

For Starters is a book you will want to finish then start to read again. Heather Jo Kennedy presents simple, yet deep, philosophies through easily accessible analogies and relatable anecdotes. For Starters should find a place in every school library and every home.

Bob Kohut - Two Time New Jersey Teacher of the Year

This book had that rare ability to capture my attention and then keep it with a combination of thought-provoking questions, stories and ideas. I feel like the author was having a conversation with me, which was nice.

Martin Hurlburt - The Happy Retirement Guy

Your level of happiness and joy will increase. Your mental health will improve. Your gratitude will grow and your outlook on life will brighten. Heather has a gift, and "For Starters" shines that gift like a beacon in a world that needs more light.

Darrell Holden - Cowboy and Poet

An insightful book and enjoyable read! Heather Jo Kennedy fuses together her IMPACT framework with a variety of stories and anecdotes that are incredibly useful for anyone looking to enhance their performance, improve their game, or simply gain a better outlook on life. Well worth the read!

Brad David Ball - Author

For Starters will give you the insights to see your true identity as a starter and making those fires burn bright!

Shalyse Bellon, High School Basketball Coach

From Youth Starters

I have started to catch a lot of things that I never would have noticed before. This has helped me solidify my identity, feel more grateful, and know who my true team is.

Age 13

This book has helped me a lot to stay true and accountable to my goals and has helped me to set my priorities straight.

Age 19

For Starters
Principles of Productivity You're Overlooking
HJ Kennedy
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Foreword

For Starters guides you through both challenges and opportunities on your journey through self-awareness, personal achievement, and betterment. While keeping a focus on the critical elements of family, relationships, and gratitude in realizing your real potential, Heather takes the hard things that are part of life and applies simple solutions. She illustrates these points through her own life experiences, simultaneously encouraging a shift from what is going *wrong* to what is going *right*.

This book doesn't try to define the next complex strategy in personal leadership and development but instead identifies effective disciplines to use throughout daily interactions with work, family, and friends. The principles in *For Starters* are familiar, easy to understand, and apply.

Col. Michael S. Rapich
Law Enforcement Leader and Administrator

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FOR STARTERS

Principles of Productivity You're Overlooking

So you want to level up? When it comes to increasing productivity and elevating performance, there are valuable skills like organization, goal setting, prioritization, and time management that are common focal points. These are great! But some of the most beneficial principles that promote productivity are a little subtler. Because of their seeming insignificance, they're often overlooked, but when examined and implemented will have a profound impact on your potential.

Do you have an idea or hope you're struggling to bring to life? Are you feeling like you have more to give but aren't sure what? Are you a team player feeling like you're on the wrong team? Here you'll find resources for discovery, a new perspective on influencers, and some undervalued tools that ignite sustainable momentum. And the bonus is...they're easy! In short, this process will make what you do more doable.



Introduction

Performance and productivity are about more than tools and tricks—they're about igniting a spark that gets you moving and keeps you going. Abraham Lincoln once said, *"If I had six hours to chop down a tree, I'd spend the first four hours sharpening the axe."* Welcome to your axe-sharpening masterclass!

WHAT

For starters... let's work on definitions. What even is a starter?

Many things could come to mind when you hear the word "starter." It's a word that carries big emotion in the sports world. Starters are the first ones to take the field, court, etc. They're the first to play. The general assumption is that they're the best—at least for the team's current objective. In the business world, "starter" could denote entrepreneurship. In a figurative sense, it could refer to someone who's impulsive or gets things done. In a fight, the label of "starter" means the same thing—whether in the street, the ring, or the principal's office, but that's a different kind of book.

- ✓ Starters use what's available to them to make a lasting change

The common thread in these definitions is the idea of someone pointed in the direction of success and ready to run.

WHO

Originally, I intended this book to be geared toward young adults since many of my clients fall into that category. On the

culp of adulthood, their ambitions and inhibitions are so much fun to coach. But I found myself organically sharing insights from these six principles with colleagues and friends of various ages and realized they have universal application. These points transcend age, gender, orientation, and ethnicity. Anyone, anywhere, at any time can implement any of these concepts and notice a positive change in their levels of performance and productivity. As a bonus, it has proved to me that old dogs *can* learn new tricks!

In close to fifty years of trying to figure out what I want to be when I grow up, I've finally got a lead—I'm a starter. Blessed with countless opportunities to learn and grow in business and personal life, I have crested tops and wallowed in bottoms of many adventures, discovering along the path ways to both make it and break it. From business owner, to coach, to artist, I've covered some ground. I must mention though, it would be remiss for me to not acknowledge almost everything I know I learned from being part of a family.

I loved camping as a kid, and had a father who would take my brothers and I often.

Regardless of where we went, who we were with, or how we slept, there would always be a campfire—the defining quality of a campout. That campfire provided an opportunity for Dad to teach a lesson. He never missed those opportunities.

At a young age he taught me how to build a proper fire. First, we set up the firepit with a hearty amount of dry kindling, then we stacked larger twigs in the traditional teepee formation around the kindling, keeping dry logs to the side at the ready. He coached me on how to allow for some airflow but still have a sturdy structure. I had it down.

One camping trip, he put me to the test in a way I wasn't expecting. As we made our tin-foil dinners, he told me it was my

job to set up the campfire. No problem. I quickly went through all the motions I'd learned. As I was wrapping up, he came over holding a single match in his outstretched hand.

"Oh, one more thing," he said, "you get one match. That's it."

No matchbox, no lighter fluid, just a splinter of cheap wood with a tip I prayed was adequate and intact. My mind went immediately back to my preparation. If I'd known I was only getting one match, would I have spent more time constructing the fire? Luckily, he let me revisit my work and you bet I did.

He laid the pressure on thick. "We'll all be real hungry tonight if you don't get it, Heather."

It was an incredible lesson, and oh so good for me on several levels. It illustrated the importance of preparation, patience, and precision. But the reason it was so effective for me personally was... it challenged me.

Now fire-lighting has become a focus of mine.

New projects, like blank canvases, are irresistible to me. I've been blessed with many of those kinds of opportunities to learn and to develop. I've traveled many roads and picked up skills. I've endured a lot of lessons—from piano to sports, to art, to language, even horse-riding lessons (I was a Texas kid, after all). As an adult, I continue to study and take advantage of as much learning as I can. I'm not extra gifted. When people describe me, they may use the word talented because of those skills, but they miss the mark. I'm not more talented or gifted, I'm just productive. And I have an insatiable desire to *start*.

Some of the talents I've developed don't get used as much as they could. But I don't count them as waste, not one bit. If what I've gained from my many ventures can be of any worth to someone else, then it won't be in vain. I've learned some dos and don'ts the hard way and want to share tips so others can be starters of their own fires.

Note that the campfire analogy begins with a search. Depending on where we were camping, there were times the

gathering was difficult, where supply was scarce. Such has been my experience with ventures as well. Not everyone has all the resources handy to even begin building let alone light the match. Some tools are better than others and some people are more anxious and ready than others. The process of becoming a starter can be applied across a variety of ambitions, but *ambition* is the key. *For Starters* is intended for individuals who sense they have unmet potential and are ready to get after it.

The trickiest moment in building a fire is the ignition—when your preparation is put to the test. For those of you who think you have what it takes, I've got the match. Let's see.

WHY

There's another word we need to attend to and it happens to be one of my favorites. *Better*. It points to improvement but not perfection, so it's much more productive. Jesus bade of His disciples to, "Be ye therefore perfect." One of the most influential 18th century Bible scholars, Charles Ellicott, translated this phrase as, "Ye therefore shall be perfect," signaling an ideal future state, should we accept all the conditions He laid out. Presuming we can attain perfection while still being mortal is not only naive, it's nonsense. And those who lean toward perfectionism know what a plague it can be. It holds you hostage. Famed academic and researcher, Brené Brown, says that when perfectionism is in the driver's seat, shame rides shotgun. And shame haunts.

On the other end of the perfectionist scale is apathy. From my perspective as a coach, apathetic clients are the most difficult. They give so little to work with. Defiance has an energy that can be manipulated and rerouted. It implies a degree of caring. Apathetic individuals lack care. They're only a step away from hopelessness. But that step is a big one.

In my probing I've found that apathy is often feigned. It's just a cloak that signals avoidance. Dig deep enough and you'll find a care. A spark. Thankfully, I've yet to meet a person without the

hint of a spark.

Our goal here is to find the balance between apathy and perfectionism—to make gradual improvements for a better you. That’s the attitude of a starter. Starters seek positive change, which is initiated most effectively by desire. You’ve got to want it. So when given the options of good, better, or best, I say choose better.

Better recognizes a much bigger picture, allowing for setbacks and delays should you mistakenly head the wrong direction. Progress is seldom linear so don’t let yourself be thwarted by the tough days. Keep facing forward, even if you’re momentarily standing still. Time is constantly passing and taking the sting of failures with it.

Consider the stock market. Full disclosure, I have an arts degree—I know nothing about stocks, but my Certified Professional Accountant brother assures me that when my IRA diminishes, it’ll recover. Gains and losses are mitigated by time, I just need to chill out and stay the course, because in the end I’ll be ahead.

Productive people are like those accounts. Patience is the name of the game. And know this... The better road will be tough. So thicken your skin.

HOW

Quick disclaimer: I am a coach, not a therapist. While there are beneficial suggestions in these pages, if your mental health is questionable, seek a licensed, medical professional for help first.

In my coaching I’ve found a specific pattern to be both effective and maintainable. It consists of three actions:

1. Find one thing to eliminate.
2. Find one thing to embrace.
3. Find one thing to consider.

Think traffic lights. Red lights signal to stop, to apply the brakes. Green is your indicator to leave that red light behind and get moving, nothing in your way. Yellow is a judgment call. Attitudes toward yellow vary greatly depending on personalities. For the purposes of these productivity points, yellow will indicate something you need to consider or apply more questioning to. Many great discoveries and movements started with a question. Each of these steps needs your personal judgment.

If you choose to use this as a workbook, there is a workspace at the end of each chapter. Take advantage of that space to write notes. Do the work.

A psychology professor at Dominican University in California performed a study with 267 participants and concluded that simply writing goals down increases your chances of success by 42%¹. Take that edge! If it's not measurable it's not movement, so use these actions as your measuring tool for productivity. Make three daily goals—something to stop, something to accelerate on, and something to question.

Directionally, these principles are more arbitrary than incremental. If one feels sticky, jump to another and come back later. I like a kind of flexibility that appeals to whichever brain hemisphere you favor. Call me inclusive.

To make the most of the suggestions in this book, take one week for each step. Focus on that step. Get in the habit of recognizing where you can improve and where you're succeeding. Refine the step until you feel like it comes naturally. Spoiler, these steps are all natural. They may be uncomfortable, but they're basic, organic, and implementable. If you find yourself uneasy about one of them, that's a good sign. It means you have something to attack—a project! Projects lead to progress. But you can trust that these steps are wholly beneficial (in moderation... as with anything).

They are simple, so much that they get overlooked, and that's the rub. If you attend to them prayerfully and with full intent, you

will become a more productive, more peaceful, more fulfilled, and a more accomplished person. You'll be better.

Now let's get started.



Gratitude

*“So remember Me; I will remember you.”
QuRan, Surah Al-Baqarah (2:152)*

How does a starter begin the day? With gratitude. It is the first and most essential tool for starting strong. It establishes a mindset for fueling progress. Granted some of us are innately “morning people”. This isn’t so much how you *feel* about the morning, it’s what you *do* about the morning. Starters don’t avoid the morning, they attack the morning. So regardless of what time you start your day, start strong. If you’re a morning-struggler, this step is a great way to attack it without overburdening yourself.

✓ Starters are grateful

You may not have a single follower on social media or a dollar in your bank account. But if you think you’re starting from scratch, you are dead wrong. You have history, knowledge, experience. You have a whole world under your feet. You have feet! If you don’t, you certainly have a brain that can comprehend inspirational self-help books. And if you’re reading this particular book, whether you’ve identified it or not, you probably have a reason. But don’t sweat about that yet.

Forget about your projects for a bit. Put them on the shelf and don’t worry about your why at present. First thing’s first, you must develop the characteristics that will allow you to achieve those goals.

We begin with gratitude. At the very least, when you wake up and before you get into bed, you *must* count your blessings. There is power in thankfulness that you can find nowhere else.

Trust me on this. It's step one on purpose.

BENEFITS

Starters are clear on what they desire because they're clear on what they've been given. Gratitude propels them in ways nothing else can. Regular practice of gratitude has been linked to immense benefits, including mental/emotional, social, and physical advantages.

Mental

- Grateful people experience significantly better mental health.²
- Gratitude helps to reduce toxic emotions, from envy and resentment to frustration and regret. It can even shift one's mental focus away from negativity, contributing to greater life satisfaction and optimism.³
- Gratitude improves self esteem. It increases resilience and emotional intelligence, and happiness.⁴
- Gratitude has been shown to alleviate anxiety, grief, and depression.⁵
- Other studies reveal improved resilience⁶ and patience.

Social

- Saying "thank you" leads to new social opportunities.⁷
- Gratitude is linked to lower levels of aggression.⁸
- Gratitude can yield lasting changes in brain function, helping individuals become more inclined toward generosity and positive social interactions.⁹
- Other research has indicated increased forgiveness, vitality, better relationships and less

jealousy. If you and your partner show regular appreciation for each other, you're more likely to stay together long-term.¹⁰

Physical

- Grateful people are physically healthier. Gratitude can contribute to lower blood pressure, glycemic control, asthma control and even eating behaviors.¹¹
- Gratitude improves immune function and reduces inflammation and anxiety.¹²
- Gratitude significantly lowers feelings of stress and fatigue.¹³
- Grateful individuals experience improved quality of sleep.¹⁴

Spiritual

- Grateful people have a heightened sense of belonging and well-being.¹⁵
- Gratitude fosters humility.¹⁶
- There is a positive link between gratitude and spirituality/religiosity.¹⁷
- Gratitude improves an individual's sense of meaning.¹⁸
- Gratitude encourages focus on the present moment, leading to increased mindfulness.¹⁹

THREE GOOD THINGS:

“Three Good Things” is a practice I learned from my doctor. After our third baby, I had minor postpartum blues so he recommended this behavioral remedy he'd learned about from Duke University.²⁰ It's a positive psychology technique that rewires the brain.

Here's an abbreviated version of what it involves: Each night

before you go to bed you reflect on the events of the day and write down three positive things that happened that day. Our brains are biologically coded to reflect on the negative aspects of the day—it’s what helps us survive as a species—but, unfortunately, this tendency to highlight the negative can lead to depression and burnout.

After only one week of participating in the study, individuals reported increased happiness and a better ability to identify positive things in their lives. After two weeks of consistent effort, people were generally happier and more peaceful than those who didn’t and for a longer duration than people who took prescription anti-depressants.²¹

Personally, I experienced similar results, so much so that I’ve implemented it now in our family. With anxiety, stress and depression on the rise in young people, I am bringing every precaution I can. So every night when I tuck my kids into bed, (if I’m too tired, I’ll admit—they tuck me in) I ask them to tell me their three good things. In the Kennedy vernacular, though, we call them our “three cookies.”

COUNTING COOKIES

At our house, there is a deep and abiding appreciation for warm, home-baked cookies. In an attempt to satisfy-yet-ration our obsession, we have established a “cookie day” once a week. It began when they were in grade school and each Wednesday was a short school day. We decided making cookies would make it extra fun. And it was even more special because they got to enjoy my parental attempt at abating obsessive portion-control tendencies. My role (besides baker) was to let them indulge freely! Well...I tried.

At one point on a particular day, however, my “mom-instincts” emerged. In a moment of weakness (or strength—you decide) I cut them off after they had three cookies each. The ensuing devastation was momentous. The poor, poor, deprived

children gave an impressive performance of their pitiful living circumstances. I mean, how dare I deprive them of their one and only piece of happiness in their sad little lives? So, with the creation of “Cookie Day” we inadvertently gave birth to “Fourth Cookie Syndrome.”

Fourth cookie syndrome: the depressed state of an individual denied an additional blessing... after prior indulgence in several.

Do we do this sometimes? Do we complain about circumstances when we should be feeling gratitude?

At any given moment, there is something to be grateful for, so especially in times of frustration, a conscious recognition of such is beneficial.

The first time I remember recognizing this concept, I was a teenager. I’d sprained my ankle in a volleyball game, and the pain was intense. Kneeling to say my prayers before bed, I could hardly tolerate the throbbing. I tried forcing myself to focus on the parts of my body that were not in pain. It didn’t ease the pain in my ankle but it did reroute my focus, which helped me cope. Then and there I promised God that when my ankle was healed, I would go out of my way to realize when it *wasn’t* hurting. And I do! Over thirty years later I say random prayers of gratitude for an ankle that is pain-free.

Gratitude has a silent strength that is too often untapped.

Next time you find yourself upset about something, take a deep breath. Look around at all the cookies you’ve had. Count them. Don’t let the denial of one thing ruin the enjoyment you received from previous blessings.

COMPLAINTS

In theory, the three-good-things practice is simple and effective. But those who live in families know the “theory”

is never the status quo. In my *real-world* experience from implementing cookie-counting with my kids at bedtime, I notice that sometimes they can't think of anything to be grateful for. Some days just stink. (Sometimes, it's just the hour or two before bedtime that really stinks and that clouds remembrance.)

This is when I ask them to complain. Stay with me—it's a trick. I am a parent after all.

Think of the last time you complained. For you goody-goodies who don't complain, when did you feel annoyed or frustrated? If you don't get annoyed...I've got nothing. Move to the next chapter, you're all good here. Otherwise, what was your last complaint about? Go to that moment in your mind. Where were you? Who was with you? What were the circumstances? Fill in the blank:

I was upset because _____.

Now, step outside those feelings and look for some aspect of this particular situation that's a blessing. Somewhere in that underlined segment is a privilege. Here's where we make the switch. Though there are many times when we struggle to vocalize our gratitude it's almost always easy to find something to complain about. And behind every complaint, you'll find an entitlement. I've yet to find an exception.

This won't solve whatever problem you're facing at the moment, but the mindset shift is liberating not only for you, but those around you as well. So when you can't think of anything to be grateful for, think of a complaint instead. Peel away that complaint to find the privilege. Once you make the realization, shift to gratitude. Here are some examples:

"There's nothing to eat."

Do you have abilities and resources? Have you eaten in the last twelve hours? Will there be an opportunity within the next twelve hours for you to eat? Maybe there's not a convenient,

immediate palate-pleasing option for your taste, but if you aren't suffering from legitimate starvation, be thankful for that.

"I'm stuck in traffic."

Are you in a vehicle? Is it working? Playing music? Is there temperature control? You may be late for an appointment or inconvenienced in your atmosphere, but there are so many entitlements in this phrase.

"I can't make the party. I have to work instead."

Do you have a job? Does someone trust you enough to pay you to do work? Employment is not only a privilege, it's also an opportunity for growth in many ways, no matter the occupation. Parties are overrated anyway.

"My bed is uncomfortable."

Our family met the sweetest, happiest girl in Mexico a couple years ago who showed us her "room." It was actually just a corner of the one-room shack. Her bed was a piece of plywood, not quite a meter in length.

Now you try...

There are too many ads on this streaming service.

I don't have time for this.

I'm broke.

This porridge is too cold.

These may seem smug or dismissive, that's not my intention. But beware of the "I'll be happy when" mentality. It's a trap. Proactively choose happiness with gratitude. Life hands us lemons and sometimes we just need to wallow in that sourness. However, we must make sure our wallowing is temporary. Because here is a hard truth. At some point everyone who walks this earth will get kicked down. Too many people face challenges far greater than a traffic jam or an empty fridge. Recognizing this

can help us shift complaints into gratitude for what we do have.

- In 2022, reports showed over 580,000 people in the United States experienced homelessness.²²
- In 2022, 44.2 million people in the US alone didn't have enough food. 13 million of those were children.²³

You will experience nightmares, loss, and heartache. But you'll also experience daydreams, gain, and peace. Complainers and critics remain unhappy while starters are able to move on.

- In 2023, reports indicated that over 36,000 permanent housing units, including supportive housing and rapid rehousing options, were added to the national inventory.²⁴
- In 2022, 49 million people received charitable food assistance. Food pantries have been estimated to annually contribute \$28 billion nationwide.²⁵

I have always loved this quote from Jenkin Lloyd Jones:

“Anyone who imagines that bliss is normal is going to waste a lot of time running around shouting that he's been robbed. The fact is that most putts don't drop. Most beef is tough. Most children grow up to be just ordinary people. Most successful marriages require a high degree of mutual toleration. Most jobs are more often dull than otherwise. Life is like an old-time rail journey—delays, sidetracks, smoke, dust, cinders, and jolts, interspersed only occasionally by beautiful vistas and thrilling bursts of speed. The trick is to thank the Lord for letting you have the ride.”

It's difficult to break the habit of complaining, but like any other

habit the first step is recognition. The next step is taking control, finding a solution or at minimum... a cookie. If you want another trick, try this. Set a stopwatch on your phone and see how long you can go without complaining. When you catch yourself in a complaint, restart the stopwatch. In a 24-hour period, how long can you go between complaints? Set a goal to improve that time each day.

There will be times when your porridge will be too cold. The point where you make the shift to gratitude is critical. Use these tricks to give yourself an advantage. Let your complaints lead you to what you've been enjoying yet remiss in recognizing. Let them lead you to the more productive response of identifying solutions instead of problems.

SUMMARY

In the New Testament, Christians read about an encounter between ten lepers and Jesus Christ. Though the ten were all healed, only one was “made whole.” (King James Version Bible. 1993. Luke 17:19) You may want healing. You may need healing. And you may get it. But how do we attain wholeness? The difference was and still is gratitude.

Austrian psychologist, neurologist, and survivor of three Holo-caust concentration camps, Viktor Frankl, taught us that “Everything can be taken from a man, but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude.”

Do not let step one be an obstacle. It’s too easy to accomplish. Develop a grateful heart by letting go of complaints and recognizing all the beautiful cookies in your life. Let vitamin G be your most important daily vitamin because few things will help you more than beginning and ending each day giving thanks, and spreading as much thankfulness throughout the day as you can.

From here on, each succeeding principle will include warnings. But there is really no way you can mess up when it

HJ KENNEDY

comes to realizing or giving thanks. I try to be careful with words like “always” and “never” but there is truly always something for starters to be grateful for. Always.









