

# The Checklist Manifesto

*Author: Atul Gawande*

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It was through a Fortune 500 client I had provided productivity consulting for that I was introduced to Atul Gawande's *The Checklist Manifesto*. Gawande's thought-provoking book was a New York Times bestseller that grew from an article he had written for The New Yorker.

Interestingly, following efforts in finessing spreadsheets, incorporating to-do lists, and then proposing and drafting a procedures manual, it was my client who, after reading the book, suggested the idea of basic checklists. I agreed to read the book as well, and on doing so made a breakthrough discovery that, for this client's project, checklists were warranted.

The author, a surgeon, makes a strong argument in the book that businesses of all kinds can do better by using checklists. He uses fascinating stories and statistics to make his compelling and impactful observations and conclusions. Clearly, Gawande gets it right when he says, "Whether running to the store to buy ingredients for a cake, preparing an airplane for takeoff, or evaluating a sick person in the hospital, if you miss just one key thing, you might as well not have made the effort at all."

Gawande was recruited by the World Health Organization (WHO) to develop a global program to reduce avoidable deaths and harm from surgery. After instituting checklists, teams in the program made using them a habit, and the effect on care was astounding. After three months, 89 percent of appendicitis patients received the right antibiotics at the correct time. After 10 months, 100

percent did. Not only did the checklists become habitual, but it became clear that a surgery could be held up until the team members completed the necessary steps.

The author clarifies that "just ticking boxes is not the ultimate goal. Embracing a culture of teamwork and discipline is." In the WHO project, specialized checklists were sometimes recommended for different types of surgical procedures.

In the investing profession, Warren Buffett uses a "mental checklist" when looking at potential opportunities. Another investor felt that the checklist gave his team an unexpected edge over others: efficiency. Speaking of efficiency, as test pilot flying has advanced, with accumulated risks, the opportunity for checklists has become more prevalent and sophisticated, thereby diminishing the dangers.

In the chapter titled "The Hero in the Age of Checklists," Gawande breaks down the code of conduct that exists in all professions into three common elements:

1. An expectation of selflessness – where those who accept responsibility for others will place the needs and concerns of those who depend on us above our own
2. An expectation of skill – that we will aim for excellence in our knowledge and expertise
3. An expectation of trustworthiness – that we will be responsible in our personal behavior toward our charges

He explains that a fourth expectation held specifically by aviators is that of discipline, stating that it is harder than trustworthiness, skill,

and possibly also selflessness. This is because we are not hard-wired for discipline; it's something we must work at. How many times have we seen our own chronically disorganized clients eventually understand the tools and skills we have transferred, but until they discipline themselves to consistently use them, they won't attain total success?

Additionally and unquestionably, technology can increase our capabilities, but there is much it can't do, according to Gawande. We all probably agree with him that technology has added another element of complexity to the systems we depend on and has given us new kinds of failure that challenge and irritate us.

Routine failures are not studied, and not all of us (or our clients) necessarily look for the patterns of our recurrent errors, nor do we develop and finesse potential solutions. Because we know the patterns, see the same balls being dropped again and again, as well as recognize the costs, we might now try a different approach: that of the checklist.

In the book's appendix, examples of checklists are provided, including a "checklist for checklists" which is broken down into development, drafting, and validation.

I found the book timely, fascinating, and informative, and feel it is an important read for anyone working with clients on efficiency and productivity.

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