

Get a Life!

The title 'Get a Life!' is rendered in a large, bold, black sans-serif font. The letters are interconnected by thin blue lines and small blue 'x' marks. A vertical line runs through the 'a' and 'e'. A curved line connects the top of the 'G' to the top of the 'a'. Another curved line connects the bottom of the 'L' to the middle of the 'e'. Small circles are placed at various points where lines meet or cross, and some have arrows pointing to specific letters.

OUR INTREPID REPORTER LETS THREE COACHES TAKE HIM IN HAND.

BY PAUL KEEGAN

The CEO of a megabillion-dollar retail chain is lying next to me in his gym shorts. We are face-down, arms stretched in front of us like Superman. We lift our legs, hold the pose, then drop to the floor, lower-back muscles burning. After a minute a whistle blows, and we get to work on our abs. “Damn, that was hard!” the chief groans. Welcome to the peculiar, intimate (and sometimes sweaty) world of executive coaching.

This fiftysomething captain of industry will later take part in a group meditation on compassion, but he's not really a touchy-feely guy. He's just looking for an edge to help him cope with the pressures of his job. So are his 28 mostly paunchy direct reports running around in their shorts at the Human Performance Institute in Orlando. And so am I.

Such programs cost thousands of dollars and burn up precious days. Which raises the question, Do they work? To find out, I asked three of the top productivity gurus on the market to give me a free taste of their work, then spent six months test-driving their systems. The three—Stephen Covey, David Allen, and Jim Loehr—have each written at least one successful book; each has spent decades advising *Fortune* 500 companies.

Covey wrote *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989), a mega-seller, and co-founded FranklinCovey, the leader of the productivity industry, with \$284 million in sales and 75 retail stores hawking its books and day planners. He argues that the key to productivity lies in clarifying your life's ultimate purpose. Allen takes the opposite approach, starting with the details of organization and workflow in his manual *Getting Things Done* (2001). Loehr believes the secret lies in managing your energy, not your time. In *The Power of Full Engagement* (2003, with Tony Schwartz) he describes how his experience coaching elite athletes, including tennis player Jim Courier and basketball star Grant Hill, has given him insights that help him whip executives into shape at companies like Procter & Gamble and Dell.

My mission: Read the books, attend a seminar, get personal coaching—and then report back. That's assuming, of course, that I can get off the floor after 60 excruciating seconds of crunches.

Stephen Covey

Everything that makes life worth living starts with the letter “L.” That's the first thing I learn at a \$299 one-day FranklinCovey Focus seminar in a New York hotel. We are on page 14 of our workbooks, trying to figure out what values govern our lives, when our seminar leader, Vicky Gilmore, plays a video of children frolicking to heart-tugging music as words dance across the screen: “To Live” ... “To Love” ... “To Learn” ... “To Leave a Legacy.”

We each get a little cardboard pyramid that sums up the FranklinCovey system: “Identify values” is at the base, followed by three steps leading heavenward: Set goals, plan weekly, and plan daily. When we reach the top of the pyramid, we are living out our life's purpose or, for the executives in the room, their corporate mission.

Sign me up! It's exciting to think that the only thing standing between me and greatness is a little scheduling. A few days later I am assigned a coach named Wade Lindstrom, who calls me

once a week (cost: \$2,795 for eight half-hour sessions, plus unlimited follow-up coaching for six months). Like a lot of coaches, Lindstrom came from the business world—he was regional manager of a financial services company—before going through FranklinCovey's standard eight- to 12-month training program. He says he has worked with more than 6,000 people and also performs as a motivational speaker. I tell Lindstrom that the past 18 months have been the happiest time of my life—marriage and fatherhood—but life has become a maelstrom. My wife works at night, I work during the day, and weekends are consumed with errands, child care, and laundry. My office is a mess, I'm out of shape, and we have fallen into debt.

First of all, Lindstrom tells me, spending time with the family is perfectly in sync with my core values; so is meeting deadlines. He advises me to create some goals. I come up with three: (1) Work out regularly and eat right, (2) Organize my office and finances, and (3) Earn more money.

Good, says Lindstrom. Now break each goal down into a series of projects and each project into individual tasks. Then create a separate, master to-do list covering everything else and start planning each week with great specificity. So I do: Buy diapers Monday at 6 P.M. Go to the gym Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday from 6 to 7:30 P.M. Because unexpected things will arise, Wade says, I need to also plan daily.

For a while, I feel great. I love starting each day with a battle plan. But soon I realize that I'm not making much progress on my goals. Something always wrecks my plan for the day—we can't find a babysitter, the computer crashes ... It's dispiriting to keep transferring the same long list of uncompleted tasks from one day to the next.

FranklinCovey, I realize, is great at helping figure out what to do but not how to do it. That's by design. “My experience,” says Covey, “is that it's very dangerous to teach practices rather than principles because every culture is so different. Instead, we encourage people to come up with their own practices consistent with the universal principles we teach.” For me, that wasn't enough.

David Allen

So I turned to David Allen, who says his system—*Getting Things Done*—is as universal as gravity. In his highly entertaining \$995 one-day public seminars, complete with the occasional karate kick, the guru of GTD asks, What is your purpose in life? What are your long-term goals? But those questions come at the end. First, Allen tells you what to do with all that junk on your desk.

Allen uses an airplane metaphor. Your working space is the runway, and you can't take off to reach “higher altitude” (i.e.,



It's exciting to think the only thing **standing between**
me and greatness is a little scheduling.



I feel **much more in control**, as though I'm driving a well-engineered car that makes doing 80 feel like 50.

longer-term) perspectives on your life until that space is clear and you have a dependable workflow system. "Process improvement—that's really all this is," Allen tells his audience.

My runway is a disaster zone. Rescue comes in the form of coach Marian Bateman, who spends two full days in my office performing a comprehensive Workflow Coaching session (cost: \$6,000 plus travel expenses). It's a deeply uncomfortable, exhausting, and ultimately exhilarating process to have an expert organizer like Bateman sit at your desk for 16 hours, pick up one piece of paper after another, and politely ask, "What is this?"

After she's gone, I'm stunned: My desk is clear, and the piles of junk on the floor have disappeared. I see carpet! My files have typed labels, and I have two plastic trays on my desk—one marked "In," the other "Read/Review." The 1,300 e-mails clogging my in-box are gone, filed away in Outlook. I feel instantly lighter, as though I've just lost 20 pounds. Most important, I have learned Allen's five-step system to keep my runway clear: Collect, process, organize, review, and do.

Say I'm writing a story when the mail arrives. I immediately toss the mail into my in-box, thus avoiding procrastination (Step 1: Collect). Later I open one of the envelopes, and if no action is necessary, I throw it away, file it, or put it on a list to do "Maybe/Someday" (Step 2: Process). If an action is required that takes less than two minutes, such as paying my cable bill online, I do it. If not, I delegate the task or defer it in one of two ways: I put a note in my calendar or in one of my various to-do lists organized by context—"@office," "@calls," "@home," etc. If more than one action is required, it becomes a project (Step 3: Organize). Throughout the day I review my lists based on where I am. On a flight I'll look at "@computer"; in the car I check "@calls" (Step 4: Review)—and finally I decide which task to do based on factors such as gut feelings, urgency, time available, and energy level (Step 5: Do). All my lists are on my computer and synced to my Palm Treo.

What I'm learning, Allen says, is a process psychologists call "distributed cognition"—getting all my nagging tasks, grand ideas, and unresolved projects out of my head and into his "trusted system." This will free my mind to think, dream, and

focus on a single task rather than worrying about everything not getting done. "Your mind is for having ideas," Allen likes to say, "not for holding them."

The hardest part is the weekly review, which requires two to three hours to keep all the lists up to date, schedule the week ahead, and create new projects with at least one "next action" task for each. This is also the time to do the "higher altitude"

work—setting specific goals for the next one to two years (30,000 feet), creating a vision of the life I want to achieve during the next three to five years (40,000 feet), and pondering my life's ultimate purpose (50,000 feet)—or at least scheduling such big thinking.

The GTD system is a revelation. My life is still as jam-packed as ever, but I feel much more in control, as though I'm tooling around in a well-engineered car that makes doing 80 feel like 50. I confess I haven't managed to organize myself enough to do very much of the kind of high-altitude thinking that Allen says arises naturally the deeper you dig into GTD (and some of his disciples say it can take years to really get the hang of it). More worrisome is my health. All this organizing and goal-setting must be wearing me down. Over the previous three months I've had two colds, the flu, two allergy attacks, and I feel constantly exhausted. I decide to let the next guru work on my body.

Jim Loehr

AGE 65

COMPANY NAME Human Performance Institute

YEAR FOUNDED 1991 (with co-founder Jack Groppe)

2007 REVENUES

\$13 million

LOCATION Orlando

E-MAIL/PHONE info@corporateathlete.com; 407-438-9911

KEY CONCEPT Think energy, not time.

Jim Loehr

My new friend the retail CEO has showered and dressed after our vigorous workout and is back in our classroom on day two of our 2½-day seminar at the Human Performance Institute (cost: \$5,500). Jim Loehr is getting tough with us after reviewing our body-composition tests. Each of us had stepped inside the egg-shaped "bod-pod," which measures percentage of body fat. The results are not something many of our paunchy crew want to think about. "You have never connected your body and your health with the mission of your company," Loehr admonishes us. The chief executive stares at the floor.

It doesn't matter how well you manage your time, Loehr argues, if you don't have enough energy to become fully engaged in what you're doing (imagine Buddhism as taught by a sports coach). That energy comes from doing everything we know we should do but don't: get enough sleep, exercise, eat right, take

Rather than being a waste of time, my workouts now feel like a smart investment.

breaks, and keep a healthy balance between work and family.

To achieve full engagement, first we have to “Face the Truth” about our current condition with the bod-pod test, a blood-chemistry analysis, and the results of a questionnaire filled out by at least five of our friends, family, and co-workers. My group treated me kindly—with a score of more than 85%, I was deemed “fully engaged” spiritually and emotionally, though mentally I am merely “engaged,” at 75%. We also rate ourselves physically, and I give myself a woeful 50% (“seriously disengaged”).

Next we face that question all the executive coaches love to ask: “What is your ultimate mission in life?” Then we come up with a “training mission” that we can accomplish during the next 90 days. Finally, we pledge to establish a series of “rituals” to help us achieve that goal.

Loehr’s concept of rituals comes from his background as a sports psychologist who has worked with elite athletes for nearly 30 years. When David Ortiz of the Red Sox spits into his hands, then claps them together before stepping into the batter’s box, Big Papi is performing a ritual that gets him fully engaged for the pitch. Our rituals may be less dramatic (and more hygienic), says Loehr, but no less important. They can range from meditating for five minutes a day to having lunch with a direct report every Thursday.

Like nearly everybody here, I commit to the physical rituals Loehr strongly recommends: three cardio and two resistance-training workouts per week, eating three light meals and two snacks per day, getting seven to eight hours of sleep per night, and taking a break from work every two hours to move around. I set a “training mission” goal of getting my body-fat percentage down.

When I get home, the results are immediate and astonishing. My evening workouts are tough—30 minutes alternating cardio sprints with a recovery jog followed by ten dumbbell exercises

plus crunches and “Superman”—but instead of being exhausted afterward, I’m energized. I sleep much better and wake up refreshed. Rather than being a waste of time, my workouts now feel like a smart investment. The nutrition guidelines are not easy—the amount of food never seems enough—but snacking between meals keeps my energy up. There are no more late-afternoon slumps.

Even more remarkably, work marathons that used to leave me feeling exhausted—redeye cross-country flights or pulling all-nighters to finish a story—now barely faze me. After a few normal nights of sleep, I’m good as new. I try inventing other rituals to increase my productivity—mentally rehearsing the day ahead, for example—but find myself coming back to David Allen’s more comprehensive program to direct my newfound physical energy toward higher-altitude goals.

And the winner is ...

All three gurus can offer up prominent executives who sing their praises, even if none can offer empirical data to prove their programs are worth the time, energy, and cost. After all, worker productivity is affected by so many factors that, short of wiring people up to brain scans, it would be extremely difficult to isolate the effects of a single program. But as any of the three would say, success cannot be measured that way: It all depends on where you start and how you finish.

My personal bottom line is that David Allen’s system was the most useful, Loehr’s the most energizing, and Covey’s the most profound. Whether I’ll be able to keep up all these new habits remains to be seen. All I know is that right now my office is perfectly organized, I’m clear about my life’s purpose, and—as much as I’d like to go on, you’ll have to excuse me. I have to walk down 15 flights of stairs to grab an energy bar. ■

PRODUCED EXCLUSIVELY BY FORTUNE CUSTOM REPRINTS. ©2008 TIME INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.