

People used to believe it was impossible to run a mile in less than four minutes. It was called the “Four-Minute-Mile-Barrier.” For many years, athletes tried to break this barrier, and no one could do it; in fact, there was a multitude of scientific evidence to support the fact that it couldn’t be done. Then in 1964, Roger Bannister, a British medical student, broke the barrier. As you’d suspect, it was a huge deal and made headlines in the world of sports. Guess what happened after he did it? Yep—a lot of people started doing the very same thing—five or seven athletes that year. Why? Simple: he had shown them the possibility and encouraged them to break through their own limitations.

When you believe that something is impossible to do, you don’t even try, or you do it half-heartedly, so that when it doesn’t work given your low level of effort, you do what...say, “see, I told you I couldn’t do it.” “It’s impossible! I knew it was!” This is the famous self-fulfilling prophecy.

If you think you can get better and be more productive, you can, and you will. Always think, “What if”? Take stock. Think about your daily tasks and ask some important questions. “How can I do this better next time?” “How can I be more efficient?” “How can I get these results with less effort?”

Occasionally, you must take the time to stop, step back, and ask yourself these questions. You can’t just keep plowing ahead without occasionally regrouping and reassessing what you’re doing or have become blind to doing.

Here are a few concrete and immediate ways to begin making changes:

Performance. When something is bothering you, do a bit of introspection to see what’s going on and how you might approach it more efficiently or effectively next time. If you’re in a rut, and you’ve grown accustomed to low productivity, change may not be comfortable and change may not be easy. Take an honest look at your life, determine what’s no longer working, and change it.

Sitting bombs. You’ve passed that magazine twenty times—you know, the one that has a great article for your parents or friends—and keep telling yourself, “I need to send that article.” Do it now. Decide that, whenever possible, you will dispatch routine tasks immediately. If it takes less than three minutes, do it right then.

Appointments. Your friend repeatedly cancels dates at the last minute. This drives you crazy, but you continue to put up with it. Next time, don’t avoid dealing with the issue. If the person is important to you, explain how frustrated you are.

Waiting time. It makes you nuts to have to continually wait for your doctor, who is always late (we must go to the same doctor). Instead, you decide you will make good use of this time and now carry notecards, a novel or textbook, or favorite magazine in your bookbag.

Forgetfulness. At the end of the day, you had to rush out the door and leave that project half-done. You’re always frustrated, because when you return and look at the page, you can’t for the life of you remember what you were thinking or doing. Before quitting for the day, jot a few notes on a sticky note about where you left off and what your next step is.

Post-vacation slam. You return from a vacation or meet and are so overwhelmed by your overflowing homework, email, or regular mail that you’re more stressed out than before you left. Decide instead to do as much as you can ahead of time.