

# Five Essential Elements to Being a Better Investor

May 2013

It is our belief that a *Better Investor* will experience higher returns and be more comfortable and confident in the process. This report presents our view of what makes a *Better Investor*.

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**Steadyhand Investment Funds** is an independent no-load mutual fund company that offers a straightforward lineup of low-fee funds directly to investors. The firm has an experienced management team and clear investment philosophy rooted in the belief that concentrated, non-benchmark oriented portfolios are the key to index-beating returns. Steadyhand's only business is managing money for individual investors and offering practical advice on building and monitoring portfolios.

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# Introduction

***It is our belief that Better Investors will experience higher returns, and be more comfortable and confident in the process.***

This report presents our view of what makes a *Better Investor*. It focuses on the structural and behavioral elements of investing rather than the nitty gritty of picking stocks and determining an asset mix. We believe that a successful investor needs to master the five essential elements laid out in this report. Specifically, a *Better Investor*:

- Is **Realistic**
- Has a **Plan**
- Has a **Routine**
- Is **Prepared** for extremes
- Is a good **CEO**

## Investment beliefs

Before getting started, it's important to understand the core investment beliefs that are embedded in this report.

*Maintaining a long-term perspective is of paramount importance.* One of the great advantages individuals have over other investors is the ability to take a long view. They have no regulations or marketing pressures to prevent them from taking advantage of the most enduring inefficiency in the capital markets – time horizon.

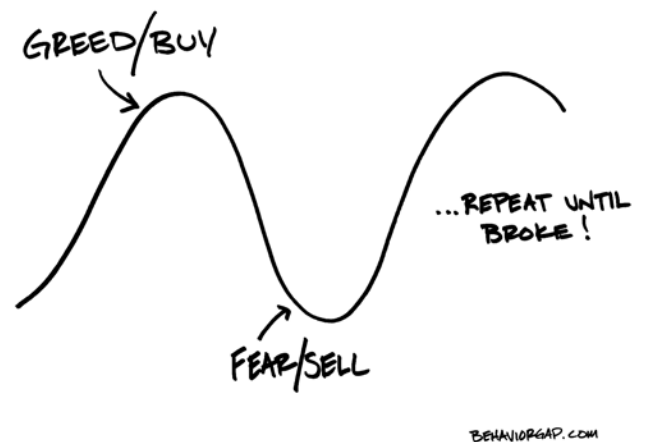
*Diversification is the only 'free lunch' in investing.* Owning a variety of securities that are linked to different economic and market factors will moderate portfolio swings, without reducing returns.

*There are no other free lunches.* Investing is all about making tradeoffs – absorbing a bumpier road

when pursuing higher returns or accepting lower returns when pursuing a smoother road. Higher and smoother is not an option.

*Markets are more volatile than the fundamentals that underpin them.* They tend to overreact to short-term news, but over time, security prices will reflect the underlying value of the company.

*The psychological element of investing is the most difficult.* IQ is important, but no investor will be successful without taking care of the EQ (emotional quotient). Investing is all about discipline, patience and courage.



*Successful investors make lots of small errors (i.e. poor stock or fund purchases), but avoid the big ones (i.e. selling out at the bottom of the market).*

*Simple is better.* A tightly focused portfolio is easier to understand and maintain, and is generally cheaper than one with a multitude of firms, products and people involved.

*Costs matter.* Vanguard, the U.S. mutual fund giant, refers to fees as 'Lost Return.' This is an appropriate way to think about it. Fees and commissions are the only certainty in any return calculation and always have a minus sign attached to them.

# Be Realistic

*Better Investors are realistic about their investing skills, the predictability of markets and the potential for future returns.*

## Look in the mirror

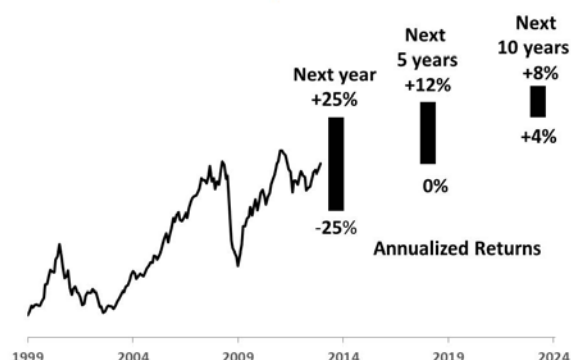
It's important that you critically assess: (1) your investment knowledge and skills, (2) the time you're willing to spend overseeing your investments, (3) your on-going interest, and most importantly, (4) your investing temperament. You need to design a process and support system, and ultimately a portfolio, that fits with your individual makeup.

## Ability to predict the markets

You not only need to be realistic about your own abilities, but those of the industry professional(s) you work with. Advisors, analysts, portfolio managers and economists are confident and well-informed, but they can't consistently predict what's going to happen in the short to medium term. With so many political-economic factors at play (some visible, many not), the direction markets take on any given day, week, month or even year is virtually random. In other words, the experts are always sure, but often wrong.

The pros' batting average goes up the further out you look. As illustrated in the following chart, the range of possible outcomes narrows as the short-term noise gets lost in time.

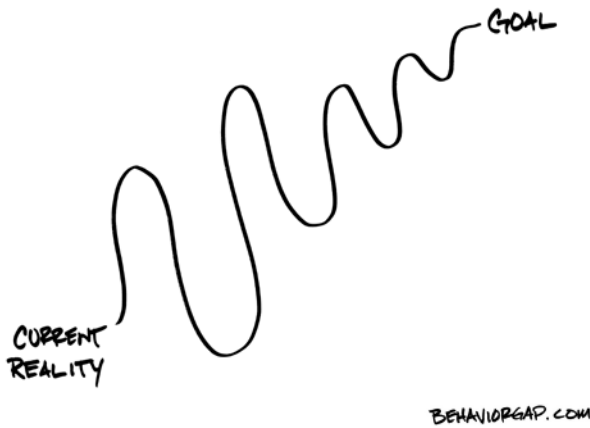
## Return Expectations



To be clear, it doesn't mean you shouldn't read sound research and listen to learned opinion. Quite the opposite. But we strongly suggest you avoid people who confidently and repeatedly make short-term market calls and keep listening to people whose approach and experience you respect, even if their recent views have proven incorrect. The last thing you want to do is only listen to experts who got their last call right.

## Future returns

In the short term, you should expect anything and everything from the markets, including big ups and downs that nobody predicted. For growth-oriented investors, the ups and downs could be 15-25% in any given year. Even conservatively positioned portfolios will go down from quarter to quarter, and even year to year. But remember, attractive long-term returns include plenty of bad short-term periods.



We suggest following the Goldilocks approach when setting long-term return expectations – plan for returns that are not too high and not too low (see box A). If you don't and your assumptions are too high, you'll be disappointed and may start to take inappropriate risks to achieve an unattainable goal. If they're too low, you won't fully utilize your nest egg in retirement.

While this report is intent on helping you do better, at the end of the day you can only take what the markets give you. No matter how your portfolio is structured, or what securities you hold, the single most important factor influencing how you do is the performance of the bond and stock markets. You can do better than the market, but your results are unlikely to be wildly different than the returns produced by the core asset classes.

As noted earlier, there will always be tradeoffs. A focus on safety and predictability will result in lower long-term returns. The pursuit of higher returns will come with more volatility and a greater risk of capital loss.

## Return Expectations

A

Future returns for bonds and stocks are impacted by a number of factors, not the least of which is the starting point. For example, bond returns have been excellent over the last 30+ years. Investors received healthy interest income and also captured capital gains as yields dropped from the high teens in the early 80's to low single digits in the current decade (when interest rates drop, bond prices rise). Over the last ten years, the DEX Universe Bond Index, which is a good proxy for the overall bond market in Canada, has achieved roughly 6% per year.

When setting expectations for the next 5-10 years, it's important to remember that the starting point for yields on government bonds and GICs is now close to zero. Going forward, income will be modest and the chance of further capital gains will be small. Current yields are a simple and reliable indicator of what future bond returns will be. If yields are 2%, then you should expect a 2% return from the bond portion of your portfolio.

Starting points and valuations are also critical factors with stock investing. Dividends and profits ebb and flow, but have a consistent trend over time. The big swing factor on future returns is what the market will pay for those dividends (yields) and profits (price to earnings ratios). Where valuation measures are with respect to their historical ranges will go a long way to determining what future returns will be.

# Have a Long-term Plan

***Better Investors have a plan. They know where they're going and have a roadmap to keep them on course.***

A plan is important because humans tend to have short attention spans and investing for retirement is one of the longest endeavours we ever take on. It will go as long, or longer, than your marriage, your Canucks or Leafs fan club membership, and longer than the time it takes to pay down your mortgage.

Whether you design a plan on your own, or enlist the help of an advisor or independent fee-only planner, and whether it's a formal document or a piece of paper tucked under your computer monitor, it should: (1) reflect your life situation, (2) encompass all your financial assets, and (3) include at least the basic elements of a financial plan.

## Fee-only planners

B

You're likely familiar with the investment services offered at your bank branch or by a full-service advisor (formerly known as a broker). You may not be aware, however, of independent, fee-only planners. 'Independent' refers to the fact that these planners don't sell products or get paid a commission, so their advice is unbiased. 'Fee-only' (or 'fee for service') means they're planning specialists. They don't manage assets or derive an income in any other way.

Most fee-only planners service a local or regional market, although there are a few firms that work with clients across the country.

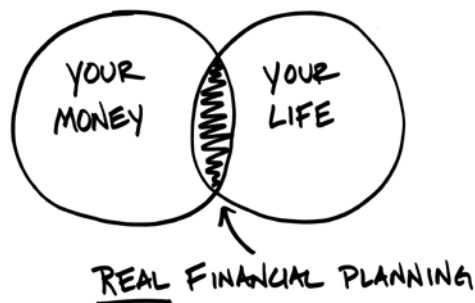
## Life considerations

It's at the planning stage that you connect your investment portfolio to what's going on in your life. Ultimately, your portfolio needs to take into account your:

- Age and investing horizon
- Dependents
- Career opportunities and risk
- Retirement goals and spending needs
- Sources of income – now and in retirement (i.e. pension or inheritance)
- Debts and other assets

## The whole picture

It's important that you include all your investments when developing a plan. It makes no sense to come up with a strategy for your RRSP without considering your non-registered investments, including GICs at the bank and any income properties or private investments you may have. Every decision you make should be done in the context of your total portfolio. (Note: Generally, we don't include a client's primary residence in the mix, partly to be conservative and partly because he/she will always need a place to live.)



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## The basics

The investment part of your financial plan should have the following elements:

- *Current state of affairs* – What does your current asset base look like?
- *Objectives* – What returns are you trying to achieve?
- *Time horizon* – When will you need to start drawing an income from your portfolio? How long does it need to last?
- *Cash flow projections* – What do you anticipate your contributions or income needs to be?
- *Investment philosophy and approach* - Do you have a bias towards a certain type of investing (i.e. active management, indexing, gold, small, medium or large stocks)?
- *Strategic Asset Mix* – What long-term mix fits your needs?
- *Security selection* – How will you implement your strategy (i.e. individual securities or professionally managed funds)?

It's beyond the scope of this report to lay out a detailed outline for a financial plan, but we don't think it needs to be complicated. For all but the most complex situations, you should be able to design a plan on your own, or with the help of a financial planner.

With that caveat, we do want to drill into one aspect of a financial plan that's a key to successful investing – your strategic asset mix.



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## Strategic asset mix (SAM)

We call it SAM. It's the long-term asset mix that fits your financial plan. It's an educated guess as to what blend of asset types have the best chance of achieving your goals. For example, an investor in her fifties might have a SAM that looks like this:

Bonds	30%
Canadian stocks	40%
U.S. and International stocks	<u>30%</u>
	100%

The SAM for an investor in his 70's might be:

Cash and GICs	10%
Bonds	50%
Canadian stocks	25%
U.S and International stocks	<u>15%</u>
	100%

Your SAM is the starting point for building your portfolio, and the baseline from which decisions are made and investment returns are compared.

Your SAM should be simple and easy to calculate. It doesn't need to be calculated to three decimal points or broken into an excessive number of asset classes. Your goal should be to get it 'approximately right'.

Your SAM will evolve over time with age and/or major life changes, but shouldn't be altered based on what's happening in the market in the short term. It's particularly important to not make significant changes in response to extreme market conditions.

# Commit to a Routine

***Better Investors have a regiment that breeds discipline, patience and courage. Discipline to follow a specific plan. Patience to let it play out over many years. And the courage to stick with it when times are tough.***

After your portfolio has been set up, there's still important work to be done. On-going management includes re-balancing, cash flow management, and for some, tactical shifts.

## Re-balancing

Re-balancing involves bringing your portfolio back in line with the asset mix you've laid out (SAM). Over time, the securities that have not kept up with your other holdings will drop below their desired long-term allocations, while top performing ones will grow to become a larger proportion of your portfolio. To get back in balance, you need to buy more of the former and sell some of the latter (or at least, buy less).

Behind the concept of re-balancing is the assumption that your SAM is the best approximation of what's going to work for you over the long term. All things being equal, you want your portfolio aligned with your SAM.

It's preferable that your re-balancing routine be automatic. In other words, no matter what's happening in the markets, you'll re-balance based on one or more of the pre-set triggers:

- A regular date – quarterly, semi-annually or annually
- A set limit that triggers an adjustment – i.e. bonds are more than 5% above/below the long-term target
- Every contribution or withdrawal

There are two primary benefits to automatic re-balancing. First, it prevents your portfolio from straying from your SAM inadvertently and second, it takes the emotion out of the process.

**MONEY = EMOTION**

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Re-balancing will enhance returns in some market environments (choppy, non-trending markets) and detract in others (long-running, consistent trends), but the risk management benefit is all-weather. If you re-balance consistently, you won't set yourself up for a fall by getting too carried away in good markets, or too discouraged in down markets such that you miss out on the inevitable recovery.

## Cash flow management

Whether you're in the accumulation phase of your investment life cycle and contributing new money to your portfolio, or are retired and in the de-accumulation phase, you need a cash flow strategy. We're referring to a plan that lays out when you're going to contribute (or withdraw), how much it will be and to (from) which account.

In most cases, contributions are easy and require little thought. New money is simply allocated to the holdings that bring your portfolio in line with its SAM. Regular withdrawals, on the other hand, require more thought. You need to determine which account(s) the money is coming from (savings, investment or registered accounts) and which securities to sell so as to minimize taxes and maximize flexibility. And if you have a spending reserve set aside, you'll need to decide when to replenish it.



## Getting tactical

You may choose to diverge from your SAM in the short to medium term by pursuing different strategies or hiring asset managers who purposefully take your portfolio in a different direction. Tactical strategies are beyond the scope of this report, but suffice to say, you should know why moves are being made and how they fit with your overall portfolio.

No matter how actively your portfolio is managed, we suggest you set limits as to how far you are willing to deviate from your SAM. If you're less experienced, or don't have the time or interest, then you should have little or no range around your SAM. You shouldn't do anything other than re-balance automatically. If you're more experienced, or have confidence in your managers' abilities, you may operate with wider ranges.

## A Simple SAM – Target and Ranges

	<b>Long-term Target</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>Current Allocation</b>
Cash/short-term	0%	0 – 20%	5%
Bonds	50%	40 - 60%	40%
Equities	50%	40 - 60%	55%

No matter where you are on the skill spectrum, we firmly believe you should have limits on how far you go in pursuing a theme or strategy, and how much of one type of security you will hold. Asset allocation is difficult and nobody has a perfect record. Limiting how far you go (in buying gold, focusing on bank stocks or making a major move like getting out of the market) will prevent the inevitable mistakes from causing irreparable damage.

# Prepare for Extremes

***Better Investors stick to their plan and are disciplined, patient and courageous at the extreme points in the market cycle.***

It's not a matter of 'if' markets sky rocket or take a sharp drop, but 'when'. Capital markets move in mysterious ways and are rarely in tune with your day-to-day life. It's important that you're prepared, not surprised.

## Down Markets

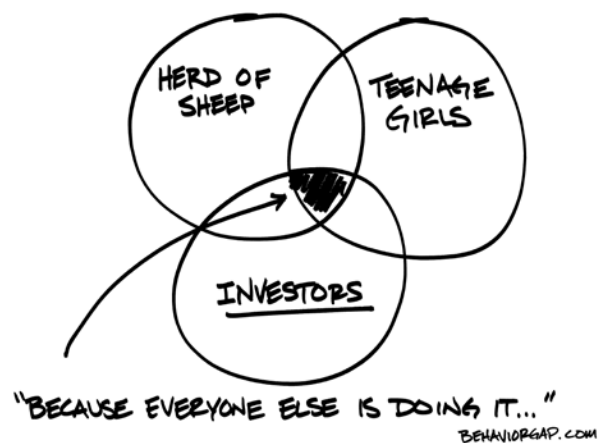
Remember that down markets are inevitable and a necessary part of long-term investing. A case in point is the Canadian stock market (as measured by the S&P/TSX Composite Index). For the ten years ending December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2012, the TSX had an average annual return of 9.2%. During that period of excellent returns, there were two negative years, one in which the index was down significantly (-33% in 2008).

No only should you be prepared for down markets, but also the negativity and hyperbole that goes along with them. Investors, advisors and the media become very short-term oriented at extreme times and too often use words like plunge, collapse, crash and capital preservation. Conversely, in times of euphoria words like soar, skyrocket, upside and potential are common.

## Temperament

Having the right temperament (or working with someone who does) is of paramount importance. If you're going to behave well at extremes, you not only need I.Q., but E.Q. (Emotional Quotient). It's good to know whose shoulder you're going to lean on.

When your portfolio returns don't match up with what others are doing or the headlines are saying, you're likely to suffer some dissonance. It will feel uncomfortable when your plan calls for you to do one thing while your taxi driver, squash partner and every newspaper you read is telling you to do the exact opposite. For example, it's unlikely you'll get any support when adding to your European holdings while Spain is collapsing or trimming your bonds when they're viewed as the only place to hide.



## (In)Action

When markets and investor sentiment are at extreme highs or lows, it's not a good time to make significant changes to your portfolio, or long-term plan. It's at these highly-charged, emotional times that the biggest mistakes are made. Perversely, you need to rely on your investment plan the most at times when you trust it the least. As Warren Buffett says, "Wall Street makes its money on activity. You make your money on inactivity."

Market extremes are an opportunity. You can dread the jolts and volatility, and try to hide from them, or you can embrace them and use them to your advantage. We highly recommend the latter.

# You're the CEO

***Better Investors are the CEO of their portfolios. They allocate time for managing people (including hiring and firing), judiciously watch expenses and regularly assess performance.***

## Hiring and firing

Like a good CEO, you need to be an effective delegator (C). Unless you're a pure do-it-yourself investor, you'll be assigning at least some activities to another person or firm. In doing so, it's important to find a balance between getting the help you need and not involving more people needlessly. There's an old adage that says, "The more people that touch your money, the lower the return." Whether it's immediately apparent or not, everyone who works on your account is getting paid (more on cost below).

Needless to say, you're in charge of hiring and firing, which means you need to find a person(s) who has experience, expertise and is a proven money maker. Someone you trust and are willing to rely on during challenging times. And given your wish to establish a lasting relationship, someone you genuinely like and want to spend time with.

When you're hiring an advisor or portfolio manager (D), there's a natural tendency to be heavily influenced by recent returns. To counteract this, we suggest using a framework called the 'Four P's'. Past Performance is one of the P's, but the focus here is on future wealth generation. The other 3 P's address the sustainability of those returns.

## Delegation, not abdication

C

Many people don't have the time or interest to manage a portfolio on their own. They need to 'delegate' some of their duties. That does not mean 'abdicate', however. There are still things investors need to do. In our view, the following list represents the bare minimum:

- Read two quarterly reports a year (out of four).
- Do an annual review of your portfolio.
- Meet your advisor/portfolio manager once a year or attend a group presentation.
- Ask questions. The more you ask, the more revealing the answers will be.

## The 4 P's

**Philosophy** – What is the portfolio manager's approach?

**Process** – How is research done and decisions made?

**People** – Who are the key individuals and how stable has the team been?

**Performance** – Have they generated good returns over the long term?

## Managing Costs

Just like a company, your portfolio's return (profit) is the result of both revenues and expenses. CEOs don't focus on one to the exclusion of the other and neither should you. When you're paying fees for fund management and advice, make sure it's something you need and if so, make sure you're getting value for money. You should always be evaluating whether the extra cost is producing additional return.

## Interviewing advisors and portfolio managers

Finding someone you can work with for a long time is extremely important, so you shouldn't hesitate to conduct thorough interviews with multiple candidates. In trying to determine who will be the best fit, you should probe the following areas:

- Background and credentials
- Reasons for making career shifts and/or changing firms
- Investment philosophy
- Successes / mistakes – They should have both
- What they read and the resources they have at their disposal
- Specific experiences – How did they handle the tech bubble and bust, the market meltdown in 2008, and the subsequent recovery in 2009?
- How is their money invested?

Even after interviewing potential candidates, it may still be a tough decision. There are situations, however, where an advisor or investment manager eliminates her/himself with one answer. In our view, the following responses (or non-responses) are deal breakers:

- He recommends a strategy or fund before he's asked you 10 questions about your situation.
- She hesitates when asked about fees.
- He betrays the confidentiality of other clients – i.e. name drops.
- He's never made a mistake - i.e. he got it right during the tech bubble, 2008 crisis and the 2009 recovery.
- If he has made mistakes, he always blames the market, his clients or other people.
- She has no way of reporting the investment returns, fees and asset mix for your total portfolio.

## Monitoring

As the CEO, one of your most important roles is monitoring progress and assessing performance. No matter how engaged you are in the investment process, you need to know:

- What you own
- How each holding fits into the plan
- The reasons for deviations from your SAM
- How you've done – in absolute terms and compared to your SAM
- What and who had the most impact on your returns
- How much you're paying and to whom

We strongly recommend that you do an annual review to re-confirm your plan, assess performance and do a general checkup on your portfolio. A thorough, annual review is better than multiple glances over the course of the year.

To learn more about assessing your investment performance, we encourage you to read our research report on the topic – *"How Is Your Portfolio Doing? A Framework for Assessing Investment Performance"*. The report is available at [www.steadyhand.com](http://www.steadyhand.com).

## Summary

Being a better investor will lead to a greater likelihood of achieving your long-term investment objectives, plain and simple.

We believe there are five essential elements to being a better investor. More than anything, they're behavioural and pragmatic in nature. You don't need to be a math whiz or Rhodes Scholar to be a better investor. What you do need is to: (1) be realistic, (2) have a long-term plan, (3) commit to a routine, (4) be prepared for the extremes, and (5) be a good CEO of your portfolio.

Being **realistic** means critically assessing your own knowledge, interest and temperament and designing a process and portfolio that fits with your individual makeup. It also means being realistic about your return expectations and recognizing that markets are totally unpredictable in the short term.

Having a **long-term plan** is crucial. It doesn't need to be a lengthy or highly detailed document; rather, it should be a roadmap to keep you on course. Integral to any plan is a Strategic Asset Mix (SAM), which is an educated guess as to what blend of asset types are best suited to your situation and will give you the best chance of achieving your goals.

Committing to a **routine** involves re-balancing, cash flow management, and for more engaged investors, tactical shifts. A regiment that breeds patience and discipline (not to mention courage) is a valuable crutch in difficult market conditions.

Being prepared for **extremes** is a must. Markets never move in a straight line, and it's not a matter of *if* there will be another sharp correction, but *when*. Having the right temperament and recognizing when, and when not, to make

adjustments to your portfolio is of paramount importance.

Being a good **CEO** (of your portfolio) is important. You need to be an effective delegator and recognize when to make changes to the people and firms you've hired to help manage your money. As well, like any good boss, you need to watch expenses and regularly assess performance.