



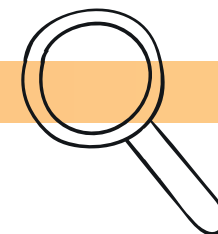
# WORKING-HABITS IN ACADEMIC STUDIES

INSPIRATION FOR PROBLEM SOLVERS

CARL  
VON  
OSSIEZKY  
*universität*  
OLDENBURG

**STUDENTENWERK**  
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PSYCHOLOGISCHER BERATUNGS-SERVICE OLDENBURG



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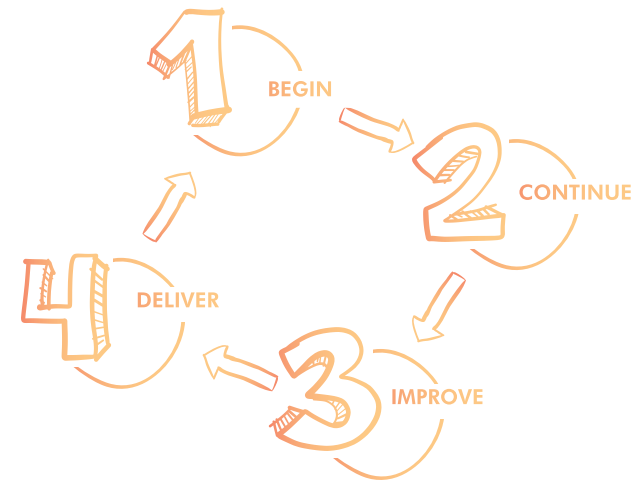
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## WHAT IS THIS BROCHURE ABOUT?

Working habits — what should be important about them? Well, habits are something special. They work without an effort of will, without focusing on goals, even without motivation and incentives. They just work automatically. For instance, you hardly have to decide every morning whether to brush your teeth. Once you have adopted habits they become "second nature". That is why habits are so important to us. Your second nature should enable you to respond to four challenges every kind of work entails:



Without appropriate responses to these challenges, nobody can work effectively. If you already follow habits which are good answers to these four, you may not even be aware of it. You just find that everything works fine. But if this should not be the case, maybe you ask yourself these questions:

- In the first place — do you follow steady habits while working at all?
- Which ones make coping with "Begin — Continue — Improve — Deliver" difficult for you?

If your answers are not satisfying for you, the next questions seem likely:

- What working habits have proven to prepare you optimally for all four demands?
- How can you learn them?

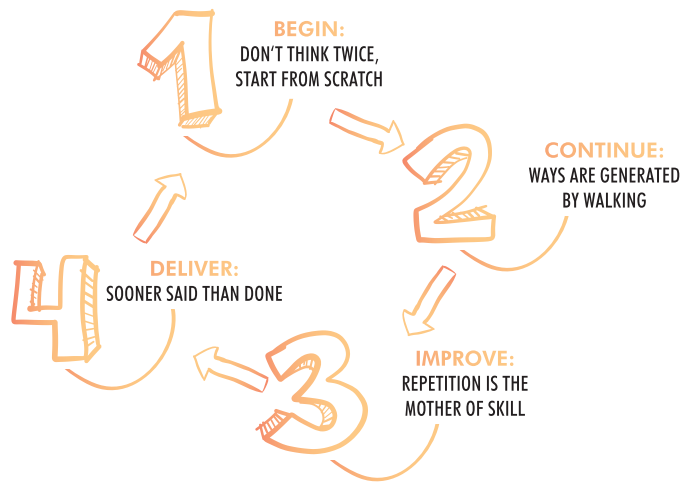
The first chapter of this brochure explains the above-named working-challenges more closely. You will have the opportunity to find out why you can master some of them comparatively easily and others not.

If you are already aware of these issues, or if you prefer to get to know things by practically trying them out, you can hop to our second chapter immediately. There, we will show you a step-by-step instruction of how you can learn well-tried working patterns and make them part of your usual habits.

In the third chapter, you will find a summary, and in the fourth hints to more proposals and assistance exceeding the scope of this brochure.

## 1. FOUR CHALLENGES, FOUR SOLUTIONS

Back to the above named four challenges. It is profitable to understand how these differ from each other and yet supplement each other. Let's breathe some more life into the four labels.



### 1.1 FOUR STARTING POINTS TO MEET THE FOUR CHALLENGES

Each of these challenges may cause you some difficulty, and you must find a way to cope with this. Every individual is different. So, let us take a closer look at your personal tools to deal with stress quite simply:

**Heart or head?** (From here on, we will speak of "Gut-feeling" and "Goal-orientation").

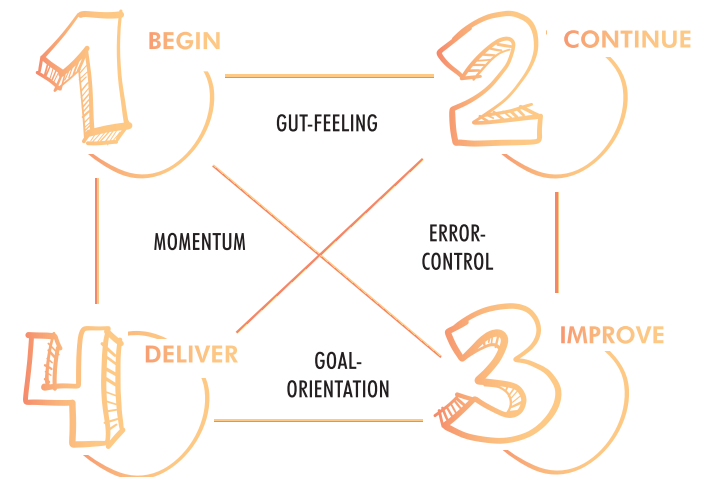
- Do you mainly rely on decisions rooted in your personal experience and feeling?
- Or do you rather trust in your intellectual judgements and reasonable choices, e.g. goals?

**Involved or observing?** (From here on, we will speak of "Momentum" and "Error-control").

- Do you mainly depend on intuition and spontaneity?
- Or do you rather count on circumspection and error-checking?

Our experience suggests that specific combinations of these preferences are the best to respond to each of the above listed four challenges. Here are these combinations that have proven to be very efficient:

- Gut-feeling and momentum are a well-tried combination to begin your work. (For details see Chapter 2.1)
- Gut-feeling and error-control are a well-tried combination to continue working. (For details see Chapter 2.2)
- Goal orientation and error control are a well-tried combination to improve your work. (For details see Chapter 2.3)
- Goal orientation and momentum are a well-tried combination to finish your work and deliver results. (For details see Chapter 2.4)



Ideally, you freely shift between the stress responses, depending on which one is currently adequate. But before we get to that, please take a little self-assessment to sharpen your notion of your own stress-coping preferences. Assess yourself related to the following statements to get the first idea.

1.2 YOUR PERSONAL STRESS-COPING TENDENCIES

BETWEEN GUT-FEELING AND GOAL-ORIENTATION

I often puzzle with plans and to-do-lists to keep the direction to my goals.

- 0  
No
- 1  
Sometimes
- 2  
Yes

I am known as unemotional and realistic.

- 0  
No
- 1  
Sometimes
- 2  
Yes

When it comes to making decisions, I depend on my reason and logic.

- 0  
No
- 1  
Sometimes
- 2  
Yes

"Goal-Orientation"

Points total?



I have a reliable feeling for the overall picture of a situation. It tells me without much pondering whether I am on a good way.

- 0  
No
- 1  
Sometimes
- 2  
Yes

I am known as robust and sure of myself.

- 0  
No
- 1  
Sometimes
- 2  
Yes

When it comes to making decisions, I trust my personal experience.

- 0  
No
- 1  
Sometimes
- 2  
Yes

"Gut-Feeling"

Points total?



BETWEEN MOMENTUM AND ERROR-CONTROL

I like dynamic processes. I get a fast first impression of situations and act spontaneously!

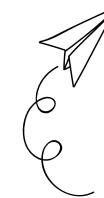
- 0  
No
- 1  
Sometimes
- 2  
Yes

I am known as enthusiastic and agile.

- 0  
No
- 1  
Sometimes
- 2  
Yes

In most situations, I act and react intuitively.

- 0  
No
- 1  
Sometimes
- 2  
Yes



"Momentum"

Points total?

I like certainty best. I want to notice early enough where my expectations go wrong, so that I can avoid trouble!

- 0  
No
- 1  
Sometimes
- 2  
Yes

I am known as sensible and precise.

- 0  
No
- 1  
Sometimes
- 2  
Yes

Usually, I focus on verifiable details.

- 0 No
- 1 Sometimes
- 2 Yes

"Error-Control"  
Points total?

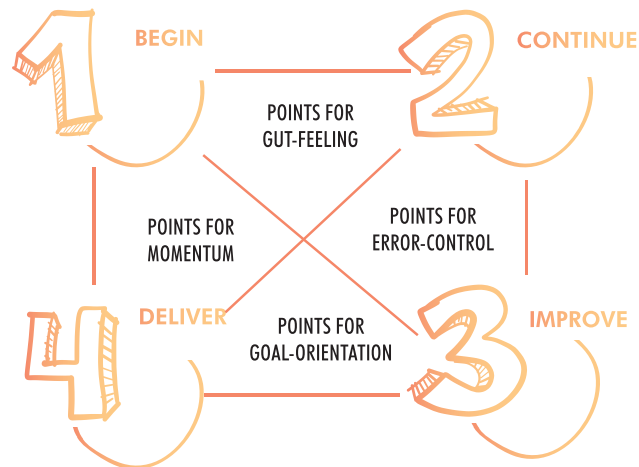


Now to your favorite combinations, e.g. the stress-coping-patterns you favor while working:

### 1.3 WHAT TO MAKE OF THIS?

You should now have a first overall impression of your personal stress-coping preferences. These preferences will shape your responses every time you meet the above-mentioned challenges "Begin – Continue – Improve – Deliver". Your preferences may match the challenges well. But we already mentioned that there are specific matches that have proven to be helpful. Let us compare your personal patterns and these commonly well-proven combinations now.

Fill in your results from the self-assessment in the following graphic:



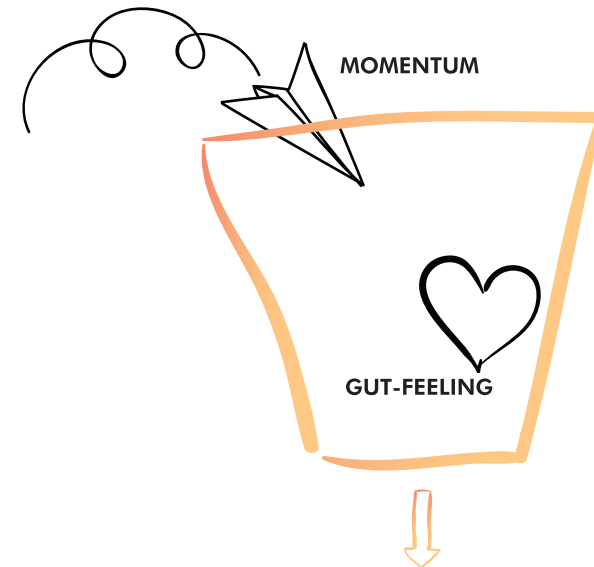
Did you score at least 3 points in each field? Ideally, your repertoire of working habits will provide pronounced answers to all the four challenges. And, ideally, you are accustomed to choosing the adequate answers "automatically".

But if you are not accustomed to one or more of these solution patterns, or if you are even accustomed to reacting to certain challenges with inapt solutions – how can you acquire better ones?

This is what our part 2 will show you now.

## 2. FOUR SOLUTIONS

### 2.1 BEGIN



**DON'T THINK TWICE,  
START FROM SCRATCH**

Choosing what to do by your gut-feeling and turning it into action means to simply jump in. You confidently try something that you intuitively rate as promising. That fits especially when you are required to begin to change, or start something all new. Don't think twice, start from scratch. This "Just do it" is somehow magic.

“There is nothing good unless you do it.”  
Erich Kästner

For that matter separate the location of your work as far as possible from that of your private life, e.g. by working in the library. Subsequent habits often connect with certain environments. Once you have "internalized" that after all a writing table is a writing table and a tea-kitchen nothing but a tea-kitchen, then that has very

practical "automated" consequences. Do you know the story of the dog who was played a ringtone every time it was fed? And who started drooling after a while when it only heard the bell? That is a habit, that is where to go!

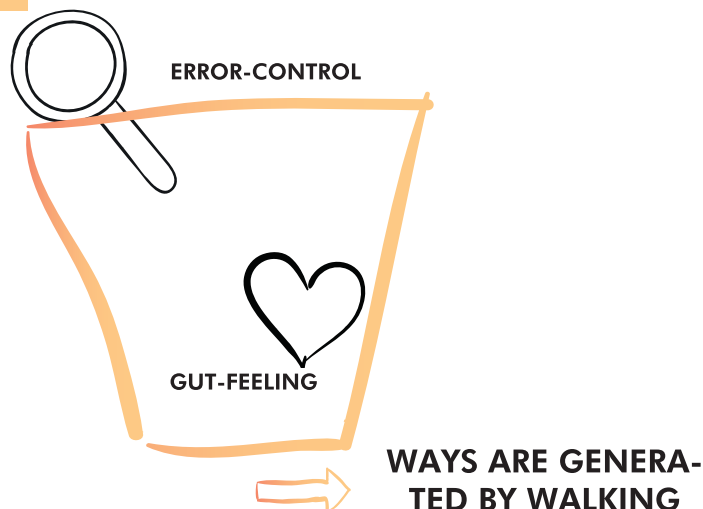
### 2.1.1 BEGIN ANYWHERE

- ☛ Choose a working project; such as a presentation, an assignment, thesis, test preparation.
- ☛ Survey your time budget minding what has already been allocated: Classes, time slots for preparation and elaboration, jobs for your financial maintenance, binding private appointments, and family obligations. An approximate check is enough: How much free time do you have left?
- ☛ Now, dispose of it! Decide when you intend to begin the chosen training project in your upcoming week, at what place you will do that work, and what the immediate next step to start with shall be.

### 2.1.2 DEVELOPING OPERATING TEMPERATURE

- ☛ Adopt a "job-mentality". The minimum expectation on you is that you show up at your working place and stay during the appointed time. So, be at the destined working place when it is time and tackle the planned work.
- ☛ Dropping out of work completely is — just like in the world of work contracts — only acceptable when you are ill.
- ☛ Although it may sound paradoxical: Boredom can be a good starting basis to pick yourself up. So, don't even leave your chosen place for working when you produce little or no results to begin with.

## 2.2 CONTINUE



Choosing what to do according to your gut-feeling and make it come true monitored by error-control basically means nothing but go on, go on, go on. Develop a routine, find your own rhythm.

Once you have kick-started your working project and got a certain operating temperature it is important to run a mean cruising speed that allows you to go long distances step by step without getting exhausted.

In this state of mind, you depend on being able to go some way or the other — generating this way by simply going it. You do not bother much about error control, based on measurable goals. You rather depend on a feeling, your instinct, and a scent.

**So, your emotional slogan can confidently be something like "The Way Is My Goal" if you consecutively check whether you really are on a way.**

“If you want to, you will find ways, if not, you will find excuses.”  
Albert Camus

If you just jot down each single next step you take on a slip of paper or a colored post-it before you get started (e.g. write one page, read one chapter, solve one problem . . .) you can throw this little memo into a glass once you are finished with it — keep that glass continually in sight: This way it stays always obvious, for you and others, that you committed to something and are pursuing it. You may find it also helpful to find "living witnesses" of your activities. Tell others how you are doing and getting on. You can also team up with a person who is also rummaging for new routines.

### 2.2.1 FINDING A RHYTHM

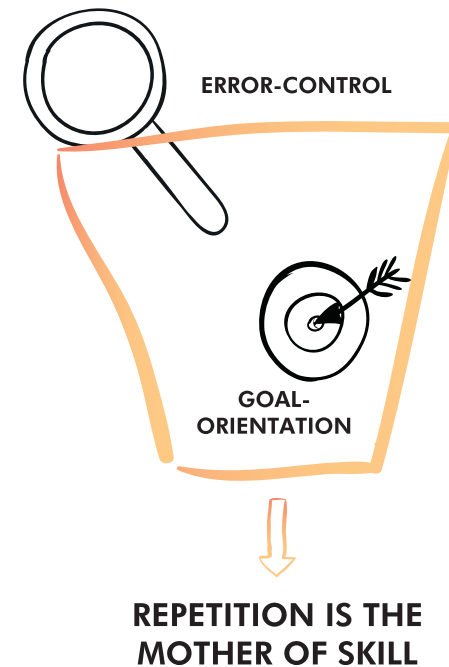
- ☛ Try to predict realistically what you dare to keep up steadily. Maybe you start with 15 minutes of work and 5 minutes of recovery, extending this slowly. You need not prove anything to yourself, except to never give up.
- ☛ For many students, after a while, things swing into an alternation between approximately 45 minutes' work and 15 minutes' recovery.
- ☛ The question of how many such units you can clock up, can as well only be answered by trial and error — so, test it out!

### 2.2.2 TAKING GOOD CARE OF YOURSELF

Generally, no work during the weekend and during the night! The time for your studies and maybe jobs serving your maintenance should not sum up to more than 40 hours a week in total.

- Even when everything is going well: Stay with your balance between work and recovery. Do not lose your rhythm.
- During recovery time, empty your head of ongoing work issues (what to do next, results, setbacks, et cetera) just as you must ignore your present individual condition during work-time (for instance whether you feel like working at all or how motivated you are).

## 2.3 IMPROVE



You coped with the challenge to get going. You established getting along; your personal way and rhythm are taking shape. That is the basis. Now you should dare to decide measurable targets, without getting insecure or losing your rhythm. This is the time for outlines, time-plans and self-chosen deadlines. That means they tell you safely how you are doing compared to the scales of your profession or your examination rules.

“There are only two sins: Wishing without acting and acting without a goal.”  
Ayu Rand

Your motto in this phase: What difference does the little pain of discipline make today, if it saves you the big pain of regret tomorrow? **Decide verifiable goals and sub-goals, and check methodically, on a regular basis, whether you are on track.** If you count among the folks who cherish little technical gadgets, then you might use an egg-timer to stick to your time-plans. ("Pomodoro-Method"; google that to find out more). But there is no need to be tight with yourself if you are honest with yourself.



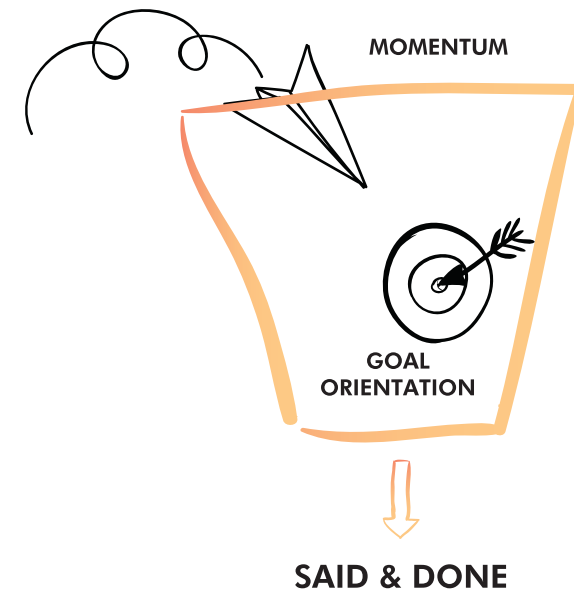
### 2.3.1 DRAWING BALANCES

- A recurring planning appointment "with yourself" should be scheduled at least once a week, no matter whether you plan alone, in a tandem or a group.
- Sum up how you are doing. Do not trust your feeling alone anymore to decide whether you are making progress. Reconsider on a regular basis what your goal is, and how much time you grant yourself to arrive there.
- Make it a part of your program to inform yourself about techniques of scientific working and reasonable preparation for examinations (check our literature proposal in chapter 4).

### 2.3.2 SIDETRACK DISTURBANCES

- Interferences for your work often do not come from the outside but are a consequence of your own feelings, thoughts, and impulses. ("I will never make it", "I am hungry", "I want to be out in the sun", "I am totally worn out", et cetera). A good support to master such phases is the "Broodingbook". Write for instance in a notebook or a writing pad whatever is impeding the working process. So at least you keep on writing and do not let your mind wander limitless anymore.
- The Broodingbook is private. If you check it every once in a while, you may discover repetitive patterns, and you can draw conclusions. While doing that, be benevolent, but quite honest with yourself.
- It may happen that a lot of time is spent on writing in the Broodingbook. But it is time well invested because it obeys the basic rule: "Going on serves getting done!"

### 2.4 DELIVER



Stay goal-oriented; make these goals come true with more and more momentum: Finally get done! You still pursue the direction to your targets, but you are open for necessary pragmatic concessions. That is a must someday — like it or not. **Sometimes foreseeable solutions and results are more important than perfection.**

So, now momentum and goal-orientation are necessary just the same. That may sound contradictory. But think about it. You have come a long way. You mobilized the necessary energy to get the rocket out of gravity. You stabilized its cruising speed. You kept it on route making corrections over and over. Now it is time to disembark, even if it may take place a little bumpily!

“Chopping wood is so popular because everybody can see the results of this activity immediately.”  
Albert Einstein

Maybe you must decide courageously at a certain point: That's it, period! And maybe you must risk gaps then. Just like in the very beginning you needed momentum to just do something, you now need the decisiveness to just finish it. Trust yourself!

### 2.4.1 PRACTICAL RESULTS

- Practical results are revisable outcomes that you can count and appreciate: Participation in group meetings, single working steps, written sentences, completed lines, filled-in assignment forms, pages read, et cetera.
- Countable results prove that you are getting closer to your goals — no matter whether slowly or fast. They promote you and produce a good feeling.
- Bottom line: Do what you can do. Do the best you can. Monitor what you did.

### 2.4.2 PERSONAL RESULTS

- Your activities do not only result in changing production quantity. They also develop your personality: initiative, routine, commitment, practical experience.
- Nobody can ever take away these properties from you again. They show what you are capable of.
- Again, bottom line: Do what you can do. Do the best you can. Monitor how you are developing, for instance, by a little monthly summary in your Broodingbook.

## 3. SUMMARY

Each of the above-listed solution patterns deserves as much study as the discipline you enrolled for. Here they are once more in a short formula for applying and rehearsing:

### 3.1 PRAGMATIST PRINCIPLE

- Heading on is more basic than heading for perfection
- Review and compass on a regular ongoing basis
- "Discard" interferences in the Broodingbook

### 3.2 "JOB MENTALITY" PRINCIPLE

- Separation of private time and work
- Being at the destined place at the destined time as decided
- Planning-units comprise working time AND recovery time; no weekend work; no work after 8:00 p.m.

## 4. AND IF NOTHING OF ALL THAT WORKS? THEN MAYBE THIS:

### 4.1 OUT OF THE ISOLATION

- In our Psychological Counselling-Service, you can also get individual appointments. Maybe an objective professional comment helps you on. Wouldn't you call a plumber as well, if you discover that you're unable to fix the faucet on your own?
- Human beings are social creatures. We already encouraged you to make sure that you have living witnesses. But maybe "conspirers" would be even more helpful? Why don't you just ally with a couple of them: For instance, by joining one of our groups for solving working-troubles ("ASG") in the Psychological Counselling-Service (for more information see <https://www.studentenwerk-oldenburg.de/de/beratung/psychologischer-beratungsservice/pbs-oldenburg.html>).

### 4.2 AHEAD ON YOUR WAY OF PERSONAL GROWTH

“The times they are a-changin’.”  
Bob Dylan

This brochure deliberately has been kept brief. Here are some tips where you can get further information:

- If you're mainly concerned with finding help for mastering very specific academic demands, give it a try to thumb through this one: "Frei geschrieben. Mut, Freiheit und Strategie für wissenschaftliche Abschlussarbeiten", 2nd ed., Böhlau UTB, Wien 2009
- If you have predominantly problems with decisions — like not easily finding how to align your thinking and your gut-feelings — then it might be worth to look at this book: "Machen Sie doch, was Sie wollen", Maja Storch, Verlag Hans Huber, Hogrefe AG, Bern, 2010

But this is just as important: Do not exclusively depend on the experiences of others, least of all on seemingly eternal truths. So, adjust our rules to your situation as well. We know that for instance students who have children or those who must work a lot for their maintenance will adapt our rules to their situation. Do not pile comparisons with others on top of the pressure you are under. Above all, don't give up!

Tell us your experiences. We will keep passing the conclusions on. That is our job. Thank you for your support.

The overall schema of the four challenges and four responses was inspired by the distinction of four motivational types in "Erfolgreich motivieren" (David Scheffer & Julius Kuhl; Hogrefe Göttingen, 2006). Replacing the original terminology by colloquial language and applying the typification to working-attitudes are of course my own responsibility. Rolf Wartenberg, PBS, July 2017

## ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

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## HERE'S ROOM FOR SOME NOTES

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✓ Begin

✓ Continue

✓ Improve

✓ Deliver