

# Managing Your Autopilot



The Autopilot is a collection of default behaviors, both good and bad, that people display without awareness and without a concerted effort to act more appropriately. We all have an autopilot mode, and it consists of our typical reflexive reactions to given situations or people.

Autopilots have a benefit—they save time and mental effort and often work well. They come in handy by simplifying and speeding up our responses to familiar situations. It’s our brain understanding what has worked for us in the past and selecting what may work again, especially in an emergency.

Autopilot behaviors are hard to break because they are deeply wired into our brains by constant repetition. It is even more difficult if the majority of those behaviors have worked or been accepted in the past. Substituting an optimal and more strategic response for an autopilot behavior can cause us to feel anxiety, fear, or frustration, especially at first. This resistance we have to change causes some of us to give up. Unfortunately, the discomfort we feel may impede us from reaching our full career potential.

As leaders who are striving for excellence, we always want our thoughts, feelings, words, and actions to be appropriate. We should select the best response for the situation. However, if autopilot is not managed, these reflexes may not allow us to exhibit the optimal responses. Therefore, to advance their leadership skills, all managers should tame their unproductive autopilots. We refer to this process as “Name it, Claim it, and then Tame it.”

Here are our recommended techniques for *Naming*, *Claiming* and then *Taming* your autopilot:

## ■ Naming the autopilot

The first step to effectively manage your autopilot is to create a catchy name for it so you can easily recall its features and examine the impact they have on others. When we tie the name to our dominant automatic processes, the autopilot no longer sits in the back of our minds and out of reach. Labeling the autopilot allows us to push the concept into our consciousness. Almost immediately after you make an unconscious habitual response conscious, it becomes less automatic and you can begin to control it.

## ■ Claiming your autopilot

Try to remain inquisitive and objective. With wisdom and compassion, consider your skills, challenges, behaviors, and motivations. Make a list of regular and challenging interpersonal situations that take place during your workday. During these times, your body language, words, and actions can shift into autopilot. These interpersonal situations will typically manifest during meetings, conversations, negotiations, conflicts, and other conditions when you should respond strategically. Are any of these behaviors that are actually strengths taken too far? We find many managers overuse their strengths to the point that they actually become challenges. For example, the talented litigator who sees every interaction as a win/lose situation. Or the overly empathetic team leader who avoids negative feedback. Create a list of these situations and identify your typical response. You might find that you are prone to interrupt, fail to delegate, become aggressive or passive, blame others, micromanage, or fail to listen actively.

## ■ Taming your autopilot

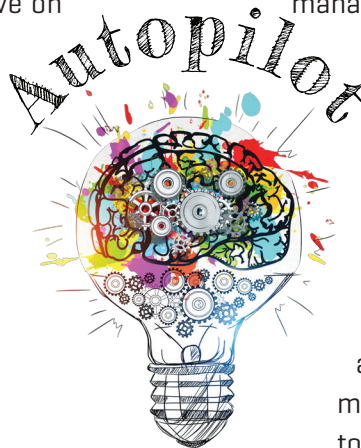
Taming the autopilot is replacing ineffective leadership behaviors with more appropriate or ideal behaviors. In

our experience, managers get the best results when they create a written plan with the following tools:

### 1. Use mnemonic devices and dedicate time and sustained effort to making a positive change

Mnemonic devices can play an essential role in learning to manage your autopilot. These techniques can help us remember to act more appropriately than our autopilot response dictates.

Our participants gave us some of the best ideas for mnemonic devices. One participant changed his phone screen to a picture of himself with his autopilot name as a caption. Another participant framed a character she drew of herself in autopilot mode. The image sits on her desk as a reminder to her each day.



Name it, Claim it,  
and then Tame it.



### 2. Lean into your discomfort

Some people seek to eliminate sources of discomfort as soon as possible. The paradox is that we need to endure a period of discomfort as we master complex new skills or change behaviors. The desire to eliminate the discomfort causes many people to slip immediately back into their autopilot to regain peace and control.

When you are feeling stress or discomfort, remind yourself that a bit of uneasiness goes a long way in terms of personal development. When you manage your autopilot, your brain creates new neural pathways that cement the new behavior in place. Eventually, this behavior will feel comfortable and reasonable.

### 3. Take baby steps with the spacing technique

The spacing learning technique is the opposite of cramming a lot of change into a short period of time. We've found making a little effort each day and spreading it over an extended period ensures positive change. We often have a great deal invested in our habits and the way we do things. These investments include our sense



of self-worth, time, overcoming past trauma, or emotions. This investment makes effecting a dramatic change rather daunting. If you aim for immediate perfection, you'll likely get frustrated and give up. So take baby steps to get the ball rolling, and then repeat the new behavior.

#### **4. Have and implement a strategy to manage your stress**

Autopilot manifests itself more when we are under pressure. If your autopilot is sometimes detrimental to the situations you face on the job, managing your anxiety will be helpful. Some ways to manage stress are yoga, prayer, meditation, exercise, mindfulness, 4-7-8 breathing, or other relaxation techniques.

#### **5. Practice in safe spaces and then test-drive the new behaviors for a restricted period of time**

Practicing a new behavior or skill regularly is among the best ways to become proficient. Training requires repetition. Role-playing exercises done in safe surroundings eventually build confidence and ability. Find a partner and practice new skills such as coaching and dealing with conflict.

Commit to taking a short vacation from your autopilot, perhaps twenty-four hours, and substitute an exaggerated and radically improved new behavior. Then journal about the situation, the new behavior, and the results. Congratulate yourself for avoiding your autopilot. Recording and analyzing your list of departures from your autopilot behaviors will create positive momentum.

#### **6. Visualize your goal**

Visualization activates your subconscious brain to generate creative ideas to achieve your goal. It engages your whole brain to solve problems. Furthermore, it enables the law of attraction, thereby subconsciously drawing into your life the people, resources, and circumstances you will need to reach your goal.

Follow this process: close your eyes, take three deep breaths, and visualize yourself performing at a whole new level of performance. Imagine the joy you will have once you're successful. Picture yourself in this new state. Then ask: What is the situation? What are you doing differently? What does your success feel like?



Repeat an empowering phrase to yourself: “I’m confident and competent,” or “I can do this.” Visualization has been shown to reduce your body’s stress response and give you the confidence to step away from your autopilot.

## 7. Be mindful, and recognize your triggers

When we are mindful and paying attention to the present moment, it is easier to make a choice to do or say something more appropriate. When we’re aware, we can detect our autopilot and the accompanying thoughts, feelings, motivations, reactions, and possible responses with greater clarity. We can pause before reacting and choose the most appropriate response for the situation we’re facing. Once you learn to detect autopilot setting in, you will know you are on the way to improvement.

Knowing our triggers can help us become more mindful. A trigger is any individual, topic, or situation that makes us uncomfortable and activates the negative behaviors associated with autopilot. When we can identify our triggers, we can anticipate when our autopilot might express itself. Then we can choose to act or behave more appropriately.

## 8. Become a student

Do an internet search about the behaviors you hope to accomplish or change. Also, find out what the top thought leaders have to say about acquiring the new skill or behavior. Research yields knowledge and applied knowledge breeds competence.

## 9. Get an accountability partner

When trying to avoid autopilot behaviors to substitute something better, enlist a trusted colleague for help. Ask them to observe you and provide objective feedback and encouragement.



## 10. Substitute a new and better behavior for the old behavior

Develop a plan to substitute a new and better behavior for the old behavior. The plan should have provisions for how you will respond when you face the triggers that prompts your autopilot to kick in. Many people have used the same technique to kick a bad habit. We need a safe mental place to go or action to substitute rather than simply eliminating the less effective habit.

Many top performing managers rely heavily on their autopilots to address the behavioral situations they face each day. Understanding your defaults and the benefits and challenges they bring to your workday is not enough. Real change requires sustained effort and dedication. You need a strategy for managing your autopilot in real time to lead others more productively.

## ■ Resources

Lee Newman, “How to Override Your Default Reactions in Tough Moments,” Harvard Business Review, April 15, 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/04/how-to-override-your-default-reactions-in-tough-moments>.

“Overcoming Fear: 10 Ways to Step Outside Your Comfort Zone,” Forbes Coaches Council, April 26, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lizryan/2018/01/31/ten-ways-to-step-outside-your-comfort-zone-and-why-its-important/#24af5d765998>.