

Psycho-Cybernetics

Updated and Expanded

Maxwell Maltz, MD, with a new introduction and commentary by Matt Furey. Perigee, 2015.

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Book Overview

Maxwell Maltz was a New York plastic surgeon who noticed that some patients changed their personalities after surgery and others did not. The patients who stayed the same kept acting as if the old face were still there. Maltz concluded that behavior follows an inner picture of the self, which he called the self-image, and that this picture can be rebuilt deliberately. First published in 1960, Psycho-Cybernetics sets out the method.

The book borrows its frame from Norbert Wiener's cybernetics. Maltz describes the brain and nervous system as a goal-seeking servo-mechanism that steers toward whatever target it is given, correcting course through feedback. The conscious mind sets the target and supplies accurate information. The automatic mechanism does the work. Because the nervous system responds to vividly imagined experience much as it does to real experience, mental rehearsal, relaxation and rational re-examination of beliefs become tools for changing what the mechanism aims at.

The 2015 edition keeps Maltz's fifteen chapters largely intact and adds an introduction, inline commentary and an afterword by Matt Furey, president of the Psycho-Cybernetics Foundation, along with updated examples.

People act in line with the picture they hold of themselves, and changing that picture through imagination, relaxation and rational thought changes what they can do.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: The Self-Image: Your Key to a Better Life

Maltz argues that every person carries a mental blueprint of the sort of person they are, and that all behavior, feeling and ability stay consistent with it. He builds the case from his surgical practice. Most patients whose disfigurement was corrected gained confidence within about three weeks. A minority did not, and some patients asked for surgery on defects that existed only in their own minds. The variable was not the face but the self-image, which can be changed without a scalpel.

- The self-image works as a ceiling. A person cannot sustain performance above the level the inner picture says is appropriate, because the picture defines what feels like being themselves.
- Maltz draws on Prescott Lecky, a schoolteacher who treated personality as a system of ideas that must stay consistent. Lecky reports a student who misspelled 55 words in 100 becoming one of the best spellers in the school once he stopped defining himself as a poor speller.
- The self-image is built from past experiences and, more importantly, from the conclusions drawn about them. Saying I failed that test describes an event. Saying I am a failure installs an identity.
- Maltz asks readers to reserve judgment for 21 days, citing his observation that surgical patients took about that long to get used to a new face and that a new mental image takes a similar period to set.

Chapter 2: Discovering the Success Mechanism Within You

The chapter introduces the core model. Maltz describes the brain and nervous system as a servo-mechanism, a goal-seeking machine of the kind cybernetics pioneers such as Norbert Wiener built into torpedoes and guided missiles. Animals have built-in goals. Humans can choose theirs. The same machinery works as a success mechanism or a failure mechanism depending only on the target it is given.

- A servo-mechanism reaches its goal through negative feedback. It moves, registers the error, corrects and moves again. Mistakes are information the system needs, not evidence of inadequacy.

- Maltz distinguishes two kinds of servo-mechanism. One steers toward a known target, like reaching for a pen. The other searches stored information for an unknown answer, like recalling a forgotten name. Both work best when consciously set and then left alone.
- Learning works by recording successful attempts and forgetting failed ones. A child learning to walk does not dwell on falls. The machinery keeps the pattern that worked.
- The practical demand on the person is to supply a clear goal and trust the mechanism. Furey's added commentary extends this to sport, citing Tom Hanson's interviews with Stan Musial on anticipating pitches.

Chapter 3: Imagination: The First Key to Your Success Mechanism

Maltz argues that imagination sets the goal picture the mechanism steers toward, and that the nervous system cannot tell a vividly imagined experience from a real one. Mental rehearsal therefore functions as practice. He supports the claim with examples from chess, selling, job interviews, music and golf, and closes with the daily exercise that became the signature practice of the book.

- Maltz cites a free-throw experiment reported in Research Quarterly. Students who practiced physically for 20 days improved 24 percent. Students who only imagined shooting improved 23 percent. A group that did neither showed no improvement.
- Selling and job interviews are treated as rehearsal problems. Maltz cites Charles B. Roth on Detroit salesmen who role-played objections at night and William Moulton Marston on rehearsal practice for job candidates.
- Golf teacher Alex Morrison taught students to practice the correct swing from an armchair, and Maltz reports one student shooting par for nine holes with no physical practice. The common principle is a clear mental picture of the correct result.
- The exercise sets aside 30 minutes a day to watch a detailed mental film of oneself acting as one wishes to act. Detail matters because detail is what makes the experience register as real to the nervous system.

Chapter 4: Dehypnotize Yourself from False Beliefs

Maltz argues that most limitations are hypnotic in a literal sense. A person accepts a belief about themselves, from others or from their own repetition, and then acts it out as faithfully as a hypnotized subject follows a suggestion. The remedy is to recognize the belief as an accepted idea rather than a fact and to replace it, with relaxation as the state in which replacement happens most easily.

- Alfred Adler was told he was dumb in mathematics and performed accordingly until he solved a problem his teacher could not. The belief, not the ability, set the limit.
- In the case Maltz takes from John D. Murphy's *Secrets of Successful Selling*, sales consultant Elmer Wheeler found a salesman who earned almost exactly 5,000 dollars a year regardless of territory or commission. He coasted when the number was in sight and worked harder when it was not.
- Feelings of inferiority come from measuring oneself against someone else's norms. Every person is inferior to someone at something. Maltz argues that the error is using another person's standard as the yardstick for one's own worth.
- Relaxation matters because effort and tension keep old suggestions in place. The chapter's exercise uses 30 minutes of daily physical relaxation paired with calming mental pictures.

Chapter 5: How to Utilize the Power of Rational Thinking

Against the psychoanalytic view of his era, Maltz argues that conscious, rational thought is the control knob of the automatic mechanism. Past failures do not need to be excavated. They need to be ignored while attention goes to the goal. Beliefs change when they are examined and found to be inconsistent with something the person holds more deeply, and the change sticks when it is paired with strong desire.

- Maltz cites Bertrand Russell's method in *The Conquest of Happiness*. When a feeling conflicts with what reason holds to be true, examine the feeling and argue against it rather than accept it.
- Ideas change through other ideas, not willpower. A salesman afraid of important prospects lost the fear when he saw that he was begging for approval, which contradicted his own sense of dignity.

- The chapter gives four questions for any limiting belief. Is there a rational reason for it? Could it be mistaken? Would the same conclusion be drawn about someone else in the same situation? Why act as if it were true without a good reason?
- Rational thought has a defined job. It decides what is wanted, gathers accurate information, and keeps attention on the task. It does not perform the task, which belongs to the automatic mechanism.

Chapter 6: Relax and Let Your Success Mechanism Work for You

Maltz argues that much modern stress comes from trying to solve every problem through conscious effort. The conscious mind should pose problems and gather facts, then step back. Creative people from Edison to Darwin report answers arriving after the problem is set aside. Excessive care and anxiety about results jam the mechanism, which is why the chapter ends in five rules for freeing it.

- The first rule comes from an executive with a weakness for roulette. Do your worrying before you place your bet, not after the wheel starts turning. Deliberate fully, decide, then commit without second-guessing.
- The second rule is to respond to the present moment. Maltz cites William Osler's practice of living in day-tight compartments and warns against reacting to people today as if they were figures from the past.
- The third rule is to do one thing at a time. Maltz cites James Gordon Gilkey's image of the hourglass, in which grains pass one at a time and the hurry is an illusion created by picturing every task at once.
- The fourth and fifth rules are to sleep on hard problems and to relax while working. Furey's commentary adds the idea of journey mode, keeping attention on the process rather than on the distance to the goal.

Chapter 7: You Can Acquire the Habit of Happiness

Maltz treats happiness as a medical and practical matter rather than a moral one. Happy people think and perform better. Happiness is not earned or deferred to a future event. It is a mental habit, a symptom of functioning as a goal-striver, and it can be practiced. The chapter argues that people add misery to events by layering their own opinions on top of the facts.

- Maltz quotes Epictetus. People are disturbed not by things but by their opinion of things. A businessman who lost 200,000 dollars was told he could be happier by not adding his own verdict to the loss.
- Unhappiness often comes from living on the deferred payment plan, waiting for a future event to grant permission to enjoy the present.
- Happiness tracks goal orientation. Maltz reports that his happiest years were as a hungry medical student, because he had something to strive toward.
- Since Maltz claims about 95 percent of behavior is habitual, the happiness habit is built the way any habit is. The chapter supplies a daily list of commitments, beginning with being as cheerful as possible and reacting calmly to whatever happens.

Chapter 8: Ingredients of the Success-Type Personality and How to Acquire Them

Maltz describes the personality that operates the success mechanism well and spells it with the word SUCCESS. The traits are Sense of direction, Understanding, Courage, Compassion, Esteem, Self-confidence and Self-acceptance. He argues that new roles require new self-images, so that a promotion or a new responsibility fails when the person keeps the old picture.

- Sense of direction comes from goals worth pursuing. Maltz argues that people feel lost when they stop moving toward anything, and that the remedy is a target rather than reflection.
- Understanding means accepting accurate information, including information about one's own mistakes. A person who cannot admit error cannot correct course.
- Courage means acting before certainty arrives. Maltz argues that no decision is guaranteed and that the courage to act on probabilities is itself a skill.
- Self-acceptance separates the person from their mistakes. People are not their errors, and accepting present imperfection is the condition for growth rather than its opposite.

Chapter 9: The Failure Mechanism: How to Make It Work for You Instead of Against You

The chapter mirrors the previous one with the word FAILURE. Frustration, Aggressiveness that is misdirected, Insecurity, Loneliness, Uncertainty, Resentment and Emptiness are presented as warning signals, readings on a gauge that show the mechanism is steering toward the wrong goal. Recognizing the symptom is the first step to correcting the course.

- Chronic frustration often comes from perfectionistic goals. Practical goals can be reached and adjusted. Perfectionistic ones guarantee a sense of failure.
- Aggressiveness is a normal part of goal-striving. It becomes destructive when it is blocked and turned on others or on oneself. Maltz recommends concentrating that energy on the problem and giving it physical outlets.
- Uncertainty is a symptom of needing to be right. Maltz quotes Samuel Smiles and argues that people who never make mistakes rarely make anything.
- Resentment and emptiness both point to the absence of a worthwhile goal. The chapter advises glancing at negatives to correct course, then focusing on positives.

Chapter 10: How to Remove Emotional Scars, or How to Give Yourself an Emotional Face-Lift

Maltz draws a parallel between physical and emotional scar tissue. Physical scars protect injured tissue but can harden into deformity. Emotional scars protect against past hurts but harden into isolation and a marred self-image. The chapter offers rules for avoiding new emotional wounds and a method for removing old ones, with forgiveness as the main instrument.

- The first rule is to be too big to feel threatened. A healthy self-image does not bruise easily, because small slights do not reach the core.
- The second rule is a self-reliant attitude. People who expect others to meet all their needs are wounded each time they do not.
- The third rule is to relax away hurts. Tension is the condition in which an emotional wound sets, and relaxation is the condition in which it does not.

- Forgiveness is presented as a surgical tool, not a moral gesture or a weapon. Real forgiveness cancels the debt rather than holding it over the other person, and it includes forgiving oneself.

Chapter 11: How to Unlock Your Real Personality

Maltz argues that what people call a good personality is simply a person who is not inhibited. Inhibition is excessive negative feedback. A servo-mechanism needs some correction, but too much makes it oscillate and freeze. Stuttering, stage fright and self-consciousness are presented as cases of a feedback system tuned too tightly.

- Maltz cites purpose tremor, the shaking that appears when a person tries too hard to thread a needle. Over-correction defeats the action it is meant to improve.
- Self-consciousness is really others-consciousness, an over-concern with what other people think. Salesman and author James T. Mangan cured his own self-consciousness by recalling how unselfconscious he felt eating in the kitchen at home.
- The value of indifference is real. A degree of not caring about the result lets the skill run without interference.
- The disinhibition exercises are deliberately counter-intuitive. Do not plan what to say in advance. Stop criticizing yourself in the moment. Speak more loudly than usual. Let people know when you like them.

Chapter 12: Do-It-Yourself Tranquilizers That Bring Peace of Mind

The chapter argues that people over-respond to minor stimuli out of habit, and that the response can be extinguished. A ringing telephone does not require a jump. Equanimity is a conditioned response that can be trained, and the mind can be given a place to retreat to between demands.

- If a response cannot be ignored, it can be delayed. Delay breaks the automatic link between stimulus and reaction, and repeated delay extinguishes it.
- Maltz recommends building a quiet room in the mind, a detailed imagined space to visit for a few minutes during the day as a decompression chamber.
- Emotional carry-over explains much rudeness, insomnia and even accidents. Feelings generated by one situation get carried into the next. Clearing the mechanism before taking on a new problem prevents that.

- Doing nothing is the correct response to an unreal problem. Maltz compares the personality to a thermostat that holds its own temperature regardless of the weather outside.

Chapter 13: How to Turn a Crisis into a Creative Opportunity

Maltz asks why some people perform best under pressure and others collapse, and answers that the difference is learned rather than innate. Clutch performers have practiced without pressure, keep an aggressive goal-directed attitude when it counts, and read their excitement as fuel rather than fear. The chapter works through each of these as a trainable skill.

- Maltz cites Edward Tolman's maze experiments. Rats that learned under hunger and thirst performed worse than rats that learned without pressure. Over-motivation narrows the mental map.
- Shadowboxing is the core technique. Gene Tunney fought an imaginary Jack Dempsey more than a hundred times before the real bout, and Maltz reports a salesman who rehearsed every objection in imaginary interviews before facing real prospects.
- Relief pitcher Hugh Casey said he thought about what he wanted to happen rather than what the batter might do. Keeping the positive goal in view lets the crisis release extra power.
- Asking what is the worst that can happen shrinks most crises to their real size. Maltz cites Bertrand Russell's practice of looking steadily at the worst outcome until it stops seeming catastrophic.

Chapter 14: How to Get That Winning Feeling

Maltz argues that the feeling of success is a signal that the mechanism is set for success. It cannot be forced, but it can be evoked by replaying stored memories of past success. Because the brain records successful action patterns, replaying them strengthens them, and repeated recall of failure strengthens failure in the same way.

- The winning feeling is a symptom, not a cause. Golfer Cary Middlecoff described it as everybody's secret of good golf, and Maltz uses it as a gauge of internal setting.
- Les Giblin told Maltz that he became a public speaker after imagining himself before a large audience while recalling the poise he felt with small sales meetings.

- Gradualness is the secret. Charles William Eliot of Harvard argued that students should be given tasks they can succeed at so that the habit of success forms first.
- Negative feelings are treated as challenges rather than verdicts. Maltz cites General George Patton's advice never to take counsel of one's fears, and recommends using a worry as the cue to rehearse the desired outcome instead.

Chapter 15: More Years of Life and More Life in Your Years

The final chapter extends the model to health and aging and is explicitly framed as Maltz's over-beliefs rather than established medicine. He draws on Hans Selye's work on adaptation energy to argue that a life force heals the body and that the failure mechanism drains it. The 2015 edition replaces his 1960 survey of anti-aging research with contemporary commentary from physician Dave Woynarowski on stress, telomeres and stem cells.

- Maltz reports that the patients who healed fastest after surgery were optimistic and had a compelling reason to get well. He links rapid healing to the traits of the success mechanism.
- Placebo effects are cited as evidence that expectation produces physical change. In a Royal Canadian Navy seasickness trial Maltz reports, 13 percent of the drug and sugar-pill groups got sick against 30 percent of an untreated group.
- People may think themselves into old age by expecting to decline and then withdrawing from mental and social activity. Maltz recommends developing a nostalgia for the future.
- Retiring from a job is different from retiring from life. Men who decline after retirement, he argues, are reacting to the loss of a goal rather than to the passage of years.

About the Author

Maxwell Maltz earned his medical degree from the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1923, trained in plastic surgery in Europe, and led reparative surgery departments in New York hospitals. He wrote *New Faces, New Futures* and *Dr. Pygmalion* on the psychology of plastic surgery before publishing *Psycho-Cybernetics* in 1960. He died in 1975. His credibility for this book comes from decades of watching how patients' sense of self did or did not change after surgery. It does not come from training in psychology or neuroscience, and the cybernetic model is an analogy he borrowed rather than research he conducted.

Matt Furey, who wrote the introduction, commentary and afterword for the 2015 edition, is president of the Psycho-Cybernetics Foundation, a former national college wrestling champion and a fitness and self-help author. His contribution is practitioner testimony and updated application. It is not independent scholarship on Maltz's claims.

Key Takeaways

1) The Self-Image Sets The Ceiling

Maltz's central claim is that performance stays consistent with a person's inner picture of who they are. Effort, skill and circumstance operate inside that limit. When conditions improve beyond what the self-image permits, the person finds ways to return to the familiar level.

- Elmer Wheeler's salesman earned about 5,000 dollars a year in good territories and bad ones, because 5,000 dollars was who he believed he was.
- Prescott Lecky's students improved in subjects they had failed once they stopped defining themselves by the failure.
- Maltz's surgical patients who kept their old self-image kept their old behavior, even with a corrected face.

2) The Mind Steers Toward Targets

Maltz models the brain as a goal-seeking servo-mechanism. It needs a target and accurate feedback, and it corrects errors on its own. The practical implication is that choosing the target is the main lever a person controls, and that error is a normal part of steering rather than proof of inadequacy.

- The same machinery works as a success or failure mechanism. The difference is the goal and the information it is fed.
- Learning keeps successful attempts and discards failed ones. Dwelling on failure reverses that process and rehearses the wrong pattern.
- Conscious thought sets the goal and checks the facts. It does not perform the skill.

3) Imagined Experience Trains The System

Because the nervous system responds to vivid imagined experience much as it responds to real experience, rehearsal in the mind functions as practice. Maltz treats daily mental rehearsal as the main method for building a new self-image, and he extends it from sport to selling, interviews and public speaking.

- Detail is what makes rehearsal register. Sights, sounds and physical sensations matter more than general intentions.
- The free-throw study Maltz cites reports imagined practice nearly matching physical practice.
- Rehearsing failure is also practice, which is why chronic worry produces the outcomes it fears.

4) Beliefs Yield To Better Ideas

Maltz rejects willpower as a method for changing beliefs. A belief changes when it is examined and shown to conflict with something the person holds more deeply. Most limiting beliefs were accepted uncritically, and they hold until someone questions them.

- The four questions in Chapter 5 test whether a belief rests on fact or on a conclusion drawn from one event.
- Measuring oneself against another person's norms produces inferiority. The fault lies in the yardstick, not the person.

- Rational re-examination works only when paired with genuine desire for the alternative.

5) Strain Jams The Mechanism

Across several chapters Maltz argues that over-effort, over-carefulness and excessive self-criticism degrade performance. A feedback system tuned too tightly oscillates and freezes. Relaxation, attention to the present and a degree of indifference to the result let skill operate.

- Do your worrying before you place your bet. Deliberation belongs before the decision, not after it.
- Purpose tremor and stage fright are the same phenomenon, correction applied so heavily that the action fails.
- Ideas often arrive after the problem is set aside, which is why sleeping on a problem is a method rather than an avoidance.

6) Pressure Is Trainable

Maltz argues that clutch performance is learned. It comes from practicing without pressure, holding the positive goal in view when the stakes rise, and reading arousal as excitement rather than fear. Crisis then releases capacity instead of consuming it.

- Tolman's rats learned better without pressure and performed better in crisis as a result.
- Shadowboxing builds the response pattern before the real event, so the crisis triggers a rehearsed action.
- Asking what is the worst that can happen returns most crises to their actual size.

Strengths And Limits

The book's lasting strength is a single, usable idea. The self-image as a limit on performance explains a pattern most readers recognize, the person who stalls at a familiar level regardless of opportunity, and it gives that pattern a mechanism and a remedy. Maltz's practices anticipate later work in sport psychology and cognitive therapy. Mental rehearsal, questioning automatic beliefs, rehearsing under low pressure and reframing arousal as excitement all now have research literatures of their own. The cybernetic frame, however dated, makes the model easy to hold. Set a target, supply accurate information, correct through feedback and stop over-correcting. The practices are concrete and cheap to try, and its publisher, Penguin Random House, says it has reached more than 30 million readers.

The evidence is the weak point. Much of the support is surgical case history, testimony and anecdote from athletes, salesmen and celebrities, and studies such as the free-throw experiment are cited without enough detail to check. The 21-day figure rests on Maltz's surgical observations, yet Furey's introduction says research now confirms it. The study most often cited on habit formation, by Phillippa Lally and colleagues at University College London, found a median of 66 days and a range of 18 to 254. A 1994 meta-analysis by James Driskell, Carolyn Copper and Aidan Moran found that mental practice helps but is less effective than physical practice and fades over weeks. Chapter 2 presents J. B. Rhine's extrasensory perception research as settled science, and Furey's afterword extends this. The 2015 edition also blends Furey's commentary and updated passages into Maltz's first-person text, so it is not always clear which claims are Maltz's. The predictable failure mode is a reader who rehearses the outcome but never confronts the obstacles or the real feedback that the cybernetic model itself says is required.

Bruce's Take

The diagnosis holds up better than the science behind it. Wheeler's 5,000 dollar salesman is still around. He shows up as the founder whose company sits at the same revenue three years in a row while the market, the team and the offer all change. The constraint is rarely capability. It is the founder's sense of what kind of company they run and what kind of CEO they are. Maltz's claim that people hold their performance to their self-image is consistent with William Swann's later research on self-verification, which finds that people seek feedback confirming how they already see themselves, even when that view is unflattering.

How the book lands depends on the person. A founder who is anxious, self-critical and replaying mistakes will get real value from Chapters 5, 6 and 11, where Maltz argues that over-correction is the problem. An overconfident founder who already pictures success vividly is the wrong audience for more visualization. That founder needs more negative feedback, not less. The book also reads differently for leadership teams than for individuals. Shadowboxing a board meeting, a key negotiation or a hard conversation with a partner is the most transferable practice here, and it works as well for a team as for one executive.

The most credible objection comes from Gabriele Oettingen at New York University. In *Rethinking Positive Thinking*, she reports experiments in which people who fantasized positively about an outcome showed lower energy and achieved less than people who held a more mixed view. Her alternative, mental contrasting, pairs the desired future with the inner obstacle and an if-then plan. That is a direct challenge to the way Psycho-Cybernetics is usually practiced. Maltz partly anticipates it with his emphasis on accurate information and negative feedback, but the daily exercises are mostly about the picture of success. Founders who use the theater of the mind should add the obstacle step.

The adjacent book is James Clear's *Atomic Habits*. Maltz argues that a changed self-image changes behavior. Clear argues the other direction, that repeated behavior is how identity changes, with each action a vote for the kind of person you are. Read together they close the loop. Maltz explains why the founder stays at the familiar level, and Clear supplies the small, repeated actions and environment design that make the new self-image believable to the person holding it.

Discussion Questions

For CEOs

- What revenue, team size or role do you treat as normal for yourself, and when did you last perform well above it and then drift back?
- Which belief about your own capabilities, such as not being a numbers person or not being good at selling, have you never actually tested against evidence?
- Where are you still worrying after the wheel has started turning, re-litigating a decision you already made?
- Which upcoming high-stakes conversation have you rehearsed only in your head as a failure?
- When you picture the company three years out, do you also picture the specific internal obstacle most likely to stop you?
- What feedback from your team or board have you discounted because it did not fit how you see yourself?
- Which past success could you replay before your next major decision, and what did it feel like to be in that state?
- What does the next stage of the business require you to be, and how far is that from the role you currently picture yourself in?

For Teams

- What does this team believe about the kind of company we are, and which of those beliefs limit what we attempt?
- Where do we practice under full pressure when we could rehearse without it first?
- Which recurring mistake do we review so often that we may be rehearsing it?
- When excitement rises before a launch or a big pitch, do we read it as readiness or as a warning sign?
- Which of our goals are practical and adjustable, and which are perfectionistic and guaranteed to frustrate?
- What emotional carry-over from one meeting tends to spill into the next one, and how could we clear it?

- Which grievance, internal or with a partner, is still shaping decisions after it should have been settled?
- What would we do differently next quarter if we asked what is the worst that can happen about our biggest current risk?

Practical Tools

1. The Theater of the Mind

Maltz's signature practice in Chapter 3 rests on his claim that the nervous system treats a vivid, detailed rehearsal much like real experience. The original prescribes 30 minutes a day of watching a mental film of oneself acting as one wishes to act. Use it ahead of a specific high-stakes event, such as a board presentation, a key hire conversation or a negotiation, where the current mental picture is one of strain or failure.

How it works:

- Name the event and the behavior you want to show in it, such as calm, direct or unhurried, in one sentence.
- Set aside 20 to 30 minutes somewhere quiet. Relax physically first, using the Chapter 4 method.
- Begin by replaying a real past success in detail, as Chapter 14 recommends, until the feeling of that day returns.
- Run the upcoming event as a film. Fill in the room, the people, the sounds and your own posture. See yourself handling the hardest moment well.
- Identify the obstacle most likely to knock you off course, then picture yourself meeting it. This step draws on Oettingen's mental contrasting research and is not in Maltz's original method.
- Repeat daily in the days before the event. Stop judging whether it is working until the event is over.

When the practice is working, the real event feels familiar rather than novel. The hardest moment arrives and the rehearsed response comes out without deliberation, with less tension and less over-explaining.

2. The Belief Audit

Chapter 5 argues that beliefs change through other ideas rather than willpower, and gives four questions for testing any limiting belief. Founders accumulate such beliefs about themselves and about the company, often from a single early event. Run this audit when a goal keeps being set and missed, or when a recurring phrase such as we are not a sales company keeps appearing in planning.

How it works:

- Write the belief as a plain sentence, such as I am not good at delegating or this company cannot win enterprise accounts.
- Trace where it came from. Note the specific event or person that installed it.
- Answer Maltz's four questions in writing. Is there a rational reason for the belief? Could it be mistaken? Would you reach the same conclusion about someone else in the same position? Why act as if it were true if there is no good reason?
- Find the deeper conviction it conflicts with, such as a commitment to the team or to the company's mission, and state the conflict directly.
- Write the replacement belief and one action in the next two weeks that would count as evidence for it.

The audit has done its job when the old phrase stops appearing unchallenged in planning conversations and someone on the team names it when it does. The replacement action gets taken, and its result becomes the new reference point.

3. Worry Before the Bet

Maltz's first rule for freeing the creative mechanism, from Chapter 6, separates deliberation from execution. Worry belongs before a decision, while options are still open. After the decision, continued worry only jams performance. Use this discipline on any significant commitment, such as a hire, a price change or an acquisition, where the leadership team tends to keep re-opening a settled question.

How it works:

- Before deciding, set a fixed deliberation window and list every risk and objection you can find.
- For each serious risk, apply the Chapter 13 question of what is the worst that can happen, and write down the response.
- Make the decision at the end of the window and record it with the reasoning.
- Name the specific new information that would justify reopening the question.
- Outside of that trigger, treat the decision as closed and redirect attention to execution.

Decisions stop being re-litigated in later meetings. The team spends its energy on making the chosen option work, and reversals happen only when the named trigger actually occurs.

4. Shadowboxing the Hard Moment

Chapter 13 argues that people learn poorly under pressure and perform well in a crisis only when they have practiced the response without pressure first. Maltz cites Gene Tunney's imaginary fights with Dempsey and a salesman who rehearsed every objection before facing real prospects. Use this before any event where a predictable hard moment could derail the outcome, such as a pricing objection, a tough board question or a difficult performance conversation.

How it works:

- List the three to five hardest moments likely to come up, written as the exact words someone might say.
- Practice responses aloud in a low-stakes setting, alone or with a colleague playing the other side, with no consequence for getting it wrong.
- Repeat until the response comes without searching for words. Then vary the delivery so it does not sound scripted.
- Before the real event, name the positive goal you want to keep in view, following Hugh Casey's practice of thinking about what he wanted to happen.

- When excitement rises just before the event, read it as readiness rather than fear.

In the real event the hard moment lands and the response is already there. Afterward the executive can point to the specific question that once would have caused a stumble and did not.

5. The Quiet Room Reset

Chapter 12 identifies emotional carry-over as a source of poor decisions and strained exchanges. Feelings from one situation get carried into the next. Maltz recommends building a quiet room in the mind and clearing the mechanism before taking on a new problem. Use it on days with back-to-back meetings, or after a hard conversation that would otherwise color the next one.

How it works:

- Build the room once. Picture a specific calm place in full detail, including light, furniture, sounds and temperature.
- Between demanding meetings, take two to five minutes to sit, relax and go to the room.
- Name what you are carrying out of the last situation, then deliberately leave it there.
- Before entering the next meeting, state its goal to yourself in one sentence.
- When a provocation arrives that cannot be ignored, delay the response rather than reacting, following Maltz's advice to break the automatic link.

The leader arrives at each meeting with the energy that meeting needs rather than the residue of the last one. Fewer late-afternoon exchanges turn sharp, and others notice the difference in tone before the leader does.

Further Research

- Phillippa Lally and colleagues. How Are Habits Formed. European Journal of Social Psychology, 2010. The study behind the 66-day median for habit formation. ([link](#))
- Gabriele Oettingen and Klaus Michael Reininger. The Power of Prospection, Mental Contrasting and Behavior Change. 2016. ([link](#))

- James Driskell, Carolyn Copper and Aidan Moran. Does Mental Practice Enhance Performance. Journal of Applied Psychology, 1994. [\(link\)](#)
- Does Mental Practice Still Enhance Performance. A 24-year follow-up and replication of the Driskell meta-analysis. Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 2020. [\(link\)](#)
- Roy Baumeister and colleagues. Does High Self-Esteem Cause Better Performance. Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 2003. [\(link\)](#)
- Maxwell Maltz, Psychocybernetic Plastic Surgeon. A biographical sketch of Maltz and his surgical work. [\(link\)](#)

Related Books

- **Rethinking Positive Thinking**, Gabriele Oettingen. The research-based challenge to pure visualization, and the source of the mental contrasting step that Maltz's theater of the mind is missing.
- **Atomic Habits**, James Clear. The reverse direction of Maltz's argument, in which repeated small actions change identity rather than identity changing action.
- **The Inner Game of Tennis**, W. Timothy Gallwey. A close cousin of Maltz's case against over-correction, built on the idea that a self-critical inner voice interferes with a skill the body already knows.
- **The Alter Ego Effect**, Todd Herman. A modern performance method that turns Maltz's self-image argument into a deliberate, situational identity a person steps into for high-stakes moments.
- **Feeling Good**, David D. Burns. The cognitive therapy version of Maltz's Chapter 5, with a structured method for identifying and disputing distorted automatic thoughts.
- **Mindset**, Carol S. Dweck. Research on fixed and growth beliefs about ability, which tests the core Maltz claim that what people believe about themselves shapes what they attempt.

- **Thinking, Fast and Slow**, Daniel Kahneman. The modern account of the split Maltz describes between deliberate conscious thought and an automatic system that does most of the work.

These summaries present Bruce Eckfeldt's analysis of business and leadership books for founder-CEOs and leadership-team members of growth companies. Each one identifies the ideas most relevant to decision quality, strategy, and leadership capacity, notes where the evidence is weak, and suggests practical ways to test what is worth testing. All ideas, stories, and quotations belong to the original author and to the people they cite. The assessments and recommendations are Bruce's. It is a companion to the book, not a substitute for reading it.

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