



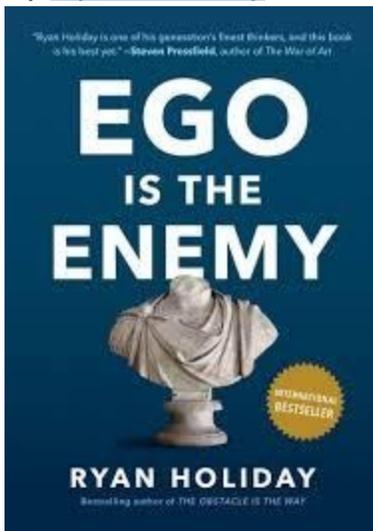
# CMCWORKFORCE

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Book Summary

## Ego is the Enemy

By [Ryan Holiday](#)



[Portfolio/Penguin](#)

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ISBN: 978-1-59184-781-6

226 pages

Read: 07.2020

Rating: 08/10

### Main Take-Aways

- Danger of Early Pride
- Work, Work, Work
- Always Stay A Student
- Managing Yourself
- Alive Time or Dead Time
- Draw the Line

### Intro

**Blurb from Book:** While the history books are filled with tales of obsessive visionary geniuses who remade the world in their image with sheer, almost irrational force, I've found that history is also made by individuals who fought their egos at every turn, who eschewed the spotlight, and who put their higher goals over their desire for recognition.

Many of us insist the main impediment to a full, successful life is the outside world. In fact, the most common enemy lies within: our ego. Early in our careers, it impeded learning and the cultivation of talent. With success, it can blind us to our faults and sow future problems. In failure, it magnifies each blow and makes recovery more difficult.

Ego is the Enemy draws in a vast array of stories and examples, from literature to philosophy to history. We meet fascinating figures such as George Marshall, Jackie Robinson, Katharine Graham, Bill Belichick and Eleanor Roosevelt, who all reached the highest levels of power and success by conquering their own egos. Their strategies and tactics can be ours as well.

**My Thoughts:** I really enjoyed this book. It's rating isn't at 10 because it seems to be written to a specific age group, mid to late 20's and possibly in their early 30's. There are references to graduating college, and

starting in the working world. That stretched it's "relatability" with me, and I felt it was unnecessary as I know a fair number of mid and late career aged individuals who could use the lessons in this book.

## Danger of Early Pride

**Blurb from Book:** Pride blunts the very instrument we need to own in order to succeed: our mind.

Pride and ego say:

“Whom the gods wish to destroy they first call promising.”  
Cyril Connolly

- I am an entrepreneur because I struck out on my own.
- I am going to win because I am currently in the lead.
- I am a writer because I published something.
- I am rich because I made some money.
- I am specific because I was chosen.
- I am important because I think I should be.

At one time or another, we all indulge in a sort of gratifying label making. Yet every culture seems to produce words of caution against it. Don't count your chickens before they hatch. DON't cook the sauce before catching the fish. The way to cook a rabbit is first to catch a rabbit. Pride goeth before the fall.

Let's call that attitude what it is: fraud. If you're doing the work and putting in the time, you won't need to cheat, you won't need to overcompensate.

The question to ask, when you feel pride, then, is this: What am I missing right now that a more humble person might see? What am I avoiding, or running from, with my bluster, franticness, and embellishments? It is far better to ask and answer these questions now, with the stakes still low, than it will be later.

**My Thoughts:** When I first read this I misunderstood what he meant and had to go back and reread the chapter.

He's not talking about having the courage to step out onto your own path, he's not even talking about being proud of the work you are doing.

It's being humble enough to know that if you start thinking you are infallible you can destroy everything you built. Holiday tells the story of Rockefeller telling himself, "Because you have got a start, you think you are quite a merchant; look out or you will lose your head - go steady."

And Rockefeller was no pushover when it came to staring down competition and outside influences, he knew it was the one inside that's the most dangerous.

## Work, Work, Work

**Blurb from Book:** The distinction between a professional and a dilettante occurs right here- when you accept that having an idea is not enough; that you must work until you are able to recreate your experience effectively in words on a page.

“Everytime you sit down to work, remind yourself: I am delaying gratification by doing this.”  
Ryan Holiday

To cultivate a product of labor and industry instead of just a product of the mind. It's here where abstraction meets the road and the real, where we trade thinking and talking for working.

The investor and serial entrepreneur Ben Horowitz put it more bluntly: “The hard thing isn't setting a big, hairy, audacious goal. The hard thing is laying people off when you miss the big goal... The hard thing isn't dreaming big. The hard thing is waking up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat when the dream turns into a nightmare.”

Sure you get it. You know that all things require work and that work might be quite difficult. But do you really understand? Do you have any idea how much work there is going to be? Not work until you get your big break, not work until you make a name for yourself, but work, work, work, forever and ever.

Is it ten thousand hours or twenty thousand hours to mastery? The answer is that it doesn't matter. There is no end zone. To think of a number is to live in a conditional future. We're simply talking about a lot of hours - that to get where we want to go isn't about brilliance, but continual effort.

Back to a popular trope: Fake it til you make it. It's no surprise that such an idea has found increasing relevance in our noxiously bullshit, Nerf world. When it is difficult to tell a real producer from an adept self-promoter, of course some people will roll the dice and manage to play the confidence game. Make it so you don't have to fake it - that's the key.

**My Thoughts:** As someone who started a Construction Company far too young, took on responsibility that far outstretched all of my capacity to manage and stay sane, I agree with this section 100%.

“As our island of knowledge grows, so does the shore of our ignorance.”  
John Wheeler

There is nothing wrong with working under a mentor, which is what I should have done all those years ago, but my pride/ego told me I could do it all “alone”. Now? None of my projects are done in a vacuum, they are all tested, iterated and involve some kind of feedback loop to guard against the draw of instant gratification.

## Always Stay A Student

**Blurb from Book:** Genghis Khan was not born a genius. Instead as one biographer put it, he was “a persistent cycle of pragmatic learning, experimental adaptation, and constant revision driven by his uniquely disciplined and focused will.

Most military cultures - and people in general - seek to impose values and control over what they encounter. What made the Mongols different was their ability to weigh each situation objectively, and if need be, swap out previous practices for new ones. All great businesses start this way, but then something happens. Take the theory of disruption, which posits that at some point in time, every industry will be disrupted by some trend or innovation that, despite all the resources in the world, the incumbent interests will be incapable of responding to. Why is this? Why can't businesses change and adapt?

A large part of it is because they lost the ability to learn. They stopped being students. The second this happens to you, your knowledge becomes fragile.

The great manager and business thinker Peter Drucker says that it's not enough simply to want to learn. As people progress, they must also understand how they learn and then setup processes to facilitate this continual education. Otherwise, we are dooming ourselves to a sort of self-imposed ignorance.

“Humility engenders learning because it beats back the arrogance that puts blinders on. It leaves you open for truths to reveal themselves. You don't stand in your own way...Do you know how you can tell when someone is truly humble? I believe there's one simple test: Because they consistently observe and listen, the humble improve. They don't assume, “I know the way.”

**My Thoughts:** Peter Drucker is one of my favorite authors and business thinkers. Unfortunately his work has been mostly turned into soundbites and his message obscured. Regardless, there is a lot to learn there. And everywhere else, really. Lessons abound when you pay attention.

Most of what I've learned, especially in my early career, I learned by doing it wrong and falling flat on my face. Going into every situation assuming I have no clue saves me the faceplant and the painful recovery. People will tell you what you need to know if you listen, which is hard for me at times, as I get very excited about the projects I work on and like talking.

## Managing Yourself

**Blurb from Book:** ...in moving up the ladder of life, the system and work habits that got us where we are won't necessarily keep us there. When we're aspiring or small time, we can be idiosyncratic, we can compensate for disorganization with hard work and a little luck. That's not going to cut it in the majors. In fact, it'll sink you if you can't grow up and organize.

“It is not enough to have great qualities, we should also have the management of them.”

La Rochefoucauld

As you become successful in your own field, your responsibilities may begin to change. Days become less and less about doing and more and more about making decisions. Such is the nature of leadership. This transition requires reevaluating and updating your identity. It requires a certain humility to put aside some of the more enjoyable or satisfying parts of your previous job. It means accepting that others might be more qualified or specialized in areas in which you considered yourself competent - or at least their time is better spent on them than yours.

What matters is that you learn how to manage yourself and others, before your industry eats you alive. Micromanagers are egotists who can't manage others and they quickly get overloaded. So do the charismatic visionaries who lose interest when it's time to execute. Worse yet are those who surround themselves with yes-men or sycophants who clean up their messes and create a bubble in which they can't even see how disconnected from reality they are.

Responsibility requires a readjustment and then increased clarity and purpose. First, setting the top-level goals and priorities of the organization and your life. Then enforcing and observing them. To produce results and only results.

**My Thoughts:** Again, going back to past mistakes, I cringed all the way through this section. He's absolutely correct. I've been both, the micromanager (mostly because I had no idea how to lead) and the self involved visionary (scared of fucking up what I had dreamed of creating).

Neither worked, neither lasted and I am eternally grateful for both working out the way they did. The depth of the project is in bringing it to life. Allowing yourself NOT to know, being okay LEARNING, see “Always

“Live without wasted time.”  
Parisian Political Slogan

stay a student”, making mistakes, cleaning up the messes you made and progressing. Stop pretending you have all the answers, no one does. We are all doing our best with the information we have at any given moment.

Trust you are smart enough to figure it out along the way. You will if you stay honest.

## Alive Time or Dead Time

**Blurb from Book:** It would feel much better in the moment to be angry, to be aggrieved, to be depressed or heartbroken. When injustice or the capriciousness of fate are inflicted on someone, the normal reaction is to yell, to fight back, to resist. This is shortsighted.

Think of what you have been putting off. Issues you declined to deal with. Systemic problems that felt too overwhelming to address. Dead time is revived when we use it as an opportunity to do what we’ve long needed to do.

As they say, this moment is not your life. But it is a moment in your life. How will you use it?

Malcolm (X) could have doubled down in the life that brought him to prison. Dead time isn’t only dead because of sloth or complacency. He could have spent those years becoming a better criminal, strengthening his contacts, or planning his next score, but it still would have been dead time. He might have felt alive doing it, even as he was slowly killing himself.

That’s what so many of us do when we fail or get ourselves into trouble. Lacking the ability to examine ourselves, we reinvest our energy into exactly the pattern of behavior that caused our problems to begin with.

It comes in many forms. Idly dreaming about the future. Plotting our revenge. Finding refuge in distraction. Refusing to consider that our choices are a reflection of our character. We’d rather do basically anything else.

But what if we said: This is an opportunity for me. I am using it for my purposes. I will not let this be dead time for me.

The dead time was when we were controlled by ego. Now-now we can live.

**My Thoughts:** We all have dead time that we let invade our lives. My favorite is when people use Weekends as dead time, as if they don’t somehow count towards Life.

“It can ruin your life  
only if it ruins your  
character.”  
Marcus Aurelius

Why would you waste any day of your life?

He, and I, are not talking about vacations or taking a break on a project, but generally how you view your time. There is no stasis in Nature, if you aren't growing you're automatically dying. Which are you doing?

## Draw the Line

**Blurb from Book:** Ego kills what we love. Sometimes, it comes close to killing us too.

It is interesting that Alexander Hamilton, who of all the Founding Fathers met the most tragic and unnecessary end, would have wise words on this topic. But indeed he does. “Act with fortitude and honor,” he wrote to a distraught friend in serious financial and legal trouble of the man's own making. “If you cannot reasonably hope for a favorable extrication, do not plunge deeper. Have the courage to make a full stop.”

A full stop. It's not that these folks should have quit everything. It's that a fighter who can't tap out or a boxer who can't recognize when it's time to retire gets hurt. Seriously so. You have to be able to see the bigger picture. But when the ego is in control, who can?

Let's say you've failed and let's even say it was your fault. Shit happens and, as they say, sometimes shit happens in public. It's not fun. The question remains: Are you going to make it worse? Or are you going to emerge from this with your dignity and character intact? Are you going to live to fight another day?

Ego says we're the immovable object, the unstoppable force. This delusion causes the problems. It meets failure and adversity with rule breaking even through that's what got you to this pain point in the first place.

At any given time in the circle of life, we may be aspiring, succeeding, or failing. With wisdom, we understand that these positions are transitory, not statements about your value as a human being. When success begins to slip from your fingers - for whatever reason- the response isn't to grip and claw so hard that you shatter it to pieces. It's to understand that you must work yourself back to the aspirational phase. You must get back to first principles and best practices.

**My Thoughts:** I've failed, it was my fault and it felt very public. Made more public by the very people who helped deliver it. Having failed once, staring at the next opportunity to succeed takes heart, humility and

## “Maintain your own Scorecard.”

courage. Stepping back into the ring after being smashed in the face is not for the faint of heart. .

We are not an immovable object, but if you keep your head on straight, both eyes forward and stay honest with yourself you'll get where you need to go.

### Actionable Tips

**From the book:** The economist Adam Smith had a theory for how wise and good people evaluate their actions:

“There are two different occasions upon which we examine our own conduct, and endeavour to view it in the light in which the impartial spectator would view it: first, when we are about to act; and secondly, after we have acted. Our views are apt to be very partial in both cases; but they are apt to be most partial when it is of most importance that they should be otherwise. When we are about to act, the eagerness of passion will seldom allow us to consider what we are doing, with the candour of an indifferent person...When the action is over, indeed, and the passions which prompted it have subsided, we can enter more coolly into the sentiments of the indifferent spectator.”

**My Thoughts:** I have used After Action Reports for the past little while, a skill I picked up a few years ago while I was reconstructing my life.

This enables me to ask “What is my outcome” daily (thank you Tony Robbins) and then create a feedback loop around what that result was, effectively sandwiching my days between two assessment periods.

The same is true of my weeks (Saturday is my planning and assessment day), my months (the last/first Sunday) and annually I take a week for large scale planning and assessment.

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### About the Author of “Ego is the Enemy”

[Ryan Holiday](#)

Ryan is a strategist and a writer. He dropped out of college at nineteen to apprentice under Robert Greene, author of *The 48 Laws of Power*, and later served as the director of marketing for American Apparel.