

THE BIG IDEAS



Systems vs. Goals

Remember: Goals are for losers.

Deciding vs. Wishing

Remember: Decide!

Mental State

Match it to your task.

6:20 on a Saturday in 2017

Where will you be?

You Are a Moist Robot

With superpowers. Program wisely.

Want to Build a Habit?

Do it daily!

Why Not Be the First

Ignore the odds.



How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big

Kind of the Story of My Life

BY SCOTT ADAMS · PORTFOLIO / PENGUIN © 2013 · 247 PAGES

“When I was in my twenties, I didn’t know anyone who could tell me how to become a cartoonist, how to write a book, or how to be successful in general. This was a big obstacle to my success. It seemed as if other people were benefiting greatly from the wisdom of their friends and families. That’s exactly the sort of inequality that pisses me off and motivates me at the same time. As a result, I’ve spent decades trying to figure out what works, and what doesn’t, on the topic of success. If you want to be successful, in just about any field, let me be your starting point. I’ll describe over the course of this book a sort of template for success that can serve as your launching pad. I won’t always have the right formula for your specific situation, but I can help narrow your choices.”

~ Scott Adams from *How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big*

[Scott Adams](#) created *Dilbert*—one of the most popular and widely distributed comic strips ever. (Get this: At the time he wrote this book, Scott had created nearly 9,000 (!) comic strips. Wow.)

This book is awesome. And, as you’d expect, hilarious.

It’s packed with wisdom on everything from dialing in your personal energy (#1 tip? Exercise daily!!), managing your attitude (Scott’s all about choosing the most empowered way to view a situation + affirmations) and focusing on systems rather than goals.

Plus, as the title suggests, we also learn a lot about how to embrace and get the most from our inevitable failures.

I highly recommend it. If you like *Dilbert*, you’ll love this. If you’re looking for a wise and witty trip through an extraordinary creator’s life, you’ll also love it. (Get the book [here](#).)

For now, let’s jump in and explore some of my favorite Big Ideas!

SYSTEMS VS. GOALS

“You could word-glue goals and systems together if you chose. All I’m suggesting is that thinking of goals and systems as different concepts has power. Goal-oriented people exist in a state of continuous presuccess failure at best, and permanent failure at worst if things never work out. Systems people succeed every time they apply their systems, in the sense that they did what they intended to do. The goals people are fighting the feeling of discouragement at every turn. The systems people are feeling good every time they apply their systems. That’s a big difference in terms of maintaining your personal energy in the right direction.

The systems-versus-goals model can be applied to most human endeavors. In the world of dieting, losing twenty pounds is a goal, but eating right is a system. In the exercise realm, running a marathon in under four hours is a goal, but exercising daily is a system. In business, making a million dollars is a goal, but being a serial entrepreneur is a system.

For our purposes, let’s say a goal is a specific objective that you either achieve or don’t sometime

“This is the story of one person’s unlikely success within the context of scores of embarrassing failures.”

~ Scott Adams

"Humans will always think in terms of goals. Our brains are wired that way. But goals make sense only if you also have a system that moves you in the right direction."

~ Scott Adams

in the future. A system is something you do on a regular basis that increases your odds of happiness in the long run. If you do something every day, it's a system. If you're waiting to achieve it someday in the future, it's a goal."

After describing some of his many failures, that's pretty much Scott's #1 Big Idea.

Systems.

I love it. We've been coming back to this idea often lately.

Gold medalist [Lanny Bassham](#) (see Notes on [With Winning in Mind](#)) tells us the story of the PGA golfer who was so focused on executing his process that he didn't even know his putt on the 18th hole was for a million bucks until his wife ran up on the green. "Did I win?" he asked her.

The golfer's mantra? "Process is primary." That's a SYSTEMS focus.

In [The Obstacle Is the Way](#) (see Notes), [Ryan Holiday](#) tells us about Nick Saban—one of the most successful collegiate football coaches ever. Coach Saban runs his organization with two words: "The Process."

He says, "*Don't think about winning the SEC Championship. Don't think about the national championship. Think about what you needed to do in this drill, on this play, in this moment. That's the process: Let's think about what we can do today, the task at hand.*"

That's a system.

Coach [John Wooden](#) was the ultimate systems guru. (And the greatest coach ever.) His system? Put your socks on right. Focus on the fundamentals. Make today's practice a masterpiece. The rest will take care of itself.

Scott tells us: "To put it bluntly, goals are for losers."

And he means it literally. If we're always focused on something we may get someday, we're always focused on what we *don't* have now and, therefore, are losing.

On the other hand, we succeed every time we apply our system throughout the day. Scott's all about optimizing our personal energy throughout the day and collecting little wins like that is a GREAT way to boost your energy.

So... Back to you. Where's *your* focus?

Obsessing on a goal? Or focusing on the SYSTEMS that will make that goal a natural by-product of you consistently crushing it?

DECIDING VS. WISHING

"One of the best pieces of advice I've ever heard goes something like this: *If you want success, figure out the price, then pay it.* It sounds trivial and obvious, but if you unpack the idea it has extraordinary power.

I know a lot of people who wish they were rich or famous or otherwise fabulous. They wish they had yachts and servants and castles and they wish they could travel the world in their own private jets. But these are mere wishes. Few of these wishful people have *decided* to have any of the things they wish for. It's a key difference, for once you decide, you take action. Wishing starts in the mind and generally stays there.

When you *decide* to be successful in a big way, it means you acknowledge the price and you're willing to pay it."

That's powerful.

Are you in *wishing* mode? Or have you DECIDED to be successful in a big way?

*"This was one of those times when the difference between wishing and deciding mattered. I didn't *wish* to say in school. I *decided*."*

~ Scott Adams

Remember, it's a three step process.

1. Figure out what you want.
2. Figure out what price you need to pay.
3. Pay it.

Not that complicated, eh? Simple but not easy.

Let's take a moment to go through the process.

First, what do you want?

I want _____.

Great. Now, what price will you need to pay?

I will pay this price: _____

_____.

Fantastic. Now, pay it. :)

P.S. Scott tells us: "Successful people don't wish for success; they decide to pursue it. And to pursue it effectively, they need a system. Success always has a price, but the reality is the price is negotiable. If you pick the right system, the price will be a lot nearer what you're willing to pay.

I can't change the fact that success requires a lot of hard work. But if you learn to appreciate the power of systems over goals, it might lower the price of success just enough to make it worth a go."

P.P.S. In *The Five Major Pieces of the Life Puzzle* (see Notes), [Jim Rohn](#) tells us: "We will all experience one pain or the other—the pain of discipline or the pain of regret—but the difference is that the pain of discipline weighs only ounces while the pain of regret weighs tons."

MATCHING MENTAL STATE TO ACTIVITY

"One of the most important tricks for maximizing your productivity involves matching your mental state to the task. For example, when I first wake up, my brain is relaxed and creative. The thought of writing a comic is fun, and it's relatively easy because my brain is in exactly the right mode for that task. I know from experience that trying to be creative in the midafternoon is a waste of time. By 2:00 P.M. all I can do is regurgitate the ideas I've seen elsewhere. At 6:00 A.M. I'm a creator, and by 2:00 P.M. I'm a copier.

Everyone is different, but you'll discover that most writers work either early in the morning or past midnight. That's when the creative writing juices flow most easily."

That's from a section called "Matching Mental State to Activity."

It's huge.

If we want to build effective systems, we need to know ourselves well enough to line up what we're doing with how our minds are doing.

I've discovered the same thing Scott describes here. I'm writing this in the early morning. Creating a Note is the first thing I do after getting up, meditating for 20 minutes and doing a quick 5 minutes of stretching/yoga. (And DEFINITELY before I go online.)

It's EASY (and fun!) to bang one of these out in a couple of hours when my mind is super fresh. Totally different story later in the day when my brain is all jacked up from the day's activities.

How about *you*? How can you match your activity to your mental state?!

"Positivity is far more than a mental preference. It changes your brain, literally, and it changes the people around you. It's the nearest thing we have to magic."

~ Scott Adams

WHERE WILL YOU BE AT 6:20 A.M. ON A SATURDAY IN 2017?

"Barry Schwartz, author of *The Paradox of Choice*, tells us that people become unhappy if they have too many options in life. The problem with options is that choosing any path can leave you plagued with self-doubt. You quite rationally think that one of the paths not chosen might have worked out better. That can eat you.

Choosing among attractive alternatives can also be exhausting. You want to feel as if you researched and considered all of your options. That's why I find great comfort in routine. If you ask me today where I will be at 6:20 A.M. on a Saturday morning in the year 2017, I'll tell you I will be at my desk finishing the artwork on some comics I drew earlier in the week. That's what I was doing last Saturday at that time and what I plan to do this Saturday as well. I can't recall the last time I woke up and looked at my options for what to do first. It's always the same, at least for the first few hours of my day."

Wow.

I had goosebumps typing that whole quote. This is the 232nd Note I've created. We've covered quite a few Big Ideas so far.

This is one of the biggest.

Imagine having so much clarity on the systems that work for you that you know *precisely* what you'll be doing a few years from now on a Saturday morning at 6:20 A.M.

I find that staggeringly awesome.

Begs the question: Where will you be at 6:20 A.M. on a Saturday in 2017?

(I'll be working on a PhilosophersNote.)

P.S. Scott talks a LOT about the fact that our willpower is finite and we don't want to waste it on stupid stuff. He tells us, "I never waste a brain cell in the morning trying to figure out what to do when. Compare that with some people you know who spend two hours planning and deciding for every task that takes one hour to complete. I'm happier than those people."

YOU ARE A MOIST ROBOT WITH SUPERPOWERS

"Exercise, food, and sleep should be your first buttons to push."

~ Scott Adams

"Your brain is wired to continuously analyze your environment, your thoughts, and your health and to use that information to generate a sensation you call your attitude. You know from experience that you do better work, and you more enjoy life, when your attitude is good. If you could control your attitude directly, as opposed to letting the environment dictate how you feel on any given day, it would be like a minor superpower. It turns out you have that superpower. You can control your attitude by manipulating your thoughts, your body, and your environment.

Your attitude affects everything you do in your quest for success and happiness. A positive attitude is an important tool. It's important to get it right."

Want a superpower?

Good news.

You have it.

You can control your attitude.

How? By manipulating your thoughts, your body, and your environment.

Scott tells us: "The best way to manage your attitudes is by understanding your basic nature as a moist robot that can be programmed for happiness if you understand the user interface."

OK. So we're robots simply waiting for the right programming. Got it.

" My observation, backed by the science, is that the person who eats right won't be bothered as much by the little bumps in life's road, and he or she will have greater optimism, too."

~ Scott Adams

The #1 programming trick?

Easy. According to Scott: "Exercise, food, and sleep should be your first buttons to push."

Exercise. Nutrition. Rest.

Sound familiar? These are the core fundamentals we come back to again and again!!!

Quick inventory:

How's your exercise?

How's your nutrition?

How's your rest?

Scott's #1 tip?

Make exercise a daily, non-negotiable, no willpower required habit. (More on that in a moment.)

Here's to programming our moist robots to tap into our latent superpowers!!!

WANT TO BUILD A HABIT?

"If you want to make a habit of something, the worst thing you can do is pick and choose which days of the week you do it and which ones you don't. Exercise becomes a habit when you do it every day without fail. Taking rest days between exercise breaks up the pattern that creates habits. It also makes it too easy to say today is one of your nonexercise days, and maybe tomorrow, too."

This is genius.

Want to make a habit of something?

Do it EVERY.SINGLE.DAY.

Period.

Otherwise you invite that whiny negotiating voice to the party that will inevitably convince us that today (and tomorrow!) is the day we should take off.

100% commitment. Every day.

#done.

P.S. Scott has this to say about the timing of his exercise: "I exercise at lunchtime because mornings are better for my creative work and afternoons are unpredictable in terms of work and family time. Other successful exercisers get up long before the sun to do their workouts. Still others go straight from work to the gym. In each case the key is to have a predictable system. The method that *never* succeeds is exercising whenever you have some spare time. If you're like most adults, you haven't had spare time in years."

WHY NOT BE THE FIRST?

"Realistically, what were the odds of being the first person on earth to beat a focal dystonia? One in a million? One in ten million? I didn't care. That person was going to be me. Thanks to my odd life experiences, and odder genes, I'm wired to think things will work out well for me no matter how unlikely it might seem."

Quick context: Scott had a super weird issue with his pinky where it would go, I quote, "nuts" whenever he tried to draw a comic. He couldn't draw without painful spasms. Focal dystonia.

He asked his doctor how to cure it. His doctor told him to change jobs. There was no cure.

D'oh.

"If you think your odds of solving a problem are bad, don't rule out the possibility that what is really happening is that you are bad at estimating odds."

~ Scott Adams

What did our hero do? He decided to be the first person to beat it.

And, of course, he did. Amazing.

Fast-forward and Scott has a new, even weirder issue. This time, his voice stops working whenever he tries to talk to people. Eek.

"What's the cure?" I whispered.

"There is none," she replied.

But that isn't what I heard. The optimist in me translated the gloomy news as "Scott, you will be the first person in the world to be cured of spasmodic dysphonia." And I decided that after I cured myself, somehow, someday, I would spread the word to others. I wouldn't be satisfied simply escaping from my prison of silence; I was planning to escape, free the other inmates, shoot the warden, and burn down the prison.

Sometimes I get that way.

It's a surprisingly useful frame of mind."

That, my friends, is a (remarkably!) well-programmed moist robot. Proper programming leads to superpowers I tell you!

(Btw: That's pretty much exactly the attitude Scott had when he decided to become an uber-successful cartoonist. Think about it. What are the odds of making it as a cartoonist? Near zero. Yet he crushed it.)

There's a super quick look at this GREAT book. Here's to wise programming and remembering that even if we fail at almost everything we can still win big!!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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you'll probably like...

[With Winning in Mind](#)

[The Obstacle Is the Way](#)

[Wooden](#)

About the Author of How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big

SCOTT ADAMS



Scott Adams is the creator of Dilbert, one of the most popular and widely distributed comic strips of the past quarter century. He has been a full-time cartoonist since 1995, after sixteen years as a technology worker for companies like Crocker National Bank and Pacific Bell. His many bestsellers include *The Dilbert Principle* and *Dogbert's Top Secret Management Handbook*. He lives outside San Francisco. Get book [here](#). Connect with Scott at [Dilbert.com](#).

About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at [brianjohnson.me](#).