



Work the System: The Simple Mechanics of Making More and Working Less

Sam Carpenter

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Work The System aims to convince people to change their fundamental perception of the world around them from a vision of an impenetrable, amorphous conglomeration, to one made up of individual linear systems, each of which can be improved and perfected. The reader is guided through the process of "getting" this new vision, and then through the specifics of applying it. It's simple, believable, and mechanical; not mystical or theoretical.

Work the System: The Simple Mechanics of Making More and Working Less Details

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E says

Achieve your goals by managing your systems

Author and project engineer Sam Carpenter owns Centratel, a now-profitable telephone-answering company that spent 15 years barely surviving. When Carpenter was working 80-hour weeks struggling to make payroll, he was a basket case – nervous, tense and depressed. He got by on a lot of coffee and very little sleep. Then, he had a eureka moment. He suddenly grasped that many different systems directed his life and work. He saw that if he could control and perfect these systems, he could solve many complex issues. This realization changed his life. Now, Carpenter enjoys himself and works only a couple of hours weekly. He has time for everything he wants to do, and his business hums along. The refreshing thing about this book is Carpenter's personal perspective as a business owner who figured things out for himself. It's not just another volume reflecting the theoretical ideas of a management consultant or professor. Carpenter explains his systems-management approach so well that you can use his accessible methods to improve your operations and your personal life. getAbstract recommends this logical book to small-business owners and all those who want to improve the way they run their lives. The caveat: You have to get to work.

Annie Smidt says

This book was recommended, amongst others, at a talk I went to at a conference, and, since I found what the speaker said interesting, I thought I'd check out the books he gathered ideas from. However, his 2-sentence summary of what's important from this book was way better than the book in its entirety.

The most interesting takeaway (and there are other points made in this book which I will not reiterate) is: When you think of everything as a system, often made up of subsystems, you can investigate them in an organized fashion, fixing each little part one at a time, until you improve the whole system, becoming more efficient.

Or, in other words, use your brain and think through logically, always trying to improve, rather than being reactionary and chaotic.

It's not really a huge revelation (despite how many times the author, who is a self-admitted relentless repeater of information to "help it sink in", claims it to be. Part of the problem, is that he's awfully abstract about it all, and when he's not abstract, he's talking about his old-fashioned seeming message-center business. I mean, there's something there... being mindful and approaching things systematically is a good idea — but there is nothing compelling about the way this is spun out into a dull, repetitive book with tangential trips into prosaic and obvious topics like making a point to work at the time of day when you feel biologically most on the ball.

I think the liner notes to Robert Fripp's 1984 record "Let the Power Fall" are way more useful than this book (reproduced here for your convenience):

I

1. One can work within any structure.
 2. One can work within any structure, some structures are more efficient than others.
-

3. There is no structure which is universally appropriate.
4. Commitment to an aim within inappropriate structure will give rise to the creation of an appropriate structure.
5. Apathy, i.e. passive commitment, within an appropriate structure will effect its collapse.
6. Dogmatic attachment to the supposed merits of a particular structure hinders the search for an appropriate structure.
7. There will be difficulty defining the appropriate structure because it will be always mobile, i.e. in process.

II

8. There should be no difficulty in defining aim.
9. The appropriate structure will recognize structures outside itself.
10. The appropriate structure can work within any large structure
11. Once the appropriate structure can work within any large structure, some larger structure are more efficient than others.
12. There is no larger structure which is universally appropriate.
13. Commitment to an aim by an appropriate structure within a larger, inappropriate structure will give rise to a large, appropriate structure.
14. The quantitative structure is affected by qualitative action

III

15. Qualitative action is not bound by number
16. Any small unit committed to qualitative action can affect radical change on a scale outside its quantitative measure.
17. Quantitative action works by violence and breeds reaction.
18. Qualitative action works works by example and invites reciprocation.
19. Reciprocation between independent structures is a framework of interacting units which is itself a structure.
20. Any appropriate structure of interacting units can work within any other structure of interacting units.
21. Once this is so, some structures of interacting units are efficient than others.

Robert says

Like most books of this style then content is really common sense but in many cases it is easily overlooked. This book focuses on the concept of breaking everything down into individual systems, then documenting and improving each part.

It is a simple message that after you finish reading the book you wonder how it could fill that many pages but there is plenty of other good information in and around the concept. In many cases it takes an outside perspective to actually help you see what needs to be done and make things plain. This book certainly achieved that for me.

The book is easy to read and contains plenty of examples that keep you engaged but I did feel that things were becoming a little drawn out towards the end. After I finished the book I felt that if I had simply read the conclusion I would have received most of what the rest of the book was saying. However, on reflection I think this book is one of those that you can put up on the shelf and revisit on a regular basis to help keep you on track.

Overall this book is a worthwhile read for those people running their own business who want to understand the process of constant improvement. It help open you eyes to fact that everything is a system and can therefore be taken apart, examined and improved. It can seem daunting at first glance having to do this but the book does say this should be an ongoing process that you don't have to get right on the first pass.

Again, a great business reference book to have in your reference library and revisit regularly to help you understand that things can usually be made much simpler than they appear.

Jon says

After reading some of the other reviews I decided to power skim this book instead of do a thorough reading and I'm glad that I did that. The book was not awful, but I personally didn't find it enlightening or the vehicle through which a great epiphany was delivered. As other comments have said, this book can be boiled down and simplified into: everything is a system, so go improve it instead of reacting to the symptoms. The concrete examples provided to help guide the inexperienced along the journey is rather generic and bland. Perhaps, readers who are not already engineering geared and see the world as some incarnation as a multitude of systems will find the book more useful

Jessica says

I was considering reviewing this book for my blog, but it never seemed to deliver on its promises. I was going to give it three stars, but I dropped a star after reading how the author tips less when a waiter serves him and then says, "Enjoy." A waiter can't learn anything from that, for one thing, but for another, it's arbitrary and mean. What are they supposed to do, read your mind? At least a negative review gives an author some constructive feedback.

Incidentally, I'm a professional organizer and I fully endorse the concept of having a system for everything.

C.A. Gray says

Stopped listening to it about 2/3 of the way... interesting concept, but not something that really applies to my business of two people all that much. I just couldn't grasp how I'd take his systems mindset and translate it to a business that small. For a huge corporation, though, I can see how this insight (that every process should be broken down into systems so that it can become turnkey) would be critical and make all the difference in the world.

Tami says

Do your days flow smoothly? Do you have plenty of time to do your work and play too? No? Then, likely your days go something like this: putting out fires all day at work, trying to keep up with family responsibilities in a very short amount of time each night, then trying to get a little sleep before the day starts all over again.

Work the System tells us that the answer isn't working harder or sleeping less. The problem is that we are looking at everything in one huge whole. We are trying to fix everything all at once but we aren't really making any real changes. No wonder we are overwhelmed.

Work the System looks at each aspect of work and life in generally as distinct systems. Each system has specific components. If these components are in working order and are properly maintained, the system works fine. However, one missing or extra cog can bring the system crashing down. The key is to find the problems and fix them. Then, you can spend your time doing other things.

S says

The author is advocating that one should work on the underlying "mechanics" of a system, instead of firefighting outcomes. Having more control of your system is the only way to live more happily. The book provides a few actionable ideas: system documentation, point-of-sales principle, quiet courage, etc.

Some of those ideas may sound common sense at first, but we all know common senses are hard to apply sometimes. What I appreciate most are those stories/practical examples in the book.

Later chapters are much more concise and more interesting than early ones.

Fab Mackojc says

This book is a great introduction to the Systems mindset, a vision of the world as an orderly collection of processes, not as a chaotic mess. In our lives everything is a system: a set of parts that come together to accomplish a goal. When a system follows a series of repeatable steps it will cause a specific outcome. Some systems are obviously more complex than others and the ones that most of us grow up learning about include biological, mechanical and social systems. The author spends most of his time showing you how systems thinking can offer radical improvements in running a business. The idea that you identify, document, optimize and then put other people in charge to run your systems is what allows one to spend more time working *on* their business instead of *in* their business. He advocates for writing Working Procedures, an easily repeatable process that anyone can follow to produce a clear outcome.

The first 50 pages or so of this book is kinda salesy. You might be able to skip the long winded introduction about what systems thinking can do for your life but at the same time it's probably through getting the mindset drilled into you that you're able to better implement the practical steps he offers later in the book. Ultimately this book is a powerful tool that I can see making drastic improvements to how I run my own projects and businesses. If you want to 10x your output you need to optimize your systems.

Marshall says

I really hated this book, and every bone in my body is telling me to give it one-star. I've decided to give it two stars, and I'll explain why later.

This book is about an epiphany the author had that everything in the world is a system. He says, once you

"get it," your whole life will transform, and you'll never look at things the same way again. You'll start seeing systems everywhere you go. His way of making the readers "get it" is to keep repeating the premise in different ways, using anecdotes from his life. There's only so many ways you can say that everything in the world is a system, and it feels like this book exhausted them. Half the book is so repetitive that I wanted to throw it at the wall. The second half is about how he applied it to his business and personal life, followed by a sales pitch for his seminars. The book is also poorly written, and his anecdotes make him sound like an anal-retentive jerk.

All he really means by everything in the world being a system is what every engineer knows about problem-solving: isolate the problem and make incremental refinements to it until it performs optimally; then document your changes to prevent duplication of effort; fix problems pro-actively and focus on maintenance rather than fixing bugs. This is like problem-solving 101. There's no epiphany here. This is what I hate about the business self-help genre: they try to bottle common sense and cliché wisdom and sell it to business people who prefer to receive their wisdom from other business people.

But after reading it, I realized there is an element of epiphany here: problem-solving strategies can be applied to everything, not just engineering problems. They can be used in your daily life and business. It was an epiphany I had years ago, so this book didn't do anything for me, but I can see how it might be transformative for others. That's why it gets two-stars.

The best example I have is my sleep patterns. For decades, I suffered from insomnia. I was so exhausted each day that I could barely keep my eyes open. I figured I was just a night owl. In college, I would stay up all night, squeezing in naps between classes. When I started working full time, it became a serious problem. Then I realized I could solve this problem the same way I solve my programming problems: isolate the sleeping habits that tend to exacerbate the problem, incrementally refine them, and document my discoveries. I started keeping a sleep log and building a list of rules. Currently, there are 17 rules. My insomnia is completely gone, and I feel great every day. I no longer waste time waiting for sleep, so I've also gained a couple hours of productive time every day.

Donal Phipps says

Interesting ideas, but with hindsight I'd put the book down as soon as you get the systems thinking notion and are prepared to give it a go.

The rest of the book was redundant and slightly patronizing.

Rohit Yadav says

1. Perceiving system (subsystems that govern those systems) that govern your work and life
 2. Come up with some preventive systems.
 3. The pathway to control is to discover, examine & optimise your mechanical & biological system
 4. Methodology : Strategic Objective, Operating Principles, Working procedures
 5. Written documentation is important
 6. Applications: Conferences, Seminar/Workshops, Guest Lectures, Magazines, Yearly Celebrations & Events, Admission & Examination process, Meetings, Assessment of teacher's performance, Recurring issues & problems of teachers (leave) & students (medical leave)
-

James says

Written procedures will improve productivity and if you are a small to medium business owner struggling with chaos this might be the book for you. This may not work for larger cases, it's very top-down oriented. I would also caution people using it in a corporate environment that some company cultures reward their firefighters and not their quiet, competent counterparts, you may need to add act out emergency to your procedures!

Nothing earthshaking here if you've ever read Taylor, Deming or countless others but companies that aren't in chaos are a minority so it must be hard to figure out. Author took about five years to convert his company over and that seemed realistic. If your personal life's a mess, some of it might be cured by a bit of organizing as covered in this book.

Ken Parkinson says

Good ideas, mediocre writing.

Pascal Wagner says

I almost stopped reading/listening to this book... I'm glad I didn't. Up until chapter 5 I would have given it a 1 star. My advice is to skip to chapter five and start reading there. The first four chapters a plenty of fluff and don't really help you in terms of defining and creating a system.
