

Making Successful Transitions

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Transitions are difficult times for everyone. If we can learn to make changes with more awareness, attention, and reflection, we gain perspective and enjoy the change process instead of resisting it. Clarifying our purpose, becoming clear about our core incompetence, learning to manage our energy, and creating an alarm system to warn us of unnecessary energy drains will make a significant difference to our enjoyment, success, and effectiveness while making transitions.

The key to making successful career and life transitions is developing clarity about what one really wants in work and in life. Often, intelligent people know what others should or should not aspire for, but they experience formidable difficulties making decisions in their own lives. When it comes to practicing what we preach, it seems that the more intelligent we are, the more difficult it becomes. Self-mastery is less about preaching and more about practicing—it is at the core of making successful changes in life.

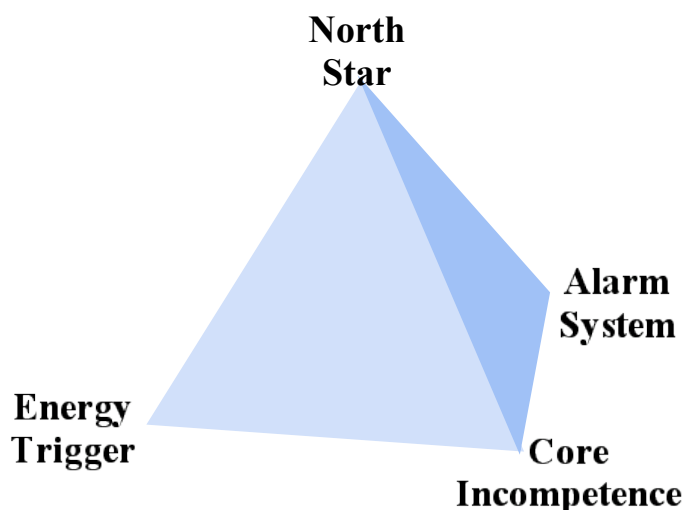
In this short article, I focus on specific ideas on self-mastery that, with practice, could help us make successful transitions. Four basic principles are covered: *Awareness*, *Attention*, *Action*, and *Reflection*. While I will address them as independent principles, they are really part of the same cycle. In this cycle, we can begin at any point and end at any point or can continue to go through the cycle multiple times. Before we focus on awareness cycle, I would like us to understand more about our *Personal DNA* (which will be explained below): *North Star*, *Core Incompetence*, *Energy Trigger*, and *Alarm System*. In the end, I will summarize the article and suggest ways to go beyond where this article stopped.

Let us understand more about our personal DNA as that is the starting point for clarifying where we want to end up.

Personal DNA

At SelfCorp, we believe that it is possible to create conscious DNA maps that represent an individual's (or corporation's) unique personalities (or cultures). Although the words "Personal DNA" and "Cultural DNA" are metaphoric with respect to the actual meaning of a genetic code, they still have the potential to affect the generative capabilities that activate hidden codes in our biological DNA. It is known that we have many more codes that lay inactive in our genetic code (often called "junk DNA"), and certain emotions and actions can trigger those codes, allowing us to tap into a latent, previously unknown inner genius. We work with our clients to create individualized, three-dimensional maps that are about 8 inches in size and constructed from plastic and cardboard. We call them *Personal DNA maps* (or *cultural DNA maps*), and they are very useful in helping people determine their unique strengths and potential fit with specific jobs in certain companies. Cultural DNA maps are excellent for cultural integration work, for identifying the best candidates for certain senior positions, and for branding products and companies. Consider Hewlett-Packard (HP). We know that HP has a unique culture that has been mapped and evolved in different parts of the world. When conflicts arise regarding the "HP Way" (like they did with during the potential merger with Compaq), the root of dissension lies with people who believe that inappropriate mergers and acquisitions will dilute the DNA and the culture. A similar phenomenon happens when we engage in a job that is inconsistent with the purposes that we have defined for ourselves, either consciously or unconsciously. Thus, the purpose of these DNA maps, or *essence maps*, is that they help shape our future when we use them to actively participate in visualizing our future and clarifying our purpose. These maps are in three dimensions and about 8" in size and have a tetrahedron shape. An archetypal personal DNA map is shown below.

We identify four base pairs of our personal DNA, just like base pairs of genetic DNA.



North Star

We all have work on finding our purpose in life sometime or another. We call that purpose as North Star because it represents something up in the sky that beckons us and helps us to orient ourselves. Some of us are clear about our North Star, while others try to find it by rejecting everything that is not their purpose. If we methodically identify our North Star and visualize it, it helps us to stretch beyond our usual autopilot patterns and co-create a future that is more exciting. But, when we are in transition, our purpose becomes hazy, and, when we are in our fear-based or survival-based modes, even the suggestion that we have a choice in co-creating our future is often difficult to accept. The key to breaking out of our fear-based patterns is to discover our larger purpose.

Clarifying personal North Star. Let us visualize what we would like to be doing and where we would like to be far into the future (in 5 to 10 years or 20 years). When we visualize, clearly identify and articulate our purpose, it becomes easier for us to appreciate where we are right now, set priorities, and identify next steps. Then, during a transition period, we can take time to identify the kind of job and company that would best help us move towards our North Star. Because we are exercising our choice in finding the right job for us, when we start working, we will certainly be much more passionate, productive, and effective. Moreover, goal setting becomes more meaningful when we understand the larger purpose behind those goals we set, and it will be easier for us to backtrack from the desired future to the present moment. Let us not worry about finding ways to reach our larger purpose yet. Nature is not so capricious that it lets us visualize a future and then denies us the tools to reach that future. Rather, once we are clear and passionate about our North Star, we automatically begin to explore ways to attain that future. In other words, when we identify our unique aspirations and ambitions, they begin to pull us toward materializing them. Purpose is one of the four core components of our personal DNA.

The conventional goal-setting process starts from the present and extends into the future. People extrapolate what they want now into the future, wishing for a better or faster version of what they currently have. It is no wonder that such a goal-setting process is depressing, because it reminds people that whatever they have now is not good enough and they will have to wait for something better.

To prevent falling into that trap, let us ask ourselves the following questions when we are clarifying our North Star:

- Does my North Star inspire me (especially when I am down)?
- Does my North Star challenge me (when I feel smug)?
- Does my North Star give me direction (when I am lost)?

When we identify our unique North Star, it can be used to figure out which way we are headed.

Core Incompetence

Often, North Star alone is sufficient. But there may be times when we have the nagging feeling that despite having identified a motivating purpose, we are not making fast enough progress towards it. To resolve this, we must understand that each of us has ingrained behaviors that hold us back. CK Prahalad and Gary Hamel introduced the notion of the “core competence” of an organization in their book *Competing for the Future*. However, I have identified another characteristic that is unique to each of us, which I call the *core incompetence* (CI). The core incompetence is a behavior that prevents us from moving towards our purpose. When the core incompetence has taken over, our capacity to think and act rationally is seriously impaired. Instead, we react from past memories and dysfunctional patterns. We can probably identify our strengths easily, but do we really know our debilitating weaknesses? Are we willing to admit them to ourselves?

Consider tennis. One’s ability to win a game of tennis does not depend just on ability to maintain strong volleys or formidable returns. One must also have a good serve. But, if my serve is my weak link, then, unless I improve it, my capability to win against another serious player would be seriously impaired. A similar effect applies to our work and our life. For example, until we control volatile tempers, learn to deal with distractions, or eliminate chronic tardiness, we won’t be able to advance vigorously toward success.

How do we discover our core incompetence? We have to look at where we get repeatedly stuck and where our “foot is nailed to the floor.” What behaviors or attitudes do we have that other people keep complaining about? What is one thing that we want to justify or hide from others? If we begin to list those things and seek the root cause behind them, we would have arrived at our core incompetence. When I work with executives one on one or during leadership programs that I conduct, I pay special attention to CI because it is a limiting factor. Once we identify our CI, we can get a coach or partner with peers who have strengths in the area of our incompetence and develop alternative approaches to make us successful despite our core incompetence.

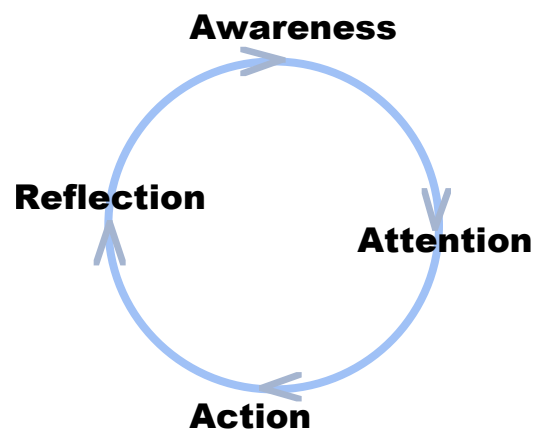
CI is like a hook: it’s an unconscious, addictive pattern. Once we become conscious of it and have a larger purpose that inspires us, our CI begins to lose its grip on us. Purpose and Core Incompetence are like opposite sides of the same coin. We can only be present to one of them at a given time. When we consciously shift our attention to a larger purpose, and explore why we are doing what we are doing, we can learn to unhook ourselves from our CIs. This is the beginning of the personal mastery journey.

Energy Trigger

I always wondered why I am full of energy one day and completely down the next? Do you know what activities excite you, rejuvenate you, and energize you every time you engage in them? Take a minute and think about it. Is it being in nature? Is it music? Is it reading? Tennis? Making love? Good food? Many of us are blind to what triggers us or drains our energy. If we are unaware of our energy trigger, we are dependent on weather, food, and unexpected surprises to cheer us up and energize us. As we become more aware and pay more attention to what activities energize us, we begin to see an increase in our energy on a daily basis. Emotional energy and passion are two factors that distinguish successful people.

For the next week, let us pay attention to what activities and practices rejuvenate us reliably and repeatedly and what activities and practices drain us. By identifying activities or practices that reliably rejuvenate us, we will reduce chances of burnout. By the way, when I mention energy trigger, I really am looking for the triggering mechanism. For example, when my laptop battery is drained, I plug the ac adapter into a wall socket. Once I plug it in, the battery starts charging and continues to charge until it is full. My role is to plug it in. Similarly, what activities in our lives do we need to initiate or to start up so that we trigger our rejuvenation process?

Alarm System



How do we identify when we are draining our energy faster than

usual? We all do get exhausted over time during the day and that is understandable. Weather, work, thinking, stress – all of them could drain our energy. But some times, we lose our energy at a faster pace and if we don't catch ourselves, we might do such things as get upset with others, snap at people, become impatient with ourselves, and make stupid decisions. These are preventable energy drains and we have to learn to identify signals that our body sends to let us know that we are getting into a danger zone. Paying attention to our breathing patterns, body signals like tension in our neck or shoulders, and sensations like sudden heat, cold, dryness of mouth help us develop our internal alarm systems. When our energy drain kicks into high gear, these could be alarm signals warning us, and if we pay attention, we might identify the cause of the drain. When these signals are consciously identified and addressed appropriately, we can really stop energy from draining out of our system. The end result is more self-control, more self-awareness and sensitivity to what is going on inside our body and outside in the room. When we

can come up with a reliable alarm system and pay attention to it regularly, we will notice a significant shift in our communication, effectiveness in working with others, and overall sense of accomplishment. The more we learn to manage our drains, the better we will be in making meaningful decisions regarding our future, which is critical during a transition period.

Awareness

The more intelligent we are, the more often we operate on “autopilot.” This is the state in which we are not consciously making choices but are responding in a mechanical fashion. We get comfortable with a set of mental models that have made us successful in the past, and those mental models become part of our unconscious patterns. These “autopilot patterns” act as filters that prevent any information from entering our minds that is contrary to our established patterns. In other words, we doubt, suspect, or outright reject new information that does not fit into our models. Moreover, when we don’t become aware of these patterns, we develop chronic incompetencies and get stuck in ways that drain our energy and vitality.

Dramatic improvements in effectiveness can be achieved when we are able to make concrete connections between our unconscious thought patterns and our behaviors. Making such connections requires listening to people who care about us, especially when they give us “unpleasant” feedback. Becoming more open and soliciting information that confronts or contradicts our point of view is thus highly recommended during transitions. Then, once we encounter contradictory opinions, it helps to dispassionately examine our autopilot behaviors and see whether they are appropriate in the current context. Developing such a perspective requires constant awareness, careful attention, the willingness to engage in new and unaccustomed actions, and regular reflection—all of which is easier said than done! These actions often need support structures, such as coaches, as well as self-control and regular practice.

Let us think about the unique competencies that each of us bring to any job that we take on. Are we aware of our own unique contributions? What makes us special? When I ask this question, some of us describe our last employer, our past job, the size of the budget that we managed, the number of people who worked for us, the school that we graduated from, or our years of professional experience. Suppose that we are attending a job interview in Silicon Valley: Is it possible that there are others who have comparable background, work experience, and academic qualifications who might attend the same interview? How are we going to distinguish ourselves from those people? We need to delve into our unique approach, our passion, and the gifts that we alone bring to any project that we take up to get that job. Now we are talking about our unique essence—sometimes called our *personal DNA*. Just like we are made of genetic DNA, we can think of personal DNA as the building block of our personality. Undeniably, there is nobody like me or you in the world. Each of us are unique. But, we must discover our distinguishing characteristics, and, when we become aware of them, we will easily find the unique qualifications and advantages that we hold over others with similar characteristics.

In summary, awareness concerns making concrete connections between our unconscious thoughts, behavior patterns, and conscious actions. The “knowing-doing” gap occurs when we mistake “knowing” something for our ability to act on it, or not knowing what we routinely do in our day-to-day life. Then, we keep doing those same things over and over, expecting different results in an “unthinking way.” Awareness is about discovering your hidden skills, talents, and passions so that it is easy to “brand” yourself. The knowing-doing gap narrows when we become more aware of our own feelings and automatic thought patterns and pay attention to the roles that they play in our lives.

Attention

William James said, “Our acts of voluntary attending, as brief and fitful as they are, are nevertheless momentous and critical, determining us, as they do, to higher or lower destinies.” Attention makes a difference when everything else is equal. When people focus their attention, superior performance results regardless of their capabilities. In his book *Inner Game of Work*, Tim Gallwey says:

The simple fact is that we do our best when we are focused, whether we are riding a bicycle, drawing a plan for a suspension bridge, conceiving a global strategy for multinational company, negotiating a contract, selling a product, cutting sushi, tasting a glass of wine, appreciating a sunset, throwing a ball, or writing a book. And when focus is lost, we simply do not perform at our best.

Attention is critical to all learning, skill development, clarity, achievement, and ultimately enjoyment. Attention is especially important to areas where one is aware of one’s core incompetence. Here is a comment from a resigned executive about his ability to get things done on time. “I know that I have to manage my tendency to procrastinate of every thing to the ‘last minute.’ I am aware that the stress is building up not only in me but also in others who support me and, of course, my clients. The problem is that I do not pay enough attention to this issue. So the problem continues and every time I curse myself, saying that I will pay attention the next time. But the next time never seems to come.” Do you relate to his dilemma? Are you aware of things that you keep putting off until the last minute? Can you take a few minutes and list all of the things that you know of that would improve your chances of getting to your goal if only you could pay enough attention to them?

Paying attention entails allowing ourselves to compensate for our core incompetence without judgment. Also, it means focusing on something in a relaxed way and allowing that focus to shape our awareness. For example, can you close your eyes and pay attention to your breath for a minute? I would like you to say out loud whether you are breathing in using the right nostril or the left nostril or both right now. Keep your attention on your breath and notice whether you breathe in and out using one nostril or both nostrils. When you really do this exercise, you might be in for a surprise. Your awareness of your own breath increases significantly. The purpose of paying attention is to increase your awareness and concentration. Whenever you pay attention, confusion lifts and clarity increases.

When you learn to pay attention and develop your focus, it becomes the master skill that can induce a state of *timeless enjoyment* in whatever you are doing. This is often called “playing in the zone,” and playing in the zone is responsible for the magical performances and effortless excellence that we observe. One recent example of such focused performance was Sarah Hughes’ figure skating during the ladies’ long program of the 2002 Winter Olympics. She seemed to have performed magically, without any expectations, and was pleasantly surprised to receive a gold medal. On the other hand, Michelle Kwan seemed to focus on the medal so powerfully that she became too tense and subsequently could only attain a bronze medal. The example shows that trying too hard produces constrained focus and wavering attention. If you can learn to develop full attention, yet remain relaxed, you will be able to perform much better in whatever you undertake (including job interviews), as well as learn faster and more fully while enjoying yourself in the process.

Where in your life are you able to focus and pay total attention? What kinds of activities can you attend to without distraction that once easily distracted you? Discovering the nature of full attention will allow you to manage your energy well and help you move effortlessly towards your purpose.

Awareness is what you develop by reading this article. It is like a light that shines and brings objects into your field of view. Read it again and discuss it with your spouse or friends until you begin to identify the four cornerstones of your personal DNA. Select one of the four DNA components and focus your attention on it. Which one you choose does not matter; you can pick the one that interests you the most. Over time, you will begin to notice that your attention is creating a significant difference to that component, and the results that you produce will begin to shift dramatically in a positive direction. While awareness is like a light, attention and focus enable you to see with greater clarity and definition.

Action

You have a choice to use your attention or not—it won't happen automatically to you. When you first learn to focus and pay attention, you will notice how many distractions you have. Your worries, expectations, doubts, and fears all seek to distract your focused attention. But, when you begin to trust yourself, break out of your autopilot patterns, choose to focus on your North Star, reduce your core incompetence, and manage your energy triggers and alarm systems well, magic begins to happen. Nonetheless, keep practicing because magic is to be generated continuously and will not become another autopilot pattern.

In India, we call it *sadhana*, or regular practice, that builds your capacity to pay full attention. You cannot force it. Becoming good at developing attention and concentration requires you to be interested, accepting of yourself, and gentle with self-criticism. When you take action with full attention, you begin to develop a “presence” that is hard to ignore. Did you ever meet the Dalai Lama? He can look at you and pay attention to you in a group of 10 or 10,000 persons and completely make you feel that he only has eyes for you. When he listens, he listens with no interruptions and apparently with no internal noise. That kind of “presence” is a rare gift, but each of us can develop it with practice. In how many activities do you pay total attention? Do you really listen to people when you are in a meeting or when you go to a lecture? You may not be aware of it, but each of us makes many unconscious judgments about another's attention, listening skills, and their interest based on how they “show up.” Do you pay attention to how you “show up” to others?

Actions are not just activities. When you are in-action, not just reacting or proactively planning, your presence shows up differently. Pay attention to your attitudes and moods while you communicate and decide what is going to happen before you speak or shake the other person's hand. Your actions and attitudes go together with your attention and awareness. The more that your actions are congruent with your attitudes and awareness, the more magic you attract in your daily life.

Attention and awareness can be practiced in everyday activities. Pick any one of the actions that you want to improve and pay attention to it. Just become aware of what you are doing without judging or evaluating. Find a variable that you can observe without difficulty. For example, you could pay attention to phenomena such as the other person's tone, brevity in communication, interest level, or your feeling of respect. When you are driving a car, you can pay attention to distractions, your comfort level, or the gap between your car and the one in front. Similarly, you can select other variables for practice.

Pick one action that would impact your personal DNA, and see what happens to your energy, effectiveness, and behavior over one week. Then, reflect on what benefits you gained and how your behavior has changed. Ask others around you to share what they noticed. Through this process, you will develop greater awareness of what has happened, and you will begin to make others more curious and aware too.

Reflection

This is the key to personal development. Pick a suitable time to reflect on the day's events. If you are comfortable, keep a journal and explore what you felt during a particular event, including how you feel at the time of reflection. Notice your judgments, assessments, and expectations about that event, yourself, and others. Examine whether those feelings and thoughts have surfaced before in the same way and, if so, identify the pattern. Reflect on the triggers that evoke those patterns. Become aware of the positive patterns that attract you and create an attachment to them and the patterns that create negative energies and aversion in you. Both of them will lead you down the garden path as they both create autopilot patterns and reduce your awareness. Each time you become aware, every time you pay attention, the more freedom you gain from your patterns and more choices you find in your action. Reflection is an extremely powerful way to recharge and recommit to your North Star. As you learn to separate yourself from what occurs and observe events without attachment, you begin to gain balance, perspective, and equanimity.

Tying it all together

If you can follow the process of identifying your personal DNA and developing a daily practice of being aware of what is going on around and inside you, paying attention to what is happening in the moment, taking action without attachment and with awareness, reflecting regularly, and identifying patterns that limit you, you will begin to notice an internal shift. Your presence, listening abilities, focus, performance, and results will be very different as you progress in your practice.

It is possible to unleash your leadership abilities, ignite your passion and commitment, harvest your creativity, and clarify your purpose by working on and strengthening all your personal DNA components. I highly recommend that you invest the time to learn more about your personal DNA. This will help you to

- Surface your autopilot patterns to the level of awareness/consciousness,
- Structure the patterns in ways that dramatize their effects,
- Identify behavior triggers that short circuit autopilot patterns, thus allowing conscious, effective intervention (action),
- Manage your energy while not letting your Core Incompetence ruin your life, and
- Move toward and reach your long-term purpose.

At SelfCorp, we consult with executives in the areas of creativity and innovation, strategic thinking, cultural integration (based on mapping cultural DNA of the organization), and coaching and mentoring services (using a custom assessment and after helping you create your own personal DNA map). You are welcome to contact me, come to free Practical Spirituality sessions that are held on Wednesday evenings in my office, or attend one of my personal/leadership development workshops. One can even sign up for a year-long program that helps you accomplish one significant project at work or home and ignite your natural genius.

Summary

Transitions are difficult times for everyone. Making changes with more awareness, attention, and reflection allows us to learn enormously, gain perspective, and enjoy the change process instead of resisting it. Clarifying our purpose, becoming clear about our core incompetence, learning to manage our energy, and creating an alarm system to warn us of unnecessary energy drains will make a significant difference to our enjoyment, success, and

effectiveness. What we enjoy sticks with us and becomes a stimulus for deeper and longer lasting changes! That is the trigger that ignites your natural genius!

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