Getting Things

Done

The Art of Stress-Free Productivity

David
Allen

out." —Mark Henricks, *Entrepreneur*

"David Allen's productivity principles are rooted in big ideas ...
but they're also eminently practical."
　　　　—Keith H. Hammonds, *Fast Company*

"David Allen brings new clarity to the power of purpose, the
essential nature of relaxation, and deceptively simple
guidelines for getting things done. He employs extensive
experience, per- sonal stories, and his own recipe for
simplicity, speed, and fun." —Frances Hesselbein,
chairman, board of governors, The Drucker Foundation

"Anyone who reads this book can apply this knowledge and
these skills in their lives for immediate results."
　　　　—Stephen P. Magee, chaired professor of business
　　　　and
　　　　　economics, University of Texas at
　　　　　Austin
　　　　　"A true skeptic of most management fixes, I have to say
　　　　　David's program is a winner!"
　　　　　　　—Joline Godfrey, CEO, Independent Means, Inc.
　　　　　　　and
　　　　　　　　author of *Our Wildest
　　　　　　　　Dreams*

　　　　"Getting Things Done describes an incredibly practical
　　　　process that can help busy people regain control of their
　　　　lives. It can help you be more successful. Even more
　　　　important, it can help you have a happier life!"—Marshall

　　　　Goldsmith, coeditor, *The Leader of the Future*
　　　　　　and *Coaching for Leadership*

　　　　"WARNING: Reading *Getting Things Done* can be hazardous
　　　　to your old habits of procrastination. David Allen's approach
　　　　is refreshingly simple and intuitive. He provides the systems,
　　　　tools, and tips to achieve profound results."
　　　　　　—Carola Endicott, director, Quality Resources,
　　　　　New
　　　　　　England Medical Center
　　　　　　PENGUIN BOOKS GETTING

THINGS DONE

David Allen has been called one of the world's most influential thinkers on productivity and has been a keynote speaker and facilitator for such organizations as New York Life, the World Bank, the Ford Foundation, L.L. Bean, and the U.S. Navy, and he conducts workshops for individuals and organizations across the country. He is the president of The David Allen Company and has more than twenty years experience as a management consultant and executive coach. His work has been featured in *Fast Company, Fortune,* the *Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal,* and many other publications. *Getting Things Done* has been published in twelve foreign countries. David Allen lives in Ojai, California.

For Kathryn, my extraordinary partner in life and work

Contents

Welcome to *Getting Things Done*

WELCOME TO A gold mine of insights into strategies for how to have more energy, be more relaxed, and get a lot more accomplished with much less effort. If you're like me, you like getting things done and doing them well, and yet you also want to savor life in ways that seem increasingly elusive if not downright impossible if you're working too hard. This doesn't have to be an either-or proposition. It *is* possible to be effectively *doing* while you are delightfully *being,* in your ordinary workaday world.

I think efficiency is a good thing. Maybe what you're doing is important, interesting, or useful; or maybe it isn't but it has to be done anyway. In the first case you want to get as much return as you can on your investment of time and energy. In the second, you want to get on to other things as fast

The art of resting as you can, without any nagging loose ends.

the mind and the be at having sleeping the minutes is exactly the more e-mail And moment a with child what beer relaxed, *whatever* in front the with you in is his potential just confident *ought* your of you're or what you, her to staff be doing, new or you crib that doing, after spending client need at whatever you'd hours, midnight, as you're to after probably a be gazing few you're the doing—that doing answering informal meeting at like it. doing your to

power dismissing all is the great probably care secrets —Captain]. men. of and of from A. one worry our of it

Teaching you how to be maximally efficient and relaxed, whenever you need or want to be, was my main purpose in writing this book.

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I have searched for a long time, as you may have, for answers to the questions of *what* to do, *when* to do it, and *how* to do it. And after twenty-plus years of developing and applying new methods for personal and organizational productivity, alongside years of rigorous exploration in the self-development arena, I can

attest that there is no single, once-and-for-all solution. No soft- ware, seminar, cool personal planner, or personal mission state- ment will simplify your workday or make your choices for you as you move through your day, week, and life. What's more, just when you learn how to enhance your productivity and decision- making at one level, you'll graduate to the next accepted batch of responsibilities and creative goals, whose new challenges will defy the ability of any simple formula or buzzword-du-jour to get you what you want, the way you want to get it.

But if there's no single means of perfecting personal organi- zation and productivity, there *are* things we can do to facilitate them. As I have personally matured, from year to year, I've found deeper and more meaningful, more significant things to focus on and be aware of and do. And I've uncovered simple processes that we can all learn to use that will vastly improve our ability to deal proactively and constructively with the mundane realities of the world. What follows is a compilation of more than two decades' worth of discoveries about personal productivity—a guide to maximizing output and minimizing input, and to doing so in a world in which work is increasingly voluminous and ambiguous. I have spent many thousands of hours coaching people "in the trenches" at their desks, helping them process and organize all of their work at hand. The methods I have uncovered have proved to be highly effective in all types of organizations, at every job level, across cultures, and even at home and school. After twenty years of coaching and training some of the world's most sophisticated and productive professionals, I know the world is hungry for these methods.

Executives at the top are looking to instill "ruthless execu-

tion" in themselves and their people as a basic standard. They know, and I know, that behind closed doors, after hours, there remain unanswered calls, tasks to be delegated, unprocessed issues from meetings and conversations, personal responsibilities unmanaged, and dozens of e-mails still not dealt with. Many of these businesspeople are successful because the crises they solve and the

opportunities they take advantage of are bigger than the problems they allow and create in their own offices and briefcases. But given the pace of business and life today, the equation is in question.

On the one hand, we need proven tools that can help people focus their energies strategically and tactically without letting anything fall through the cracks. On the other, we need to create work environments and skills that will keep the most invested people from burning out due to stress. We need positive work- style standards that will attract and retain the best and brightest.

We know this information is sorely needed in organizations. It's also needed in schools, where our kids are still not being taught how to process information, how to focus on outcomes, or what actions to take to make them happen. And for all of us indi- vidually, it's needed so we can take advantage of all the opportuni- ties we're given to add value to our world in a sustainable, self-nurturing way.

The power, simplicity, and effectiveness of what I'm talking about in *Getting Things Done* are best experienced *as* experiences, in real time, with real situations in your real world. Necessarily, the book must put the essence of this dynamic art of workflow manage- ment and personal productivity into a linear format. I've tried to organize it in such a way as to give you both the inspiring big- picture view and a taste of immediate results as you go along.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 describes the whole game, providing a brief overview of the system and an explanation of why it's unique and timely, and then presenting the basic methodologies themselves in their most condensed and

basic form. Part 2 shows you how to implement the system. It's your personal coaching, step by step, on the nitty-gritty appli- cation of the models. Part 3 goes even deeper, describing the subtler and more profound results you can expect when you incor- porate the methodologies and

models into your work and your life.

I want you to hop in. I want you to test this stuff out, even challenge it. I want you to find out for yourself that what I prom- ise is not only possible but instantly accessible to you personally. And I want you to know that everything I propose is *easy to do.* It involves no new skills at all. You already know how to focus, how to write things down, how to decide on outcomes and actions, and how to review options and make choices. You'll validate that many of the things you've been doing instinctively and intuitively all along are *right.* I'll give you ways to leverage those basic skills into new plateaus of effectiveness. I want to inspire you to put all this into a new behavior set that will blow your mind.

Throughout the book I refer to my coaching and seminars on this material. I've worked as a "management consultant" for the last two decades, alone and in small partnerships. My work has consisted primarily of doing private productivity coaching and conducting seminars based on the methods presented here. I (and my colleagues) have coached more than a thousand indi- viduals, trained hundreds of thousands of professionals, and deliv- ered many hundreds of public seminars; This is the background from which I have drawn my experience and examples.

The promise here was well described by a client of mine who wrote, "When I habitually applied the tenets of this program it *saved* my life . . . when I faithfully applied them, it *changed* my life. This is a vaccination against day-to-day fire-fighting (the so- called urgent and crisis demands of any given workday) and an antidote for the imbalance many people bring upon themselves."

Getting Things Done

part

The Art of Getting Things Done

A New Practice for a New Reality

IT'S POSSIBLE FOR a person to have an overwhelming number of things to do and still function productively with a clear head and a positive sense of relaxed control. That's a great way to live and work, at elevated levels of effectiveness and efficiency. It's also becoming a critical operational style required of successful and high-performing professionals. You already know how to do everything necessary to achieve this high-performance state. If you're like most people, however, you need to apply these skills in a more timely, complete, and systematic way so you can get on top of it all instead of feeling buried. And though the method and the techniques I describe in this book

Anxiety is caused are immensely practical and based on common sense,
by a lack of control, most people will have some major work habits that
organization, must be modified before they can implement this
preparation, and system. The small changes required—changes in the
action. way you clarify and organize all the things that com-
. —David mand your attention—could represent a significant shift in how you approach some key aspects of your day-to-day work. Many of my clients have referred to this as a significant paradigm shift.

The methods I present here are all based on two key objec- tives:(1) capturing *all the* things that need to get done—now, later, someday, big, little, or in between—into a logical and trusted sys- tem outside of your head and off your mind; and (2) disciplining yourself to make front-end decisions about all of me "inputs" you

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let into your life so that you will always have a plan for "next actions" that you can implement or renegotiate at any moment.

This book offers a proven method for this kind of high- performance workflow management. It provides good tools, tips, techniques, and

tricks for implementation. As you'll discover, the principles and methods are instantly usable and applicable to everything you have to do in your personal as well as your profes- sional life.* You can incorporate, as many others have before you, what I describe as an ongoing dynamic style of operating in your work and in your world. Or, like still others, you can simply use this as a guide to getting back into better control when you feel you need to.

The Problem: New Demands, Insufficient Resources

Almost everyone I encounter these days feels he or she has too much to handle and not enough time to get it all done. In the course of a single recent week, I consulted with a partner in a major global investment firm who was concerned that the new corporate-management responsibilities he was being offered would stress his family commitments beyond the limits; and with a midlevel human-resources manager trying to stay on top of her 150-plus e-mail requests per day fueled by the goal of doubling the company's regional office staff from eleven hundred to two thousand people in one year, all as she tried to protect a social life for herself on the weekends.

A paradox has emerged in this new millennium: people have

*I consider "work," in its most universal sense, as meaning anything that you want or need to be different than it currently is. Many people make a distinc- tion between "work" and "personal life," but I don't: to me, weeding the garden or updating my will is just as much "work" as writing this book or coaching a client. All the methods and techniques in this book are applicable across that life/work spectrum—to be effective, they need to be.

enhanced quality of life, but at the same time they are adding to their stress levels by taking on more than they have resources to handle. It's as though their eyes were bigger than their stomachs. And most people are to some degree frustrated and perplexed about how to improve the situation.

Work No Longer Has Clear Boundaries A major factor in the mounting stress level is that the actual nature of our jobs has changed much more dra-

Time is the matically and rapidly than have our training for and

quality of nature our ability to deal with work. In just the last half of

that keeps events the twentieth century, what constituted "work" in the
from happening all industrialized world was transformed line, make-it and move-it kinds of Peter Drucker has so aptly termed "knowledge In the old days, work was self-evident. from assembly-activity to work." Fields
at once. Lately it
what
doesn't working.
seem to be
—Anonymous

were to be plowed, machines tooled, boxes packed, cows milked, widgets cranked. You knew what work had to be done—you could see it. It was clear when the work was finished, or not finished.

Now, for many of us, there are no edges to most of our proj- ects. Most people I know have at least half a dozen things they're trying to achieve right now, and even if they had the rest of their lives to try, they wouldn't be able to finish

Almost every these to perfection. You're probably faced with the
project could be same dilemma. How good could that conference
done better, and an potentially be? How effective could the training pro- gram be, or the structure of your executives' compen- sation package? How inspiring is the essay you're writing? How motivating the staff meeting? How
infinite quantity of information is now available that could make that happen.
functional the reorganization? And a last question: How much available data could be relevant to doing those proj- ects "better"? The answer is, an infinite amount, easily accessible, or at least potentially so, through the Web.

On another front, the lack of edges can create *more* work

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for everyone. Many of today's organizational outcomes require cross-divisional communication, cooperation, and engagement. Our individual office silos are crumbling, and with them is going the luxury of not having to read cc'd e-mails from the marketing department, or from human resources, or from some ad hoc, deal-with-a-certain-issue committee.

Our Jobs Keep Changing The disintegrating edges of our projects and our work in general would be challenging enough for anyone. But now we must add to that equation the constantly shifting definition of our jobs. I often ask in my seminars, "Which of you are doing only what you were hired to do?" Seldom do I get a raised hand. As amorphous as edgeless work may be, if you had the chance to stick with some specifically described job long enough, you'd probably figure out what you needed to do—how much, at what level—to stay sane. But few have that luxury anymore, for two reasons:

These all, by neces- sity, shake up ... ms, roles, and responsibilities. 2 | The ... essional is more of a free agent

... s than ever before, changing careers as ... his or her parents once changed jobs. ... ysomethings and fiftysomethings hold to ... ; of continual growth. Their aims are just ... tegrated into the mainstream now, ... by the catchall "professional, manage- ... d executive development"—which sim- ... is they won't keep doing what they're ... any extended period of time.

We can never really be prepared for that which is wholly new. We have to adjust , • ourselves, and every radical adjustment is a crisis in self- esteem: we undergo a test, we have to prove ourselves. It needs subordinate self-confidence to face drastic change without inner trembling.

—Eric Hoffer

| The organizations we're involved with seem to e in constant morph mode, with ever-changing goals, roducts, partners, customers, markets, technologies,

Little seems clear for very long anymore, as far as what our work is and what or how much input may be relevant to doing it well. We're allowing in huge amounts of *The burner I go,* information and world and generating communication from the an equally large volume of outer

the —Anonymous behinder I get.

ideas and agreements with ourselves and others from our inner world. And we haven't been well equipped to deal with this huge number of internal and external commitments.

The Old Models and Habits Are Insufficient Neither our standard education, nor traditional time-management models, nor the plethora of organizing tools available, such as personal notebook planners, Microsoft Outlook, or Palm per- sonal digital assistants (PDAs), has given us a viable means of meeting the new demands placed on us. If you've tried to use any of these processes or tools, you've probably found them unable to accommodate and changing priority are doing. The ability control during these demands new ways is a great need for new of to fertile factors thinking be methods, successful, but the inherent and turbulent speed, technologies, working. relaxed, in complexity, what times and There you and in

The waves on ablest —Edward the winds navigators. side are always of and

Gibbon the

work habits to help us get on top of our world.

The traditional approaches to time management and per- sonal organization were useful in their time. They provided help- ful reference points for a workforce that was just emerging from an

industrial assembly-line modality into a new kind of work that included choices about what to do and discretion about when to do it. When "time" itself turned into a work factor, personal calendars became a key work tool. (Even as late as the 1980s many professionals considered having a pocket Day-Timer the essence of being organized, and many people today think of their calendar as the central tool for being in control.) Along with discretionary time also came the need to make good choices about what to do. "ABC" priority codes and daily "to-do" lists were key techniques

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that people developed to help them sort through their choices in some meaningful way. If you had the freedom to decide what to do, you also had the responsibility to make

good choices, given your "priorities."

What you've probably discovered, at least at some level, is that a calendar, though important, can really effectively manage only a small portion of what you need to organize. And daily to-do lists and simplified priority coding have proven inadequate to deal with the volume and variable nature of the average professional's workload. More and more people's jobs are made up of dozens or even hundreds of e-mails a day, with no latitude left to ignore a single request, complaint, or order. There are few people who can (or even should) expect to code everything an "A," a "B," or a "C" priority, or who can maintain some predetermined list of to-dos that the first telephone call or interruption from their boss won't totally *undo.*

The "Big Picture" vs. the Nitty-Gritty At the other end of the spectrum, a huge number of business books, models, seminars, and gurus have championed the "bigger view" as the solution to dealing with our complex world. Clarify- ing major goals and values, so the thinking goes, gives order, meaning, and direction to our work. In practice, however, the well-intentioned exercise of values thinking too often does not achieve its desired results. I have seen too many of these efforts fail, for one or more of the following three reasons:

1 | There is too much distraction at the day-to-day, hour-to-hour level of commitments to allow for appropriate focus on the higher levels. 2 | Ineffective personal organizational systems create huge sub-conscious resistance to undertaking even bigger projects and goals that will likely not be managed well, and that will in turn cause even *more* distraction and stress. 3 | When loftier levels and values actually *are* clarified, it raises

the bar of our standards, making us notice that much more that needs changing. We are already having a serious negative reaction to the over- whelming number of things we

have to do. And what created much of work that's on those lists in the first place Our values!

Focusing on values does *not* simplify your life. It gives meaning and direction—and a lot more complexity.

Focusing on primary outcomes and values *is* a critical exer- cise, certainly. But it does not mean there is less to do, or fewer challenges in getting the work done. Quite the contrary: it just ups the ante in the game, which still must be played day to day. For a human-resources executive, for example, deciding to deal with quality-of-work-life issues in order to attract and keep key talent does *not* make things simpler.

There has been a missing piece in our new culture of knowl- edge work: a system with a coherent set of behaviors and tools that functions effectively at the level at which work really hap- pens. It must incorporate the results of big-picture thinking as well as the smallest of open details. It must manage multi- ple tiers of priorities. It must maintain control over hundreds of new inputs daily. It must save a lot more time and effort than are needed to maintain it. It must make it easier to get things done.

The Promise: The "Ready State" of the Martial Artist

Reflect for a moment on what it actually might be like if your per- sonal management situation were totally under control, at all lev- els and at all times. What if you could dedicate fully 100 percent of your attention to whatever was at hand, at your own choosing, with no distraction?

It *is* possible. There *is* a way to get a grip on it all, stay relaxed, and get meaningful things done with minimal effort,

Life is denied by lack of attention,

whether it be to cleaning windows or trying to write a

masterpiece.—*Nadi a*

Boulanger

Your ability to generate power is directly proportional to your ability to relax.

'hole spectrum of your life and work.

erience what the martial artists call a

ater" and top athletes refer to as the

n the complex world in which you're

ngaged. In fact, you have probably already been
this state from time to time.

It's a condition of working,
oing, and being in which the mind is clear and
onstructive things are happening. It's a state that
accessible by everyone, and one that is
creasingly needed to deal effectively with the
omplexity of life in the twenty-first century. More
nd more it will be a required condition for
gh-performance professionals who wish to
aintain balance and a consistent positive output
their work. World-class rower Craig Lambert
as described how it feels in *Mind Over Water*
loughton Miffin, 1998):

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Rowers have a word for this frictionless state: swing. . . .
Recall the pure joy of riding on a backyard swing: an easy
cycle of motion, the momentum coming from the swing itself.
The swing carries us; we do not force it. We pump our legs
to drive our arc higher, but gravity does most of the work.
We are not so much swinging as being swung. The boat
swings you. The shell wants to move fast: Speed sings in its
lines and nature. Our job is simply to work with the shell, to
stop holding it back with our thrashing struggles to go faster.
Trying too hard sabotages boat speed. Trying becomes

striving and striving undoes itself Social climbers strive to be aristocrats but their efforts prove them no such thing. Aristocrats do not strive; they have already arrived. Swing is a state of arrival.

The "Mind Like Water" Simile In karate there is an image that's used to define the position of perfect readiness: "mind like water." Imagine throwing a pebble into a still pond. How does the water respond? The answer is,

totally appropriately to the force and mass of the

If your mind is input; then it returns to calm. It doesn't overreact or

empty, it is always underreact.

The power in a karate punch comes from speed, not muscle; it comes from a focused "pop" at the end of the whip. That's why petite people can learn to

ready for anything; it is open to everything. —Sbunryu Suzuki

break boards and bricks with their hands: it doesn't take calluses or brute strength, just the ability to gen- erate a focused thrust with speed. But a tense muscle is a slow one. So the high levels of training in the martial arts teach and demand balance and relaxation as much as anything else. Clearing the mind and being flexible are key.

Anything that causes you to overreact or under- react can control you, and often does. Responding

Anything that inappropriately ects, what lead people to you your give less need unread either

effective to to do, your magazines, more your results e-mail, or children, less than your your

attention you'd or staff, thoughts your like. your to boss things about

Most proj-

will

causes overreact underreact control often does. you, you or

can to

and

than they deserve, simply because they don't operate with a "mind like water."

There is one thing

Think You were what **Can When You** probably **Required?**

not you about **Get** stressed **into** were the had **Your** last doing; out; a **"Productive** time sense you time you of were **State"**

felt being tended highly highly in to control; focused productive. disappear you on

we happiest those it their can present. to can be the ability. who completely do, We people limit can and can We do of are the

(lunchtime already?); and you felt you were making

be all here. We noticeable progress toward a meaningful outcome.

can . . . give all Would you like to have more such experiences?

our attention to And if you get seriously far *out* of that

the opportunity state—and start to feel out of control, stressed

before us. out, unfocused, bored, and stuck—do you have the —ability to get yourself back *into* it?

That's where the

methodology of *Getting Things Done* will have the greatest impact on your life, by showing you how to get back to "mind like water," with all your resources and faculties functioning at a maximum level.

The Principle: Dealing Effectively with Internal Commitments

A basic truism I have discovered over twenty years of coaching and training is that most of the stress people experience comes from inappropriately managed commitments they make or accept. Even those who are not consciously "stressed out" will invariably experience greater relaxation, better focus, and increased productive energy when they learn more effectively to control the "open loops" of their lives.

You've probably made many more agreements with yourself than you realize, and every single one of them-big or little—is being tracked by a less-than-conscious part of you. These are the "incompletes," or "open loops," which I define as anything pulling at your attention that doesn't belong where it is, the way it is. Open loops can include everything from really big to-do items like "End world hunger" to the more modest "Hire new assistant" to the tiniest task such as "Replace electric pencil sharpener." It's likely that you also have more internal commitments cur- rently in play than you're aware of. Consider how many things you

feel even the smallest amount of responsibility to change, finish, handle, or do something about. You have a commitment, for instance, to deal in some way with every new communication landing in your e-mail, on your voice-mail, and in your in-basket. And surely there are numerous projects that you sense need to be defined in your areas of responsi- bility, as well as goals and directions to be clarified, a career to be managed, and life in general to be kept in balance. You have accepted some level of internal responsibility for every- **12**Anything that does not belong where it is, the way it is, is an "open loop" pulling on your attention.

thing in your life and work that represents an open loop of any sort.

In order to deal effectively with all of that, you must first identify and collect all those things that are "ringing your bell" in some way, and then plan how to handle them. That may seem like a simple thing to do, but in practice most people don't know how to do it in a consistent way.

The Basic Requirements for Managing Commitments

Managing commitments well requires the implementation of some basic activities and behaviors:

• First of all, if it's on your mind, your mind isn't clear. Anything you consider unfinished in any way must be captured in a trusted system outside your mind, or what I call a collection bucket, that you know you'll come back to regularly and sort through.

• Second, you must clarify exactly what your commitment is and decide what you have to do, if anything, to make progress toward fulfilling it.

• Third, once you've decided on all the actions you need to take, you must keep reminders of them organized in a system you review regularly.

An Important Exercise to Test This Model I suggest that you *write down the project or situation that is most on your mind at this moment.* What most "bugs" you, distracts you, or interests you, or in some other way consumes a large part of your conscious attention? It may be a project or problem that is really "in your face," something you are being pressed to handle, or a situation you feel you must deal with sooner rather than later.

Maybe you have a vacation trip coming up that you need to make some major last-minute decisions about. Or perhaps you just inherited six million dollars and you don't know what to do with the cash. Whatever.

Got it? Good. Now describe, in a single written sentence, your intended successful outcome for this problem or situation. In other words, what would need to happen for you to check this "project" off as "done"? It could be as simple as "Take the Hawaii vacation," "Handle situation with customer X," "Resolve college situation with Susan," "Clarify new divisional manage- ment structure," or "Implement new investment strategy." All clear? Great.

Now write down the *very next physical action required to move the situation forward.* If you had nothing else to do in your life but get closure on this, where would you go right now, and what visi- ble action would you take? Would you pick up a phone and make a call? Go to your computer and write an e-mail? Sit down with pen and paper and brainstorm about it? Talk face-to-face with your spouse, your secretary, your attorney, or your boss? Buy nails at the hardware store? What?

Got the answer to that? Good. Was there any value for you in these two minutes of think- ing? If you're like the vast majority of people who complete that

drill during my seminars, you'll be experiencing at least a tiny bit of enhanced control, relaxation, and focus. You'll also be feeling more motivated to actu- ally *do* something about that situation you've merely

been thinking about till now. Imagine that motiva- tion magnified a thousandfold, as a way to live

and work. If anything at all positive happened for you in this little exer- cise, think about this:

What changed? What happened to create that improved condition within your own experience? The situation itself is no further along, at least in the physical world. It's certainly not finished yet. What probably happened is that you acquired a clearer definition of the outcome desired and the next action required.

But what created that? The answer is, *thinking.* Not a lot, just enough to solidify your commitment and the resources required to fulfill it. 14 *Think like a man* of action, act like a man of thought.'

—Henry Bergson

The Real Work of Knowledge Work Welcome to the real-life experience of "knowledge work," and a profound operational principle: *You have to think about your stuff more than you realize but not as much as you're afraid you might.* As Peter Drucker has written, "In knowledge work ... the task is not given; it has to be determined. 'What are the expected key question tive. And it sions. There choices instead. is in is a And usually making results question results from no knowledge that have right this demands to answer; work?' be workers clearly risky is there produc- ... speci- deci- the

are

The every thought.

—Ralphancestor action Waldo *is of a*

fied, if productivity is to be achieved."

Most people have a resistance to initiating the burst of energy that it will take to clarify the real meaning, for them, of something they have let into their world, and to decide what they need to do about it. We're never really taught that we have to think about our work before we can do it; much of our daily activity is already defined for us by the undone and unmoved things staring at us when we come to work, or by the family to be fed, the laundry to be done, or the children to

be dressed at home. Thinking in a concentrated manner to define desired outcomes is something few people feel they have to do. But in truth, outcome thinking is one of the most effective means available for making wishes reality.

Why Things Are on Your Mind Most often, the reason something is "on your mind" is that you want it to be different than it currently is, and yet:

• you haven't clarified exactly what the intended outcome is;

• you haven't decided what the very next physical action step is; and/or

• you haven't put reminders of the outcome and the action required in a system you trust.

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That's why it's on your mind. Until those thoughts have been clarified and those decisions made, and the resulting data has been stored in a system that you *absolutely* know *This constant,* you will think about as often as you need to, your *unproductive* brain can't give up the job. You can fool everyone *preoccupation with* else, but you can't fool your own mind. It knows *all the things we* whether or not you've come to the conclusions you *have to do is the single largest consumer of time and energy.* —Kerry

need to, and whether you've put the resulting out- comes and action reminders in a place that can be trusted to resurface appropriately within your con- scious mind. If you haven't done those things, it won't quit working overtime. Even if you've already decided on the next step you'll take to resolve a prob- lem, your mind can't let go until and unless you write yourself a reminder in a place it *knows* you will, without fail, look. It will keep pressuring you about that untaken next step, usually when you can't do anything about it, which will just add to your stress.

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Your Mind Doesn't Have a Mind of Its Own At least a portion of your mind is really kind of stupid, in an interest- ing way. If it had any innate intelligence, it would remind you of the things you needed to do *only when you could do something about them.*

Do you have a flashlight somewhere with dead batteries in it? When does your mind tend to remind you that you need new batteries? When you notice the dead ones! That's not very smart. If your mind had any innate intelligence, it would remind you about those dead batteries only when you passed live ones in a store. And ones of the right size, to boot.

Between the time you woke up today and now, did you think of anything you needed to do that you still haven't done? Have you had that thought more than once? Why? It's a waste of time and energy to keep thinking about something that you make no progress on. And it only adds to your anxieties about what you should be doing and aren't.

It seems that most people let their minds run a lot of the show, especially where the too-much-to-do syndrome is con- cerned. You've probably given over a lot of your "stuff," a lot of your open loops, to an entity on your

Rule your mind or inner committee that is incapable of dealing with

it will rule you. those things effectively the way they are—your mind.

—

The Transformation of "Stuff" Here's how I define "stuff": anything you have allowed into your psychological or physical world that doesn't belong where it is, but for which you haven't yet determined the desired outcome and the next action step. The reason most organizing systems

haven't worked for most people is that they haven't

We need to yet transformed all the "stuff" they're trying to orga-

transform all the nize. As long as it's still "stuff," it's not controllable.

"stuff" we're trying Most of the to-do lists I have seen over the years

to organize into (when people had them at all) were merely listings of

actionable stuff we "stuff," not inventories of the resultant real work that

need to do. needed to be done. They were partial reminders of a lot of things that were unresolved and as yet untranslated into out- comes and actions—that is, the real outlines and details of what the list-makers had to "do."

"Stuff" is not inherently a bad thing. Things that command our attention, by their very nature, usually show up as "stuff." But once "stuff" comes into our lives and work, we have an inherent commitment to ourselves to define and clarify its meaning. That's our responsibility as knowledge workers; if "stuff" were already transformed and clear, our value, other than physical labor, would probably not be required.

At the conclusion of one of my seminars, a senior manager of a major biotech firm looked back at the to-do lists she had come in with and said, "Boy, that was an amorphous blob of undoability!" That's the best description I've ever heard of what passes for orga- nizing lists in most personal systems. The vast majority of people have been trying to get organized by rearranging incomplete lists of

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unclear things; they haven't yet realized how much and what they need to organize in order to get the real payoff. They need to gather everything that requires thinking about and then *do* that thinking if their organizational efforts are to be successful.

The Process: Managing Action

You can train yourself, almost like an athlete, to be faster, more responsive, more proactive, and more focused in knowledge work. You can think more effectively and manage the results with more ease and control. You can minimize the loose ends across the whole spectrum of your work life and personal life and get a lot more done with less effort. And you can make front- end decision-making about all the "stuff" you collect and create standard operating procedure for living and working in this new millennium.

Before you can achieve any of that, though, you'll need to get in the habit of keeping nothing on your mind. And the way to do *that,* as we've seen, is not by managing time, managing informa-tion, or managing priorities. After all:

> • you don't manage five minutes and wind up with six;
> • you don't manage information overload—otherwise you'd walk into a library and die, or the first time you connected to the Web, or even opened a phone book, you'd blow up; and
> • you don't manage priorities—you *have* them.

Instead, the key to managing all of your "stuff" is managing your *actions.*

Managing Action Is the Prime Challenge What you *do* with your time, what you *do* with information, and what you *do* with your body and your focus relative to your

priorities—those are the real options to which you must allocate your limited resources. The real issue is how to make appropriate choices about what to *do* at any point in time. The real issue is how we manage *actions.*

That may sound obvious. However, it might amaze you to discover how many next actions for how many projects and com- mitments remain undetermined by most people. It's extremely difficult to manage actions you haven't

The beginning identified or decided on. Most people have dozens of

is half of every things that they need to do to make progress on

action. many fronts, but they don't yet know what they are.

—Greek And the common complaint that "I don't have time to ____" (fill in the blank) is

understandable because many pro- jects seem overwhelming—and *are* overwhelming because you can't *do* a project at all! You can only do an action related to it. Many actions require only a minute or two, in the appropriate context, to move a project forward.

In training and coaching thousands of professionals, I have found that lack of time is not the major issue for them (though they themselves may think it is); the real problem is a lack of clarity and definition about what a project

Things rarely get really is, and what the associated next-action steps

stuck because of required are. Clarifying things on the front end,

lack of time. They get when they first appear on the radar, rather than on

stuck because the the back end, after trouble has developed, allows
doing of them has

people to reap the benefits of managing action.
not been defined.

The Value of a Bottom-Up Approach I have discovered over the years the practical value of working on personal productivity improvement from the bottom up, starting with the most mundane, ground-floor level of current activity and commitments. Intellectually, the most appropriate way *ought* to be to work from the top down, first uncovering personal and corpo- rate missions, then defining critical objectives, and finally focus- ing on the details of implementation. The trouble is, however,

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that most people are so embroiled in commitments on a day-to- day level that their ability to focus successfully on the larger hori- zon is seriously impaired. Consequently, a bottom-up approach is usually more effective.

Getting current on and in control of what's in your in-basket and on your mind right now, and incorporating practices that can help you *stay* that way, will provide the best means of broadening your horizons. A creative, buoyant energy will be unleashed that will better support your focus on new heights, and your confidence will increase to handle what that creativity produces. An immedi- ate sense of freedom, release, and inspiration naturally comes to people who roll up their sleeves and implement this process. You'll be better equipped to undertake higher-focused thinking when your tools for handling the resulting actions for implementation are part of your ongoing operational style. There are more meaningful things to think about than your in- basket, but if your management of that level is not as efficient as it could be, it's like trying to swim in baggy clothing.

Many executives I have worked with during the day to clear the decks of their mundane "stuff" have spent the following evening having a stream of ideas and visions about their company and their future. This happens as an automatic consequence of unsticking their workflow.

Horizontal and Vertical Action Management You need to control commitments, projects, and actions in two ways—horizontally and vertically. "Horizontal" control maintains coherence across all the activities in which you are involved. Imagine your psyche constantly scanning your environment like police radar; it may land on any of a thousand different items that invite or demand your attention during any twenty-four-hour period: the drugstore, the housekeeper, your aunt Martha, the strategic plan, lunch, a wilting plant in the office, an upset cus- **20** *Vision is not*

enough; it must be combined with venture. It is not enough to stare up the steps; we must step up the stairs. —Vaclav Havel

tomer, shoes that need shining. You have to buy stamps, deposit that check, make the hotel reservation, cancel a staff meeting, see a movie tonight. You might be surprised at the volume of things you actually think about and have to deal with just in one day. You need a good system that can keep track of as many of them as pos- sible, supply required information about them on demand, and allow you to shift your focus from one thing to the next quickly and easily.

"Vertical" control, in contrast, manages thinking up and down the track of individual topics and projects. For example, your inner "police radar" lands on your next vacation as you and your spouse talk about it over dinner—where and when you'll go, what you'll do, how to prepare for the trip, and so on. Or you and your boss need to make some decisions about the new depart- mental reorganization you're about to launch. Or you just need to get your thinking up to date on the customer you're about to call. This is "project planning" in the broad sense. It's focusing in on a single endeavor, situation, or person and fleshing out whatever ideas, details, priorities, and sequences of events may be required for you to handle it, at least for the moment.

The goal for managing horizontally and vertically is the same: to get things off your mind and get things done. Appropri- ate action management lets you feel comfortable and in control as you move through your broad spectrum of work and life, while appropriate project focusing gets you clear about and on track with the specifics needed.

The Major Change: Getting It All Out of Your Head There is no real way to achieve the kind of relaxed control I'm promising if you keep things only in your head. As you'll discover, the individual behaviors described in this book are things you're already doing. The big difference between what I do and what others do is that I capture and organize 100 percent of my "stuff" *in and with objective tools at*

There is usually an inverse proportion between how much something is on your mind and how much it's getting done.

hand, not in my mind. And that applies to *everything*—little or big, personal or professional, urgent or not. Everything.

I'm sure that at some time or other you've gotten to a place in a project, or in your life, where you

just *had to* sit down and *make a list.* If so, you have a reference point for what I'm talking about. Most people, however, do that kind of list-making drill only when the confusion gets too unbearable and they just *have* to do some- thing about it. They usually make a list only about the specific area that's bugging them. But if you made that kind of review a characteristic of your ongoing life- and work style, and you main- tained it across all areas of your life (not just the most "urgent"), you'd be practicing the kind of "black belt" management style I'm describing.

I try to make intuitive choices based on my options, instead of trying to think about what those options *are.* I need to have *thought* about all of that already and captured the results in a trusted way. I don't want to waste time thinking about things more than once. That's an inefficient use of creative energy

and a source of frustration and stress. And you can't fudge this thinking. Your mind will keep working on anything that's still in that undecided state. But there's a limit to how much unresolved "stuff" it can contain before it blows a fuse.

The short-term-memory part of your mind—the part that tends to hold all of the incomplete, undecided, and unorganized "stuff"—functions much like RAM on a personal computer. Your conscious mind, like the computer screen, is a focusing tool, not a storage place. You can think about only two or three things at once. But the incomplete items are still being stored in the short-term- memory space. And as with RAM, there's limited capacity; there's only so much "stuff" you can store in there and still have that part of your brain function at a high level. Most people walk around with their RAM bursting at the seams. They're constantly distracted, their focus disturbed by their own internal mental overload. **22** There is no reason ever to have the same thought twice, unless you like having that thought.

CHAPTER 1 I A NEW PRACTICE FOR A NEW REALITY

For example, in the last few minutes, has your mind wan- dered off into some area that doesn't have anything to do with what you're reading here? Probably. And most likely where your mind went was to some open loop, some incomplete situation that you have some investment in. All that situation did was rear up out of the RAM part of your brain and yell at you, internally. And what did you do about it? Unless you wrote it down and put it in a trusted "bucket" that you know you'll review appropriately sometime soon, more than likely you *worried* about it. Not the most effective behavior: no progress was made, and tension was increased.

It is hard to fight The big problem is that your mind keeps

an enemy who has reminding about means them. that you as It soon of has as things no you sense tell when yourself of you past can't that or you future. *do* anything

need

That

outposts head. —Sally Kempton

in your

to do something, and store it in your RAM, there's a part of you that thinks you should be doing that something *all the time.* Everything you've told yourself you ought to do, it thinks you should be doing *right now.* Frankly, as soon as you have two things to do stored in your RAM, you've generated personal failure, because you can't do them both at the same time. This produces an

all-pervasive stress factor whose source can't be pin- pointed. Most people have been in some

version of this mental stress state so consistently, for so long, that they don't even know they're *in* it. Like gravity, it's ever-present—so much so that those who experience it usually aren't even aware of the pressure. The only time most of them will realize how much tension they've been under is when they get rid of it and notice how different they feel.

Can you get rid of that kind of stress? You bet. The rest of this book will explain how.

Getting Control of Your Life: The Five Stages of Mastering Workflow

THE CORE PROCESS I teach for mastering the art of relaxed and con- trolled knowledge work is a five-stage method for managing workflow. No matter what the setting, there are five discrete stages that we go through as we deal with our work. We (1) *collect* things that command our attention; (2) *process* what they mean and what to do about them; and (3) *organize* the results, which we (4) *review* as options for what we choose to (5) *do.*

The knowledge

This constitutes the management of the "horizontal" *that we consider* aspect of our lives—incorporating everything that *knowledge proves* has our attention at any time. *itself in action.*

The method is straightforward enough in princi- *What we now* ple, and it is generally how we all go about our work in *mean by* any case, but in my experience most people can stand *knowledge is information in action, information focused on results. —Peter F. Drucker*

significantly to improve their handling of each one of the five stages. The quality of our workflow manage- ment is only as good as the weakest link in this five- phase chain, so all the links must be integrated together and supported with consistent standards. Most people have major leaks in their *collection* process. Many have collected things but haven't *processed* or decided what action to take about them. Others make good decisions about "stuff" in the moment but lose the value of that thinking because they don't efficiently *organize* the results. Still others have good systems but don't *review* them consistently enough to keep them functional. Finally, if any one of these links is

weak, what someone is likely to choose to *do* at any point in time may not be the best option.

The dynamics of these five stages need to be understood, and good techniques and tools implemented to facilitate their func- tioning at an optimal level. I have found it very helpful, if not essential, to separate these stages as I move through my day. There are times when I want only to collect input and not decide what to do with it yet. At other times I may just want to process my notes from a meeting. Or I may have just returned from a big trip and need to distribute and organize what I collected and processed on the road. Then there are times when I want to review the whole inventory of my work, or some portion of it. And obviously a lot of my

time is spent merely doing something that I need to get done. I have discovered that one of the major reasons many people haven't had a lot of success with "getting organized" is simply that they have tried to do all five phases at one time. Most, when they sit down to "make a list," are trying to collect the "most important things" in some order that reflects priorities and sequences, with- out setting out many (or any) real actions to take. But if you don't decide what needs to be done about your secretary's birthday, because it's "not that important" right now, that open loop will take up energy and prevent you from having a totally effective, clear focus on what is important.

This chapter explains the five phases in detail. Chapters 4 through 8 provide a step-by-step program for implementing an airtight system for each phase, with lots of examples and best practices.

Collect

It's important to know what needs to be collected and how to col- lect it most effectively so you can process it appropriately. In order for your mind to let go of the lower-level task of trying to hang on

to everything, you have to know that you have truly captured *everything* that might represent something you have to do, and that at some point in the near future you will process and review all of it.

Gathering 100 Percent of the "Incompletes" In order to eliminate "holes in the bucket," you need to collect and gather together placeholders for or representations of all the things you consider incomplete in your world—that is, anything personal or professional, big or little, of urgent or minor impor- tance, that you think ought to be different than it currently is and that you have any level of internal commitment to changing.

Many of the things you have to do are being collected *for* you as you read this. Mail is coming into your mailbox, memos are being routed to your in-basket, e-mail is being funneled into your computer, and messages are accumulating on your voice-mail. But at the same time, you've been "collecting" things in your environ- ment and in your psyche that don't belong where they are, the way they are, for all eternity. Even though it may not be as obviously "in your face" as your e-mail, this "stuff" still requires some kind of resolution—a loop to be closed, something to be done. Strategy ideas loitering on a legal pad in a stack on your credenza, "dead" gadgets in your desk drawers that need to be fixed or thrown away, and out-of-date magazines on your coffee table all fall into this category of "stuff."

As soon as you attach a "should," "need to," or "ought to" to an item, it becomes an incomplete. Decisions you still need to make about whether or not you are going to do something, for example, are already incompletes. This includes all of your "I'm going to"s, where you've decided to do something but haven't started moving on it yet. And it certainly includes all pending and in-progress items, as well as those things on which you've done everything you're ever going to do except acknowledge that you're finished with them.

In order to manage this inventory of open loops appropri-

ately, you need to capture it into "containers" that hold items in abeyance until you have a few moments to decide what they are and what, if anything, you're going to do about them. Then you must empty these containers regularly to ensure that they remain viable collection tools.

Basically, everything is already being collected, in the larger sense. If it's

not being directly managed in a trusted external sys- tem of yours, then it's resident *somewhere* in your psyche. The fact that you haven't put an item in your in-basket doesn't mean you haven't *got* it. But we're talking here about making sure that every- thing you need is collected somewhere *other* than in your head.

The Collection Tools There are several types of tools, both low- and high-tech, that can be used to collect your incompletes. The following can all serve as versions of an in-basket, capturing self-generated input as well as information coming from outside:

• Physical in-basket
• Paper-based note-taking devices
• Electronic note-taking devices
• Voice-recording devices
• E-mail

The Physical In-Basket The standard plastic, wood, leather, or wire tray is the most com- mon tool for collecting paper-based materials and anything else physical that needs some sort of processing: mail, magazines, memos, notes, phone slips, receipts—even flashlights with dead batteries.

Writing Paper and Pads Loose-leaf notebooks, spiral binders, and steno and legal pads all work fine for collecting random ideas, input, things to do, and so on. Whatever kind fits your taste and needs is fine.

Electronic Note-Taking Computers can be used to type in notes for processing later. And as character-recognition technology advances, a parade of digital tools designed to capture data continues to be introduced. Hand- held devices (personal digital

assistants, or PDAs) and electronic legal pads can both be used to collect all kinds of input.

Auditory Capture Available auditory devices include answering machines, voice- mail, and dictating equipment, such as digital or microcassette recorders. All of these can be useful for preserving an interim record of things you need to remember or deal with.

E-mail If you're wired to the rest of the world through e-mail, your software contains some sort of holding area for incoming mes- sages and files, where they can be stored until they are viewed, read, and processed. Pagers and telephones can capture this kind of input as well.

Higher-Tech Devices Now you can dictate into computers as well as hand-write into them. As more and more communication is morphed into digital and wireless formats, it will become easier to capture ideas (with a corresponding increase in the amount of data reaching us that we need to manage!). "Computer!" "Yes, David?" "I need bread." "Yes, David." My needed grocery item has been *collected.* And as the *orga- nizing* part of the action-management process is further digitized, "bread" will automatically be added to my electronic grocery list, and maybe even ordered and delivered.

Whether high-tech or low-tech, all of the tools described above serve as similar in-baskets, capturing potentially useful informa- tion, commitments, and agreements for action. You're probably already using some version of most of them.

The Collection Success Factors Unfortunately, merely having an in-basket doesn't make it func- tional. Most people *do* have collection devices of some sort, but usually they're more or less out of control. Let's examine the three requirements to make the collection phase work:

1 | Every open loop must be in your collection system and out

of your head. 2 | You must have as few collection buckets as you can get by with. 3 | You must empty them regularly.

Get It All Out of Your Head If you're still trying to keep track of too many things in your RAM, you likely won't be motivated to use and empty your in-baskets with integrity. Most people are relatively careless about these tools because they know they don't represent discrete, whole systems anyway: there's an incomplete set of things in their in-basket and an incomplete set in their mind, and they're not getting any payoff from either one, so their thinking goes. It's like trying to play pin-ball on a machine that has big holes in the table, so the balls keep falling out: there's little motivation to keep playing the game.

These collection tools should become part of your life-style. Keep them close by so no matter where you are you can collect a potentially valuable thought—think of them as being as indis- pensable as your toothbrush or your driver's license or your glasses.

Minimize the Number of Collection Buckets You should have as many in-baskets as you need and as few as you can get by with. You need this function to be available to you in

every context, since things you'll want to capture may show up almost anywhere. If you have too many collection zones, however, you won't be able to process them easily or consistently.

An excess of collection buckets is seldom a problem on the high-tech end; the real improvement opportunity for most people is on the low-tech side, primarily in the areas of note-taking and physical in-basket collection. Written notes need to be corralled and processed instead of left lying embedded in stacks, note- books, and drawers. Paper materials need to be funneled into physical in-baskets instead of being scattered over myriad piles in all the available corners of your world.

Implementing standard tools for capturing *Men of lofty genius* ideas and input will become more and more critical •*when they are* as your life and work become more sophisticated. As *doing the least* you proceed in your career, for instance, you'll proba- •*work are the most active.* — *Leonar* bly notice that your best ideas about work will not come to you *at* work. The ability to leverage

that thinking with good collection devices th at hand is key to increased productivity.

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Empty the Buckets Regularly The final success factor for *collecting* should be obvious: if you don't empty and process the "stuff" you've collected, your buckets aren't serving any function other than the storage of amorphous material. Emptying the bucket does not mean that you have to *finish* what's in your voice-mail, e-mail, or in-basket; it just means you have to take it out of the container, decide what it is and what should be done with it, and, if it's still unfinished, organize it into your system. You don't put it back into "in"! Not emptying your in-basket is like having garbage cans that nobody ever dumps— you just have to keep buying new ones to hold all your trash.

In order for you to get "in" to empty, your total action- management system must be in place. Too much "stuff" is left piled in in-baskets because of a lack of effective systems "down- stream" from there. It often seems easier to leave things in "in"

when you know you have to do something about them but can't do it right then. The in-basket, especially for paper and e-mail, is the best that many people can do in terms of organization—at least they know that *somewhere* in there is a reminder of some- thing they still have to do. Unfortunately, that safety net is lost when the piles get out of control or the inventory of e-mails gets too extensive to be viewed on one screen.

When you master the next phase and know how to process your incompletes easily and rapidly, "in" can return to its original function. Let's move on to how to get those in-baskets and e-mail systems *empty* without necessarily having to *do* the work now.

Process

Teaching them the item-by-item thinking required to get their collection buckets empty is perhaps the most critical improve- ment I have made for virtually all the people I've worked with. When the head of a major department in a global corporation had finished processing all her open items with me, she sat back in awe and told me that though she had been able to relax about what meetings to go to thanks to her trust in her calendar, she had never felt that same relief about all the many other aspects of her job, which we had just clarified together. The actions and infor- mation she needed to be reminded of were now identified and entrusted

to a concrete system.

What do you need to ask yourself (and answer) about each e-mail, voice-mail, memo, or self-generated idea that comes your way? This is the component of action management that forms the basis for your personal organization. Many people try to "get organized" but make the mistake of doing it with incomplete batches of "stuff." You can't organize what's incoming—you can only collect it and process it. Instead, you organize the actions you'll need to take based on the decisions you've made about what needs to be done. The whole deal—both the *processing* and

organizing phases—is captured in the center "trunk" of the decision-tree model shown here.

In later chapters, I'll coach you in significant detail through each element of the process. For now, though, I suggest you select a to-do list or a pile of papers from your in-basket and assess a few items as we take an overview.

What Is **It?** This is not a dumb question. We've talked about "stuff." And we've talked about collection buckets. But we haven't discussed what stuff *is* and what to do about it. For example, many of the items that tend to leak out of our personal organizing systems are amor- phous forms that we receive from the government or from our company—do we actually need to *do* something about them? And what about that e-mail from human resources, letting us know that blah-blah about the blah-blah is now the policy of blah-blah? I've unearthed piles of messages in stacks and desk drawers that were tossed there because the client didn't take just a few seconds to figure out what in fact the communication or document was really about. Which is why the next decision is critical.

Is **It** Actionable? There are two possible answers for this: YES and NO.

No Action Required If the answer is NO, there are three possibili- ties:

1 | It's trash, no longer needed. 2 | No action is needed now, but something might need to be done later (incubate). 3 | The item is potentially useful information that might be needed for something later (reference).

These three categories can themselves be managed; we'll get into that in a later chapter. For now, suffice it to say that you need

a trash basket and <Del> key for trash, a "tickler" file or calendar for material that's incubating, and a good filing system for refer- ence information.

Actionable This is the YES group of items, stuff about which something needs to be done. Typical examples range from an e-mail requesting your participation in a corporate service project on such-and-such a date to the notes in your in-basket from your face-to-face meeting with the group vice president about a significant new project that involves hiring an outside consultant.

Two things need to be determined about each actionable item:

1 | What "project" or outcome have you committed to? and 2 | What's the next action required?

If It's About a Project. . . You need to capture that outcome on a "Projects" list. That will be the stake in the ground that reminds you that you have an open loop. A Weekly Review of the list (see page 46) will bring this item back to you as something that's still outstanding. It will stay fresh and alive in your management system until it is completed or eliminated.

What's the Next Action? This is the critical question for anything you've collected; if you answer it appropriately, you'll have the key substantive thing to organize. The "next action" is the next physical, visible activity that needs to be engaged in, in order to move the current reality toward completion.

> *It does not take much strength to do things, but it requires a great deal of strength to decide what to do. —Elbert*

Some examples of next actions might be:

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• Call Fred re tel. # for the garage he recommended.
• Draft thoughts for the budget-meeting agenda.
• Talk to Angela about the filing system we need to set up.
• Research database-management software on the Web.

These are all real physical activities that need to happen. Reminders of these will become the primary grist for the mill of your personal productivity-management system.

Do It, Delegate It, or Defer It Once you've decided on the next action, you have three options:

1 | *Do it.* If an action will take less than two minutes, it should be *done* at the moment it is defined. 2 | *Delegate it.* If the action will take longer than two minutes, ask yourself, Am I the right person to do this? If the answer is no, *delegate* it to the appropriate entity. 3 | *Defer it.* If the action will take longer than two minutes, and you are the right person to do it, you will have to *defer* acting on it until later and track it on one or more "Next Actions" lists.

Organize

The outer ring of the workflow diagram shows the eight discrete categories of reminders and materials that will result from your processing all your "stuff." Together they make up a total system for organizing just about everything that's on your plate, or could be added to it, on a daily and weekly basis.

For nonactionable items, the possible categories are *trash, incubation tools,* and *reference storage.* If no action is needed on something, you toss it, "tickle" it for later reassessment, or file it so you can find the material if you need to refer to it at another time. To manage actionable things, you will need a *list of projects, storage or files for project plans and materials,* a *calendar,* a *list of reminders of next actions,* and a *list of reminders of things you're waiting for.*

All of the organizational categories need to be physically contained in some form. When I refer to "lists," I just mean some sort of reviewable set of reminders, which could be lists on

notebook paper or in some computer program or even file folders holding separate pieces of paper for each item. For instance, the list of current projects could be kept on a page in a Day Runner; it could be a "To Do" category on a PDA; or it could be in a file labeled "Projects List." Incubating reminders (such as "after March 1 contact my accountant to set up a meeting") may be stored in a paper-based "tickler" file or in a paper- or computer- based calendar program.

Projects I define *a project* as any desired result that requires more than one action step. This means that some rather small things that you might not normally call projects are going to be on your "Projects" list. The reasoning behind my definition is that if one step won't complete something, some kind of stake needs to be placed in the ground to remind you that there's something still left to do. If you don't have a placeholder to remind you about it, it will slip back into RAM. Another way to think of this is as a list of open loops.

A Partial "Projects"List Get new staff person on board R&D joint-venture video project August vacation Produce new training compact disk Staff off-site retreat Establish next year's seminar schedule Publish book Orchestrate a one-hour keynote Finalize computer upgrades . presentation Update will Get proficient with videoconferencing Finalize budgets access Finalize new product line Finalize employment agreements Get comfortable with new contact- Install new backyard lights

management software Establish formal relationships with South Get reprints of *Fortune* article American rep Get a publicist Finalize staff policies and procedures Finish new orchard planting Get a new living-room chair

Projects do not need to be listed in any particular order, whether by size or by priority. They just need to be on a master list so you can review them regularly enough to ensure that appropri- ate next actions have been defined for each of them.

You don't actually *do* a project; you can only do action steps *related* to it.

When enough of the right action steps have been taken, some situation will have been created that matches your initial picture of the outcome closely enough that you can call it "done." The list of projects is the compilation of finish lines we put before us, to keep our next actions moving on all tracks appropriately.

Project Support Material For many of your projects, you will accumulate relevant informa- tion that you will want to organize by theme or topic or project name. Your "Projects" list will be merely an index. All of the details, plans, and supporting information that you may need as you work on your various projects should be contained in separate file folders, computer files, notebooks, or binders.

Support Materials and Reference Files Once you have organized your project support material by theme or topic, you will probably find that it is almost identical to your reference material and could be kept in the same reference file system (a "Wedding" file could be kept in the general-reference files, for instance). The only difference is that in the case of active projects, support mate- rial may need to be reviewed on a more consistent basis to ensure that all the necessary action steps are identified.

I usually recommend that people store their support materi- als out of sight. If you have a good working reference file system close enough at hand, you may find that that's the simplest way to organize them. There will be times, though, when it'll be more convenient to have the materials out and instantly in view and available, especially if you're working on a hot project that you need to check references for several times during the day. File

folders in wire standing holders or in stackable trays within easy reach can be practical for this kind of "pending" paperwork.

The Next-Action Categories As the Workflow Diagram makes clear, the next-action decision is central. That action needs to be the next physical, visible behav- ior, without exception, on every open loop.

Any less-than-two-minute actions that you perform, and all other actions that have already been completed, do not, of course, need to be tracked; they're done. What *does* need to be tracked is every action that has to happen at a specific time or on a specific day (enter these in your calendar); those that need to be done as soon as they can (add these to your "Next Actions" lists); and all those that you are waiting for others to do (put these on a "Wait- ing For" list).

Calendar Reminders of actions you need to take fall into two categories: those about things that have to happen on a specific day or time, and those about things that just need to get done as soon as possi- ble. Your calendar handles the first type of reminder. Three things go on your calendar:

• time-specific actions;
• day-specific actions;
and
• day-specific information.

Time-Specific Actions This is a fancy name for appointments. Often the next action to be taken on a project is attending a meet- ing that has been set up to discuss it. Simply tracking that on the calendar is sufficient.

Day-Specific Actions These are things that you need to do *some- time* on a certain day, but not necessarily at a *specific* time. Perhaps you told Mioko you would call her on Friday to check that the

report you're sending her is OK. She won't have the report until Thursday, and she's leaving the country on Saturday, so Friday is the time window for taking the action—but anytime Friday will be fine. That should be tracked on the calendar for Friday but not tied to any particular time slot—it should just go on the day. It's useful to have a calendar on which you can note both time-specific and day-specific actions.

Day-Specific Information The calendar is also the place to keep track of things you want to *know* about on specific days—not nec- essarily *actions* you'll have to take but rather *information* that may be useful on a certain date. This might include directions for appointments, activities that other people (family or staff) will be involved in then, or events of interest. It's also helpful to put short-term "tickler" information here, too, such as a reminder to call someone after the day they

return from a vacation.

No More "Daily To-Do" Lists Those three things are what go on the calendar, and nothing else! I know this is heresy to traditional

time-management training, which has almost uni- versally taught that the "daily to-do list" is key. But such lists don't work, for two reasons.

First, constant new input and shifting tactical priorities reconfigure daily work so consistently that it's virtually impossible to nail down to-do items ahead of time. Having a working game plan as a ref-

erence point is always useful, but it must be able to be renegotiated at any moment. Trying to keep a list in writing on the calendar, which must then be rewritten on another day if items don't get done, is demoralizing and a waste of time. The "Next Actions" lists I advocate will hold all of those action reminders, even the most time-sensitive ones. And they won't have to be rewritten daily.

Second, if there's something on a daily to-do list that doesn't absolutely *have* to get done that day, it will dilute the emphasis on **40** *Blessed are the* *flexible, for they shall not be bent out of shape.__ Michael*

the things that truly *do.* If I *have* to call Mioko on Friday because that's the only day I can reach her, but then I add five other, less important or less time-sensitive calls to my to-do list, when the day gets crazy I may never call Mioko. My brain will have to take back the reminder that that's the one phone call I won't get another chance at. That's not utilizing the system appropriately. The way I look at it, the calendar should be sacred territory. If you write something there, it must get done that day or not at all. The only rewriting should be for changed appointments.

The "Next Actions" List(s) So where do all your action reminders go? On "Next Actions" lists, which, along with the calendar, are at the heart of daily action-management organization.

Any longer-than-two-minute, nondelegatable action you have identified needs to be tracked somewhere. "Call Jim Smith re budget meeting," "Phone Rachel and Laura's moms about sleepaway camp," and "Draft ideas re the annual sales conference" are all the kinds of action reminders that need to be kept in appro- priate lists, or buckets, to be assessed as options for what we will do at any point in time.

If you have only twenty or thirty of these, it may be fine to keep them all on one list labeled "Next Actions," which you'll review whenever you have any free time. For most of us, however, the number is more likely to be fifty to

Everything should 150. In that case it makes sense to subdivide your

be made as simple "Next make tions" to when Actions" be asked you're list at at your into a phone weekly categories, or briefing.

"Project such as Head "Calls" Ques- to

as simpler. —Albert possible, Einstein but not

Nonactionable Items You need well-organized, discrete systems to handle the items that require no action as well as the ones that do. No-action sys- tems fall into three categories: *trash, incubation,* and *reference.*

Trash *Trash* should be self-evident. Throw away anything that has no potential future action or reference value. If you leave this stuff mixed in with other categories, it will seriously undermine the system.

Incubation There are two other groups of things besides trash that require no immediate action, but this stuff you will want to *keep.* Here again, it's critical that you separate nonactionable from actionable items; otherwise you will tend to go numb to your piles, stacks, and lists and not know where to start or what needs to be done.

Say you pick up something from a memo, or read an e-mail, that gives you an idea for a project you *might* want to do someday, but not now. You'll want to be reminded of it again later so you can reassess the option of doing something about it in the future. For example, a brochure arrives in the mail for the upcoming sea- son of your local symphony. On a quick browse, you see that the program that really interests you is still four months away—too distant for you to move on it yet (you're not sure what your travel schedule will be that far out), but if you *are* in town, you'd like to go. What should you do about that?

There are two kinds of "incubate" systems that could work for this kind of thing: "Someday/Maybe" lists and a "tickler" file.

"Someday/Maybe" It can be useful and inspiring to maintain an ongoing list of things you might want to do at some point but not now. This is the "parking lot" for projects that would be impossi- ble to move on at present but that you don't want to forget about entirely. You'd like to be reminded of the possibility at regular intervals.

Typical Partial "Someday/Maybe" List Get a bass-fishing boat Create promotional videos of staff Learn Spanish Find Stafford Lyons Take a watercolor class Get a digital video camera * Get a sideboard for the kitchen Northern Italy trip Build a lap pool Apprentice with my carpenter Get Kathryn a scooter Spotlight our artwork Take a balloon ride Build a koi pond Build a wine cellar Digitize old photos and videos Take a trip through Montana Have a neighborhood party Learn Photoshop software capabilities Set up remote-server access at home Set up a not-for-profit foundation

You'll probably have some subcategories in your master "Someday/Maybe" list, such as

• CDs I might want

- Videos to rent
- Books to read
- Wine to taste
- Weekend trips to take
- Things to do with the kids
- Seminars to take

You must review this list periodically if you're going to get the most value from it. I suggest you include a scan of the con- tents in your Weekly Review (see page 46).

"Tickler" File The most elegant version of holding for review is the "tickler" file, sometimes also referred to as a "suspended" or "follow-on" file. This is a system that allows you to almost literally mail something to yourself, for receipt on some designated day in the future.

Your calendar can serve the same function. You might remind yourself on your calendar for March 15, for example, that

your taxes are due in a month; or for September 12, that *Swan Lake* will be presented by the Bolshoi at the Civic Auditorium in six weeks.

For further details, refer to chapter 7.

Reference Material Many things that come your way require no action but have intrinsic value as information. You will want to keep and be able to retrieve these as needed. They can be stored in paper-based or digital form.

Paper-based material—anything from the menu for a local take-out deli to the plans, drawings, and vendor information for a landscape project—is best stored in efficient physical-retrieval systems. These can range from pages in a loose-leaf planner or notebook, for a list of favorite restaurants or the phone numbers of the members of a school committee, to whole file cabinets dedicated to the due-diligence paperwork for a corporate merger.

Electronic storage can include everything from networked database information to ad hoc reference and archive folders located in your communication software.

The most important thing to remember here is that refer- ence should be exactly that—information that can be *easily* referred to when required. Reference systems generally take two forms: (1) topic- and area-specific storage, and (2) general- reference files. The first types usually define themselves in terms of how they are stored—for example, a file drawer dedicated to contracts, by date; a drawer containing only confidential employee-compensation information; or a series of cabinets for closed legal cases that might need to be consulted during future trials.

General-Reference Filing The second type of reference system is one that everyone needs close at hand for storing ad hoc informa- tion that doesn't belong in some predesignated category. You need somewhere to keep the instruction manual for your cell phone,

the notes from the meeting about the Smith project, and those few yen that you didn't get to change at the end of your last trip to Tokyo (and that you'll use when you go back there).

The lack of a good general-reference file can be one of the biggest bottlenecks in implementing an efficient personal action- management system. If filing isn't easy and fast (and even fun!), you'll tend to stack things instead of filing them. If your

reference material doesn't have a nice clean edge to it, the line between actionable and nonactionable items will blur, visually and psycho- logically, and your mind will go numb to the whole business. Establishing a good working system for this category of material is critical to ensuring stress-free productivity; we will explore it in detail in chapter 7.

Review

It's one thing to write down that you need milk; it's another to be at the store and *remember* it. Likewise, writing down that you need to call a friend for the name of an estate attorney is different from remembering it when you're at a phone and have some dis- cretionary time.

You need to be able to review the whole picture of your life and work at appropriate intervals and appropriate levels. For most people the magic of workflow management is realized in the con- sistent use of the review phase. This is where you take a look at all your outstanding projects and open loops, at what I call the 10,000-foot level (see page 51), on a weekly basis. It's your chance to scan all the defined actions and options before you, thus radi- cally increasing the efficacy of the choices you make about what you're doing at any point in time.

What to Review When If you set up a personal organization system structured as I rec- ommend, with a "Projects" list, a calendar, "Next Actions" lists,

and a "Waiting For" list, not much will be required to maintain that system.

The item you'll probably review most frequently is your calendar, which will remind you about the "hard landscape" for the day—that is, what things will die if you don't do them. This doesn't mean that the things written on there are the most "important" in some grand sense—only that they have to get done. At at any point in time, knowing what *has* to get done, and when, creates a terrain for maneuvering. It's a good habit, as soon as you conclude an action on your calendar (a meeting, a phone call, the final draft of a report), to check and see what else remains to be done.

After checking your calendar, you'll most often turn to your "Next Actions" lists. These hold the inventory of predefined actions that you can take if you have any discretionary time during the

day. If you've organized them by context ("At Home," "At Computer," "In Meeting with George"), they'll come into play only when those contexts are available. "Projects," "Waiting For," and "Someday/Maybe" lists need to be reviewed only as often as you think they have to be in order to stop you from wondering about them.

Critical Success Factor: The Weekly Review Everything that might potentially require action must be reviewed on a frequent enough basis to keep your mind from tak- ing back the job of remembering and reminding. In order to trust the rapid and intuitive judgment calls that you make about actions from moment to moment, you must consistently retrench at some more elevated level. In my experience (with thousands of people), that translates into a behavior critical for success: the Weekly Review.

All of your open loops (i.e., projects), active project plans, and "Next Actions," "Agendas," "Waiting For," and even "Someday/ Maybe" lists should be reviewed once a week. This also gives you **46** Review your lists as often as you need to, to get them off your mind.

an opportunity to ensure that your brain is clear and that all the loose strands of the past few days have been collected, processed, and organized.

If you're like most people, you've found that things can get relatively out of control during the course of a few days of operational intensity. That's to be expected. You wouldn't want to distract yourself from too much of the work at hand in an effort to stay totally "squeaky clean" all the time. But in order to afford the luxury of "getting on a roll" with confi- dence, you'll probably need to clean house once a week. The Weekly Review is the time to

• Gather and process all your "stuff."
• Review your system.
• Update your lists.
• Get clean, clear, current, and complete.

The affairs of life embrace a multitude of interests, and he who reasons in any one of them, without consulting the rest, is a visionary unsuited to control the business of the world.
—-James
Fenim ore Cooper

Most people don't have a really complete system, and they get no real payoff from reviewing things for just that reason: their overview isn't total. They still have a vague sense that something may be missing. That's why the rewards to be gained from imple- menting *this* whole process are at least geometric: the more complete the system is, the more you'll trust it.

Most people feel And the more you trust it, the more complete you'll
best about their be motivated to *keep* it. The Weekly Review is a mas-
work when they've ter key to maintaining that standard.
cleaned up, closed Most people feel best about their work the week
up, clarified, and before their vacation, but it's not because of the vaca-
renegotiated all tion itself. leave on renegotiate others. I of yearly.

  What do you do the last week before you a big trip? You clean up, close up, clarify, and all your agreements with yourself and just suggest that you do this weekly instead

their agreements with themselves and others. Do this weekly instead of yearly.

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Do

The basic purpose of this workflow-management process is to facilitate good choices about what you're *doing* at any Every decision to point in time. At 10:33 A.M. Monday, deciding act is an intuitive whether to call Sandy, finish the proposal, or process one. is *hoping* choice it's to the The migrate right to it's challenge *trusting* the choice. from

right

your the fident *trust* speed proper e-mails and in about your effectiveness. preplanning your will actions, choices. always you immediately be You can an can intuitive feel move much increasing call, from more but *hope* your con- with

to

Three Models for Making Action Choices Let's assume for a moment that you're not resisting any of your "stuff" out of insecurity or procrastination. There will always be a large list of actions that you are *not* doing at any given moment. So how will you decide what to *do* and what *not* to do, and feel good about both?

The answer is, by trusting your intuition. If you have *col- lected, processed, organized,* and *reviewed* all your current commit- ments, you can galvanize your intuitive judgment with some intelligent and practical thinking about You have more to

your work do than you can

and values. possibly just good choices.

need about do. to your You feel

ful about whether for I have what you you developed to to incorporate call do. Frederick, They three won't in models your e-mail tell decision-making that you your will answers— be son help- at school, or just go have an informal "how are you?" conversation with your secretary—but they will assist you in framing your options more intelligently. And that's some- thing that the simple time- and priority-management panaceas *can't* do.

1. The Four-Criteria Model for Choosing Actions in the Moment At 3:22 on Wednesday, how do you choose what to do? There are four criteria you can apply, in this order:

1 | Context 2 | Time
available 3 | Energy
available 4 | Priority

Context A few actions can be done anywhere (like drafting ideas about a project with pen and paper), but most require a specific location (at home, at your office) or having some productivity tool at hand, such as a phone or a computer. These are the first factors that limit your choices about what you *can* do in the moment.

Time Available When do you have to do something *else}* Hav- ing a meeting in five minutes would prevent doing many actions that require more time.

Energy Available How much energy do you have? Some actions you have to do require a reservoir of fresh, creative mental energy. Others need more physical horsepower. Some need very little of either.

Priority Given your context, time, and energy available, what action will give you the highest payoff? You have an hour, you're in your office with a phone and a computer, and your energy is 7.3 on a scale of 10. Should you call the client back, work on the pro- posal, process your voice-mails and e-mails, or check in with your spouse to see how his or her day is going?

This is where you need to access your intution and begin to rely on your judgment call in the moment. To explore that con- cept further, let's examine two more models for deciding what's "most important" for you to be doing.

2. The Threefold Model for Evaluating Daily Work When you're getting things done, or "working" in the universal sense, there are three different kinds of activities you can be engaged in:

- Doing predefined work
- Doing work as it shows up
- Defining your work

Doing Predefined Work When you're doing predefined work, you're working off your "Next Actions" lists—completing tasks that you have previously determined need to be done, managing your workflow. You're making the calls you need to make, drafting ideas you want to brainstorm, or preparing a list of things to talk to your attorney about.

Doing Work as It Shows Up Often things come up ad hoc—unsuspected, unforeseen—that you either have to or choose to respond to as they occur. For example, your partner walks into your office and wants to have a conversation about the new prod- uct launch, so you talk to her instead of doing all the other things you could be doing. Every day brings surprises—unplanned-for things that just show up, and you'll need to expend at least *some* time and energy on many of them. When you follow these leads, you're deciding by default that these things are more important than anything else you have to do.

Defining Your Work Defining your work entails clearing up your in-basket, your e-mail, your voice-mail, and your meeting notes and breaking down new projects into actionable steps. As you process your inputs, you'll no doubt be taking care of some less- than-two-minute actions and tossing and filing numerous things (another version of doing work as it shows up). A good portion of this activity will consist of identifying things that need to get

done sometime, but not right away. You'll be adding to all of your lists as you go along.

Once you have defined all your work, you can trust that your lists of things to do are complete. And your context, time, and energy available still allow you the option of more than one thing to do. The final thing to consider is the nature of your work, and its goals and standards.

3. The Six-Level Model for Reviewing Your Own Work

Priorities should drive your choices, but most models for deter- mining them are not reliable tools for much of our real work activity. In order to know what your priorities are, you have to know what your work is. And there are at least six different per- spectives from which to define that. To use an aerospace analogy, the conversation has a lot to do with the altitude.

• 50,000+ feet: Life
• 40,000 feet: Three- to five-year
vision
• 30,000 feet: One- to two-year
goals
• 20,000 feet: Areas of
responsibility
• 10,000 feet: Current
projects
• Runway: Current actions

Let's start from the bottom up:

Runway: Current Actions This is the accumulated list of all the actions you need to take—all the phone calls you have to make, the e-mails you have to respond to, the errands you've got to run, and the agendas you want to communicate to your boss and your spouse. You'd probably have three hundred to five hundred hours' worth of these things to do if you stopped the world right now and got no more input from yourself or anyone else.

10,000 Feet: Current Projects Creating many of the actions that you currently have in front of you are the thirty to one hundred

projects on your plate. These are the relatively short-term out- comes you want to achieve, such as setting up a home computer, organizing a sales conference, moving to a new headquarters, and getting a dentist.

20,000 Feet: Areas of Responsibility You create or accept most of your projects because of your responsibilities, which for most people can be defined in ten to fifteen categories. These are the key areas within which you want to achieve results and maintain standards. Your job may entail at least implicit commitments for things like strategic planning, administrative support, staff development, market research, customer service, or asset manage- ment. And your personal life has an equal number of such focus arenas: health, family, finances, home environment, spirituality, recreation, etc. Listing and reviewing these responsibilities gives a more comprehensive framework for evaluating your inventory of projects.

30,000 Feet: One- to Two-Year Goals What you want to be expe- riencing in the various areas of your life and work one to two years from now will add another dimension to defining your work. Often meeting the goals and objectives of your job will require a shift in emphasis of your job focus, with new areas of responsi- bility emerging. At this horizon personally, too, there probably are things you'd like to accomplish or have in place, which could add importance to certain aspects of your life and diminish others.

40,000 Feet: Three- to Five-Year Vision Projecting three to five years into the future generates thinking about bigger categories: organization strategies, environmental trends, career and life- transition circumstances. Internal factors include longer-term career, family, and financial goals and considerations. Outer- world issues could involve changes affecting your job and organi- zation, such as technology, globalization, market trends, and

competition. Decisions at this altitude could easily change what your work might look like on many levels.

50, 000+ Feet Life This is the "big picture" view. Why does your company exist? Why do *you* exist? The primary purpose for any- thing provides the core definition of what its "work" really is. It is the ultimate job description. All the

goals, visions, objectives, projects, and actions derive from this, and lead toward it.

These altitude analogies are somewhat arbitrary, and in real life the important conversations you will have about your focus and your priorities may not fit exactly to one horizon or another. They can provide a useful framework, however, to remind you of the multilayered nature of your "job" and resulting commitments and tasks.

Obviously, many factors must be considered before you feel comfortable that you have made the best decision about what to do and when. "Setting priorities" in the traditional sense of focus- ing on your long-term goals and values, though obviously a neces- sary core focus, does not provide a practical framework for a vast majority of the decisions and tasks you must engage in day to day. Mastering the flow of your work at all the levels you experience that work provides a much more holistic way to get things done, and feel good about it.

Part 2 of this book will provide specific coaching about how to use these three models for making action choices, and how the best practices for collecting, processing, planning, organizing, and reviewing all contribute to your greatest success with them.

Getting Projects Creatively Under Way: The Five Phases of Project Planning

You've got to think about the big things while you're doing small things, so that all the small things go in the right direction. —Alvin Toffler

THE KEY INGREDIENTS of relaxed control are (1) clearly defined outcomes (projects) and the next actions required to move them toward closure, and (2) re- minders placed in a trusted system that is reviewed regularly. This is what I call horizontal focus. Al- though it may seem simple, the actual application of the process can create profound results.

Enhancing "Vertical" Focus

Horizontal focus is all you'll need in most situations, most of the time. Sometimes, however, you may need greater rigor and focus to get a project under control, to identify a solution, The goal is to get or to ensure that all the right steps have been deter- projects and mined. This is where vertical focus comes in. Know- situations off your ing how to think productively in this more "vertical" mind, but not to way and how to integrate the results into your per- lose useful any ideas. potentially sonal needed system for knowledge is the work. second powerful behavior set This kind of thinking doesn't have to be elabo- rate. Most of the thinking you'll need to do is infor- mal, what I call back-of-the-envelope planning—the kind of thing you do literally on the back of an envelope in a coffee shop with a colleague as you're hashing out the agenda and structure of

a sales presentation. In my experience this tends to be the most productive kind of planning you can do in terms of your output relative to the energy you put into it. True, every once in a while you may need to develop a more formal structure or plan to clarify components, sequences, or priorities. And more detailed outlines will also be necessary to coordinate more complex situations—if teams need to collaborate about various project pieces, for exam- ple, or if business plans need to be drafted to convince an investor you know what you're doing. But as a general rule, you can be pretty creative with nothing more than an envelope and a pencil.

The greatest need I've seen in project thinking in the profes- sional world is not for more formal models; usually the people who need those models already have them or can get them as part of an academic or professional curriculum. Instead, I've found the biggest gap to be the lack of a project-focusing model for "the rest of us." We need ways to validate and support our think- ing, no matter how informal. Formal planning sessions and high- horsepower planning tools (such as project software) can certainly be useful, but too often the participants in a meeting will need to have *another* meeting—a back-of-the-envelope session—to actu- ally get a piece of work fleshed out and under control. More for- mal and structured meetings also tend to skip over at least one critical issue, such as *why* the project is being done in the first place. Or they don't allow adequate time for

brainstorming, the development of a bunch of ideas nobody's ever thought about that would make the project more interesting, more profitable, or just more fun. And finally, very few such meetings bring to bear suffi- cient rigor in determining action steps and accountabilities for the various aspects of a project plan.

The good news is, there *is* a productive way to think about projects, situations, and topics that creates maximum value with minimal expenditure of time and effort. It happens to be the way we *naturally* think and plan, though not necessarily the way we *normally* plan when we consciously try to get a project under con- trol. In my experience, when people do more planning, more

informally and naturally, they relieve a great deal of stress *and* obtain better results.

The Natural Planning Model

You're already familiar with the most brilliant and creative plan- ner in the world: your brain. You yourself are actually a planning machine. You're planning when you get dressed, eat The most lunch, go to the store, or simply talk. Although the experienced planner process may seem somewhat random, a quite com- in the world is your plex series of steps in fact has to occur before your brain. brain can make anything happen physically. Your mind goes through five steps to accomplish virtually any task:

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1 | Defining purpose and principles 2 | Outcome visioning 3 | Brainstorming 4 | Organizing 5 | Identifying next actions

A Simple Example: Planning Dinner Out The last time you went out to dinner, what initially caused you to think about doing it? It could have been any number of things— the desire to satisfy hunger, socialize with friends, celebrate a spe- cial occasion, sign a business deal, or develop a romance. As soon as any of these turned into a real inclination that you wanted to move on, you started planning. Your intention was your ***purpose,*** and it automatically triggered your internal planning process. Your *principles* created the boundaries of your plan. You probably didn't consciously think *about* your principles regarding going out to dinner, but you thought *within* them: standards of food and service, affordability, convenience, and comfort all may have

CHAPTER 3 I GETTING PROJECTS CREATIVELY UNDER WAY: THE FIVE PHASES OF PLANNING

played a part. In any case, your purpose and principles were the defining impetus and boundaries of your planning.

Once you decided to fulfill your purpose, what were your first

substantive thoughts? Probably not "point II.A.3.b. in plan." Your first ideas were more likely things like "Italian food at Gio- vanni's," or "Sitting at a sidewalk table at the Bistro Cafe." You probably also imagined some positive picture of what you might experience or how the evening would turn out—maybe the peo- ple involved, the atmosphere, and/or the outcome. That was your **outcome visioning.** Whereas your purpose was the *why* of your going out to dinner, your vision was an image of the *what*—of the physical world's looking, sounding, and feeling the ways that best fulfilled your purpose.

Once you'd identified with your vision, what did your mind naturally begin doing? What did it start to think about? "What time should we go?" "Is it open tonight?" "Will it be crowded?" "What's the weather like?" "Should we change clothes?" "Is there gas in the car?" "How hungry are we?" That was **brainstorming.** Those questions were part of the naturally creative process that happens once you commit to some outcome that hasn't happened yet. Your brain noticed a gap between what you were looking toward and where you actually were at the time, and it began to resolve that "cognitive dissonance" by trying to fill in the blanks. This is the beginning of the "how" phase of natural planning. But it did the thinking in a somewhat random and ad hoc fashion. Lots of different aspects of going to dinner just occurred to you. You almost certainly didn't need to actually write all of them down on a piece of paper, but you did a version of that process in your mind.*

Once you had generated a sufficient number of ideas and details, you couldn't help but start to **organize** them. You may

*If, however, you were handling the celebration for your best friend's recent tri- umph, the complexity and detail that might accrue in your head should warrant *at least* the back of an envelope!

have thought or said, "First we need to find out if the restaurant is open", or "Let's call the Andersons and see if they'd like to go out with us." Once you've generated various thoughts relevant to the outcome, your mind will automatically begin to sort them by components (subprojects), priorities, and/or sequences of events. *Components* would be: "We need to handle logistics, people, and location." *Priorities* would be: "It's critical to find out if the client

really would like to go to dinner." *Sequences* would be: "First we need to check whether the restaurant is open, then call the Andersons, then get dressed."

Finally (assuming that you're really committed to the project— in this case, going out to dinner), you focus on the **next action** that you need to take to make the first component actually happen. "Call Suzanne's to see if it's open, and make the reservation."

These five phases of project planning occur naturally for everything you accomplish during the day. It's how you create things—dinner, a relaxing evening, a new product, or a new com- pany. You have an urge to make something happen; you image the outcome; you generate ideas that might be relevant; you sort those into a structure; and you define a physical activity that would begin to make it a reality. And you do all of that naturally, without giving it much thought.

Natural Planning Is Not Necessarily Normal But is the process described above the way your committee is planning the church retreat? Is it how your IT team is approach- ing the new system installation? Is it how you're organizing the wedding or thinking through the potential merger?

Have you clarified the primary purpose of the project and com- municated it to everyone who ought to know it? And have you agreed on the standards and behaviors you'll need to adhere to to make it successful?

Have you envisioned success and considered all the innovative things that might result if you achieved it? 58^{Have you} envisioned wild success lately?

Have you gotten all possible ideas out on the table— everything you need to take into consideration that might affect the outcome?

Have you identified the mission-critical components, key milestones, and deliverables?

Have you defined all the aspects of the project that could be moved on right now, what the next action is for each part, and who's responsible for what?

If you're like most people I interact with in a coaching or consulting capacity, the collective answer to these questions is, probably not. There are likely to be at least some components of the natural planning model that you haven't implemented.

In some of my seminars I get participants to actually plan a current strategic project that uses this model. In only a few minutes they walk themselves through all five phases, and usually end up being amazed at how much progress they've made compared with what they have tried to do in the past. One gentleman came up afterward and told me, "I don't know whether I should thank you or be angry. I just finished a

business plan I've been telling myself would take months, and now I have no excuses for not doing it!"

You can try it for yourself right now if you like. Choose one project that is new or stuck or that could simply use some improvement. Think of your purpose. Think of what a successful outcome would look like: where would you be physically, finan- cially, in terms of reputation, or whatever? Brainstorm potential steps. Organize your ideas. Decide on the next actions. Are you any clearer about where you want to go and how to get there?

The Unnatural Planning Model

To emphasize the importance of utilizing the natural planning model for the more complex things we're involved with, let's con- trast it with the more "normal" model used in most environments— what I call unnatural planning.

When the "Good Idea" Is a Bad Idea Have you ever heard a well-intentioned manager start a meeting with the question, "OK, so who's got a good idea about this?"

What is the assumption here? Before any evaluation of what's a "good idea" can be trusted, the purpose must

If you're waiting to have a good idea before you have any ideas, you won't have many ideas.

be clear, the vision must be well defined, and all the relevant data must have been collected (brain- stormed) and analyzed (organized). "What's a good idea?" is a good question, but only when you're about 80 percent of the way through your thinking! *Start- ing* there would probably blow anyone's creative

mental fuses. Trying to approach any situation from a perspective that is not the natural way your mind operates will be difficult. People do it all the time, but it almost always engenders a lack of clarity and increased stress. In interactions with others, it opens the door for egos, politics, and hidden agendas to take over the discussion (gen- erally speaking, the most verbally aggressive will run the show). And if it's just you, attempting to come up with a "good idea" before defining your purpose, creating a vision, and collecting lots of initial bad ideas is likely to give you a case of creative constipation.

Let's Blame Mrs. Williams If you're like most people in our culture, the only formal training you've ever had in planning and organizing proactively was in the fourth or fifth grade. And even if that wasn't the *only* education you've had in this area, it was probably the most emotionally intense (meaning it sank in the deepest).

Mrs. Williams, my fourth-grade teacher, had to

Outlines as wrote first.
long the as were report
you
easy,
teach lesson But report, an *outline!*
in us plans). what order about did We to organizing we were write have going a to our
well-organized, write to thinking learn first? to (it That's write was successful *reports.*
right— in her

Did you ever have to do that, create an outline to begin with? Did you ever stare at a Roman numeral I at the top of your page for a torturous period of time and decide that planning and orga- nizing ahead of time were for people very different from you? Probably.

In the end, I did learn to write outlines. I just wrote the report first, then made up an outline from the report, after the fact.

That's what most people learned about planning from our educational system. And I still see outlines done after the fact, just to please the authorities. In the business world, they're often headed "Goals" and "Objectives." But they still have very little to do with what people are doing or what they're inspired about. These documents are sitting in drawers and in e-mails some- where, bearing little relationship to operational reality.

The Reactive Planning Model

The unnatural planning model is what most people consciously think of as "planning," and because it's so often artificial and irrelevant to real work, people just don't plan. At least not on the front end: they resist planning meetings, presentations, and strategic operations until the last minute.

But what happens if you don't plan ahead of time? In many cases, crisis! ("Didn't you get the
tick-
When you find ets? I thought you were going to do that?!") Then,
yourself in a hole, when the urgency of the last minute is upon you, the
stop digging. reactive planning model ensues.
—Will

What's the first level of focus when the stuff hits the fan? *Action!* Work harder! Overtime! More people! Get busier! And a lot of stressed-out people are thrown at the situa- tion.

Then, when having a lot of busy people banging into each other doesn't resolve the situation, someone gets more

sophisticated and says, "We need to get **organized!"** (Catching on now?) Then people draw boxes around the problem and label them. Or *redraw* the boxes and *relabel* them.

At some point they realize that just redrawing *Don't just do*
boxes isn't really doing much to solve the problem. *something. Stand*
Now someone (much more sophisticated) suggests *there. —Rochelle Myer*
that With more everyone creativity in the is needed. "Let's **brainstorm!"** room, the boss asks,
"So, who's got a *good* idea here?" (Thank you, Mrs. Williams.) When not much happens, the

boss may surmise that his staff has used up most of its internal creativity. Time to hire a consultant! Of course, if the consultant is worth his salt, at some point he is probably going to ask the big question: "So, what are you really trying to *do* here, anyway?" ***(vision,purpose).***

The reactive style is the *reverse* of the natural model. It will always come back to a top-down focus. It's not a matter of *whether* the natural planning will be done—just *when,* and at what cost.

Natural Planning Techniques: The Five Phases

It goes without saying, but still it must be said again: thinking in more effective ways about projects and situations can make things happen sooner, better, and more successfully. So if our minds plan naturally anyway, what can we learn from that? How can we use that model to facilitate getting more and better results in our thinking?

Let's examine each of the five phases of natural planning and see how we can leverage these contexts.

Purpose It never hurts to ask the "why?" question. Almost anything you're currently doing can be enhanced and even galvanized by more

scrutiny at this top level of focus. Why are you going to your next meeting? What's the purpose of your task? Why are you having friends over for a barbeque in the backyard? Why are you hiring a marketing director? Why do you have a budget?

I admit it: this is nothing but advanced common sense. To know and to be clear about the purpose of any activity are prime directives for clarity, creative development, and cooperation. But it's common sense that's not commonly practiced, simply because it's so easy for us to create things, get caught up in the form of what we've created, and let our connection with our real and primary inten- tions slip.

I know, based upon thousands of hours spent in many offices with many sophisticated people, that the "why?" question cannot be ignored. When people complain to me about having too many meetings, I have to ask, "What is the purpose of the meetings?" When they ask, "Who should I invite to the planning session?" I have to ask, "What's the purpose of the planning session?" Until we have the answer to *my* questions, there's no possible way to come up with an appropriate response to *theirs.*

The Value of Thinking About "Why" Here are just some of the benefits of asking "why?":

• It defines success.

• It creates decision-making criteria.

• It aligns resources.

• It motivates.

• It clarifies focus.

• It expands options.

Let's take a closer look at each of these in turn.

Fanaticism consists of redoubling your efforts when you have forgotten your aim.

—*George*

People love to win. If you're not totally clear about the purpose of what you're doing, you have no chance of winning.

about the purpose of what you're doing, you have no *progress. Don't* *•wait to get perfect. —Ann McGee Cooper*

chance of winning. Purpose defines success. It's the primal reference point for any investment of time and energy, from deciding to run for elective office to designing a form. Ultimately you can't feel good about a staff meeting unless you know what the purpose of the meeting was. And if you want to sleep well, you'd better have a good answer when your board asks why you fired your V.P. of marketing or hired that hotshot M.B.A. as your new finance director. You won't really know whether or not your business plan is any good until you hold it up against the success criterion that you define by answering the question "Why do we need a business plan?"

It Creates Decision-Making Criteria How do you decide whether to spend the money for a five-color brochure or just *Often the only way* go with a two-color? How do you know whether it's *to make a hard* worth hiring a major Web design firm to handle your *decision is to come* new Web site? *back to the* purpose.

It all comes down to purpose. Given what you're trying to accomplish, are these resource investments required, and if so, which ones? There's no way to know until the purpose is clarified.

It Aligns Resources How should we spend our staffing allocation in the corporate budget? How do we best use the cash flow right now to maximize our viability as a retailer over the next year? Should we spend more money on the luncheon or the speakers for the monthly association meeting?

In each case, the answer depends on what we're really trying to accomplish—the *why.*

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It Defines Success People are starved for "wins" these days. We love to play games, and we like to win, or at least be in a position where we *could* win. And if you're not totally clear

It Motivates Let's face it: if there's no good *reason* to be doing something, it's not worth doing. I'm often stunned by how many people have forgotten *why* they're doing what they're doing—and by how quickly a simple question like "Why are you doing that?" can get them back on track.

It Clarifies Focus When you land on the real purpose for any- thing you're doing, it makes things clearer. Just taking two min- utes and writing out your primary reason for doing something invariably creates an increased sharpness of vision, much like bringing a telescope into focus. Frequently, projects and situations that have begun to feel scattered and blurred grow clearer when someone brings it back home by asking, "What are we really try- ing to accomplish here?"

It Expands Options Paradoxically, even as purpose brings things into pinpoint focus, it opens up creative thinking about wider possibilities. When you really know the underlying "why"—for the conference, for the staff party, for the

If you're not sure elimination of the management position, or for the

why you're doing merger—it expands your thinking about how to make the desired result happen. When people write out their purpose for a project in my seminars, they

something, you can never do enough of it.

often claim it's like a fresh breeze blowing through their mind, clarifying their vision of what

they're doing. Is your purpose clear and specific enough? If you're truly experiencing the benefits of a purpose focus—motivation, clarity, decision-making criteria, alignment, and creativity—then your purpose probably *is* specific enough. But many "purpose state- ments" are too vague to produce such results. "To have a good department," for example, might be too broad a goal. After all, what constitutes a "good department"? Is it a group of people who are highly motivated, collaborating in healthy ways, and taking

initiative? Or is it a department that comes in under budget? In other words, if you don't really know when you've met your pur- pose or when you're off track, you don't have a viable directive. The question "How will I know when this is off-purpose?" must have a clear answer.

Principles Of equal value as prime criteria for driving and directing a project are the standards and values you hold. Although people seldom think about these consciously, they are always there. And if they are vio- lated, the result will inevitably be unproductive distraction and stress.

A great way to think about what your principles are is to complete this sentence: "I would give others totally free rein to do this as long as they. . ."—what? What policies, stated or unstated, will apply to your group's activities? "As long as they stayed within budget"? "satisfied the client"? "ensured a healthy team"? "promoted a positive image"?

It can be a major source of stress when others engage in or allow behavior that's outside your stan- dards. If you never have to deal with this issue, you're truly graced. If you do, some constructive conversa- .tion about and clarification of principles could align the energy and prevent unnecessary conflict. You may want to begin by asking yourself, "What behavior might undermine what I'm doing, and how can I prevent it?" That will give you a good starting point for defining your standards.

Another great reason for focusing on principles is the clarity and reference point they provide for positive conduct. How do you want or need to work with others on this project to ensure its success? You yourself are at your best when you're acting how?

Whereas purpose provides the juice and the direction, principles define the parameters of action and the criteria for excellence of behavior. **66** *Simple, clear purpose and principles give rise to complex and intelligent behavior. Complex rules and regulations give rise to simple and stupid behavior.*
—Dee

CHAPTER 3 I GETTING PROJECTS CREATIVELY UNDER WAY: THE FIVE PHASES OF PLANNING

Vision/Outcome In order most productively to access the conscious and uncon- scious resources available to you, you must have a clear picture in your mind of what success would look, sound, and feel like. Pur- pose and principles furnish the impetus and the monitoring, but vision provides the actual blueprint of the final result. This is the "what?" instead of the "why?" What will this project or situation really be like when it successfully appears in the world?

For example, graduates of your seminar are demonstrating consistently applied knowledge of the subject matter. Market share has increased 2 percent within the northeastern region over the last fiscal year. Your daughter is clear about your guidelines and support for her first semester in college.

The Power of Focus Since the 1960s thousands of books have expounded on the value of appropriate positive imagery and focus. Forward-looking focus has even been a key element in

Olympic-level sports training, with athletes imagining the physical effort, the positive energy, and the successful result to ensure the highest level of unconscious support for their performance. We know that the focus we hold in our minds

Imagination is affects what we perceive and how we perform. This is

more important as true on during a the golf course as it is in a staff serious conversation with a

spouse. meeting My or

than —Albert knowledge.

Einstein interest lies in providing a model for focus that is dynamic in a practical way, especially in project thinking.

When you focus on something—the vacation you're going to take, the meeting you're about to go

into, the product you want to launch—that focus instantly creates ideas and thought patterns you wouldn't have had otherwise. Even your physiology will respond to an image in your head as if it were reality.

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