

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Why Intention?

We're stuck. Stuck to the couch. Stuck scrolling. Stuck at work. Stuck in worn-out paths of habitual action. Stuck in patterns and echo chambers of thought. Stuck in carefully curated lives where we've traded our agency for endless comforts that wrap us in existential ennui.

As our eyes fixate on a constant parade of images meant to engage us, we notice something in the periphery. We see folks who are just like us, except they seem to be deeply happy and fulfilled. They go through life with ease and grace, overcoming obstacles and making amazing things happen for themselves.

Peering closer, we see that they aren't gods or superhumans. They're just people who have chosen to not be stuck and decided to become the “main characters” in their own lives. Their success (as they define it!) is not a birthright bestowed upon a lucky few, but the result of lives lived with intention.

Take a moment right now to imagine a different version of yourself. A superhero in your daily life. Your superpower? Infinite self-control. Your circumstances haven't changed one bit, but you suddenly have the power to deeply engage with everything you do and unstick yourself. Visualize this and think about your life. What would you do differently in your day-to-day life (e.g., how would your morning routine change)? What would your life look and feel like? How would this new way of being affect your feelings about yourself? What about the value you bring to your family, friends, and colleagues?

This exercise is more than a fantasy—it's a challenge. One that we spend the rest of this book preparing you to face.

Borrowing from a wide variety of related disciplines—philosophy, psychology, religion, neuroscience, and organizational management to name a few—we focus on the five key ingredients of intention: willpower, curiosity, integrity, attention, and habits. For each ingredient, we provide an overview of the current scientific understanding of why they are important and how they work. More importantly, we provide information that's actionable, and present you with knowledge and methods that you can actually apply to your working and personal life to gain a higher sense of agency, authenticity, and engagement in everything you do. Intention is an expression of our identity, and to live without it is to lose ourselves. Our aim is to help you reconnect with that power in you.

No, These Traits Are Not Innate and Immutable

Some combination of willpower, curiosity, integrity, attention, and habits can be found in every high performer and recent research shows that they're strong predictors of success. But there's a second reason why we focus on these, which speaks more broadly to how we can claim our agency and lead fuller lives: The other thing these five ingredients have in common is that many of us were taught (and still believe—see the following survey data) that they're innate, and we're born with a fixed amount of each. They are not. And in this book we

show, with scientific evidence, that each of them is highly trainable, and we teach you how to train them. If there's any aspect of your life you want to excel in, whether work, home, sports, the arts, or spirituality, you can exercise these five aspects of intention and improve.

Nearly 50% of people believe that willpower, curiosity, integrity, attention, and habit formation are inherent traits that cannot be trained.¹

Although this book is based around the science behind each of these aspects, as with any story told with science, this is not the full picture—which is why we also illustrate our points with case studies, stories, diagrams, and drawings that support the idea that no matter who you are or how you approach these ingredients, you can use them to become more intentional.

Our core message is that intention can be trained—not just a fleeting feeling of agency, but the real application of intention that improves our lives and the lives of those around us.

What Do We Mean by *High Performance*?

This book focuses on the skills of high performers—not their ability to run consecutive marathons or lead Fortune 500 teams, but their willpower, curiosity, integrity, attention, and habits. We understand and love that high performers don't always have traditionally lofty achievements to their name—maybe they only ran one marathon, or maybe they took a walk around the block for the first time in decades. We see high performance not as a competition against others or the attaining of some objective standard, but as a way of life. What sets our high performers apart from the rest of us is their ability to act with intention. These aren't just CEOs and top athletes; they're students, stay-at-home parents, minimum-wage workers, and artists. Despite the limits of their circumstances, these individuals harness the power of intention and—in some cases—are able to radiate that feeling of intention to others.

Consequently, for us, high performance can be domain-specific (eating 25 hotdogs in 10 minutes) or not (being a generally

“good” person). It can be outwardly reflected (Michael Phelps’s long list of wins) or something much more personal (a 67-year-old getting over their life-long fear of driving). It can lead to “Success” (big *S*, as defined by society) or “success” (small *s*, as defined by how you see a life well lived).

We’re not passing judgment or comparing the ways each of us can exhibit high performance. We define *high performance* as: “the ability to do subjectively hard things.” So if your goal is to eat a lot of hot dogs quickly, more power to you—we’ll help you get there as best we can. We are also there for you if your vision of high performance is about making the world better. On that front, there has never been a time that doing hard things has been needed more, and we can all increase our impact by strengthening the five skills in this book. Intention is not a cure-all for languishing and disengagement. In some cases these feelings might have deeper roots than we’re qualified to address. But we’ve found that being more intentional in our lives has helped us to break out of moments of languish and get unstuck.

Beyond the Individual

This book is an answer to the corporate challenge of improving engagement at work. By building intentional teams using the five core muscle groups of intention, you can improve how your colleagues are performing and give them back a sense of autonomy. In doing so, we can together create more dynamic, adaptable, and resilient organizations. Additionally, by addressing the challenge of languishing and applying intention in one aspect of your life, you can dramatically improve how you exercise intention in all other aspects. Becoming more intentional in your own life is good for your family, your community, and for society at large. This is not only because your level of engagement will be contagious to those around you, but also because you will be contributing your best to the world—at whatever scale and in whatever areas you choose.

About Us

While much of this story revolves around what it means to be a high performer and how to get there, we’re not claiming to always fit the bill ourselves. We’re certainly working hard at it, but we’re on a

journey just like everyone else. That said, we do know a lot about applied behavioral science and how to motivate people. Bringing that knowledge to you is what this book is all about.

Dan and *Sekoul* are co-founders of The Decision Lab (TDL), an applied research and innovation firm that uses behavioral science to generate social impact. They were roommates in Toronto, where Dan worked in banking and Sekoul was a consultant at the Boston Consulting Group. They decided to take their backgrounds (in decision systems and neuroscience) to build an organization that would be intentional about the type of work it does. TDL works with some of the largest organizations in the world, carrying out research in priority areas and running one of the most popular publications in applied behavioral science. In the past, they've helped organizations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Capital One, the World Bank, and many Fortune 500s solve some of their thorniest problems using scientific thinking.

Mike is a former lawyer, private equity investor, McKinsey consultant, and startup founder who is currently the CHRO for a large Canadian retailer, helping motivate and engage more than 5,000 employees while maintaining a unique corporate culture that has lasted for more than 180 years. For him, his highest performance is raising his children to be good citizens and intentional in their own right.

