

— WHY THIS WORKS

The research *foundations* of 5 Minutes Ahead.

A note for the sceptical reader. The thinking behind this method draws on twenty-five years of work in cognitive science, organisational behaviour and decision research — much of it from MIT, Penn, and the leading journals in the field.

A working paper from 5 Minutes Ahead

For the curious and the cautious

A NOTE BEFORE
YOU BEGIN

The leadership development industry is full of confident assertions and short on citations. We think you deserve better. This page sets out the published research that underpins the 5 Minutes Ahead discipline — what supports it, where the evidence is strongest, and where we are honestly extending the science rather than quoting it.

Read it slowly. There are no shortcuts in here, and there shouldn't be.

The case that *anticipation* makes the difference.

The most replicated finding in the research on career progression is that proactive, anticipatory behaviour — not raw intelligence, not hours worked, not even technical excellence — is the strongest predictor of who advances and who stalls. The seminal study by Seibert, Kraimer and Crant in *Personnel Psychology* in 2001 established a longitudinal link between proactive personality and career success. Twenty years of replications have only strengthened the finding.

The most rigorous synthesis to date used meta-analytic structural equation modelling on a sample of 101,131 employees drawn from multiple organisations and industries. It found that proactive behaviour predicts salary, promotion, and subjective career satisfaction — mediated by stronger task performance and more visible organisational citizenship. The effect holds across sectors, geographies, and seniority levels.

FROM THE LITERATURE

"As work becomes more dynamic and decentralised, proactive behaviour and initiative become even more critical determinants of organisational success."

Crant, J. M. — Proactive Behavior in Organizations, *Journal of Management*

This matters for our method because it answers the most important question first: **is anticipation actually what separates the operators whose judgement gets trusted from those whose doesn't?** The answer, across decades of peer-reviewed work, is yes. The research links proactive, anticipatory behaviour to stronger task performance, greater organisational

standing, higher career satisfaction and — for those pursuing it — faster progression. Working harder is not the lever. Anticipation is.

Firefighting is not a phase. It is a *trap*.

If anticipation predicts progression, why are so many capable professionals stuck in reactive mode? The most rigorous answer comes from the work of Nelson Repenning and John Sterman at MIT Sloan, who have spent more than two decades modelling firefighting in organisations — mathematically, ethnographically, and empirically.

Their finding is uncomfortable: firefighting is not a temporary condition that resolves itself when the workload eases. It is a **steady-state phenomenon** that organisations actively reproduce by rewarding the people who do it well.



Most organisations reward last-minute problem solving over the activities that prevent crises in the first place.

The implication for an individual manager is sharp. If you are good at firefighting, your organisation will give you more fires to fight. You will be promoted into the role of senior firefighter, not into the role of leader. The way out is not to fight harder. It is to develop a different muscle — the one this course is built to train.

SOURCE PAPER

Repenning and Sterman's paper "Nobody Ever Gets Credit for Fixing Problems That Never Happened" appeared in *California Management Review* in 2001, and remains the most cited account of why intelligent people get stuck in reactive mode despite knowing better.

MIT Sloan · System Dynamics Group · Twenty years of replication

Anticipation is a *learnable* faculty, not a personality.

One of the most important pieces of evidence behind this course is the relatively young field of **prospective psychology** — the science of how human beings represent and evaluate possible futures. Founded in 2013 by Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania, with Roy Baumeister, Peter Railton and Chandra Sripada, it has reframed future-thinking as a basic cognitive faculty rather than a fixed trait.

The 2013 paper "Navigating Into the Future or Driven by the Past" in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, and the 2016 book *Homo Prospectus* from Oxford University Press, argue that prospection is a core organising principle of human cognition — comparable in foundational status to language and reasoning.

2013

The founding paper of prospective psychology, by Seligman, Railton, Baumeister and Sripada.

$d = 0.65$

The effect size of implementation intentions on goal attainment, across 94 independent studies.

Why does this matter for the course? Because if anticipation were a personality trait, training it would be largely pointless. The prospection literature establishes that it is not. It is a faculty — like reasoning or memory — that can be exercised, refined, and strengthened. That is precisely what 5 Minutes Ahead sets out to do.

The mechanism: *if-then* planning.

The specific cognitive mechanism behind our techniques — the morning scan, the next-hour question, the weekly review — comes from one of the most replicated findings in modern social psychology. It is the work of Peter Gollwitzer at New York University on **implementation intentions**: short, structured "if X happens, then I will do Y" plans that translate intent into action.

The 2006 meta-analysis by Gollwitzer and Sheeran, published in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, synthesised 94 independent studies and found a medium-to-large effect on goal attainment (Cohen's $d = 0.65$). For comparison, this is a stronger and more reliable effect than most published findings in leadership development. It holds across health, achievement, and workplace contexts.

WHY THIS MATTERS

An implementation intention specifies the when, the where, and the how of a goal-directed behaviour in advance. The more specific the cue, the more reliably the behaviour follows. The discipline of 5 Minutes Ahead is the same architecture, applied to anticipation.

Gollwitzer & Sheeran (2006) · *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 38

When we ask you to spend two minutes at the start of each hour scanning what is about to happen, we are not making it up. We are applying a thirty-year body of research to the specific problem of staying one step ahead of your working day.

The counterintuitive part: why *further* isn't better.

The most distinctive — and most contested — claim of this method is that thinking *too far* ahead is as much a problem as not thinking ahead enough. We do not pretend this is settled science. But the case for it is strong, and it draws on three serious bodies of work.

The planning fallacy. Beginning with Kahneman and Tversky in 1979, and developed by Buehler, Griffin and Ross in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 1994, this literature shows that human beings systematically underestimate the time, effort and obstacles involved in distant tasks — and continue to do so even when shown evidence of their own past errors. Lovallo and Kahneman extended the finding to executive forecasting in *Harvard Business Review* in 2003.

Tetlock's expert prediction work. Philip Tetlock at the University of Pennsylvania spent twenty years tracking 28,000 expert predictions from political and economic specialists. His finding: long-range expert forecasts barely outperform chance. The book is *Expert Political Judgment* (Princeton, 2005), with the practical follow-up *Superforecasting* in 2015.

Construal level theory. The work of Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman, summarised in *Psychological Review* in 2010, establishes a clean cognitive principle: the more distant an event, the more abstract our thinking about it becomes. Near-future thinking is concrete and operational. Distant-future thinking is desirable but vague. The further out you look, the less actionable your thoughts.



Only the here and now can be directly experienced. Everything else is reconstruction.

Together, these three strands suggest that the practical sweet spot for anticipation is closer than most leadership advice would have you believe. Five-year visions inspire. Five-minute anticipation acts. The course teaches the second.

What we are *not* claiming.

Honesty matters more than marketing. Three things we want to be straight about:

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- i.* **"5 Minutes Ahead" is not a peer-reviewed construct.** It is our synthesis of established research into a teachable method. The phrase is rhetorical — a memorable shorthand for near-term, concrete, actionable anticipation. We are not claiming a literal five-minute window has been validated in a laboratory.

 - ii.* **Long-range strategic foresight has its place.** Scenario planning, horizon scanning and weak-signal analysis are valuable disciplines for organisations and policymakers. They are not what this course teaches. We focus on the operational habit of staying ahead of your own working week — a different skill, serving a different purpose.

 - iii.* **No course guarantees a specific outcome.** The research links anticipatory behaviour to better task performance, stronger standing among colleagues, and — for those pursuing it — faster progression. It does not show that any single intervention causes any of those things on its own. What we offer is a method grounded in evidence, not a promise dressed as one.

For the reader who wants to *go deeper*.

Every claim above traces back to a specific published source. These are the seven we recommend most.

01

Seibert, S. E., Kraimer, M. L., & Crant, J. M. (2001)

What do proactive people do? A longitudinal model linking proactive personality and career success. *Personnel Psychology*, 54(4), 845–874.

— The foundational study on proactive personality and progression.

02

Repenning, N. P. & Sterman, J. D. (2001)

Nobody Ever Gets Credit for Fixing Problems That Never Happened. *California Management Review*, 43(4), 64–88.

— Why firefighting persists, from the MIT Sloan System Dynamics Group.

03

Seligman, M. E. P., Railton, P., Baumeister, R. F. & Sripada, C. (2013)

Navigating into the future or driven by the past. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 8(2), 119–141.

— The founding paper of prospective psychology. Expanded in *Homo Prospectus*, OUP, 2016.

04

Gollwitzer, P. M. & Sheeran, P. (2006)

Implementation intentions and goal achievement: A meta-analysis of effects and processes. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 38, 69–119.

— Ninety-four studies, one of the most replicated findings in modern psychology.

05

Trope, Y. & Liberman, N. (2010)

Construal-level theory of psychological distance. *Psychological Review*, 117(2), 440–463.

— Why near-term thinking is concrete and distant-future thinking is abstract.

06

Lovallo, D. & Kahneman, D. (2003)

Delusions of Success: How Optimism Undermines Executives' Decisions. *Harvard Business Review*, July 2003.

— The planning fallacy applied to senior decision-making.

07

Tetlock, P. E. (2005)

Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know? Princeton University Press.

— Twenty years, twenty-eight thousand expert predictions, one humbling conclusion.

— READY WHEN YOU ARE

The evidence is solid. The *discipline* is what's missing.

Reading the research changes nothing. Practising the discipline changes everything. Start with the free self-assessment.

[Take the self-assessment](#)