



## Being a Self-Manager

“It’s You Versus You.”

Gail Snyder

**B.F.** Skinner—inventor, author, and the man known as the creator of behavioral science—arranged the details of his life down to the order of the books on his desktop. Those, he arranged in such a way that he could grab the volume he needed without taking his eyes off the work at hand. “He didn’t do this because he was compulsive,” explained Robert Epstein, Ph.D. “Far from it. He did it because he knew if the behavioral chain was too long, the effort too great to pull down a certain book, he just wouldn’t do it.”

**“Self-managers can cope with changing worlds because they are not dependent on their smartphone. They have skills that help them through changing environments.”**

– Robert Epstein

According to Epstein, Skinner’s fellow researcher and friend, B.F. Skinner was the epitome of a self-manager.

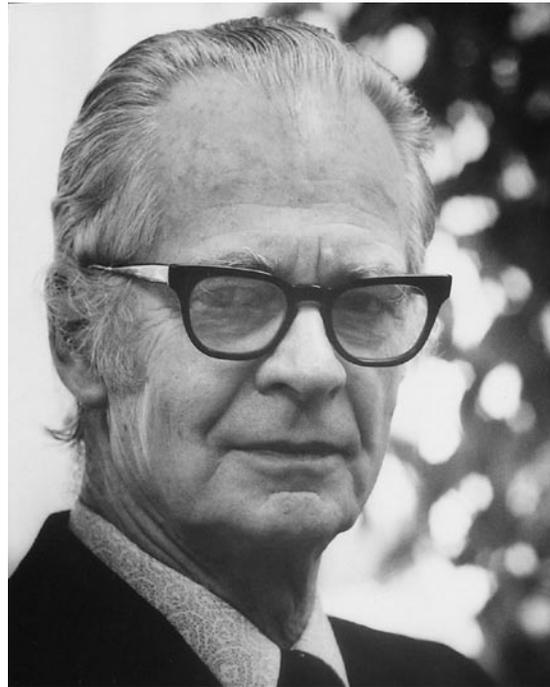
Indeed, he managed his life so succinctly that he scheduled time for leisure (a part of life he felt crucial to his own creativity) and put the finishing touches on a manuscript only hours before his death in 1990. “He was a self-manager because it changed the probabilities of all kinds of behaviors that were important to him. It made it easy and effortless for him to be productive and creative,” said Epstein. Epstein believes that B.F. Skinner’s abilities to self-manage were also self-taught and in that there is a lesson for all of us. That lesson is that we, too, can become self-managers.

These days entire sections of book stores are set aside for self-management books. The study of self-management is not a new idea.

It has been researched, written and read about for over 25 years. Yet, Epstein compares the effects of much of the literature on this subject to the old adage: Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you’ve fed him for a lifetime. “Self-management is a different way to live your life,” he said. To guide people toward that life change, Epstein developed three functionally distinct, self-management skill categories, what he calls the...

**THREE M’S OF SELF-MANAGEMENT:**

1. **Modify Your Environment.** We do things every day to change our environment, but we do not look at these things in terms of self-management. For example, we write ourselves notes as reminders, set an alarm clock to wake ourselves up, and tie



strings around our fingers to remember to remember. According to Epstein, the problem with these types of cues to modify our behavior is that we do them in a fit of desperation rather than as a targeted effort at self-management. When we consciously change our environment to modify our behavior, we will eventually come up with the right change. “There are hundreds of changes you can make, but you only have to make one to dramatically change the probability [of a behavior],” said Epstein. “For example, when Skinner stuck a television on top of his exercise bike, he was simply changing his environment to promote a desired behavior.”

We can also change our environment by making changes in our bodies, such as practicing stress control by using methods such as biofeedback. “Modifying your environment could include a whole slew of relaxation techniques for modifying your internal environment,” he said. How does one get himself to start a new behavior?

Epstein suggests trying another behavior, one that is easier than the behavior you are trying to encourage or change. For example, if you bite your nails, buy reams of nail files and place them everywhere including in your pockets. Then, when you get the urge to bite, file instead.

**2. Monitor Your Behavior.** “Anytime you heighten your awareness of a behavior, you behave better,” said Epstein. “That will work in both directions getting rid of undesirable behavior or strengthening desirable behavior.” The trick here is to make the monitoring process as effortless as possible. Keeping track of your performance does not have to be restricted to pencil and paper data or formal graphs. If you will keep count in your head and it works for you, that is fine. Some people make small tears in their cigarette packages to monitor how many they have smoked. You can fill in dots on a page, tear the edges of a piece of paper, or drop pennies or tokens in a jar. The key in monitoring yourself is that you set up a process that is so easy you do not have to think about it, one that is natural and fun to do.



“I will make an assertion that the people who exercise, keep their weight under control, and are productive are self-managers whether they know it or not,” said Epstein. “If you carefully observe how they conduct themselves during the day, you’ll find that they do these things even when they have never heard of them.”

The weigh-ins of weight loss programs, the batting statistics of a baseball player, and the handicap of a golfer are all means of making people more aware of their performance.

Epstein asserts that there is no such animal as self-reinforcement, that a self-reinforcing person is essentially a self-monitoring person. “What you have really done is heightened your awareness of what it is you have accomplished,” he said. “Many studies show that if you get someone to be more aware of what they are doing they’ll be better at it, virtually without exception.”

**3. Make A Commitment.** If you have ever told someone, “I’ll be there at four o’clock. You can count on me,” you have made a commitment. Making a commitment highly increases the probability that you will follow through on a behavior. That is why this category of self-management may be the most difficult. “You can use making a commitment to deliberately and systematically change your behavior,” explained Epstein. “Not just on random occasions.”



An extreme example of making a commitment is to write a nasty letter to your manager, sign it, seal it, and give it to a friend with a statement such as, “If I smoke another cigarette, drop this in the mail.” You have then set up a negative, immediate, and certain consequence for yourself. A less risky means of doing this is to write a check to your least favorite charity and give it to your friend under similar contingencies.

Have trouble getting yourself to work on time? Epstein suggests you set off a time bomb; no, not to blow yourself out of bed, but to set up a commitment that you are compelled to follow through on. During college he hid an alarm clock in the library shelves set to go off at 9:00 a.m. On the back of the alarm clock he taped his

name, phone number, and address. “I did this all through graduate school,” he said. “That example is a bit extreme, but you can use it to push yourself the extra mile if you really need that push. Set up real contingencies involving other people.”

One may try many things in each of these categories before hitting on just the right formula for individual successful self-management. However, the skills themselves will definitely work, if followed diligently. “Behavior changes behavior and that is what we need to know,” explained Epstein. “You know about these principles, because you use some of them as managers of other people. Use them on yourself. When you manage others you can screw up. The fact is that makes us a little bit too timid because of the consequences that

Dr. Robert Epstein, is graduate of Harvard University, and has published more than 60 scientific articles, four of them in collaboration with Dr. B. F. Skinner. He is the founder of the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies where he was recently elected Director Emeritus, making him, at age 37, the youngest behavioral scientist in history to hold the honorary “emeritus” title. He is on the faculties of Boston University and the University of California, San Diego.

may follow our decisions. But in self-management, it’s you versus you. When you practice these skills you either come up even or you come up ahead. You can’t really come up behind. It’s fun-management without the risk.”



## [About the Author]

### GAIL SNYDER

Gail Snyder is a staff writer for Aubrey Daniels International. For the past 27 years, she has worked with clients to share their stories of the impact the science of behavior has had on their people and their business. In addition, Gail was the editor of Performance Management Magazine from 1987 to 2004.

## [About ADI]

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