



WHAT THE ROMANS DIDN'T KNOW:

Overcoming Personal Constraints to Achieve Higher Performance and Fulfillment

By Flip Flippen



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Wouldn't it have been impressive if I had found a term from antiquity—Latin would have been the coolest—that embodied the theme of this article?

I tried, actually.

But the term doesn't exist. There was no phrase for "individual empowerment" or "continuous personal improvement." Why not? Because, those noble Romans wouldn't waste letters on a wacky idea that people like us could have a say in our fate.

The stars controlled each man's destiny, so you had no ability, or even right, to strive beyond your station in life. Grow old, then die—enjoy!

Is life really bigger than us? Then kill us all now! What a pitiful existence.

Even the title of this web forum, ChangeThis.com, wouldn't be welcome in the Roman Forum. Irrelevant concept, I guess, since apparently change is futile. Sounds cocky to me. I should have a talk with the editor.

Actually, I would probably get along well with the editor because I am unwavering in my belief that I am bigger than my environment, and I can become greater tomorrow than I am today.

Sadly, I see a lot of us still living within that archaic, programmed mindset. We've conceded. We've fenced in our abilities, our potential, and even our happiness due to constraints—some of which we self-impose!

Even the self-improvement experts say to accept our “negatives” and urge, “Play to your strengths!” I agree that we have to identify our strengths and keep them in the weight room, but that’s just part of the journey. The other important segment of the trip is to figure out what limits us—what is holding us back from flying higher! Don’t tell me to flap my wings harder if I’m chained to the ground!

What’s holding us back is what kills us. You don’t believe me? Look in the dictionary under Enron (just kidding, it’s not in the dictionary, but you know what I mean). You can bet they played to their strengths, but it was their personal constraints that ultimately limited how high they could fly.

If you believe me, or even if you don’t for that matter, answer this question: What is the number one thing holding you back from higher performance and fulfillment?

(I’m tapping my fingers on the table right now...)

Come on, this is ridiculous—that answer shouldn’t take long! If you have to think about it then it means you don’t have a clear plan to break through that constraint.

Being your personal best is the greatest challenge we face, yet most of us go out with a whimper.

Would someone please explain to me why mediocre has become acceptable? What’s the deal with that? We have the ability to become better and we don’t. I am reminded of some of the sports people we have worked with over the years. They had tremendous skills but they didn’t do the work needed to take them to the top.

They were talented...they had athletic ability...heck, some of them even looked good. But, that wasn’t enough. What counts is being your personal best—and, if you care about others, helping them do the same.

In my years of working with people, I have been struck by how many people wanted to be better even when they appeared to be at the top of their game. As far as my work with athletes, people such as Mark and Betsy McCormack, Nolan Ryan, Terry Bradshaw, Anthony Munoz, and many more come to mind: They wanted to grow and they did.

The question for me was: How do I help someone grow who is at the top? They are already playing to their strengths and doing a great job at it. How do I help them go even further?

If that little voice inside you knows you can be more, then keep reading, because I've dialogued with thousands of peoples' muted inner "yes you cans" over the past 30 years.

I can assure you that it wouldn't have helped to simply tell them to play to their strengths more when they were already playing to them better than virtually anyone in their field. Their strengths and talents had carried them a long way but that wouldn't be what gave them their next boost in performance.

What I had to do was find out what was holding them at their current level. I labeled those “holding forces” their personal constraints because that was what they were...they were constraints and they were personal. It’s like being hooked up to a bungee cord. You can really only go as far as the cord will let you.

Could it really be that the things that hold you back—or constrain you—are a far more reliable indicator of your success than any skills or talents you possess? That would be a YES.

As you might guess, it’s not just about athletes. It’s about business executives, and school teachers, and kids, and me.

So if you want to live life as you always have, listen, I still love you but I don’t have time for that. I’m not mean—I’m just getting older! But if that little voice inside you knows you can be more, then keep reading, because I’ve dialogued with thousands of peoples’ muted inner “yes you cans”—and cranked up the volume—over the past 30 years.

And I finally wrote a book about it.

Let me clarify something: I’m not some weak-spirited person who is writing this in hopes of gaining your approval or accolades. I’m old enough that I honestly don’t need anyone’s applause (well, my wife’s is nice). So don’t do it for me. Do it for those around you. They are the ones most affected by your constraints...and sometimes the impact can last generations.

What’s funny is that this book should have been finished several years ago, but ironically, my book about personal constraints got held back by my own. Oops! I won’t get into that story now, but it’s on page one of the book if you are curious.

I wrote the book because I couldn’t find anything in the library celebrating the life-altering results we see after people identify their constraints and demolish them.

The phrase the Romans were lacking? Overcoming Personal Constraints.

And OPC, as presented in the just-published *The Flip Side: Break Free of the Behaviors That Hold You Back* is the basis for much of the work of The Flippen Group, one of the fastest-growing training companies in the country, with a client list that runs from board rooms to locker rooms to living rooms to classrooms and back again.

The phrase the Romans were lacking? Overcoming Personal Constraints.

I learned most of the OPC process the hard way—first hand experience from my own “personal constraints.” The ones that have to be eliminated before I can be the best (as opposed to “good enough”) husband, father, friend, boss and co-worker. Every day I learn it anew as my team and I help others—entrepreneurs and educators, teenagers and adults, the successful and the struggling—recognize their biggest constraints so they can unleash their greatest strengths.

It isn't always an easy process. Those rocks are heavy, the fences can be high and some chains are doubled up. But it's a surprisingly simple one: One step at a time.

We've not only identified the biggest and baddest constraints, the “Top 10 Killer Constraints,” but also fine-tuned “constraint elimination strategies.”

The names on the Top 10 list will be familiar. Each of us can find several of these creatures inside our personalities: Bulletproof (overconfidence), Ostriches (low self-confidence), Marshmallows (overly nurturing), Critics (too demanding), Bulldozers (overly dominant)—or some of the other five presented in the book.

To be our best, we can—and must—learn how to minimize our behavioral constraints while maximizing our strengths because real success demands more than talent and ability.

Is it hard for you to admit fault? Are you opinionated? Is your first reaction to feedback to think about why it isn't accurate? Do you really think you're Bulletproof?

Is it important what other people think about you? Do you have a hard time moving on from your mistakes? Ostrich, get your head out.

Do you struggle with saying "no?" Is it difficult for you to say what you really think? Do you frequently find yourself being overcommitted and worn out? Move over, Marshmallow.

Do you have unrealistically high expectations of yourself and others? Are you typically skeptical of ideas and opinions? Do you point out (and usually remember!) the mistakes of others? Critic, quit beating up those around you and yourself.

Is being in control important to you? Do your strong opinions cause others to perceive you as not listening? Do you finish other people's sentences? Odds are good that you are a Bulldozer.

But before the de-constraining begins, everybody needs to understand the rules.

Law 1. We all have personal constraints. And there are more than ten! Some are “hireable,” like employing a highly-efficient assistant to keep your disorganization from becoming fatal. But others are “owned constraints” such as low self-control and not being able to maintain effective relationships. You can’t hire someone to care about your employees on your behalf. One of my clients actually suggested this as a solution!

Law 2. You can’t rise above constraints that you don’t or won’t address. We are blind to some of our biggest constraints. But we also tend to cling to some obvious constraints that stare back at us in the mirror—a common one being stubbornness. If you think, “I’m not stubborn!”, you probably are.

Law 3. Our personal constraints play themselves out in every area of our lives. They are with us 24/7 (sort of like mosquitoes in a Texas summer). At work, at home, and anywhere in between. And they affect those around us.

Law 4. Personal constraints are role-specific. Behaviors leak into every compartment of our lives but become constraints only when they get in the way of attaining specific goals. High aggression can be beneficial in competitive sports but disastrous in social interactions (or in a library!).

Law 5. Those with the least personal constraints...WIN! It’s not necessarily the most talented or the hardest working that win but rather those who remove their most impacting constraints. Go, underdogs!

To be our best, we can—and must—learn how to minimize our behavioral constraints while maximizing our strengths because real success demands more than talent and ability. That can be a difficult task, but it is a task within our reach.

And it is a task that Overcoming Personal Constraints is designed to facilitate.

Let me describe the beauty of the overall process. As far as the steps, what's Latin for "keep it simple, stupid!!"? It's really not that complicated—just a few sequential steps. The constraint chapters in the book follow the same process: 1) Diagnose me. 2) Assure me that it's not fatal. 3) Prescribe a treatment. 4) Bonus: Help me treat others who have this prognosis (even if I don't).

Step one is to diagnose your personal constraints, so here is a sample checklist of symptoms for the Killer Constraint we've labeled Bulldozer:

- I often finish other people's sentences.
- When I disagree with others, it's okay to interrupt to correct them.
- I am comfortable leading a large group of people by actively taking charge.
- Being strong-willed enables me to accomplish more than others.
- I am comfortable with heated discussions.
- When others are talking, I am already thinking of what to say next and looking for an opportunity to win them to my way of thinking.
- I can be pushy and maybe even hard-headed, but I'm usually right.
- If I'm in charge, I don't like people stepping on my toes—people should stick to their role.
- People have said I'm stubborn, but I just have strong opinions.
- Weaker people shouldn't be in charge of things.

How did you do? Even if you only checked a few, you might have some shades of Bulldozer that are worth investigating further.

Step two is reassurance, and for that I'll use an excerpt from the book:

So I'm a Bulldozer—Help Me!

You might be thinking: Is this really that big of a constraint? What's wrong with me being in charge—doesn't someone have to be? What if people like who I am, including the fact that I'm more assertive? Could it be that I'm just a great leader? If I got input from everybody, wouldn't I waste a lot of time? Do I really need to get votes from everyone if I already know the best option?

Did you notice what all of the above questions have in common? They're all about you. And when it comes to this constraint, that may be the greatest lesson to take home: it's not about you.

The reality is that people usually don't write in big bold letters that we've been running over them. They may speak by moving on to another opportunity, and there may be hurt that was never expressed. I would venture that most of the people whom you've had heated discussions with or whom you have perceived as pushy had this in common: being similar to you!

But let's remember that the goal isn't to become passive. The goal is to keep the strengths of being strong-willed while also minimizing the damage. Instead of the leader that builds followers, be the leader that builds other leaders!

A diagnosis isn't much help without the prescription in **Step three**. You don't need a membership in the AMA to figure out if someone has a fever or to deduce that a bone is protruding, so the promise of OPC isn't in the diagnosis, vitally important as it is. In fact, I rarely provide someone with a shocking, unprecedented diagnosis. Someone who isn't naturally adept at deepening relationships usually knows that already.

The challenge is to be able to give the person those simple, practical steps to make progress without compromising his or her core identify.

Let's again use the Bulldozer constraint to illustrate an abbreviated version of this step in the OPC process. Here are a few sample TrAction Steps Bulldozers can do to start moving forward:

- 1.** I, _____ (AKA Bulldozer), will start taking a step back in group interactions at times. If I have an opinion, I will hold my thought and see if anyone else steps up to express a similar perspective. Instead of clarifying my position, I will focus on asking more reserved people what their thoughts are, being willing to say things such as “No, you go ahead, I insist.” I will avoid interrupting other people or finishing their sentences. [Designate a specific person to watch you and hold you accountable during a few interactions.]
- 2.** I, _____ (AKA Bulldozer), will start checking in more during conversations by asking, “Am I answering your question?” or “Am I giving you the impression that I am really listening?” or “Do you feel strongly about this? Tell me more.” Communication is more than just tag-team talking, so I will better engage the people I have discussions with.
- 3.** I, _____ (AKA Bulldozer), will start getting more feedback on how I am perceived by others. For example, at the end of a meeting I could ask someone, “Did I listen well and participate proportionally?” Or I could ask someone whom I work closely with, “Do you feel like I’m overcontrolling at times? Do I ever micromanage you?” [Have someone give you feedback once a week on a specific question like one of these.]

(As with the earlier sections, there are more TrAction Steps in the book.)

What if you don't have this constraint? If so, what a big waste of time reading that chapter!

Actually, that's where **Step four** comes in handy, because we all know a Bulldozer. I know I do. Frankie Williams, brown eyes, from Colorado Springs, born on June 3, 1956, wife named Joy, dog named Sparky, are you out there? Do you hear me? Just kidding, people, I made that up. I wouldn't embarrass a friend like that! Well, I might.

But for the “Frankie’s” in your life that you want to help, first of all, be sure to validate the strengths that Bulldozers have, such as being decisive and assertive.

To effectively deal with a Bulldozer, here are some other tips to keep in mind:

- Be sure to ask questions about what Bulldozers think and how they feel. Say things such as “Your opinion is really important to me—tell me more” to help reinforce that you value their perspective. If you are feeling pushed on or run over, it is appropriate to say that you aren't feeling heard. Let them know that you want to hear them but that you want the same courtesy in return.
- Provide clear guidelines when appropriate for interactions with Bulldozers. For example, before a meeting you might clarify, “We have an hour together, and here are the topics we really need to cover...” This will make it clear who is running the meeting and help him or her understand if you need to take the reins.

There are more, but you get the idea. And the same type of process is laid out for all ten Killer Constraints.

Now about those Romans...

The emblem of the empire was the eagle. Good choice, that. Powerful, inspiring, beautiful and strong.

But even eagles can be grounded, denied their birthright to soar.

Golden eagles have 7,000 feathers. Losing 10 or 20 shouldn't be a big deal—especially if the bird still looks the same.

But pluck them from strategic spots and the eagle can't fly. The glorious six-foot wing span isn't shortened. The finely-tuned muscles are still strong. The efficient aerodynamic design appears intact. The bird can still glide gracefully and, sometimes, gain a little lift. But its soaring days are done. All that ability, talent and potential grounded by a handful of feathers.

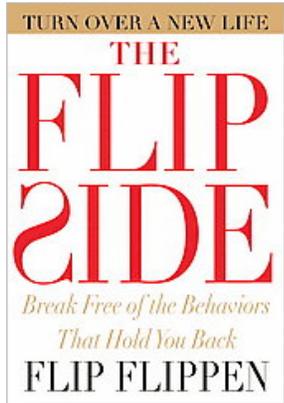
At least until the feathers grow back.

Our constraints affect us the same way.

Our wing span isn't shortened. Our musculature is the same. We have the certificates to prove we mastered flight school. But we're definitely not riding the thermals because something is keeping those vital feathers trimmed.

Two eagles, identical to the naked, admiring eye. One is a few feathers short. And that makes all the difference.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Flip Flippen is the head of [The Flippen Group](#) which offers personal development and transformation processes to businesses, organizations, and individuals. Clients have included football legend Terry Bradshaw, Wall Street private equity investors Richard Allsopp and Mark Bourgeois, IMG founder Mark McCormack, and National Baseball Hall of Famer Nolan Ryan. Over 200,000 people attended the company's programs in 2006.

Flippen's work has been featured on "The Today Show" as well as the Super Bowl pregame show. He earned his master's degree from Texas A & M University and is a member of the American Counseling Association. Flip and his wife Susan, who is CEO of The Flippen Group, reside in College Station, Texas. Together they have helped raise more than twenty children.

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