over time. Today’s A, may become tomorrow’s C, while today’s C becomes tomorrow’s A. you need to set priorities continually, considering the best of your time right now.”

In thinking of the ABC priorities, I would like you to refer back to an important distinction which I stress in NetWeaving. I believe it is critical to understand and appreciate the difference between

- **Following Up**
- **Following Through**

Treat **following up** in a **time-related** context, meaning that a person **takes some action** within a fairly short period following whatever activity triggers the follow up.

For example, you meet someone at a networking event or reception who really impresses you. Then, either that same night, or the next day, you send a personal note or an email. It’s a fairly simple action which doesn’t take too much time or effort. So in my vernacular, in this example, **following up** refers to the action of writing and sending a follow up email or personal note either that night or the next day.

But, **following through** is the **Quality** and the **Creativity with which you follow up**. In the former example, following your conversation, you would immediately sneak over to a corner and make some notes on the back of the person's business card noting what you talked about with special emphasis on important points the other person made. You would then include some or all of these points in the email or personal note you sent out. That adds quality and creativity to the follow up and is **above and beyond** what others do.

But let's say that in addition to sending a personal note with this higher degree of touch, here are some additional things you could do which would truly exemplify the distinction to which I'm referring:

- Along with the email you send, you followup by attaching an article with a note saying,
"Thought you might enjoy this article which pertains to our discussion."
- Even better, and much more powerful, you send an article with a cover note saying, *"Thought you might enjoy this article and in line with our discussion, the points in the article which were most helpful to me were. . . list three or four points"*. – this is what I mean by above and beyond.
- Better yet, in addition to **ALL** of the above, you follow up with a phone call within 24 or 48 hours, and you set up a breakfast or lunch meeting or maybe just a cup of coffee to get to know the person better.
- But, **best of all**, you follow up with: 1) **the note**; 2) the 'personalized' **article**; 3) the **follow up phone call**, and you go that **one additional key extra step**, and 4) on your phone call, you say,

"You know after we spoke last night, I thought of someone I whom I believe you would really benefit knowing (describing him or her briefly) and I'd like to 'host' a meeting to introduce you to him/her." **That's the power of NetWeaving.**

Now consider this distinction in line with the ABC priority system of Lakein. I would consider writing the email 'follow up' as a 'C'. It will have little value to you and the person receiving it will probably delete it as soon as he or she receives.

But now consider that the person goes WAY above and beyond what the person expects as follow up and do all four:

- 1) sends an email note mentioning points the person made
- 2) includes a 'personalized' article
- 3) makes a follow up phone call
- 4) sets up a 'hosting' meeting to introduce that person to someone he or she would benefit meeting and knowing.

All of a sudden, the 'quality' and the 'creativity' of your extensive 'Follow Through' has turned a 'C' into something of great value to you – an 'A'.

There are a chapters in the middle of the book which cover setting ‘life goals’ but since we’ll be covering those in other books we’ll be reading as part of our “**Don’t Need to Read the Book**” book club, you can read those sections on your own (HINT- another reason to buy the book actually read it).

The 80/20 Rule

Although everyone has heard of the 80/20 rule, Lakein helps show how broadly it applies. The one I hear most often: *80% of sales are made by the top 20% of the sales force.*

Lakein drives the point home by citing other examples to which this typically applies:

- 80 percent of **sales** comes from 20 percent of **customers**.
- 80 percent of **production** is in 20 percent of the **product line**.
- 80 percent of **sick leave** is taken by 20 percent of **employees**.
- 80 percent of **file usage** is in 20 percent of **files**.
- 80 percent of **dinners** repeat 20 percent of the **recipes**.
- 80 percent of the **dirt** is on 20 percent of the **floor area** which is highly used.
- 80 percent of **dollars** is spent on 20 percent of the **expensive meat and grocery items**.
- 80 percent of **TV time** is spent on 20 percent of **programs** most popular with the family.
- 80 percent of **reading time** is spent on 20 percent of the pages in the **newspaper** (front page, sports page, editorials, columnists, feature page).
- 80 percent of **eating out** is done at 20 percent of **favorite restaurants**.

Lakein mentions all of these to emphasize and remind us again and again *not to get bogged down on low-value activities but to focus on the 20% where the high value lies.*

You need a ‘C’ drawer – “*Rather than let the high-quality A’s get buried by the much larger quantity of C’s, try reserving a special place on the top of your desk for the A items. Create a Special C-Drawer where the unimportant items can get dumped safely out of the way. If you already have a C-drawer, get your self a bigger one, or whole cabinet for C’s to be kept out of the way.*”

Ask Lakein’s Question

Of all the great information in this book, one of the most valuable ones which reinforces the importance of planning each day – either early in the morning (advantage – you’re fresh) or last thing in the evening (advantage – you can actually let your subconscious work on solving some of your A’s while you sleep) – involves Lakein’s Question.

“What is the best use of my time right now?”

“At first you’ll have to remind yourself to keep asking Lakein’s Question, whenever you’re not positive whether you’re using your time to best advantage. After a week or so, it should become second nature to you.”

When I decided to feature this book for our book club, I thought I had remembered that I had read a quote from the book, which was the most valuable thing I drew from it. Nevertheless, when I re-read it – unless I just missed it – I can't find it. Then I remembered that we covered this book as a group exercise at a company back in Dallas, Texas where I was Marketing VP. We had a discussion leader who used the book as part of a '**time management**' training session and so now I think that this phrase must have been one that he thought up rather than Lakein.

In either case, it fits in perfectly with the A's, B's, and C's and the importance of focusing on the A's.

The problem with the A's is that they seldom are things or projects which can be completed at one sitting, and especially not within a relatively short time slot. They are more complex and usually require stretching your work on them over longer periods of time. That's why it's so easy when you apply Lakein's Question: "*What's the best use of my time right now?*" to rationalize that you only have 15 minutes before: you have to leave for an appointment. . .or before you have to start a conference call. . .or some other commitment – and so you decide to knock out a couple "C's".

The phrase that has made a huge difference in my life and ability to move important projects forward is,

"When in doubt. . .Chip at an A"

In other words, and this is why planning at the beginning or end of the day is so important. You have study your A's and figure how to break it down into 'manageable pieces' which can be completed in a relatively short period of time.

That might be to 'google' some topic to begin your research. It might be to make one phone call that somewhere along the way is going to be needed. It's just the act of slicing and dicing your A's into 'bite-size' pieces which you can digest over time and eventually you'll look back and say, "**I CAN'T BELIEVE I ATE THE WHOLE THING!**"

Lakein's version of tackling an **Overwhelming A-1** is to turn it into "**Swiss Cheese**" by poking some holes in it. He call these '**instant tasks**'. An 'instant task' required five minutes or less of your time and makes some sort of hole in your Overwhelming A-1. He suggests making a list of your possible instant tasks and then setting priorities. His only rule with regard to these is, while making up this list, limit it to items that can be started quickly and easily and are in some way connected with working on the Overwhelming A-1.

Try a Leading Task

Interestingly, the book we studied last month, "*Following Through – A Revolutionary New Model for Finishing Whatever You Start*" featured two techniques for overcoming our 'natural' tendency to procrastinate, rationalize, justify, delay, postpone, or otherwise ignore the fact that we need to often find ways to trick our brain to just get started on something which we really know needs to be done.

The authors of that book, Greider and Levinson mentioned a follow through technique called, “**Spotlighting**” which entails “*stimulating your desire to do what you intend to do by keeping your good intentions from getting lost in the shuffle.*”

Lakein approaches the same tendency to get started on something by easing yourself gradually into the big job. He calls this a ‘**leading task**’ because it *leads you on* (i.e. keeps you going when you might otherwise quit).

One example he gives is to keep yourself in the physical presence of some item associated with your A-1. You have a letter that you know you should answer, but have been avoiding. Try putting it right in the middle of your desk. As Lakein says, “*Leading yourself toward the A-1 in this way will not always work. But I have observed many times that a simple physical action does indeed lead to meaningful involvement.*”

Give Yourself a Pep Talk

Lakein makes a very interesting point: “*Studies have shown that most people don’t start a project they believe they can’t finish. Conversely, most people will attempt something that appears easy even though in fact it is impossible. The basis of their willingness to try is their subjective estimate of the probability of success.*”

So just as the coach gives the ‘*one for the Gipper*’ talk before the team goes out on the field, you might want to do the same.

No Need to Become Bored

Lakein: “*Various experiments have been carried out in which an individual is placed in a room with a strictly controlled environment. His responses are monitored. In one of these experiments, the subject lies on a comfortable bed in total darkness most of the time. All his physical needs are cared for. He pushes a button and finds a hot meal behind a sliding panel. After five days of this, most the test subjects reported hysteria, fantasies, and delusions. No subject was able to continue for more than a week, and all took many months to recuperate fully. Such experiments confirm that in the absence of what is called “stimulus change”, a person undergoes rapid psychological deterioration.*”

Stimulus can either be **distracting** (e.g. Noise, telephone) or **constructive** (e.g. moving from your desk to another comfortable place).

So in conclusion, start this year on the right foot, by regularly: 1) making a commitment to **PLAN** and to consistently **PRIORITIZE**, and **RE-PRIORITIZE** – ASKING yourself ONE question: “*What is the most important use of my time right now?*” and REMINDING yourself of ONE key point: “*When in doubt, Chip at an A!!*”.