

# **GIVE ME A BREAK**

**The art of making time work for you**

**Hugh D. Culver**

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*It's not the minutes that make a life,  
but the life in the minutes.*

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# Part I



## IT'S ABOUT TIME

**Getting honest about what  
defines success**

*Honesty is such a lonely word.*

—BILLY JOEL, musician



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# You Are Exhausted

*Watson, you see but you do not observe.*

—SHERLOCK HOLMES, detective

**Y**ou are exhausted. Despite best efforts to cross tasks off your To-Do list endless interruptions, a deluge of email and drawn out meetings have a grip on your day. By midday you feel like the contortionist trying to escape from a straight jacket; your efforts look impressive, but get you nowhere. The paper is piling up, your list just got longer and it seems the hallway outside your office has become social-central.

Sound familiar? Welcome to the club.

People just like you come to my workshops every year looking for solutions for their ongoing treadmill of conflicting deadlines, unfinished projects, disappointments and frustrations.

And usually I start every session with the same three questions:

- 1) “Do you usually have more work to do in a day than you have time for?” All of the hands in the audience quickly shoot up.



- 2) “Do you frequently finish your day saying to yourself, ‘The day is over and I have no idea where it went’?” Everyone groans in affirmation.
- 3) “In the past three months have you tried any new way, however small, to reorganize your day, prioritize work differently, change your patterns or manage your time better?” Now only a few hands go up.

And there is the irony: most people know they have a time-management problem, yet few take the time to do anything about it.

If we don’t change our patterns, our same ineffective approaches to workload and distractions will keep repeating themselves. The work may change, but there is little improvement in the approach. It’s like the old joke: What is the definition of insanity? Answer: doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a new result.

Here’s a better question: What is the definition of *sanity*? Answer: doing things differently until you get the result you are looking for.

At some point you may reach the point of work overload where you think, “Enough is enough! I don’t want to work this hard anymore, and I need to do something about it.” Do you need to manage your time better? Of course, but first ask yourself this: will just crossing more items off my list satisfy me, or do I want to *experience* my time differently?

Anthony is, by all accounts, a winner. Good paying job, lots of responsibility, healthy family and he likes his work – maybe a bit too much. “I rarely turn work off, I can’t,” he admitted to me in a phone conversation. “If I don’t stay on top of everything I will pay later.” Just like millions of hard working people everywhere, Anthony’s dedication to his vocation will have a cost and eventually something will give. It’s not unreasonable to predict that either: his health will suffer, his marriage will falter or his work will be impacted.

Following the strategies I’m presenting in this book, Anthony

now practices specific disciplines to unlock himself from work *before* he arrives home. Perhaps for the first time in years, he is committing himself to his time *away* from work with the same dedication and vigor that he commits to his work-time. Instead of working to have more time, this is how you would ‘make time work for you’.

My guess is that *you* also want more sanity and more balance between work, with all of its allure and complications, and your personal life, with all of its richness. All of this is possible, but it’s not going to happen by learning a few email tricks or how to shuffle paper faster.

The approach I’ve taken in this book is based on my own experience of unfolding the layers of ineffectiveness that have plagued my working career for three decades. I have looked at the patterns, habits, systems (you’ll hear a lot about systems) and beliefs that have conspired to frustrate my efforts to create success and have the kind of life I desire.

Of course I have to provide you with some tools and better ways to plan and manage the distractions and work volume, but I hope you will agree that this book isn’t just about tips and techniques.

I want you to rethink your approach to time *itself* and from there rebuild your approach to work, leisure and life. This journey is full of potential and (unfortunately for most) is fully optional. But it is possible; I know because I’ve done it.

I am well aware that self-help authors usually make bold claims right about now about how their lives have turned around due to their newfound insights. They boast of their wonderful lifestyles, their numerous homes, snazzy cars and frequent trips to luxurious islands where they inevitably are sipping from drinks with umbrellas . . .

*Once you make  
the decision, the  
universe conspires  
to make it happen.*

—R.W. EMERSON,  
philosopher and leader  
of the Transcendentalist  
movement

. . . I'm not going to do that.

When I started writing this book it quickly became a cathartic experience of self-reflection. With every chapter I found myself asking, "Am *I* really doing this?" It was painful to be promoting a formula for success while in my own estimation *still falling short*. Despite this, I continued to put these ideas on paper because I realize that perfection isn't my goal.

I don't work in a factory where work processes and tasks are repeated over and over; I live in a world that is constantly changing and challenging me to respond in the best possible way. And my guess is you live in that same world.

So, dear reader, I'm not predicting perfection, more wealth or time sipping from drinks with umbrellas. But I am predicting that this book can provide something even better: growth.

If you use even one of the strategies in this book, you will grow in your ability to enjoy more success have more free time and get more of what you are looking for. That's what I *can* promise.

The solutions provided in this book are simple, and yet they work. I know this because more than 3,000 people who have attended my live training sessions have experienced successful changes immediately. And because I use them myself (okay, I know this sounds "self-help author" here) and they are still turning my life around for the better.

## GETTING THE MOST FROM THIS BOOK

*Being busy is a form of laziness –  
lazy thinking and indiscriminate action.*

–TIM FERRISS, author, serial entrepreneur  
and ultra vagabond

Rest assured, the methods are simple to implement, and you won't have to purchase an expensive time-management system or new software. What you need to do, if you are committed to creating real change, is to:

- 1) Read this book,
- 2) Do the short exercises at the end of some of the chapters,
- 3) Choose the most relevant solutions for you, and
- 4) Practice them for thirty days.

By the end of thirty days, your new habits will be formed. These habits will put you onto a path of change that will give you more time, more freedom and more success.

If you are like me you might get distracted somewhere in the third chapter with another book, or a new project of some other life distraction. Don't; I'm going to suggest that you approach this book differently. I don't want you to read this book word for word – it's not necessary (nor is it a great use of time).<sup>1</sup>

Instead I want you to read this book more like a manual. Start with an overview (that's what this next section is about) and get an understanding of the *flow* of the book so you know what to expect.

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1. Some readers I am sure are quick readers and they read every word. But if 90% of people that buy business books never finish them then I suggest there is both a reading and a motivation problem. See my side bar on how to double your reading speed.

Next I encourage you to learn to read faster (see page five). Whenever I provide an exercise, do it. These are going to greatly help you to focus on what is important *for you* and to help you to create real, lasting change. Your objective should be to find and pull out the concepts and skills that you need, not to plan for an exam.

## OVERVIEW

**Part I “It’s about time”** – is about getting real about where time goes and how you are doing for time efficiency. (Don’t read these chapters alone – it’s scary!). Pay particular attention to “Mirror, Mirror on the wall” if you want to get to the heart of why you do what you do (you’ll thank me later).

**Part II “Systems”** – will give you the foundations for creating more time-success in all aspects of your work. is all about your systems: planning, interruptions, meetings, email and clutter. Be prepared: no stickie note, phone message or wasted minute will be ignored. Everything is under scrutiny (you *might* thank me later).

**Part III: “Habits of Heroes”** – is your toolbox for great habits (some of which you maybe have never thought of as habits). I want this to be a fun tour through options that are easy to apply, but could have impressive long-term impact.

**Part IV “This is the time”** – focusses on constant improvement and keeping the flame lit.

Throughout the book there are one-page worksheets. If you are anything like me, you will be tempted to skip these. Don’t. It’s important that you do some of the work of creating improvements as you read the book. I’ve kept it simple – take time for a little reflection, jot a few notes, make a few decisions. Your time commitment for each of these short exercises should be ten minutes or less.

There are also some references to more resources online. You can access all of these at [www.HughCulver.com/BreakBook](http://www.HughCulver.com/BreakBook). Use these, and share them with friends. They are there for you.



*Note: from time to time I have inserted this symbol in this book. Pay special attention to these thoughts, or tips. These are gems that could really make a big difference for creating results.*

## Once And For All, How To Read

*I took a speed-reading course and read ‘War and Peace’ in twenty minutes. It involves Russia.*

—WOODY ALLEN, actor and playwright

How do you read a book? Are you a ‘skimmer’ flying through the pages gleaning only what is valuable for you? Are you a ‘starter’ – slowly reading each word for the first five chapters and then losing interest of getting distracted with a new book? Simply based on statistics I know it’s unlikely you are a ‘finisher’ – few people are.

So I thought it would be helpful to give you some tips on how to get the most from this book. This is a simple approach and certainly there are far more complicated approaches, but if you are a slow reader you probably won’t get through those, so, here’s a short version.

The average person reads at about 200 – 250 words per minute. With a few small improvements and a bit of practice

you should be able to at least double your reading speed and still have a comprehension rate of at least 75%. Here are some quick tips for reading faster and getting better retention and value out of books:

- **Plan to read.** You will have greater speed and retention if you read in a quiet place, at a time of day when you are fully awake and when you have committed time to read.
- **Read the Table of Contents.** Take a couple of minutes and scan the list to get some idea of the flow of the book. The Table of Contents should also give you some idea of what in the book will have value for you, and what can be skimmed.
- **For each chapter read the first paragraph,** then the sub-heads and finally the last paragraph. Decide if the chapter has any value for you. If not, move on to the next one.
- **Stop re-reading.** Use a device – a piece of paper, a ruler or your finger – to move down the page, keeping your eye moving along with the device. Keep moving at a steady pace, slightly faster than comfortable.
- **Skip words.** To get sufficient comprehension you don't need to read every word as you were taught as a child. Start by reading the third or fourth word in from both ends of the line of text. This will prepare you to take snapshots of lines, rather than reading every word.
- **Create a goal.** You can quickly calculate your reading speed by averaging the number of words on a line and multiplying

that number by the number of lines on the page. From there it is easy to measure your speed for reading the page. Set a goal to double your reading speed. You will save time and probably not miss anything. See [www.HughCulver.com/BreakBook](http://www.HughCulver.com/BreakBook) for more tips on speed-reading.

Ready to try your new skills? Here we go . . .



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# The Ultimate Currency

*Running into the sun but I'm running behind.*

—JACKSON BROWNE, 'Running on empty',  
songwriter, artist

**L**ong before recorded history we have been keeping track of time. The earliest examples were crude lunar calendars that predated the reforms of Julius Caesar's more exact Gregorian calendar by some 34,000 years. We've come a long way with recording time, while its importance in our everyday thinking and life has continued to increase. We use time as a measure of our day, as a record of our history, as a tool to compete against others and as a way to find our location.

Think of time as the ultimate, universal, non-renewable currency. Virtually anywhere in the world you can live a rich life by using it well or you can squander it like a weekend gambler on a sortie to Los Vegas. High performers who enjoy wonderful lives of wealth and personal freedom have the same amount of time as the millions who are convinced that there is never enough time. Either way, once you use it, it is gone.

Whether we operate a stall in Marrakesh, teach primary school in Santiago or arrive at our Seattle office by 9 a.m., time is democratic: we all get the same amount to start with. It's no different than the first cast of the die in a game of Monopoly. In life every player gets the same amount of currency every time we wake up and pass 'GO': 24 hours; 1,440 minutes; 86,400 seconds.

What we do with time is always up to us, and that all starts with perception.

As I grew older, my perception on time changed. When I was young, time seemed to go too slowly and I was restless for it to pass. In my twenties I felt like I had all the time in the world and, for the most part, I enjoyed the luxury of designing my days as I wished. In my thirties I learned to resent how other people could demand some of my time, and in my forties I felt I had no time: work, schooling, family and relationships filled every waking hour. I was perfecting "busy." And now, past the half-century mark, I truly regret time's passing – the lost opportunities and all the should-have's that I can't recapture. Same me, just a different perception.

## Are You Satisfied?

*There may be no 'i' in team but there's two in 'idiot'.*

There must be some reason why you have this book in your hand. Maybe you are already successful and are looking for an extra insight that will create even more success. Maybe you haven't achieved the success you want but you want to learn how to better reach your goals. Or maybe you are frustrated with the way time slips through your fingers and you want to change your habits, but don't know how.

At a recent seminar for university professors that I was leading, a woman in the audience expressed exasperation about her workload and the impact on her family. She admitted she wasn't happy with some of her time-habits.

“Every night I bring home my ‘Guilt Bag’”, she admitted. Then she explained that her Guilt Bag was her case with laptop, notes and files that need her attention. When I asked her what she does with the bag once she arrives home she answered “I lean it up against the wall and rarely touch it.” “And all night”, she continued, “it stares at me reminding me of my workload and I feel more tired, anxious

and guilty.” That’s what I call negative programming and it’s all self-induced. It’s also preventable.



I have been studying and teaching time management for more than twelve years. I have probably read every current

book on the subject, taken courses, written articles, interviewed masters and spent endless hours working on my own performance. Here is the simple truth that I have discovered: *time management is not the goal.*

In the end, nobody will care how we organize our minutes. The only thing that will be measured is the value we create in the minutes we have.

I am not about to make moral judgments, but I am about to ask questions that promote action that serves you. Here are three great questions I want you to ask yourself before you read any further:

- 1) Do you start your day excited about what you are going to work on and what you are going to accomplish?
- 2) Do you usually finish your day smiling with the feeling that comes from a day well spent?
- 3) Do you feel like, for the most part, you are in control of how you spend your time?

If you are reading this book with the ambition of becoming more time effective, you will definitely get great skills and techniques for “saving” time and getting more done in a day.<sup>2</sup>

But while becoming more effective at work is a laudable goal, it’s not entirely why I wrote this book. I am interested in *how* you use your time, not how much you can pack into your time. *Give me a Break* is not about better time management and taking a physical break; it is about how to best take a mental break from work and the anxiety that comes from it in order to develop new patterns of making time work for you.

Perhaps this is the best question to consider as you dive into this book and discover ways to be reclaim more time in your day: What will you do with your new-found time?

## A LOOK IN THE MIRROR

*If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.*

—ANONYMOUS

Hyrum Smith, author of *The 10 Successful Laws of Time and Life Management* and modern pioneer of the day planner concept, discovered that most people believe in two self-limiting beliefs:

- 1) that someday we will have more time, and
- 2) that somehow we can save time.

Does this ring true for you? I certainly know that I lived with these same delusions for thirty years as I took my sloppy time-management habits with me, from business to business, from committee to committee, and into my personal life.

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2. In our post-seminar surveys, we find that 95% of participants are saving at least one hour a day. This is time they can redirect to more important results in work and life.

I was constantly dreaming up new projects and starting them before finishing the old ones. I could easily justify procrastination as a by-product of my ambitious nature, and multi-tasking was my badge of productivity. As I tried to accomplish three things at once I did none of them well and mostly ignored everyone around me.

Although I was rarely late for business meetings, I had a poor track record for picking up my daughters from school or piano lessons (twice I was actually on time, but at the wrong location). It seemed that I never had enough time and my appointments, meetings and phone calls plagued my schedule and filled my To-Do lists.

My work and personal life was so out of balance that seven-day workweeks and sleeping at the office was not uncommon, nor were last-minute business trips to South America or cancelled dates with friends. I was frustrated. I knew I needed to change my patterns, but I didn't have a clue how to be successful and actually go home at a reasonable hour.

My ultimate excuse was that someday I would have more time for the pleasures of life. Just as Smith predicted, I believed that working faster than everyone else would save me time, but that mysterious bank of saved time never seemed to appear. I was oblivious to the evidence staring me in the face – that as I changed jobs, locations and careers, the pattern simply travelled with me. Each time I had a new set of circumstances to blame (never me of course!) it was always the exciting new project, the challenging new opportunity or the wealth that I was going to enjoy.

Luckily, my condition wasn't permanent. Using the concepts and tools in this book, I eventually managed to create more success in my work, more balance with my family, and more satisfaction in my life.

So, how are you doing? Do you know where your time is being

used well and where it isn't? Do you know which systems in your office are serving you and which are not? Do you really know the areas that you need to work on?

The first step in any development program or self-enlightenment program is always about awareness. You need to get very clear about the strengths that you want to keep and grow, and the areas of opportunity that are passing you by.



For years I was delusional about my situation. I was convinced that I was working as hard as humanly possible.

Maybe I was, but I was a long way from working smart. It wasn't until I got clear about the cost my weaknesses were exacting on my business success, relationships and health that I became serious about making change happen.

Self-assessment is the place to begin your path to 'Taking a Break.' The short quiz that follows mirrors the curriculum in this

book and asks you to rate how well you are utilizing certain essential systems and habits.

I want you to take the quiz now and, again, in thirty days.

In my seminars I call the first thirty days after the learning experience the “thirty-day challenge.” This is the time it takes to create a new habit. It is also the time when you will either apply some of what you learned and benefit from it, or lose it.

The challenge is to see how much value you can get from those first thirty days.

Also, we need to repeat a new habit *with intent*. In other words you have to really want the new habit to stick. Obviously you won’t stick with a change in your diet, like from dairy to a diet of tofu and soy milk if either one of these makes you nauseous. Similarly, adopting any strategies from this book won’t stick if you don’t have the intent to make them stick (or if they make you nauseous).

Take the quiz now. It should only take about three minutes to complete.

If you are like me, you might be tempted to jump ahead to the next section. Don’t do it. This quiz is an important starting point – it will help align the curriculum in this book with your specific needs. Go ahead and take the quiz now!

# Time Management Self-Assessment Quiz

Rate yourself against the following statements based on a typical day by circling one of the numbers (1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5=always)

## PRIORITIES

I start my day by reviewing what I will accomplish that day (high priority).

1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5

I avoid distractions and focus on what is most important, most of the time.

My goal is to accomplish priority tasks first, every day.

I plan my activities and priorities for the next day before leaving work.

## GOALS

I have goals for the month or week.

1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5

I routinely set goals for all major projects or committee work.

My goals are visible and I constantly review them (at least weekly).

I constantly use my weekly goals to keep me on track and effective.

## SYSTEMS

I have a time-management system that I use and keep updated.

1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5

My workspace is free of files, paper, stickie notes, etc.

I manage my email and other message volume well.

I try to match my work to my energy (e.g. hardest work in the morning).

## HABITS

I am able to remove distractions and focus on the single task at hand.

1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5

When I find myself wasting time, I get back on track.

I manage my energy well and take regular health breaks every day.

When I leave work, I leave it behind.

## CONSTANT IMPROVEMENT

I learn from others to improve my systems and habits.

1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5

I frequently review my habits and improve old habits that waste time.

In the last month, I have made an improvement to my time management.

I make time for education, relationships and self-improvement.

**OVERALL SCORE** (total each column and then get the sum of those 5 totals.)

--	--	--	--	--

To get a free copy of this quiz online, go to [www.HughCulver.com/BreakBook](http://www.HughCulver.com/BreakBook)



As you review your scores for each of the five sections, here are some questions to consider:

**HIGH SCORES** (you rated yourself between 85 and 100): Look at the high scores you gave yourself. Why did you rate yourself high in those areas? What is the process or habit that supports that score? Often you can perform at a high level in some aspect of time management and not be aware that what you are doing is unique. Record at least one process or habit you are doing well that resulted in your high score.

.....

.....

**MID RANGE SCORES** (you rated yourself between 70 and 85): Look for areas that you excel and have good performance. How can you reinforce these and support them always happening? Look at areas that you rated a '1', '2' or '3' – what is that habit that underlies this performance? Record at least one process or habit you are doing well that resulted in a low score.

.....

.....

**LOW SCORES** (you rated yourself below 70): What are you doing that is inhibiting your performance? Think about your office setup, your habits, your approach to creating and keeping goals. By becoming more aware of your patterns, you will be able to create the change you need. List three of the most obvious areas in need of improvement (here are some examples):

- I know I procrastinate about the hardest goals.
- I don't start my day with a plan and by mid-morning I feel out of control.

- I have all the papers on my desk in neat piles, but they constantly distract me. I know I need to do something about it, but I don't want to forget anything.
- People drop by my desk all day. I don't want to be rude, but it makes it difficult to focus and get any work done.

I need to change/improve .....

.....

I need to change/improve .....

.....

I need to change/improve .....

.....

Keep these areas of development in mind. The more focused you are on what you want to change, the more likely you are to find the solution in this book.

---

# Where Does the Time Go?

*Take care in your minutes,  
and the hours will take care of themselves.*

—LORD CHESTERFIELD, ambassador to Spain

“The day is over and I have no idea where the time went!”  
Do you ever wonder where the time goes? For many people the day is a blur of meetings, phone calls, interruptions, email and last-minute problems that need to be dealt with right now.

With all of our clients the same three distractions always seem to be at the scene of the crime:

- 1) email,
- 2) interruptions, and
- 3) meetings.

We call these the Big Three Time Thieves and they are the rust that eats away at performance and seems to grow incessantly. Here's quick rundown on them:

**Email** – Most people have no idea how much time they actually are spending on email. It can become one long stream of lost minutes between morning scans while commuting (not while driving, obviously!), a constant bombardment while at your desk, quick peeks during meetings, in elevators, waiting in line at Starbucks or at the ball park while pretending to watch your child chewing gum in left field.

One Microsoft survey found that employees were spending on average one hour and forty-five minutes a day on email (note that this means some people are spending much more time than this). My guess is that for many of us this is short by a half.

The ubiquitous nature of email (on your computer at work, your laptop at home, your Smartphone in your car, etc.) means that it can become a normal part of the day, like breathing and walking, that fills most of your available moments.

Is it really necessary to be that available? Certainly we used to survive admirably with only phones, faxes and meetings. Common sense would suggest (and if it doesn't, I will) that there is a downside to being always connected and constantly checking who has sent you something on your phone. But as Will Rogers once quipped, "Just because something is common doesn't mean it is common sense".

**Interruptions** – Interruptions can eat up your day. Just think of the people who drop by to chat, the non-urgent phone calls, the interruptions from vendors with their latest pitches, and distracting office noise. Workshop participants typically tell me that they have to deal with at least one hour of interruptions a day.

What percentage of your day is lost due to low-value interruptions that could be diverted to someone else, dealt with faster or avoided altogether?

**Meetings** – If you are in meetings just one hour per day (many of

our clients state that meetings can take up to three hours per day), and you have 250 working days per year, more than thirty-one of your days are spent in meetings over the course of a year. What percentage of this time is really necessary, and what percentage is being chewed up due to poor-quality or unnecessary meetings?

As a part of your look in the mirror, let's put some numbers together to show how your time is being spent. Below you will



find a table designed to help you calculate where your time goes. In the example on the left hand side I have inserted average time spent by our clients on the Big Three (email, interruptions and meetings): 1.75 hours on email, 1 hour on interruptions and 1 hour in meetings per day. Calculated over 250 working days in

a year,<sup>3</sup> this adds up to twenty-three work-weeks (based on a forty hour work week) per year.

Do I have your attention now?

In a nutshell, you spend about one-half of your working years on email, interruptions and meetings.

Now try it for yourself: do the calculation in the following chart using the formula provided.

3. Allowing for an average of a one-day holiday per month there are about 250 working days in a year.

### Annual Time Used on the Big Three

TYPICAL AMOUNT OF TIME USED			YOUR AMOUNT OF TIME USED		
Big Three time activities	Calculation	Work-weeks lost per year	Big Three time activities	Calculation	Work-weeks lost per year
Email	$(1.75 \text{ hrs.} \times 250 \text{ days}) / 40 \text{ hrs.}$	11	Email	$(\text{ } \text{hrs.} \times 250 \text{ days}) / 40 \text{ hrs.}$	
Interruptions	$(1 \text{ hr.} \times 250 \text{ days}) / 40 \text{ hrs.}$	6	Interruptions	$(\text{ } \text{hrs.} \times 250 \text{ days}) / 40 \text{ hrs.}$	
Meetings	$(1 \text{ hr.} \times 250 \text{ days}) / 40 \text{ hrs.}$	6	Meetings	$(\text{ } \text{hrs.} \times 250 \text{ days}) / 40 \text{ hrs.}$	
Total time		23 weeks	Total time		

Were you surprised by the total? Most people don't think in terms of week after week losses of time, and certainly not in terms of a full year. But this is exactly the perspective you need to take if you are going to value your time more and be committed to making the small changes every day.

Now imagine being able to get back even five percent of that lost time. That alone, over the course of a year, could be as much as a whole work week. In fact, here is a great formula to remember:

Ten minutes a day saved is equivalent to about one week per year<sup>4</sup> of recovered time that you can redirect to more important work, to planning, to relationship-building or to growing your business.

Ten minutes per day = One week per year

4. This is a rough calculation that obviously depends on the hours you work in a year.  $10 \text{ min/day} \times 250 \text{ days/year} = 2,500 \text{ minutes}$ .  $2,500 \text{ min}/60 = 41.6 \text{ hours}$ , or about one forty hour work-week.

This is the power of making small changes consistently every day to maximize your use of time. It's no different from putting deposits in your bank, starting an exercise routine or improving your diet. Initially you can feel discouraged because the results aren't visible, but over time the small improvements become big pay offs you can enjoy.

And now I'm going to show you how . . .

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# A Model for Change

*Opportunity is missed by most people because  
it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.*

—THOMAS EDISON, inventor extraordinaire

If you don't get your work done today, you will have it tomorrow. The pile of unfinished work will accumulate and with it will come frustration, anxiety and stress. So you have two choices: work harder (which most of us try to do already) or work smarter.

In school we learned about cell biology, dividing exponential numbers and conjugating verbs. Unfortunately, our sixth grade teacher didn't provide us with more practical life lessons, like how to prioritize.

Rarely at school were we asked to decide what was the most important work. Instead, we were rewarded for getting everything on our list done, without exception.

Once the responsibilities and workloads build up to the point where you know you can't get it all done, this approach doesn't work anymore. You are left knowing that mitochondria has something



to do with ATP, but no clue what to do with your ever-growing To-Do list.

What you need is a new way of looking at your workload, and a new approach for moving from overwhelm to getting work done. Unfortunately, this won't happen just because you buy a new Day-Timer or learn a few tricks on your Blackberry. And while most well-meaning time management training programs are about making you more efficient at processing work faster, I doubt that this is what you aspire to in your career.

The new tricks might save you a minute or two, but they won't address the pattern that got you where you are in the first place, or where you want to go.

"Life is hard." That blunt opening to the M. Scott Peck classic, *The Road Less Traveled*, still holds true. Life can be unforgiving, and work is no different.

### **Beware the Downward Slide**

Just as water always prefers downhill, we typically migrate to what is easier in life. Maybe your habit is to put off making sales calls, or coaching that recalcitrant underperforming salesperson, until you have spent the morning reviewing emails. Or maybe a project you committed to hasn't gotten off the ground because of minor interruptions and general busy-ness.

That pattern won't change by learning a little trick for sending emails faster. It requires a more wholesale change, and that starts with your beliefs and the mental pattern of priorities that you have established through habits over time.

Darren, a manager at a large insurance company, is responsible for thirteen insurance adjusters. He has many responsibilities, including training new staff, coaching existing staff and conducting performance reviews. His time-management style was what I call the Radar Approach – when something came into view, he

treated it with the same priority as everything else, regardless of its real value, who sent it, or how old it was.

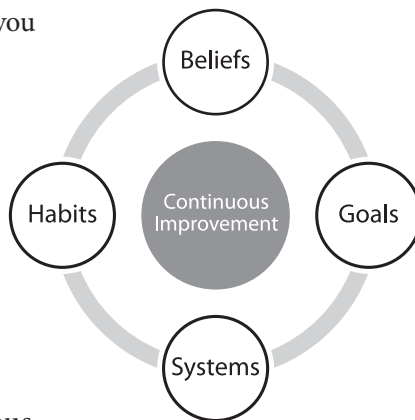
The Radar Approach is a chaotic way to manage workload, because you are constantly chasing after the newest interruption and leaving behind what you are already working on. No doubt he was achieving some success with this approach, but the problem was that nothing long-term was being addressed. Darren's workdays were frenetic, put-out-fires experiences that left him exhausted and frustrated.

Without a new system he was destined to repeat this frustrating pattern over and over again.

Sound familiar?

### Coming Full Circle

The model I am going to show you is what Darren and hundreds of our clients are using to get a fresh start on their patterns and to create dramatic improvements in their results. First, I will give you a quick overview about the five parts of the model – Beliefs, Goals, Systems, Habits and Continuous Improvement. Then, in the remainder of the book, I will provide more detail about each part, starting with the Chapter Mirror, Mirror on the Wall.



Confession time: I know that every time-management book worth its salt has a model. Some models are about three ways, the seven habits, 101 things to do, etc. I realize that by introducing my model I'm following a predictable path. Please bear with me. This

simple model is just to provide some glue to the sections in the book. The real heart of the book is found in the individual sections: Beliefs, Goals, Systems, Habits and Continuous Improvement.

## Beliefs

After awareness, when we recognize an opportunity to improve, we have to always visit our beliefs. It is our beliefs about our abilities that are the pivotal points for changing results. Negative, self-defeating beliefs such as: “there is only so much I can get done in a day,” or “interruptions make it impossible for me to concentrate and complete my work,” will stymie our best efforts to get work done effectively or to improve.

**You need to believe that you are the master of your time, and not the victim of other peoples’ agendas.** Remember that you will always get more of what you focus on – this is never truer than with time management. If you think you are swamped by your workload and you will never get caught up, guess what? You won’t! And if you think other people’s agendas are constantly interfering with your ability to get work done, guess what? They are! Just as Henry Ford famously forewarned, “Whether you think you are right or you think you are wrong, you probably are.”

If instead you think that you are capable of finding time to get organized and to work on priorities, guess what? Opportunities will show up for moving forward on your biggest goals. By switching your focus from what *you can’t do* to what *you can do*, you open up a world of possibilities.

Sound like simplistic, positive-thinking mumbo jumbo? Maybe so, but it works. In the Chapter “Mirror, Mirror on the wall” I am going to challenge you to really look at what you believe about time, and to recreate those beliefs so that they serve you, every day.

## Goals

Our client research has discovered an alarming fact: people don't plan – they don't set goals. Of course, they probably have a plan for their business, their marketing strategy or their product launch, *but they don't plan the one thing that will generate the biggest results: time.*

In a post-program study of participants in our program, we found that participants who began a new habit of setting goals at the end of each day and planning the next day's schedule had by far the most dramatic increases in time-management success (by the way, I define success as effective planning and completion of plans, more productive time and fewer time-stealing surprises).

The Chapter "Goals work" will give you a simple formula for goal setting, and Part II, Chapter 1 will show you how to create your Action Plan for the week – this is easily the best improvement you can make to your time-management thinking and results.

## Systems

Systems are great sources of efficiency and productivity (think filing systems, phone systems or bookkeeping systems). When you lack good systems, you are destined to forever repeat your time-wasting behavior. For example, if you don't have a good paper management system you will always be frustrated by clutter on your desk. And lack of a system for email means time wasted rereading emails, dealing with unwanted messages and manually sorting your Inbox.

The good news is that small changes in your systems can create enormous time savings. For example, if you could save just ten minutes every day by starting meetings on time and having a well-designed agenda, you could free up an entire workweek every year.

## Habits

More than 300 years ago Samuel Johnson accurately described the incredible influence of habits when he said, “The chains of habits are too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken.” When you improve a habit (how you plan your week, or how you start your mornings, or how you tackle big projects), your new habit automatically starts working for you and with little effort. It’s like finding that perfect investment, once you see the opportunity and make the investment it will start working for you. Day after day you are better off without seemingly having to do anything.

## Continuous Improvement

Be honest: have you done anything in the last month to improve your time-management success? If you are anything like over 80% of the participants in our training programs, the answer is *nada*.

In our seminars, 80–90% of participants have never taken a course or spent more than one hour learning how to use Microsoft Outlook® – yet most of them are using it every day!

Most haven’t changed their office layout in years, are always rushed in the morning (and don’t know why), use the same excuses to explain their procrastination and allow the same people to interrupt them all day.

One of the best ways to improve your success is to simply focus your use of time every day. By constantly asking yourself what is working and what could be improved you will start to see opportunities for improvement. Having this attitude of continuous improvement will make work more interesting, provide you with more freedom and bring you more success – every day.

I’m glad we have gotten the one and only model in the book out of the way. Now it’s time to get to the biggest source for change: what you say to yourself.

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# Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

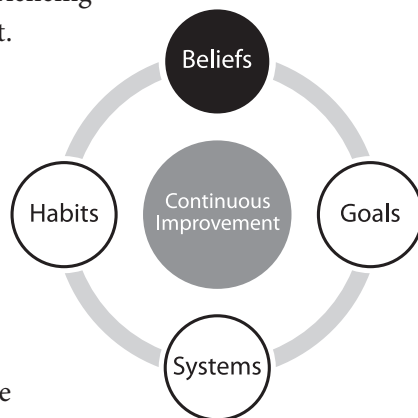
*It's easier to say 'No'  
when there is a deeper 'Yes' burning inside.*

—STEPHEN R COVEY, internationally best-selling author

Most of our challenges are self-created because of our self-limiting beliefs. And the same applies to our frustrations with time. Our beliefs got us into the time management challenges we are experiencing and our beliefs will get us out.

As Pogo, Walt Kelly's famous 1960s comic strip character, exclaimed, "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Your belief about your ability to get work completed, and your belief about your ability to change



your patterns, will be either the lock or the key to creating more success. It's as simple as that – and as hard as that: all significant changes in our lives begin by changing our beliefs. And the ones that don't serve are invisible, working in the background to sabotage our efforts, and frustratingly difficult to reverse.

“When we learn a bad habit it takes over the brain map in that area. explains David Doidge M.D. in his remarkable book *The Brain That Changes Itself* “This is why it is so hard to ‘unlearn’ a bad habit. It has residency first, like an unwanted roommate.”

When I was in the tourism industry, my belief was that I needed to keep my schedule open every day to see what would happen. I operated from a simple To-Do list that seemed to have a life of its own as it grew longer daily. My days were packed with phone-call interruptions, friends dropping in (our office was in a public marketplace in Vancouver), impromptu meetings and conversations with customers and staff. It was chaotic, but I had no idea that I was the architect of the chaos. In fact, I became a pro at blaming my frustrations on others and on my environment.

I was convinced that successful people must be really good at handling crisis. My logic was simple: I was successful and surrounded by chaos; therefore people more successful must just be better at dealing with chaos.

What I failed to pay attention to were the successful business leaders who were also extremely efficient. You know – the leaders with uncluttered desks, meticulous planning and measured habits developed over years of trial and error. I assumed that *those* leaders must have other people doing all the work for them.

Only now do I recognize that my believing that chaos was normal actually allowed it to happen. In short, I was putting my energy into convincing myself that I was doing my best instead of looking for *how I could improve*.

Until I changed what I believed, I was destined to operate from crisis, in that business and in every enterprise I created. This led to a stressful pattern of desperate last-minute efforts to meet deadlines, and to many missed opportunities. The more I justified my beliefs with evidence, the more entrenched I became in my ineffective approach.



*Here's a simple formula to remember that applies to literally all aspects of your life. It is the secret to why you experience success in certain areas of your life, like a relationship, or your education, or ability to earn money; and it is the exact cause of where you fail.*

- ✓ *First we make up our beliefs. Rightly or wrongly, we are the author of our stories.*
- ✓ *Second we forget we made them up. Yep! We believe what we believe and we love to be right.*
- ✓ *Next we act as if the belief is true. Ever been convinced you were in the right, despite objective evidence to the contrary (like speeding in your car, skipping the tip to the grumpy waitress, or not mentioning the error in your favor on a bill)?*
- ✓ *And finally we look for evidence to prove we are right. That's right, if you think that co-worker is an idiot, guess what you will notice?*

Here's a quick exercise to prove to you the incredible influence of our beliefs.

To make this exercise most effective you need to hold a piece of



paper over the right hand column of figures. Please do that now.

As I ask you each question, try to answer it and then you can slide the paper down to reveal the correct answer in the right-hand column.

Let's try it with the first example.

If the following image is a Roman numeral, how do you add a single line to make it a six?



Okay, you got that one right. Do a happy dance and now go to the next one . . .

And, if the following image is a Roman numeral, how do you add a single line to make it a seven?

Again, slide your paper down to reveal the answer.



And, if the following image is a roman numeral, how do you add a single line to make it an eight?

Again, slide your paper down to reveal the answer.



Okay, you are on a roll! Now, in the final image, below, how do you add a single line to make it a six?

When you are ready, turn the page for the answer.



# SIX

If you are like virtually everyone who takes this exercise (assuming you didn't peek) you got stumped. Your brain couldn't come up with a solution for adding a single line to make "IX" into six. But wait!

Are you looking at the problem from an *objective* point of view, unobscured by history or beliefs you might have conjured up based on the previous instructions? Or are you looking at it *through your belief window* and spending more time looking for evidence to prove that you are right ("I knew it, there is no solution for making this Roman numeral into a six with only one line") instead of thinking creatively?

Notice that I didn't instruct you that the last example was Roman numerals, but almost everyone makes the assumption that because the first three examples were about Roman numerals that the last one would be as well.

The reality is that if you were presented with the last iteration of this problem first: 'How do you add a single line to 'IX' to make it 'SIX' I think you would quickly arrive at the correct answer that you just need to add an 'S' to 'IX' to make 'SIX'.

Let's go through what I think happened here.

First you were given enough evidence to create a belief that you were working with Roman numerals and you were successful in creating the right answers. This relationship between belief being confirmed as correct was repeated enough times to make it reliable.

Next you are provided with quite a different challenge, but your belief that this was all about Roman numerals inhibits your willingness to examine the problem more closely and you get stuck.

Your new belief (that was created in a matter of moments) tells you that you are good at Roman numerals, but this last puzzle is a tough one. You think, maybe it can't be solved? Or it's a trick question. But, in fact, the answer is so incredibly simple that a six year old could probably solve it.

As an adult we love being right and once we create a belief we go to work to prove that it is a correct one.

What beliefs do you have that prevent you from creating more success? Maybe, for example, you believe:

- you work better under pressure;
- that nothing can improve until your boss changes her or his ways;
- that the nature of your job or the season of your business is to blame;
- or that no one can prepare a quotation better than you can.

Certainly in the tourism industry we always had the ultimate excuse: the time of year. I can remember trying to get staff to plan ahead and to work more from goals. But, between May and September, the excuse was that there was too much going on to revisit our goals and adjust our strategies. In the slow season I would again try to rally the troops to get organized and look at goals, but by then, the excuse was that they didn't have the energy for it. So we would repeat this cycle of feast to famine and never really get ahead of the game with our planning.

Let's take a look at some old beliefs (maybe they will look familiar), and how to rewrite them to better advantage.

### **Old Belief, New Belief It's Your Choice**

For each 'old belief' I present ask yourself if it sounds at all familiar and then ask yourself if it still serves you. Be honest with yourself. The first (and hardest) step in all change is awareness; we have to be honest about what holds us back for any change to start.

Okay, here we go. I'm going to present just five dysfunctional beliefs and some better alternatives. You will probably be able to add to this list with ones of your own. If so, let me know!

### 1) Old belief: “I’ve done pretty well so far, so why change?”

Yes, you probably do have some approaches to time management that work for you. For example, many of the people who have taken our course are already well-organized when it comes to preparing for and attending meetings. On the other hand, after they leave the meetings the procrastination starts on everything they committed to doing.

*“I was going to buy a copy of *The Power of Positive Thinking*, and then I thought: ‘What the hell good would that do?’”*

—RONNIE SHAKES,  
comedian

**Better belief:** “I know that better is always possible and I am looking forward to earning more freedom with my time.”

### 2) Old belief: “I work best under pressure.”

This is a classic belief and one of mine for many years. When we learn that we are good under pressure and, in fact, get rewarded for it, it’s inevitable that our success will depend on having that last-minute pressure. This belief can lead to procrastination, desperate last-minute crises, and frustration with others on your team.

**Better belief:** “I enjoy working from a plan, crossing tasks off my list, and having less stress.”

### 3) Old belief: “It’s impossible to plan for my day. I have to be able to respond to the chaos around here.”

This is a hugely popular belief for people who work in customer-service roles such as front counters in banks, hotels and recreation centers, or deep in the IT and administrative departments of many companies. The reality is that if you don’t plan, you will constantly be frustrated by interruptions, and

these interruptions will emerge as part of your self-fulfilling chaos prophecy.

**Better belief:** “As I plan and work from my plan I can respond better to my client’s needs.”

**4) Old belief: “I don’t have a good history of keeping promises with myself.”**

It is true that most people have a hard time keeping promises with themselves. I read once that only 12% of people keep their New Year’s resolutions. It is probable that your previous goals were poorly created in the first place. Don’t be too hard on yourself. Do you show up for work on time? Do you obey traffic laws? You are already a promise-keeper. You just need to get into a habit of creating more goals that serve you and committing to them.

**Better belief:** “I am a promise keeper and I am strengthening that skill every day.”

**5) Old belief: “I have tried time-management systems in the past and am never able to stick with them for more than a week.”**

Okay, I have to admit I am also one of those people who have taken time-management courses and only stuck with the plan for a short while. Here’s the problem with many time-management courses: they are too hard to stick with! There are special pages to be completed each day, review charts to fill out and percentages-of-an-hour to be calculated. Within a week you are spending more time filling in your Day-Timer than you are spending getting work done. What you need is a process

for being more effective that seems effortless to execute. Don't worry; that's what this book is about.

**Better belief:** "I am a promise-keeper, and I keep commitments about what is important to me."

New beliefs are not created by positive thinking. The brain will never be fooled by your attempts to change years of patterned thinking by just chanting a new mantra. The synapse connections are too entrenched and the knee-jerk reactions too engrained.

What is needed is a combination of the new belief married with some tangible evidence. In other words, prove to your brain that the belief works, and you are well on your way to creating a new pathway.

### **A Formula for Success**

When I used to race whitewater kayaks, I had to learn how to maneuver my wafer-thin racing boat around hanging poles (called 'gates') as fast as possible while negotiating through some pretty wild whitewater. If you make one small mistake the river's current will blow you past the gate and you are penalized.

It was easy to be intimidated by the power of the river and the ruthless way it discarded paddlers that missed critical strokes and flushed them downstream. I can remember standing on the river shore watching paddlers struggling to stay upright and hold their course and noticing my own doubts surfacing.

The trick I learned was to be aware of what was happening and to change my belief quickly. Watching other paddlers struggle was making me doubt my own abilities (not a good thing) and weakening my resolve for when it would be my turn (really not a good thing).

Next, I had to remind myself of my training and all the days

I had spent on rivers wilder than this one. And then the critical last step was to really pay attention to the little successes I enjoyed when I was in my boat. I nailed that turn; I powered over to number four gate and got through clean; I made the spin and backed through number five clean.

With every success I reinforced my belief in my abilities; I was adding evidence to the belief.

On race day my belief was entrenched and ready to serve me. Small set backs were overlooked because of the strength of my belief in my abilities. In effect, this is exactly how we create successful change in our life:

- 1) Become crystal clear about the challenge,
- 2) Determine a possible better solution,
- 3) Test it, and if it works
- 4) Repeat it.

Let's look at a simple formula to represent this process: adopt a new belief, prove it works, and repeat.

$$(\text{New Belief} + \text{Evidence}) \times \text{Repeat} = \text{New Success}$$

Here is another great example: I used to believe that I worked better under pressure (see Old Belief #2, above). This helped me to get a lot done, and to get it done faster than most people I knew.

The problem was I was looking at the wrong evidence. While I was focusing on what a hero I was for doing all-nighters and accomplishing incredible amounts of work, I was ignoring how disastrous my life was in other areas. My lack of planning meant that I was constantly going from unproductive to overwhelm. There was no steady state and I was ignoring the important, but



not urgent, leadership work of building successful relationships and planning.

My new belief is that I love the feeling of working from a plan and having less stress. The evidence I focus on is the clarity and productivity I enjoy at work and being able to go home at a reasonable hour. I also notice that short gaps of ‘unproductive’ time in the day can reward me with a sense of calm and attention for when I am re-engaged. The more I focus on evidence that working from my plan is paying big dividends, the more entrenched and useful my belief becomes.

**(New Belief + Evidence) × Repeat = New Success**

Think about your own beliefs – which ones serve you well and which ones do you need to change?

Once you have defined the new belief, start to look for evidence that supports it. Is your new belief that you can be satisfied with



‘good quality’ work (as opposed to seeking perfection)? Or maybe that other people can and should have more ownership over work that you have controlled in the past. Great!

Now notice any evidence that this new belief is serving you. Maybe you notice that the meeting agenda you had someone else prepare for a change was actually quite good. And notice that you save yourself twenty minutes of tedious work putting the agenda together.

The next time the same task comes up, revisit your evidence and remind yourself of your new belief. Just like a river carving a path through a field, the more it runs its course the more predictable the path becomes.

## Beliefs Worksheet

As you were reading the list of beliefs above, you might have recognized one you have that no longer serves you. (Example: “It’s impossible to plan for my day. I have to be able to respond to the chaos around here.”) Write that belief in the space provided below.

My old belief:

.....  
 .....

Now create of a replacement belief that will serve you better. (Example: “When I start the day with a plan and stick to it I enjoy more success.”) Write this new belief in the present tense, as if it were true today.

My new belief:

.....  
 .....

What evidence proves this new belief to be true? In other words, what proof do you have that this new belief will work for you? If your new belief is, “I am in control of what I eat and enjoy eating less and losing weight” then what is the evidence to support it? (Example: “I had a goal to lose five pounds and did it by November last year.”)

Evidence to support my new belief:

.....  
 .....

Finally, you need to post your new belief where you can see it often. Repeat this goal to yourself every morning and anchor it in your subconscious.

(New Belief + Evidence) × Repeat = New Success

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# Getting Your Boulders Rolling

*If you have to swallow two frogs,  
swallow the big one first, and don't look at it too long.*

—MARK TWAIN, author and humorist

One of the simplest and yet most remarkable economic theories comes from a nineteenth-century Italian economist named Vilfredo Pareto. When studying the wealth distribution in northern Italian villages, Pareto discovered that about 80% of the wealth was held by about 20% of the citizens. In every community he studied, a similar ratio of wealth distribution appeared.

This magic ratio is now commonly referred to as the 80/20 Rule, or Pareto's Principle. The 80/20 Rule can also be stated as, "Eighty percent of the results you get in life come from only 20% of your activities." The depressing flipside is that about 80% of our activities only lead to about 20% of our desired results.

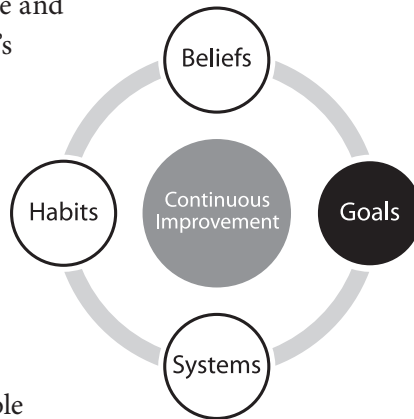
Does this ring true for you? Think about all the activities that occupy your day – which ones actually make the most difference to

your success? If you are involved in sales, the three sales calls you made this morning were far more valuable than the four hours of interruptions, reading emails and meetings that followed.

If you are a manager you might invest 30 minutes to coach an employee and it could improve that person's results for months to come. Whereas the same thirty minutes spent repairing their mistakes only produces a short-term benefit.

So the secret to success in business and in life is to spend as much time as possible working on the 20% of activities that creates 80% of the results. To do this you first have to be able to recognize high-value activities from low-value activities, and to get better at working on the former while avoiding the latter.

Okay, I know that much should be obvious, but now I want to show you how to re-frame to make it easier to stay focused on what is important. To do this we will use new definitions for all the activities that fill your day: **Boulders, Pebbles and Sand.**



## Boulders

Boulders are your long-term goals. These are the high Return-On-Investment (ROI) objectives that give you the best results. Boulders are not completed in one day, and usually they are the hardest to find time to complete.



Examples of Boulders are:

- executing a plan with your team
- launching a new marketing campaign
- building or revamping a website
- researching and purchasing new equipment
- launching a new sales campaign
- improving an internal system (bookkeeping, invoicing, etc.)
- designing a new brochure
- staff development (hiring, training, etc.)

## Pebbles

Then we have Pebbles. Pebbles are tasks; the productive kind of work that occupies your day. Pebbles can be single, stand-alone tasks such as preparing a quote for a client, or they can be chunks of a Boulder such as organizing a meeting for a project committee or getting quotes for equipment purchases. Pebbles can usually be completed in one day, one meeting, one phone call or one visit. When you are working on your Pebbles, you are working on the 20% that gets you 80% of your results.



Examples of Pebbles are:

- drafting a proposal
- calling vendors for quotations

- writing new sales copy for your website
- updating your calendar for sales milestones
- sales calls
- coaching staff
- following up on a client enquiry
- taking a course on using email

## Sand

Finally, there is Sand. Sand is the least productive use of your time. Time spent on Sand has few rewards and is part of the 80% of your time that only produces 20% of your results.



Examples of Sand include:

- much of your email,
- unnecessary interruptions,
- scanning reports not relevant to your work,
- attending poorly planned meetings, and
- spending time in irrelevant conversations.

These tasks seem especially designed to get your attention and steal your time. The overall goal of *Give me a Break* is to show you how to work at completing your **Pebbles** so you can accomplish all of your **Boulders** while staying out of the **Sandbox**.

## **The Boulder, Pebbles, Sand Demonstration**

One day a professor produced a large glass pitcher in front of his class and instructed them to think of the vessel as representing the time they have in the day. “If you work from 8:30 am until 4:30 pm, then that is what the vessel represents,” He said. “Whatever you can fit into the vessel gets completed. And what does not fit is left over to face you the next day.”

Next, the professor proceeded to put large boulders into the vessel. One after another he placed them on top of each other. “These are your projects,” he explained. “You want to focus on these and work on them as soon as possible when you start your day.”

Then he produced a bag of small pebbles and these he added to the vessel. Each pebble slipped through the cracks between the boulders to fill the spaces. “Now I am adding all the important tasks and steps you need to take during your day to accomplish your work.”

Finally, he poured a small amount of sand into the vessel. Some of the sand filtered through the pebbles and boulders to the bottom. Some filled the spaced in between. “And finally we have sand,” he explained. “Sand represents the low-value interruptions in your day that distract you from your real work. It’s inevitable that you will have sand. Your objective is to minimize its influence on your productivity.”

“What lesson can you take from this demonstration?” he asked the students.

“That sand is inevitable?” suggested one student.

“Yes, that is true, but that’s not the only point of this demonstration,” the professor replied.

“The point I want you to take away,” he continued, “is that when you start with your boulders you assure that important work is getting done despite the distractions.”

Or the way I put it is “Focus on Boulders, complete Pebbles and stay out of the Sandbox.”

With that, the professor reached under the desk and produced a can of beer. Pulling the tab and with great ceremony and a smile, he poured the beer into the vessel and announced to the class, “And when all is done, remember there is always room for a beer!”

### **A Useful Language**

Here is a neat side benefit to thinking in terms of *Boulders, Pebbles and Sand*. Using this language is a valuable re-frame for your staff and team and a helpful way to get everyone on the same page quickly.

After attending my seminar a vice-president client of ours decided to put Boulders, Pebbles and Sand into action immediately. Gathering her immediate team in her office, she wrote, “Boulders” at the top of a white board. “For the next twenty minutes I had the team share the Boulders that they were working on while I listed them.” she recalled. “What was amazing was how many boulders were being addressed and how many weren’t priorities in my mind. Clearly we were getting lost in a sea of goals, objectives, priorities and miscellaneous targets.”

Next, she and her team reduced their list to the most important Boulders and refocused their activities to align with the new list. “From now on,” she said, “we use the word ‘Boulders’ to galvanize the team towards the most important priorities. It’s a simple shift, but a critical one with everyone so busy in their own departments.”



## A Quick Definition

Sometimes students get confused about the definitions of **Boulders, Pebbles and Sand**. Here's a quick definition that can help:

**Boulders are long-term goals** – projects, purchases, new hires, strategic initiatives etc. Boulders usually take many weeks and many steps to complete.

**Pebbles are tasks** – phone calls, meetings, reports, etc. that are valuable. Some may be independent and stand alone tasks, like calling a supplier or coaching an employee. Often your pebbles are connected to the completion of a Boulder. Pebbles can usually be completed in one sitting, one conversation, one meeting, etc.

**Sand is low-value interruptions** – people dropping by your desk to chat, some phone calls, much of your email, etc. Sand often looks important – “Hey, have you got a minute?” It often fails to produce a meaningful result.

I hope that helps! Go to [www.HughCulver.com/BreakBook](http://www.HughCulver.com/BreakBook) for more information and tips on how to use this language and model to keep your Boulders rolling and stay out of the Sandbox!

## The Pareto Principle Goes to Work

If you are like most people who work at a desk, you come in to the office, grab a coffee, sit down at your computer and go to work on your email. By mid-morning you're feeling pretty good about your progress. You had fifty-five new emails when you came in and now you have replied to eighteen, deleted twelve and have twenty-five more to go. Three people have dropped by your desk to chat about the weekend or to ask you a question. You have answered the phone five times, but none of the calls were about client work. The tasks that typically fill your morning hours involve email, phone calls and interruptions.

Thinking about the Pareto Principle, you have just spent your morning working on the 80% of the tasks that create the least value for you. To be blunt: you have spent the morning in the Sandbox. Of course some of the email conversations have value, but mostly your activities have been driven by others.

By mid-morning your stress level has risen, you are frustrated and any plan you might have created is out the window. You are fully in reaction mode.

Don't get me wrong – if you are an air traffic controller or a front-desk receptionist maybe should be leaving your time open to respond to what comes your way. However, my experience is that 99% of us want to and can work differently.

The answer is to always start your day working from a plan that points the majority of your activity toward completing your Boulders. Of course you will have needless interruptions and unwanted email – we all do. But when you are proactive in your planning and diligent in choosing which interruptions to spend time on, suddenly your results improve.

*There cannot be  
a crisis next week,  
my schedule is  
already filled.*

—HENRY KISSENGER,  
political scientist  
and diplomat

\* \* \*

Shelly is a recreation programmer for a municipal government. Her job is to develop, market and deliver fitness, education, sports and other leisure options for local residents. Her planning deadlines are critical and yet interruptions, distractions and new objectives make her job stressful.

"I know what I need to work on," she told me, "but I can't seem to find time in the day. Everything gets pushed to the last minute. It happens constantly, and I hate it." Sand has crept in and taken over Shelly's time, leaving little time for planning or for working

on Pebbles and Boulders. Until she becomes proactive by starting every day with a plan that is completely oriented toward her Boulders, Shelly's pattern of frustration will repeat itself as it has for dozens of the clients I work with.

So how successful are you at working on the 20% that makes the most difference? Is your plan for the day aligned with your Boulders? Do you even have your Boulders clearly defined? How much Sand is creeping into your day, distracting you with false urgencies?

In the next section I am going to challenge you to take the Time Audit. This is one of the most powerful, scary and revealing exercises I have ever done. It completely changed my outlook on time, and I think it will do the same for you.

Focus on Boulders. Complete Pebbles.

Stay out of the Sandbox.

## **Getting Honest About Time**

Few things are more powerful than holding a mirror to our own lives and taking a good, hard look. My first appointment with a financial advisor brought a surprise that left an indelible impression on me, and changed my money-spending habits from that day forward. Rather than dole out the expected investment advice about mutual funds or dollar cost averaging, he suggested I record how I was currently spending my money.

For two weeks I had to carefully record every purchase I made, from the large amounts for groceries and gas to the smaller amounts for magazines and coffee. It was painful. Every day I dutifully recorded my financial impulses and discretions. And then came the day of reckoning – looking at my total expenses.

Suddenly I realized how totally unaware I was of my spending habits; including my coffee drinking habit.

The coffee for my morning commute, the break-time coffee, the

post-lunch take-out and that afternoon café latte were adding up. By the end of the two-week exercise, and after calculating my costs in pre-tax dollars, I realized I was working one and a half weeks a year for Starbucks!

I was so shocked by the lesson and by my cavalier spending habits that I resolved to stop drinking coffee cold turkey.<sup>5</sup> That one lesson has stuck with me for twelve years. Not only did it lead to a switch from the roasted bean to dried leaf, but also it raised my money-spending awareness to a new level.



But this book is about time management, so let's talk about doing a Time Audit instead of a cash-flow audit.

Unless you are different from most people, you won't initiate any significant changes in your life until you experience a crisis or have a burning desire to change. Until you realize that your patterns are holding you back from achieving the success you want, all the advice in this book, along with the strategies, ideas and tips, will be wasted. You will continue to repeat ineffective patterns, get the same results, and define your success based on current results.

The Time Audit is designed to bring you face-to-face with your current patterns. Here's how it works:

- 1) For one week you need to record every activity, phone call, interruption and meeting you make or attend.

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5. So far, it has been twelve years since I've had coffee of any kind. By the way, I stopped drinking alcohol in 2005 and even though I was only drinking a beer or two a week, I've noticed it is one more expense that I don't miss.

- 2) Then you will label each activity either as a Boulder (where you are working on completing a major project), a Pebble (where you are working on a high-value task), or Sand.

This will be your personal current-reality picture. My guess is that even if you complete the Time Audit for only one day your patterns will be obvious (but one week is better). To get your copy of the Time Audit chart, go online to the free resources in our Products section to download a simple Excel chart.<sup>6</sup> This is a neat tool

*Lots of folks  
confuse bad  
management  
with destiny.*

—KIM HUBBARD,  
photography  
editor, Audubon

that automatically calculates what percentage of your day is going to Boulders, Pebbles and Sand. Simply keep it handy throughout the day to record what amount of time is being spent on your different activities.

A quick thought about the Time Audit. Some of my clients do the Time Audit and some don't. I understand that not everyone will fully commit to this work, but I know that everyone who makes the effort to have the Time Audit beside their keyboard, even just for one day, will get a huge awakening from the exercise.

If you do the Time Audit, you will see how your minutes can drift away into myriad miscellaneous activities that are only occasionally aligned with your Boulders or with completing important Pebbles. It's a simple, easy wakeup call that I hope you will get.

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6. Goto [www.HughCulver.com/BreakBook](http://www.HughCulver.com/BreakBook).

*You can observe a lot by just watching.*

—YOGI BERRA, former American Major  
League Baseball player and manager

	<b>MONDAY</b> – Activity	<b>B P S</b>		<b>TUESDAY –</b> Activity	<b>B P S</b>		<b>WEDNESDAY</b> – Activity	<b>B P S</b>
7:30	email	P	7:30	email	S	7:30	plan	B
7:45	email	S	7:45	email	S	7:45	email	S
8:00	plan	P	8:00	plan	B	8:00	email	S
8:15	meeting	B	8:15	TM visit	P	8:15	email	S
8:30	meeting	B	8:30	TM visit	P	8:30	JR visit	S
8:45	meeting	B	8:45	sales call	P	8:45	email	S
9:00	meeting	B	9:00	sales call	P	9:00	paper wk	S
9:15	PV call	S	9:15	paper wk	P	9:15	paper wk	S
9:30	sales call	P	9:30	paper wk	S	9:30	email	S
9:45	sales call	P	9:45	paper wk	S	9:45	sales call	P
10:00	paper wk	S	10:00	meeting	B	10:00	sales call	P
10:15	updates	P	10:15	meeting	B	10:15	email	S
10:30	TM visit	S	10:30	meeting	B	10:30	TM visit	P
10:45	email	S	10:45	meeting	B	10:45	TM visit	P
11:00	paper wk	S	11:00	email	S	11:00	client call	P
11:15	paper wk	S	11:15	email	S	11:15	client call	P
11:30	JR visit	P	11:30	client call	P	11:30	paper wk	S
11:45	JR visit	P	11:45	client call	P	11:45	email	
12:00	email	P	12:00	email	P	12:00	email	
12:15	email	S	12:15	email	P	12:15	lunch	
12:30	lunch		12:30	lunch		12:30	lunch	
12:45	lunch		12:45	lunch		12:45	lunch	
13:00	plan	B	13:00	plan		13:00	meeting	
13:15			13:15	JR visit		13:15	meeting	
13:30			13:30	JR visit		13:30		
13:45			13:45			13:45		
14:00	meeting		14:00			14:00		
14:15	meeting		14:15			14:15		
14:30	meeting		14:30			14:30		
14:45	meeting		14:45			14:45		
15:00			15:00			15:00		
15:15			15:15			15:15		
15:30			15:30			15:30		
15:45			15:45			15:45		
16:00			16:00			16:00		

**Boulders and Pebbles Worksheet**

What changes would I have to make to enable me to work more on my Boulders, complete my Pebbles and stay out of the Sandbox? Some examples:

- 1) I could schedule five minutes at the end of every day to plan my next day, with a focus on Boulders first.
- 2) In the morning, I could allow myself only twenty minutes on email before concentrating on my Boulders, then return to email later in the morning.
- 3) I could stop my habit of jumping from task to task, and instead work on one thing until I come to a logical completion point.
- 4) I could close my door and let other people know that I prefer to deal with interruptions only after 10:30 a.m.

One change I could make as I plan my day:

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One change I could make at the start of my day:

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One activity I would have to stop doing:

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One change I could make in how I respond to interruptions:

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.....

.....

Now that you have done some investigation into your ‘current reality’ with the Time Audit it’s time to look at turning your vision into reality with goals.

“Focus on Boulders. Complete Pebbles.  
Stay out of the Sandbox.”



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# Goals Work (for you)

*What man actually needs is not a tensionless state  
but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal,  
a freely chosen task.*

—VIKTOR E. FRANKL, holocaust survivor; author of *Man's Search for Meaning*

Goals are the most important part of effective planning and predicting the future. Without goals, planning is nothing more than a 'wish list' written in vague language designed for happy procrastinators. Ask any successful person (and I don't just mean business success) and they will tell you about goals they set for themselves, whether it was for sports, finances, family, health, business achievement or just plain fun.

When we create well defined goals, whether they are to save more money, eat the right foods, increase our sales or organize our office we create new expectations and tension. The tension is between where we are now (our current reality) and where we want to go (our vision). This is a good thing! We need this tension to motivate us and to inspire us to overcome barriers and setbacks.

In the 1960s Harvard researcher Hans Segle coined the term ‘eustress’ to refer to the good stress we experience when we are motivated and positively attracted to a result we want. Segle was looking at various external factors that created stress or eustress.

What I’m fascinated by is how we can effectively *create eustress to our benefit*.

In a classic twenty-year longitudinal study of Harvard Business School MBA graduates, researchers measured the general achievement level of graduates as they progressed in their careers and compared these results to their stated goals upon graduation. The researchers divided the graduates into three groups:

- Those who had no goals upon graduation. These people might have stated their goal in a vague manner such as, “to get a good job that pays well.”
- Those who had vague goals. They might have stated their goal as, “I am hoping to get into management with a medium-sized firm in the area of manufacturing, and I want to have a high income.”
- Those who had specific goals such as: “I want to get a job in fashion design that pays \$50,000 to start, and where within five years I can move up to \$100,000 with five week’s vacation per year. I want to marry and have two children, and live in Westhaven.” Understandably, this group comprised only three percent of the study group.

The results were nothing short of amazing. The second group (with vague goals) were, on average, 20% more successful than those who graduated with no goals at all. Not bad, but those turned out to be only modest successes, compared to the third group with specific goals.

The third group was *twice as successful* as the no-goals group in

terms of wealth generation (earnings, investments and assets); life-style (time off, holidays and life experiences); happiness; and family. And it all started by turning on the brain's natural new-expectation software and letting the magic of eustress begin to do its work.

Maybe you are thinking you already know that goals work. Great, but are you using goals to their full benefit? In my life I have seen goals turn crazy ideas into amazing results that created news internationally. At the same time I have seen many entrepreneurs and employees drift through years of work without goals, direction or motivation.

In all cases, goals, properly set and created with intention are the one key factor that will always get you on a path to creating new success. "The best way to predict the future" as computer scientist and professor Alan Kay famously put it, "is to create it."

Here are four arguments for why goals work, and why I want you to re-visit your own goals:

### **Goals Help You Say 'No'**

Does this sound familiar?

"Have you got just a minute?"

"Can I just ask you a quick question?"

"I just need a small favor . . ."

If you are like most people, you hear lines like this all day long. Of course it is important to help others, but when you work from clear, motivating goals you become more focused on completing your tasks and less willing to be pulled away from them. You can also be more assertive by saying 'No' to other people (and without remorse).

Darrell, an IT manager in a government department, oversees eight technicians who troubleshoot technology issues. When I met with the Director of Darrell's department, he told me that when Darrell is in the office there is a lineup of staff all day wanting his help to resolve issues. Apparently Darrell's open-door policy and

helpful nature keeps him busy all day answering questions from staff that should really be getting these answers on their own. But his generous time-sharing has a cost. Darrell was often the one coming in early and staying late. While the staff was obviously getting what they wanted with quick advice and direction, Darrell was paying the cost with long hours catching up on his own work.

“Here’s the surprising thing,” continued the Director. “When Darrell is out of the office there is no lineup and everyone seems to be able to get their work done!”

What’s missing from this picture? Until Darrell revisits his goals and what are the most important objectives he is committed to then everyone else’s objectives will become his. This is not to say that Darrell shouldn’t own some responsibility for other people’s needs in his department – he should be responsible. And he needs to have a goal of building their capacity to create solutions on their own.

There is a rule for this: “Those who don’t have goals are ruled by those who do.” In other words, if you don’t start your day with a clear plan, then everyone else’s emergencies often become yours. Sound familiar?

Think of all the interruptions you get in a day – how many of them are aligned with *your* goals and how many are only serving others? Having clear, compelling goals is the first step to creating the kind of day and success you want. Simple advice? Maybe, but worth repeating: Goals Work.

*We must not  
promise what  
we ought not,  
lest we be called  
on to perform  
what we cannot.*

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN,  
16th president of  
the United States

## Goals Save You Time

When you did your Time Audit you likely noticed (I know I did) that *Sand* finds a way to fill most of the cracks in your schedule. If you have ten minutes before a meeting starts sand shows up with a

bucketful of emails and phone messages? Hitting that energy slump around 11 am? Perfect – there's a sand-pile of paper on your desk

*Give me a stock clerk  
with a goal and I'll give  
you a man who will  
make history. Give me a  
man with no goals and  
I'll give you a stock clerk.*

—J.C. PENNY, businessman  
and entrepreneur

to shuffle through, and no end of Boulders that haven't been looked at for days.

When we have goals that motivate us, we naturally are more aware of our time and how we use it. When we first arrive at work we are more committed to being efficient.

We look for ways to keep meetings short. We become polite but efficient in conversations, and we find ways to save time when completing our email correspondence and doing other busy work.

Effective goals are time-bound. The challenge is to be effective with our time and ideally to find new time for high-value work or breaks.

## Goals Help You Achieve More

*'Someday' is a disease that will take your dreams  
to your grave with you.*

—TIM FERRISS

When you set a goal for yourself you always achieve more, even if you don't fully reach your goal. It's simply a matter of motivating your conscious thinking enough to beat out all the distractions.

Every time I commit to a triathlon competition or marathon run, for example, my workout patterns improve. I'm fitting in a run early before work; where before these opportunities were often missed in the rush of the day. I'm watching what I eat and paying more attention to sleep and stretching. The whole chain of new patterns was triggered by one event: making a goal and committing to it.

And here's a bonus: even if you don't quite reach your finish-time goal, you have still achieved more because of it. You probably have friends or family members who have committed to start training for their first 10K race, triathlon or half-marathon with no previous experience and after many years of not seriously exercising. Whatever happens (other than injury, of course) they always enjoy better health, more energy and a positive experience, even though they rarely reach their performance goal on the day of the race. As soon as they commit to the goal a whole chain of opportunities start to unfold to support their objective. Or as Emerson more eloquently predicted: "Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen."

### **You and the Moon Mission**

One of the more famous notions of Jim Collins, best-selling author of *Good to Great* and *Built to Last*, is that successful organizations have what he calls BHAGs, or Big Hairy Audacious Goals. "There is a difference between merely having a goal and becoming committed to a huge, daunting challenge, like a big mountain to climb," says Collins. Anything less than this will simply not cut it. You will probably vacillate and procrastinate, and eventually it won't happen. Think of the moon mission in the 1960s, says Collins.

"President Kennedy and his advisors could have gone off into a conference room and drafted something like, 'Let's beef up the space program,' or some other such vacuous statement. Instead, Kennedy issued his BHAG '...that this Nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth.' The rest is history."

Have a look at your goals. Are they enough of a stretch? Do they get you excited about working on them? Are they meaningful enough for you? If not, get to work on some new goals. As Abraham Lincoln once said, “A goal properly set is halfway reached.”

### Goals vs. Flexibility

Perhaps you are thinking, “I don’t want to be one of those people who are constantly looking at their watches and fretting about goals.” I agree – the objective of having goals is not to become so results-focused that you cannot enjoy yourself or the task at hand. Goals are also not intended to blind you to opportunities.

Goals are about getting done what is most important, so that you are able to get the benefits of those results and have reflection time, planning time or simply do-nothing time. In fact, my experience has been that when I work from goals I create even more opportunities for spontaneity, fun and time away from work.

Perhaps you’ve noticed that feeling that ‘there is never enough time to do everything I need to do’ feeling. It could sweep across you as you review your Action Plan or as you look at your bulging Inbox with unread emails that might as well be archived they are so old. Or you could feel it as you return home after a frenetic day of dealing with what Stephen Covey would call Quadrant III: urgent, but not important items.

The brain loves to ruminate on what’s wrong. And a sense of unfinished work gives your brain a lot to attend to; and it will. You will worry, have anxiety and stay busy.

Goals, well designed, get you focused on what needs to be done. You have a plan and if you follow it you will reap the benefits of knowing when to work and when not to. You can be assured that

there is a game plan to rely on and that it's okay to turn work off be with the family and recharge.

## Dopamine and Goals

We now know that the neurotransmitter Dopamine is the secret juice we create when we anticipate some good event. Often referred to as the neurotransmitter of anticipation, Dopamine is responsible for that Christmas Eve buzz that keeps children awake far too late and the nervous excitement of young lovers preparing to meet on a date. Once we focus on a goal that we want, the body goes to work and uses Dopamine to heighten our anticipation and attention.

I often use this internal switch to my advantage in seminars by announcing the 'exciting' lesson or that we will have a training movie following the break. Hearing the announcement, students tend to be more likely to be back on time and keen to get started. You can use it as well.

When you have a goal that you are excited about, the body's wiring is ready to help you get there. But you need to give it a picture to focus on. It's no different that imagining the beaches of Cabo San Lucas before you actually arrive. The image of endless stretches of sun-soaked sand on the Baja Peninsula excites and energizes you to put in the extra effort to get your work wrapped up. By staying focused on your dream you are able to head off on your vacation guilt free.

Take a moment to create either a physical image (download a picture off the Internet or use pictures from magazines) or a mental one of one of your goals. I usually imagine crossing Pebbles off my Day Plan and feeling complete when I pack up at the end of a day. Let this image develop in your mind so you can recall it at any

*If you have a plan you  
are eighty percent  
certain of, you should  
violently execute it.*

—GEORGE PATTON, U.S.  
general in World War II



time. And use it to pull you out of energy slumps or recharge you when it feels like progress is elusive.

It's like the turbocharger on my car's diesel engine. It's always there waiting to be used and to give me a boost in power. But I have to intentionally engage it when I need it, or it sits idle waiting.

Get clear on your vision, return to it often and let your internal programming help get you to the beach.

### Setting Smart Goals

People are not planning for retirement. Every year the Royal Bank of Canada surveys Canadians to measure their readiness for retirement. And the results are dismal. A meagerly 38% have a solid, substan-

tial financial plan for creating the savings they want for their golden years. Another third of Canadians have no plan at all. Not only do they not have a plan, they are probably too late to create the savings needed. But it gets worse.

The remaining one third of Canadians are categorized as having a plan, but not one that is considered to be substantial enough to ensure a similar quality of living after retire-

ment. And a full 13% of them have included winning the lottery as a part of their strategy!

We have all had times where we missed the target and didn't create the results that we wanted. It could be the Valentine's Day card we meant to buy and only remembered when our spouse or partner hands us the card they *did* remember to get. Or some work-



related target like increased sales, coaching for staff, or improved marketing that somehow slipped by and didn't materialize.

It might be that the problem is the goal itself. A poor goal will always lead to poor results.

The classic acronym SMART is a good starting place for improving your goal-setting habits. For years this simple formula has been invaluable as a quick checklist for me on my own goal-setting activities. It's also the formula to use when delegating to staff, or designing team goals or coaching employees (even with your children!).

## **S is for Specific**

Before you start, you need to know what you are creating. All too often I hear the most incredibly vague goals from people, like, "I need to improve the way I communicate," or "I have to deal with interruptions better." On the surface there is nothing wrong with these goals – that is, until you try to keep them!

You have probably been in planning meetings where there was a lot of excited conversation about the need to improve some process such as communications or customer service. At the end of the conversation there seemed to be an agreement: something needed to be done to improve the situation, and so a line was added to the To-Do list that said, "Improve communications." Inevitably, one month later nothing had changed except that your team had documented a flaw that needs attention.

*Nothing is particularly hard if you divide it into smaller jobs.*

—HENRY FORD, founder of the Ford Motor Company

Being specific requires work. After you identify the need for change, improvement or growth, you need to narrow the focus to a specific outcome. For example, "improving communication" could actually be stated as, "finishing every planning meeting with a specific list of tasks each with accountabilities and deadlines." Or

it could be something like this: “Every Friday Jim will circulate an email with the sales numbers recorded for that week.” Saying ‘I will improve communications’ is akin to saying I will get richer; it’s hard to measure and even harder to know what to work on.



*One of the greatest benefits of a goal is the process of writing it. If you follow the model I present here then there is a certain degree of rigour required and gaps in logic or direction will quickly become apparent. Defining a specific desired outcome also requires you to organize and evaluate options and to prioritize the outcomes you want. Not only does this lead to better outcomes, but it forces you to decide what is ultimately important. Try this now; take an objective or goal that you have, but have not yet completed. Write down a description of the goal and then compare it to the model on these pages. Is it specific? Does it motivate you? Is it realistic?*

Use these questions to evaluate other goals and learn how to craft goals that are realistic objective. The better your goals the better your outcomes; it’s that simple.

## **M is for Measurable**

There has to be a measurable outcome for every goal. Without some kind of metric of success, your goals are just hopeful wishes. The measure can be the number of sales calls you will make this week, the amount of time you dedicate to the marketing strategy creation, the amount of time you commit to cleaning your office, or the number of work-free evenings you will enjoy this week.

Just like an athlete, setting a specific performance target is critical for being accountable and for creating more success. Without

a number attached to the goal, we can easily convince ourselves that we have worked hard enough. But when you add a measure to your goal, you immediately raise the stakes and start to work toward better results.

A good rule of thumb is that there has to be a number in your SMART goal. Here are some weak goals that are not measurable, followed by improved versions:

**Weak: Get better at managing my time.**

**Better:** Block fifteen minutes at 4 pm every Friday to plan the next week.

**Weak: Learn how to use my email software better.**

**Better:** Get Jerry to show me how to set up rules and folders on Thursday and empty my Inbox.

**Weak: Take better care of myself.**

**Better:** Walk for twenty-five minutes four times a week after work on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and record my exercise.

## A is for Achievable

A good goal should teach us that we are goalkeepers. In other words, it should set us up for success. For example, if you want to get into better physical shape, first create a goal that you know you can reach within one week, such as “no snacking after 8:00 pm this week.” After you achieve that goal, then create a harder goal. By continuing in this increasingly harder goal-setting pattern, you are teaching yourself an incredibly powerful lesson: you are a goalkeeper.

Paying attention to how you carry your body and intentionally feeling optimistic can launch you into that Day before Vacation anytime. It may not compare to a week in Cancun, but it's available

all day every day, and you don't have to worry about losing your luggage.

### **Put Procrastination on Pause**

Many people believe that they are procrastinators (see page \*\*\* “Put Procrastination on Pause”) when in fact they just make poor decisions. Paying attention to how you carry *your body* and intentionally feeling optimistic can launch you into that Day before Vacation anytime. It may not compare to a week in Cancun, but it's available all day every day, and you don't have to worry about losing your luggage.

They either set their sights too high (“I've been out of work for six months and have no savings, but I plan to be debt free by year-end.”) or they make poor choices in the moment and avoid the hard work needed to get what they want. So watching TV or exploring YouTube gets your attention while more worthy endeavours lay idle.

By setting realistic goals and then each time achieving more than the last time, you develop a new persona as a non-procrastinator. SMART goals are carefully written to ensure that there is a very good chance of success. This is also why the measurable part of the goal has to be carefully defined. We want to stretch ourselves with our goals, but the purpose is also to *prove* we can reach further. We are, in effect, training our minds to create even greater successes.

### **R is for Risky**

Good goals stretch and challenge you. Notice the difference in the following two goals:

- 1) “I commit to spending two hours a month coaching my staff.”
- 2) “I will create a coaching contract with each person on staff. This will include at least one coaching conversation with each person each month. This is a six month trial commitment.”

The first example is a goal, but the target is pretty low. The second goal would stretch any leader and be easy to measure: you either did it or you didn't.

When you create a risky goal, you activate a part of the brain that is competitive and risk-adverse. This part of the brain is hyper-aware of things relating to risk, and it seeks ways to minimize them. For example, if you are in a dangerous place it will marshal hormones, endorphins and adrenalin to prepare your body to respond to the perceived danger. In a similar way, when you create a risky goal for yourself, this part of the brain will want to find solutions that mitigate the risk.

*Luck is a matter  
of preparation  
meeting  
opportunity.*

—OPRAH, television  
host, producer, and  
philanthropist

When I committed to compete in my fourth Ironman competition, it was a risk. Not a risk with physical danger, but a risk in terms of fitting in sufficient training for an ultra-distance event when I already had a full personal and work schedule. Unlike my previous Ironman events, I now had young children at home and a wife who worked. I owned a busy company, worked long hours, travelled about ten times a month and sat on two volunteer boards. Time was tight and I didn't have extra time for the rigorous training regimen needed for an Ironman. Yet I knew I needed to stay motivated with my exercise so I made the commitment anyway.

Once I committed to the new goal I started to notice a variety of unique and fortuitous opportunities to fit in training workouts. After a presentation, I would sometimes quickly change and get in a short workout before my flight home. Often I would run to work or combine a bike ride with errands. I changed my sleep patterns to go to bed earlier, get up earlier and do my workout in the morning before anyone else in the house woke up.

I was truly amazed to find that, despite my workload and other commitments, I was able to average more than thirty-five hours

of training per month in the four months leading up the Ironman. While this will seem paltry compared to some serious competitors, it was almost double the workout volume I had averaged in the previous six months. And I have been able to maintain that target, or more, every month since.

## **T is for Time Bound**

The final part of the SMART formula is to add a time factor to every goal. You should be asking: “What date will motivate me, allow me to get the work done on time, and make it less likely that I will procrastinate?” Human nature is such that we are more likely to overestimate our abilities and not leave enough time. On the other hand, allowing too much time might mean there is less motivation to get the project moving towards completion.

When I am working with teams I encourage them to set the most realistic time goals they can based on their knowledge of completing demands, workload, etc. And I ask them to commit to renegotiating dates, if necessary, not simply pushing dates back when they run out of time. Renegotiating means that you, or the team, have to do more than simply postpone the date. Postponing deadlines can lead to a disastrous pattern of putting off the inevitable. A better strategy is to change the date *and* to make some other change to ensure that the goal is achieved. You might need to assign more help to the goal, move some other goal, break the goal into small parts, delegate internally or outsource some of the work.

The good news is that the more times you set and achieve your goals, the more likely you will be to continue creating goals in the future.

## **A quick review**

Before we get to the worksheet, here is a quick reminder of the formula:

**Specific** – can you and others tell when you reach your goal?

**Measurable** – can this goal be measured?

**Achievable** – are you setting yourself up for success?

**Risky** – is this a stretch goal that will build your success?

**Time Bound** – do you have a deadline for achieving your goal?

When I teach our seminar I always have students share their commitments with a partner. That partner's role is to listen carefully and then ask good coaching type questions (open-ended questions) to help refine the new commitments. Some of the typical questions asked are:

“By when will you have started that goal?”

“How will you know that you have reached the goal?”

“Who do you need to help you with this goal?”

“What is the first step you need to make in order to get started?”

“What is the most likely barrier you will encounter and how will you overcome it?”

Ask yourself these questions now. This is a great way to catch any vague language and to think through the execution of the goal. Ultimately every goal that goes through this filter improves.

You can reproduce this conversation at your office or, if you are self-employed, with a colleague. Make it a reciprocal agreement – you ask for help with your new goals and offer to help them with theirs. Ideally, schedule a check-in date to reconnect and review progress.



**Smart Goals Worksheet**

This is a good chance for you to practice writing SMART goals. You might be surprised to discover that it's not easy, but give it a try. First, write an objective that you would like to set. Don't worry about the format – just capture the idea here:

.....  
.....

Next, rewrite this objective as a SMART goal paying particular attention to making it specific and having a measurable outcome.

Goal #1: .....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Finally, who can support you in reaching this goal? I find that sharing my goals with someone I know who will hold me accountable greatly increases my success.

.....

Following this same process, write two more goals as SMART goals:

Goal #2: .....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Support person is: .....

Goal #3: .....

.....

.....

.....

Support person is: .....



# Part II



# SYSTEMS

**Rewiring your programs  
to create more success**

*The person that never makes a mistake  
never tried anything new.*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN, Theoretical Physicist



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# Systems for Success

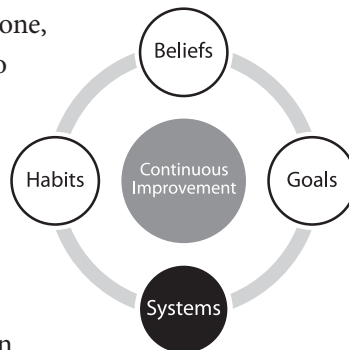
*Be sceptical of your stories:  
I don't necessarily agree with everything I say.*

—MARSHALL MCLUHAN, Canadian educator,  
philosopher and scholar

Okay, time for a tour. Please take a minute to look around the room you are in. Whether you are hanging out in a café, in your home, or sitting on a bus just have a quick scan.

Notice the orientation of your chair to the door, the windows, the table, etc. If in your office, take note of the location of your paperwork, phone, pens and anything you rely on to do your work. Or if you are in a café take note of how it is organized to manage traffic flow and allow for product sales.

Inherently all of the pieces of a room make up a system. And that system influences what can



happen in that room, what can't and what is downright awkward. For example, you can maneuver easily between furniture, but it's pretty hard to cross the room *through* a desk. The furniture, in effect, guides where you go; it becomes a part of the system you work within.

Other examples of systems are roadways and street signs, your banking accounts, the lights in your house, meetings and day-timers. Just as you are influenced by the design of each system, if the system were to change it would influence what you do around that system.

Examples of corporate instituted systems are all around us: performance management and incentive plans, documentation and filing, ordering and accounting and even systems to promote creative thinking. The first out of the gate was 3M giving engineering employees 15% of their 'out of the box' thinking. Google has a similar 20% formula that is reputed to be the source of Google maps, Google news and other game changing tools. On a smaller scale, it is still form du jour for high tech firms to provide employees with mini theatres, foosball tables and climbing walls to stimulate the synapses and give people permission to experiment with new ideas and 'fail forward', as one CEO described it.

Forms and templates you use in your work are examples of systems – their design influences what you do. If you were to improve a form (such as your invoice template or order form), naturally you would have to change the way you enter the data. Over time, the results could be dramatic in amount of time saved, reduced aggravation and reallocation of your resources. It is only a form, but one small change and you could reap long-term benefits.

I get excited about systems (strange, but true) because I only have to change them once, and then they start to work for me. Consider how drive-through restaurants, bank ATMs and self-service checkout lines at grocery stores have meant less waiting time for consumers

and have improved the bottom line for many companies. Online shopping for books, travel, cameras, shoes and even finding a date are all examples of new systems that have transformed routine activities and, to some degree, affected our lives.

In this chapter we look at five important systems. These could be corporate-wide system changes and they can start with just one person – you. They are:

- 1) **Creating your Action Plan** – *why and how you need to plan for the week*
- 2) **You come first** – *reducing interruptions so you can focus on Boulders*
- 3) **Putting meetings on a diet** – *maximizing the benefits from meetings*
- 4) **Exorcise your email** – *using email as a tool, not a time-filler*
- 5) **Clearing up the clutter** – *reducing distractions and increasing focus*

First up is a re-think on your perspective.



# 1

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## Creating Your Action Plan

*Life is what happens to you  
while you're busy making other plans.*

—JOHN LENNON, songwriter

Confession time: I have been hired to lead at least one hundred strategic planning sessions for corporate, government and not-for-profit organizations. I have worked with some of the most ambitious, brightest and talented leaders in industries ranging from high tech to health care, and they are all the same. What I mean is that they all fall into the same trap – and I am guilty of leading them there.

They love to create big, ambitious goals (remember Jim Collin's BHAG?). They usually do a brilliant job of defining the goal, the people who are accountable and even add in milestones. And then they stop. The goals go into a nice report that gets circulated and everyone nods in collective agreement. After that, in an ongoing flurry of putting out fires and new initiatives, the goal is rarely mentioned, except at the year-end review but by then, the focus is on new goals.

Okay, to be fair, often lots of movement occurs and there is discussion about the goals and many goals do get completed. But for the most part there is a disconnect between the momentum experienced in the planning stage and the daily activity that makes up the organization's success. Great intentions are swallowed up in the day-to-day malaise of distractions. While you are fussing over urgent client requests or staffing issues, you are usually not looking at the important strategic plan created at the retreat six months ago.

The problem is not so much lack of *intention*; it is more an issue of *perspective*. The planning retreat was all about the coming year (or half-year, or quarter). The crisis on Tuesday is all about Tuesday. So when you are putting out the fire about late shipments, it's hard to be thinking about the new scheduling software that was you were talking about last September.

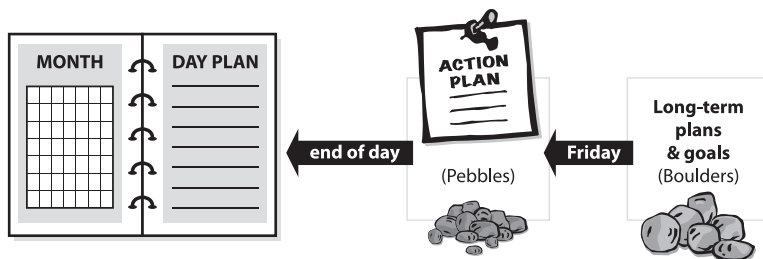
In his book *First Things First* Stephen Covey likens the problem to trying to walk down the street while looking through the telephoto lens of a camera. You have an intense focus on what is right in front of you, but miss out on a larger perspective.

To solve this problem, you need a more workable action-oriented perspective, which is (drum roll please): the week. Okay, I know this doesn't sound revolutionary, but stick with me. This is actually the most revolutionary change my clients make in planning and in how they think about time.

When you plan for the week you can include long-term strategies and goals with the more immediate needs of the day. We call this the Action Plan, because it is all about what is going to create action for you moving your Boulders forward.

In my work, moving Boulders forward toward completion can translate into more sales, better staff performance, lower costs, fewer missed deadlines and (best of all) less stress for me. Boulders can

also include coaching staff, resolving conflicts, improving customer service and other non-sales-related and non-client-related goals.



Creating a list of high-priority goals for the week will be one of your most valuable systems. It will keep you on track with what is important, and it will prevent you from spending your time on low-priority Sandbox tasks. Your Action Plan will give you targets to work toward, and a reason to get back on course after every interruption. It will also break the larger Boulders down into Pebbles, making previously daunting tasks more achievable.

There are four steps to creating your Action Plan:

- 1) **Review last week's Action Plan.** I recommend that you allow at least fifteen minutes for this exercise every Friday afternoon. This is a good time to stop, review, decide what items you want to transfer forward to the next week, and what items you want to drop and then create your Action Plan. There are at least four choices you can make with each decision:
  - **Do it now.** Here's a quick rule of thumb: If you estimate that the task can be completed in less than two minutes don't bother recording it on your Day Plan. Simply complete the task and move on.
  - **Defer it.** Later today? Record it on your Day Plan. Later this week? Record it on your Action Plan.

- **Delegate it.** Use this as an opportunity to train or coach someone else on your team or outsource the work.
  - **Dump it.** Decide that this is not important and cross it out.
- 2) **Identify** the Boulders that you want to complete, or to move ahead to next week. This is your chance to reflect on your progress with long-term goals, and to look at what you need to get done. If you did not manage to complete a certain Boulder last week, it may not have been presented in achievable, bite-sized chunks. Go ahead and break your Boulders down to one or two Pebble-sized chunks that can be managed within the week.

Warning: Avoid the mistake of making the Action Plan another shopping list of miscellaneous tasks screaming for attention. Your Action Plan for the week should only list major, high-priority tasks. I recommend that your list include between eight and twelve chunks of Boulders. Anything more than twelve, and your Action Plan will lose its focus.

- 3) **Define** the list to make sure it is full of SMART goals. All five elements of the SMART acronym are excellent (forgot what they are? Go to page \*\*\* to refresh your memory).

### **I Can See Clearly Now . . .**

When defining your goals for the week, make sure they are Clear, Appealing and Realistic. Pay close attention to these three elements:

**Clear** – does each item on the list provide clear direction, enabling you to begin immediately? Remember that a goal properly set is halfway reached. Set yourself up for success

by spending the extra minute in your planning time to record each item carefully. Three days from now, a vague ambition will become a procrastinator's dream, and it will likely be skipped over in favor of more urgent needs.

**Appealing** – have you written each Pebble to look like you will enjoy working on it and completing it? Get into the practice of writing Action Plan goals as small chunks of work, clearly defined and inviting to work on. Instead of writing, “Work on competitor research,” try restating the goal as something you will be more likely to work on: “Call Jim and offer support for getting the competition research started.”

**Realistic** – can you accomplish every Pebble in your Action Plan this week while still allowing for interruptions? You will be better off completing your Action Plan and enjoying that success instead of writing endlessly long lists that only get partially completed. Focus only on the work that must be done this week.

Here are three examples of Boulder-style goals written in an intimidating, unclear manner, then changed into Clear, Appealing and Realistic Pebbles:

**Poorly written objective:** Resolve issues with committee team.

**Better objective:** Update the last committee agenda for next meeting including debrief on last meeting, circulate, and agree on next meeting date.

**Poorly written objective:** Meet with Anne-Marie to resolve issue with poor sales tracking.

**Better objective:** Meet with Anne-Marie to design sales tracking chart in Excel (include cold calls, warm calls, enquiries and

sales pending). Allow thirty minutes for first draft. Circulate to sales team and give them three days to review.

**Poorly written objective:** Review marketing plan.

**Better objective:** Call Jim and get copy of last year's marketing plan. Brainstorm draft outline of new plan for thirty minutes. Create draft table of contents for new plan (allow fifteen minutes) and circulate for comments.

- 4) **Post** – make sure your list is visible where you refer to it throughout the day. You can post the list at your desk, in your Day-Timer or in Microsoft Outlook® Tasks. Outlook Tasks is a great place to record and keep track of your Action Plan, especially if you learn how to use Categories (note that to view categories you have to make a one-time selection by clicking on *View > Arrange by > Categories*).<sup>7</sup>

You start by creating your own list of Categories (to do this right-click on any Task and *select Categorize > All Categories > New > enter new name > OK*). And every time you create a new Task,<sup>8</sup> select the category you want it listed in.

At a minimum, I would create a Category called “@Boulders” for all upcoming Boulders and one called “@Action Plan” for the Pebbles you are working on this week (note that including @ in front of a name will keep it at the top of your list.).

When you arrive at work Monday morning and all your planning is complete, you become focused and excited about starting to work on your goals. Participants in our *Reclaiming the Clock* seminars tell us that adopting the Action Plan system

- 
7. Categories are shown in a selection box in the bottom right corner of the new Task form in Outlook 2003 and top right in Outlook 2007.  
8. The shortcut keys for creating a new Task is **CNTL+SHIFT+K**

is one of the most important improvements to their effectiveness at work and at home.

### **Mondays are for recruiting . . .**

Here is a neat idea used by a John, a division director at Investors Group, a national financial advice firm in Canada that I think is so widely-applicable that I want you to know about it.

When John plans his week he designates each day with a different theme. Mondays are for recruiting new consultants. In his business, having a successful consultant team is the key to sales growth.

Tuesdays and Thursdays are for appointments with his clients. Wednesdays are open-door days for trouble shooting, coaching and supporting his team. Fridays are reserved for professional development and internal meetings.

As John explained, what started as a survival solution to the unpredictable needs of his consultants has become a winning strategy for focusing, and for forcing others to work around their priorities.

### **Creating Your Day Plan**

Our twelve-seat deHavilland Twin Otter had just taken off from Inuvik in the northern Yukon Territories heading to the Firth River for ten days of magical wilderness river rafting. Flying in a bush plane in the Arctic across endless miles of open tundra is a remarkable adventure in itself. And especially when you are loaded to the roof with rolled up rafts, life jackets, camping gear, food and duffle bags in addition to twelve anxious and slightly nauseous guests.

By map our destination was a straight line, heading roughly southwest to the headwaters of the river. But bush planes never fly

in a straight line. In fact, one of our pilots admitted that they are usually off course more than 50% of the time. Does this sound like a typical day in your office?

The pilot (or the autopilot on bigger planes) is constantly adjusting direction and altitude based on weather conditions, geography of the land (small, low-flying planes don't like mountains) and proximity to other aircraft. In a small plane like the Twin Otter this constant maneuvering and bouncing is obvious, less so in a big commercial jet. So how is it that the plane always arrives at its destination?

*Plan your work,  
work your plan.*

—ANONYMOUS

Simply put: pilots always work from a flight plan (think Action Plan) and when pushed off course they always return to the flight plan. It would be ridiculous for a pilot to take off from the airport thinking, "I'll just see how it goes today," or to base a trip on how everyone is feeling that day. Instead, pilots have a flight plan and after every interruption they return to that flight plan.

Why should your approach to work be any different than the pilots' approach?

I have just introduced the Action Plan, the best way I know of creating a meaningful, focused flight plan from long-term objectives. Now it is time to create your plan for the day. We call this your Day Plan.

The Day Plan will become your most important tool for staying focused, but it must be created with care. The worst mistake I see is making a To-Do list of un-prioritized, miscellaneous tasks that compete for your attention.

Take the time to avoid the "garbage in, garbage out" syndrome, and you will have an efficient system that will serve you well, even in the most harried, crazy-busy times. As Ben Franklin said more than 300 years ago, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."



Here are the four steps to creating your Day Plan:

- 1) Set aside at least ten minutes before you go home to create your Day Plan for the following workday. Again use the process of: stop, review, decide what needs your attention and then plan. For each item, make a decision to either: Do it, defer it, Delegate it, or Dump it.
- 2) Next, review your Action Plan. Record on your Day Plan any Pebbles that you are going to complete tomorrow. Again, make sure that what you are recording is Specific, Appealing and Achievable.

### **Stop!**

By now you might have made a classic mistake: you mysteriously just designed a twelve-hour workday (not including interruptions). Everything looks important, and because it was on your list yesterday it is magically appearing on your Day Plan for tomorrow. Sound familiar? There is a solution.

Instead of creating a gargantuan list that will realistically never get done in a day, make some decisions. Can you complete any tasks immediately? Often I find that I just need to send off a quick email request to delegate a task, or that I can simply delete a low-value item. Often, in just two minutes I can deal with an annoying reminder that has been migrating from Tuesday to Wednesday to Thursday. Do yourself a favor: look for quick solutions, and keep your Day Plan short.

- 3) Prioritize this list with an “A” for Pebbles that must get done first. That’s it. Don’t waste your time prioritizing the whole list,

or calculating what portion of an hour each task will take to complete. Just mark “A” for what needs to get done first.

Most days I will have between three and five “A” items on my list. That’s it. Any more than that and I need to examine how I am prioritizing, or get help.

Start each day by reviewing your Action Plan and your Day Plan. Then, throughout the day, especially in the morning and right after lunch, update your plans.



*Keep both your Action Plan and your Day Plan visible all day, and work from them. Now here is a great secret that serves me, and my clients, well. When you come back from a meeting, or finish a conference call, or put the final touches on that meeting agenda, return first to your Action Plan, not to your Day Plan. Maintaining your focus on the objectives for the week will remind you of what is most important, and ensure you stay focused on Boulders.*

*This simple change in attention will pay big dividends as you find yourself mired in the chaos and distractions of your day. Just like a pilot, your flight plan (Action Plan) is ultimately all that matters.*

- 4) Finally, take pleasure in crossing Pebbles off your list.

## Action Plan Worksheet

Changing the way you organize your work requires a new system, a commitment to follow that system, and the habit of using it daily. Now is the time to make some commitments to your new system.

On the worksheet below, fill in some commitments that you are prepared to make to ensure that your new system will be successful. Here are some examples:

- ✓ I will create new Categories in Outlook® Tasks for Boulders, Action Plans, Personal, etc. (remember to change your View setting to 'View > Arrange by > Category')
- ✓ I will block ten minutes on Fridays to create my Action Plan for the following week.
- ✓ I will block ten minutes every afternoon to create my Day Plan for the next day.
- ✓ I will keep my Action Plan and Day Plan visible.
- ✓ After an interruption, I will review my Action Plan for the week.

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# 2



## You Come First

*You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes  
you might find you get what you need.*

—ROLLING STONES, 'You can't always get what you want', mega rock band

“Have you got a minute?”

Based on the feedback we get in our training programs, the three biggest thieves of time are email, meetings and interruptions. Interruptions may be considered normal for your workday, but they break your concentration and slow your progress. In fact, most people greatly underestimate the impact of interruptions. When the phone call takes you away from the spreadsheet you are working on your brain goes as well. Unlike a computer, it takes time and effort to return to what you were originally working on. And often we never return.

In one study on time management, researchers observed that the average worker was interrupted every eight to twelve minutes. It took between four and ten minutes to complete the interruption – using the minimum numbers, that's over ten weeks of lost

time a year! But here's the kicker; 40% of the time the interrupted person never returned to the original task.<sup>9</sup> Like a pinball, where someone else is pushing the flipper button, we bounce from task to task without finishing anything we put our attention on. Does this sound familiar?

In a separate study, researchers Gloria Mark and Victor Gonzalez of the University of California, Irvine, found that workers they studied were switching activities as on average *every three minutes* from working on a document to speaking with a colleague to making a call. And, once interrupted, it takes workers 25 minutes to return to the original Task, if they return at all.<sup>10</sup>

Remember that in the Chapter *Where Does the Time Go?*, we estimated that a total of one hour of interruptions each day is the equivalent of six weeks of lost time each year – and for most people I work with, this estimate is low. Limiting interruptions means you get more Pebbles completed, move your Boulders forward and enjoy more control over your day.

Experiment with the following seven approaches – they all work, but you need to find the ones that work best in your situation. I suggest that you try each new approach for one week and notice the difference. Some improvement? Great, keep going. No change? Okay, try a different approach.

### **Google's Pac Man logo costs millions**

To celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the iconic Pac Man computer game, Google posted their logo as an operational Pac Man game for one Friday in May, 2010. One estimate is that

9. Researchers, Gloria Mark and Victor Gonzalez, of the University of California, Irvine, as reported in the *Houston Chronicle*, 2/27/2006

10. Betty Lin-Fisher, *Houston Chronicle*, 2/27/2006

the one half billion visitors to the Google search engine that day stayed (and played?) an average of thirty-six seconds longer. Doing the math and using twenty-five dollars per hour as the wage rate, Google reduced productivity by some one hundred million dollars that day. That's the equivalent of 20,000 people working for six weeks – that's a lot of productivity!

Now imagine how much time is lost to the occasional view of a YouTube video, Facebook entry, funny email, or flash web page advertisement?<sup>11</sup>

## Time Boundaries

When I moved to Kelowna I wanted to start working with a financial planner to help me with my savings plan. I suggested a Thursday afternoon for our first meeting. "Sorry," he said. "I don't have appointments on Thursday afternoons. That's my time to read and study the markets."

When I expressed my surprise at his discipline, he replied, "Would you rather work with an advisor who spends all his time with clients, or with one who takes time every week to study the markets and to learn as much as possible to serve you better?"

Good point!

Creating Time Boundaries is about being proactive: **taking the stand to work on your Boulders before other people nibble away at your minutes with their crises.** Remember the rule: "Those who don't have goals are ruled by those who do." I find that

*The mirror will  
always reveal to  
you the number  
one interrupter  
in your life.*

—JOHN ADAIR,  
television host, author

11. <http://blog.rescuetime.com/2010/05/24/the-tragic-cost-of-google-pac-man-4-82-million-hours/>

Time Boundaries are a critical technique for protecting my time and exercising control over my calendar.

Examples of good Time Boundaries include:

- Time blocked to work on a Boulder. Even blocking twenty minutes can be enough to move the Boulder forward by delegating some of the work to others.
- Thirty minutes once a week for planning, contemplation or professional-development reading.
- Time to return client phone calls (mornings are best) every Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.
- Time once a week for creative thinking and for reviewing systems in your office. In his book, *First Things First*, Stephen Covey suggests that we ask one powerful question: “What is one thing that I am *not* doing now, but if I did it well and consistently, it would make a significant difference to my work?”
- Time to resolve a communications issue with a colleague.
- Time to plan for your next team meeting, so that it can be more than just a review of what’s going on.
- Time every afternoon to review and update your Day Plan.
- Time every Friday to clear off your desk, do filing and prepare your Action Plan for the following week.
- Time for physical exercise: a brisk walk around the block, combining an errand with a break to get some fresh air, or stretching at your desk.

## Be Honest

If you only have a few minutes, at the start of the conversation let the other person know this. If the interruption is important and

needs more time, suggest that you schedule a time to meet later.

While at first this new practice might seem blunt, instead think of it as simply being honest. My guess is that if the other person told you she didn't have time at this moment, you would respect it. So how about you take the lead and provide an excuse for exiting the conversation early?



## Learn to Say No

One of the classic mistakes many people at work make is being available all the time. This can lead to staff members being overly dependent and you being frustrated. And it can lead to heightened stress levels, lower productivity and growing frustration.

When you say No to people you are not abandoning them; you are merely declaring your boundaries and avoiding unclear expectations.

Whether you manage people or not, be honest with them. If you don't have time, apologize and let them know when you will have



time, or who else might be of help. Being honest with people can also help you avoid many low-value interruptions in the future.

## Unplug

If you are working on a difficult problem or need space for creative thinking, take your work into a different room. This is one of my favorite solutions: I have found that if I go across the street to a local café with my laptop (and no cell phone) I can be twice as productive for creative writing, planning or just thinking. The walk to the café, the change in setting and the background sounds all seem to stimulate creative work.

It might be that leaving the office for sojourns to cafés is a no-no in your office, but how about just moving to a different workspace, or using a difference office in your building?



*If you are often interrupted during the day, allow for that time when you are planning your day. In other words, if you notice that after interruptions you might have two hours left then try schedule only that much work. Your objective should be to cross off as many Pebbles as possible on your list, not to have a huge carry-over to the next day.*

## No More Band Aids

Look for opportunities to train people or to document answers to typical questions that can create permanent solutions to some interruptions.

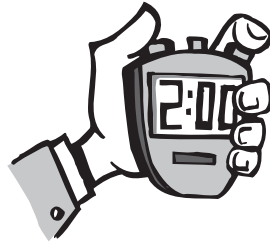
For example, in our office we have a binder called our Systems Binder. Any time that we notice recurring questions or the need for certain information, it gets recorded in the Systems Binder. Here are some examples:

- Passwords to software and computers.
- Self-help instructions for common computer woes.
- Favorite hotels for travelling.
- Frequent flyer numbers, customer service phone numbers for airlines and a record of flight credits.
- A list of meeting room venues with meeting room sizes and prices and phone numbers.
- Routines for booking e-learning clients and setting up user-names and passwords.
- Instructions for using our shopping-cart software.

Not only are these notes useful for us throughout the day, they are a perfect resource for temporary or new staff.

### The Two-Minute Rule

What are the requests from other people that break up your day? They can include requests from your boss, colleagues or customers, or emails that need your attention. The problem with stopping what you are doing and reacting to these interruptions is that you will forever be distracted from your Day Plan. Instead, try practicing the Two Minute Rule:



- If an interruption will take two minutes or less, just do it. Don't bother recording it, scheduling it or coming back to it. Simply stop what you are doing, complete the phone call or email or whatever, and get back to what you were working on.

- Otherwise, schedule it. Record the task in your Day Plan for later that day, in your Action Plan for later that week or some future date.

I estimate that in a typical day I have forty to fifty unplanned interruptions. Of those, about one half can be completed in less than two minutes. Good examples are when a client requests a document, or I realize that one of my staff members needs a document file I have. These tasks I do immediately. There is usually no need to record them or schedule them. I simply take care of them and move on.

Anything that requires more time, I schedule to do later in the day (Day Plan) or later in the week (Action Plan). By following the Two-Minute Rule I am being selective about what I allow to interrupt my flow and I am sticking to my planning tools so that nothing gets lost and my desk isn't littered with reminders on stickie notes and scraps of paper.

## Interruptions Worksheet

Changing how you respond to interruptions can have an incredible impact on your productivity and sense of accomplishment in the day. What system changes do you need to make so that you can follow your plans more effectively? How are you going to measure results (for example, by recording the time saved in one day)?

One change I need to make when dealing with unwanted interruptions is:

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For one week I am going to practice:

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I am going to measure my results by:

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# 3

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## Putting Meetings on a Diet

*Meetings are indispensable  
when you don't want to do anything.*

—JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH,  
economist and author

**M**eetings can provide an invaluable opportunity for information sharing, decision-making and generating new ideas, but they can also be a huge waste of time.

Jason Fried, simplification advocate and co-founder of 37signals, has an interesting rational for why he abhors team meetings. He thinks of a one-hour meeting with six people attending as really being a six-hour event (because that's the financial cost to the company). The sheer thought of that investment is enough to limit company meetings to an absolute minimum and keep them off his agenda completely.

In a survey by Office Team of more than 600 office workers in the United States, the majority of respondents said that meetings were the biggest time waster. By the way, their list of time wasters

included unnecessary interruptions, socializing with colleagues and disorganized work areas.

One of my clients complained in a seminar about her seven-meeting days. She said that not only was it challenging to have that many meetings in a day, but the last fifteen minutes of each meeting were wasted while she mentally prepared for the next meeting. You may not have seven meetings in a day, but even one a week can provide an opportunity to make that time more effective.

When meetings are inefficient, they waste time and lead to poor results. Worse, they create negative expectations for future meetings. People start to dread going to them, and invitees mysteriously become unavailable or simply do not show up.

Based on my observations with hundreds of clients, the most common meeting failures are caused by:

- agendas not created or circulated in advance
- objectives unclear or not followed
- meetings starting late or going overtime
- people distracted by laptop computers, or cell phones
- presenters not prepared
- people not contributing due to a lack of trust, or confusion about roles
- participants taking the conversation off-topic
- disagreements or personal attacks that don't get addressed and resolved
- the same topics reappearing in subsequent meetings without decisions being reached
- unclear commitments and promises not kept

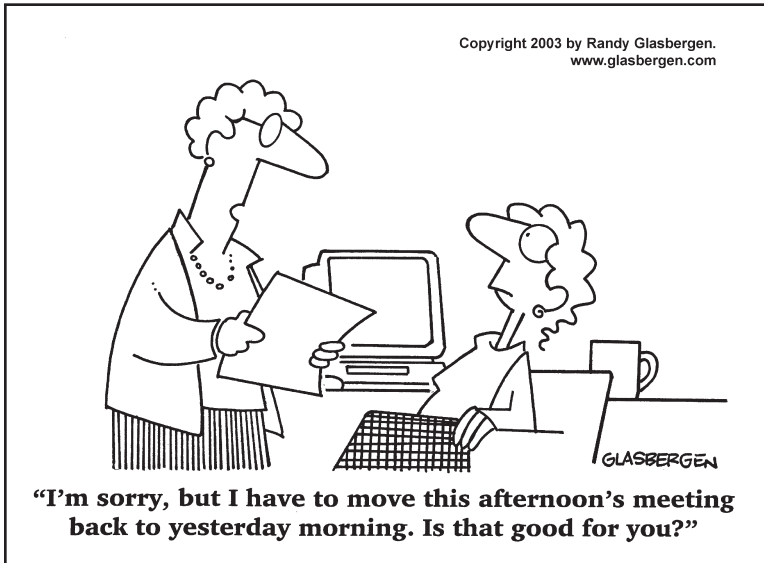
Here are twelve of my best solutions for putting meetings on a diet. As with all of my tips and techniques, your job is to find one or two solutions that you will commit to using and put to the test for one month.



*You may not chair the meetings you attend, but you can still influence their quality. Remember that even the most ineffective chairperson would easily agree that holding an effective meeting is a common goal.*

- 1) **Don't go.** Your time is valuable, and you must absolutely ensure that you are needed at each meeting. When you can, send a written communication or ask someone who did attend to brief you afterward. You can also rely on alternative mediums such as conference calls, teleseminars and webinars.
- 2) **Start on time.** Reward those who arrive on time and notify the rest that they are wasting everyone's time. Close the door at the start time and coach latecomers after the meeting. Hint: meetings scheduled for fifteen minutes after the hour have been proven to get better on-time attendance. Try it!
- 3) **Drop twenty percent.** Could your meetings become shorter just by scheduling them for less time? The Parkinson Principle states that work expands to fit the time allotted. In other words, a one-hour meeting will mysteriously tend to wrap up at around fifty-five minutes while a ninety-minute meeting will drag on until eighty minutes have passed. The speed with which the meeting progresses is often predicated by the scheduled end time (just think how much more small talk happens at the start of a typical two-hour meeting, compared to a half-hour meeting.)

Instead of scheduling a one-hour meeting, make it for forty-five minutes and get a commitment from everyone to start on time and stay on task. You will be surprised how this changes the tone of the meeting, and the results.



### The 16oz Rule for Meetings

I love the suggestions from Caterina Fake co-founder of the photo-sharing site [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com). As her company grew, she kept an open-floor design so people could talk to each other, and she kept dividing teams into smaller and smaller groups.<sup>12</sup> When meetings became more frequent she created the sixteen-

12. She also subscribes to Jeff Bezos's (founder of [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)) two-pizza rule: project teams should be small enough to feed with two pizzas.



ounce rule. Here concern was that excessive time would be spent in discussion and not enough doing. “At the beginning of the meeting, everyone would drink a full glass of water.” she explained. “Then we would get very focused and work through the agenda making as many decisions as possible. But as soon as the first person had to go to the bathroom the meeting would be over.” That’s what I would call pressure to perform!

**4) Have meeting agreements.** One of the simplest improvements is an agreement for how the meeting will be managed. Have your committee or team create and commit to their own set of agreements. The agreements become the measurement of a successful meeting, and it can be used to get a meeting back on track. Here’s are sample Meeting Agreements:

- We will start on time.
- We will respect the speaker. We will let people finish their thoughts and respect what they shared before we introduce our own ideas.
- If we miss part of a meeting, it is our responsibility to catch up.
- We will follow our meeting objectives and agenda.
- Presenters will make every effort to arrive early and come prepared.
- We will stay on topic.
- We will not tolerate personal attacks.
- We will direct our conversation toward consensus-based decisions.

- We will not discuss people who are not present.
  - We will end on time, or earlier.
- 5) **Lead with objectives.** Agendas are useless without objectives. Typical agendas give a chronology of events such as, “The vp will open the meeting with a welcome,” or “Bob will provide an update on the current export plan.”
- This is good stuff, but more important is *what we are meeting about* and what we hope to accomplish. Meeting objectives should announce the true purpose of the meeting, provide focus for the discussions, and give the chairperson the boundaries needed to bring a meeting back on track.
- Even if you are not using agendas, you should still have a short list of objectives for every meeting (it’s okay if they are only announced verbally). At the end of every meeting, allow five to ten minutes to review the objectives and to confirm who is doing what (accountabilities).
- 6) **Send homework in advance** if possible, and encourage participants to do their reading *before* the meeting. Homework can include past meeting minutes, a relevant (short) article or even a couple of provocative questions about the subject. I use these techniques whenever I am preparing for a brainstorming or strategic planning session.<sup>13</sup>
- 7) **Use a “parking lot”** for unrelated questions, ideas and concerns. In the language of facilitation, a parking lot is a record of topics, ideas or concerns that are not on the agenda but need further

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13. Often I will compose a short online survey, and use that to quickly gather some background information to customize my session design. At the start of the meeting I present a summary of my survey findings as a way to engage the group with information about their current reality.

discussion. Before the meeting ends, ensure that there is a plan for how these items will be handled. This is an excellent way to keep the energy in the meeting focused on objectives.

*A meeting is an event where  
minutes are taken and hours wasted.*

—JAMES T. KIRK, captain of the USS Enterprise

**8) Get ramblers back on track.** Some people love the sound of their own voice. Unfortunately, people who go off-topic or ramble on ad nauseum about their favorite subject can distract other delegates and waste precious time. I've experienced this far too many times, so I created a simple, four-step process that hundreds of my clients now use to deal with unwanted ramblers. The next time you hear, "Oh, that reminds me of the war . . ." use these four steps to respectfully get the meeting back on track:

- **Interrupt** – Politely interrupt and get the Rambler's attention. You might interrupt with, "Excuse me [name]. Let me see if I can summarize what you are saying." Most people will be quite happy if you interrupt and the attention is still on what they were talking about.
- **Summarize** – repeat a few key points from what the person said (mention only what was related to the topic at hand). "John, it seems like you are saying that we also need to consider the history of the association before making a decision."
- **Confirm** – show respect for the ideas by asking if your summary is accurate. "...have I got that right?"
- **Move on** – turn the attention to someone else by asking for another opinion or bringing the group attention back to the meeting objectives. "Who else has an opinion on how we should progress from here?"

**9) Monitor and debrief.** Periodically, ask a volunteer to monitor meeting quality. During the meeting, the monitor makes notes (both positive and negative) about the quality of the meeting. At the end of the meeting they report back to the group. Great feedback might include:

- Did we stay on track with our objectives?
- Did we keep our comments brief?
- Did we start and end on time?
- Were presenters prepared?
- Did we reach valuable conclusions with accountabilities?

Select one area of development, and commit as a team to work on it at subsequent meetings. You should enjoy at least two wins from this technique: your team will improve in at least one specific area, and your team members will be more aware of their behavior at future meetings.

**10) Plus/Delta your meetings.** Every six meetings or so, there should be a meeting about the meetings. I use a Plus/Delta process for these debriefs. Draw a line down the middle of a flip chart. On the left-hand side under the heading 'Plus', have the group make a list of things that are working or have improved in recent meetings. On the right-hand side, entitled 'Delta' (the Greek symbol used to represent change) make a list of what is not working or could be better.

Once you have your lists, go to the right-hand column and identify a short list of improvements that the group can commit to right away. Choose realistic improvements that can be made relatively soon. Now start a conversation about how to make those changes happen.

Not only will you improve the quality of the meetings in the future, but also this is an excellent team builder. Your group will feel heard, understood and respected for their opinions and will welcome the changes.

### **Standing Room Only**

One study found that “standing meetings” could reduce meeting time by as much as 80%, with no loss of effectiveness.

Walk up the single flight of stairs from the main lobby and enter the swinging glass doors to the Department of By-laws and Building Permits and you might think you were observing a well-oiled service machine. People were in their places, phones were being attended to and you would be greeted at the long front counter promptly. But, like an animal with a terminal illness, first impressions can be deceiving.

This office team of ten staff with one manager was suffering. Morale was at an all time low, there was poor internal communication, low staff-manager trust and festering relationship issues between some of the staff. Staff sick time was rampant and an alarming share of staff attention was directed at unresolved internal strife instead of to their work. Staff meetings were infrequent and, when they did occur, were ineffective at best. Lack of information can be a source of distrust and, certainly, miscommunications and other related team dis-eases. So I decided to start with their meetings.

The new system I asked them to implement was for daily *standing* staff meetings. It was mandatory that all staff attend. The meetings would start at 8:05 am (twenty five minutes before the doors open to the public) and would last no longer than ten minutes. Instead of an agenda the purpose of every

meeting was to simply and quickly (hence the idea to stand) update each other on what each person was working on and what impacted other staff.

It was a communication compromise; a full staff meeting with agendas and objectives would have been ideal, but the need to serve customers made that difficult to arrange. All I wanted was for them to have to practice communicating effectively with each other and to share information at least once a day. Like the ritual of family meals making for healthy families, we started to notice a difference.

At first, the changes weren't huge. There were fewer emails between staff and they started to talk with each other more. Staff chose to have lunch together more often. And sick time dropped dramatically. At ten minutes a day, the standing meetings turned out to be a good investment.

- 11) **Make decisions.** Often an 80% solution is better than no solution, or revisiting the same discussion every meeting. Set a time limit for your discussion and agree that you will reach a decision by the end. If you are encountering a stalemate, you can assign a small research project to one person and postpone the decision until you get new information.

Conclude every meeting by having each person announce their personal commitments arising from the meeting. This is a powerful way to gain clarification on commitments. It quickly becomes obvious when there is no deadline, or when the deliverables are vague, or when someone has taken on too much and will need help.

- 12) **Finish early.** Whenever you can, finishing early sends a message that you were organized, efficient and improving. It frees

people up to do other work and it makes people want to participate.

### **What if My Boss is The Problem?**

It's not uncommon for the boss who also chairs the team meetings to be a part of the problem. Some common issues include: the chair (the boss) commandeers the meeting and doesn't let others speak; the chair rambles on about unrelated topics; or the chair is late to the meeting, or forgets altogether. Left to their own devices, it's unlikely change will happen.

Here's the bottom line: you all want the same thing. Everybody wants successful meetings and for the team to succeed. From this point you need to get buy in from the boss to hold a meeting about meetings. Then do the plus/delta exercise. You'll be doing the whole team a favor and the boss as well.

A couple of facilitation notes. It's usually best if the chairperson is not facilitating this meeting. Let someone neutral do that. Start by restating your common objectives. Keep the conversation focused on improving the future, not dwelling on who did what in the past.

Meetings are a mixed blessing. They are great for creating dialogue and consensus, but they use up precious time. To get started on putting your meetings on a diet, try out one of these ideas for one month and notice the difference. Pay attention to attendance (are people showing up on time?) and results (were clear decisions made and are there clear accountabilities and shared responsibility?) these are good measures of healthy meetings.

**Meetings Worksheet**

Putting meetings on a diet is a system improvement. A little attention and effort in this direction will be good for you and for your team in the long term. You can make individual changes (be on time, be better prepared, etc.) or group changes. This worksheet will help make your meetings leaner and more efficient.

Changes I can make immediately to the way I attend meetings are:

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Changes that we can make as a team to enhance our meetings are:

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In the next week I commit to:

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# 4

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## Exorcise Your Email

*I don't believe in email. I'm an old-fashioned girl.  
I prefer calling and hanging up.*

—SARAH JESSICA PARKER, actress

To: [jschultz@gofarcom.com](mailto:jschultz@gofarcom.com)  
From: [tmurray@gofarcom.com](mailto:tmurray@gofarcom.com)  
Subject: re: email etiquette

Jeff,

Hope you're well and enjoying the new committee work☺ I'm swamped this week and can't wait for that (long promised) CRM improvement to get going so I can stop the double entries for new contacts.

Anyhow, I need some help from you about email etiquette. I'm hearing from lots of folks that their Inbox is always full and mostly it is internal mail!☺ How about you? Same thing? So, here's what I'm thinking.

Lots of companies have some kind of email etiquette protocol to stop this sort of thing getting out of hand. But I know some

folks are in love with their email and there could be resistance to this sort of thing. Remember what happened with the roll out of our values two years ago? It took months to get the buy-in and to work through the edits.

On the other hand I've heard from enough people on the other side of the fence to think it's worth trying to change the way people are using their email now.

Great to get your comments on this.

Cheers

Tim

PS. I know you're swamped, so don't drop everything for this☺

\* \* \*

To: [tmurray@gofarcom.com](mailto:tmurray@gofarcom.com)

From: [jschultz@gofarcom.com](mailto:jschultz@gofarcom.com)

Subject: re: email etiquette

Hey Tim

Great to hear from you! Okay, I know this is an issue for lots of folks. Some will defend their actions (CYA is always there☺). I was also thinking that something formal, across the company would be best. I don't know where to start . . .

What are your ideas for etiquette?

J

\* \* \*

To: [jschultz@gofarcom.com](mailto:jschultz@gofarcom.com)

From: [tmurray@gofarcom.com](mailto:tmurray@gofarcom.com)

Subject: re: email etiquette

Hey thanks Jeff for the response. It's great to be able to get a conversation going about this.

Here's what I'm thinking: we should get others involved through a committee. We need buy-in. And we should collect some data on what's going on out there in email-land. Who's emailing whom, volume of emails received, etc.

T

\* \* \*

To: [tmurray@gofarcom.com](mailto:tmurray@gofarcom.com)  
From: [jschultz@gofarcom.com](mailto:jschultz@gofarcom.com)  
Subject: re: email etiquette

Yeah, but who's going to have the time for that? I know I'm way overdue on some major projects. Maybe we should start with something simple like an online survey. What do you think?

Jeff

\* \* \*

To: [jschultz@gofarcom.com](mailto:jschultz@gofarcom.com)  
From: [tmurray@gofarcom.com](mailto:tmurray@gofarcom.com)  
Subject: re: email etiquette

Could work. Where do we start with that? I know Dave has done these before – we could ask him.

T

\* \* \*

To: [tmurray@gofarcom.com](mailto:tmurray@gofarcom.com)  
From: [jschultz@gofarcom.com](mailto:jschultz@gofarcom.com)  
Subject: re: email etiquette

Good one. I'll take that on.

J

\* \* \*

If you were counting, that was 362 words in six emails and a whole lot of inaction – especially for two guys who work twenty feet from each other!

Here are three words about email: email is evil.

Well, maybe evil is a bit strong but let's face it, email is a mixed blessing. No question it's a cool invention: it's quick, convenient, recorded, searchable and easy to use. And it wastes hundreds of hours of your time every year, often with little gain to show for your frantic flurry of keyboard pecking.

I've talked to literally thousands of people about their email strife and I think I can safely summarize the source of their email woes in three points:

- 1) **Email is cheap and easy.** For marketers email is the Holy Grail for shotgun marketing (what we used to call the spray-and-pray strategy for advertising). The cost is incredibly low, if you don't mind bothering a few hundred people to reach thousands more. According to Forrester Research, the number of marketing emails sent by retailers and wholesalers in the United States hit 158 billion in 2008 and this is expected to grow 63% to 258 billion in 2013. More than one-quarter of the email that consumers currently receive in their Inboxes is marketing-related.

At the same time, email has become the de-facto internal communication channel for quick updates from the committee chair to invitations for lunch by a buddy ten feet down the hall. The propensity for emailing about everything to everyone has exacerbated the bulging Inbox problem from an average of 142 emails received per person per day in 2007 to 199 in 2010, and the volume is projected to reach 228 emails per person per day in

2011. Already it is estimated that workers are spending between twenty and 40% of their time in email management.<sup>14</sup>

- 2) **Email all looks the same.** Okay, you get some clues from the subject line, the sender and so on, but for the most part we have to constantly make decisions on what to look at, what to ignore. As a result we spend precious time trying to weed through the morass of pitches for GRLWBH (get rich, lose weight, be happy) to find the emails we actually want to see.

Of course there are solutions (and I'm going to give you some below) but we are far from having a perfect solution.

- 3) **Email is omnipresent.** No longer do phone messages and old-fashioned paper mail stay in the office when we go home. We now bring them with us on our smart phones and laptops.<sup>15</sup>

One study by AOL found that:

- nearly 25% of Internet users said they are most likely to check email upon waking,<sup>16</sup>
- 59% are emailing from portable devices in their pajamas in bed,
- 53% are in the bathroom (which gives a new definition to 'urgent'),
- 37% are checking email while they drive, and
- 12% admit to checking email in church.<sup>17</sup>

14. Spending on email marketing will grow from \$1.2 billion in 2007 to \$2.1 billion in 2012. Spending on retention strategies for clients by using e-mail will more than double during that period. Jupiter Research, New York.

15. More than seven out of ten employed respondents also said they checked their personal email at work – and nearly one-third said they did so more than three times a day. AOL/Beta Research Corporation.

16. AOL/Beta Research Corporation (June 2008)

17. AOL/Beta Research Corporation (June 2007)

At the same time we are experiencing a blurring of the lines between being ‘off line’ (not checking Inboxes, voice mail, etc.) and ‘on line’. Not only has this addiction to connection and staying busy shown up at work big time, it has crept into our personal time.

Combating a growing email volume by just working faster and longer is a sure recipe for burn out. My experience is that most people are anchored to their email software but their approach hasn’t improved while the volume of new emails has gone up exponentially. Instead of using more sophisticated techniques or making better decisions on what to read they simply pour more time into checking, reading, replying and being frustrated. Even a single strategy, like finding five minutes once a week to identify senders that repeatedly plug your Inbox and unsubscribe from their lists will make a noticeable difference. Yet, according to one study, only 22% of professionals ever bother to unsubscribe from unwanted emails.

In our workshops, people tell us that email is becoming the number-one source of frustration and consumption of time. In fact, when I ask people in our workshops how much email they typically get in a day, eyes start to roll and I can feel the energy being sucked out of the room faster than you can say, “My Inbox is full!”

Yet when I ask people what they have done in the last week or month to improve their *systems* for managing email volume, the typical answer is nothing. If the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over expecting a different result, then this behavior certainly meets the definition.

Most of us need to use email – that much is a given. The trick is to get email under control, so it doesn’t control you. And that involves rethinking what is most important to spend your time on.

## Email and Pavlov

I remember in the late 1980s when we got our first facsimile machine. The fax machine would ring and we would stop what we were doing

to run across the room and see what was being received. It only took a few months to learn that most faxes were advertisements, and our Pavlovian response came to an end.

Email still has some of that novelty attached to it, although it's wearing off quickly. To see the impact, just watch Blackberry-toting colleagues checking their email in the middle of a conversation, commuters on subways, lunch patrons in restaurants or travelers in airports. Some behavioral tracking studies have found that the average worker was checking their email thirty to forty times a day. Is it really that important to respond immediately to your messages? It's no wonder that research from the Universities of Glasgow and Paisley found that one third of workers studied experienced stress because of their high email volume.

### **Email and the Path of Least Resistance**

The author Robert Fritz coined the expression, "path of least resistance" to describe a universal tendency we humans have to take the easier route when presented with a choice. You use the drive through instead of parking and walking and you grin and bear the annoying habit of your colleague that eats at their desk because you 'don't want to make a scene'. You've been there, haven't you?

Or maybe you've done this. You come home brimming with good intentions, determined to squeeze in a much-needed run. As you head for the closet to fetch your runners, however, the thought of a quick sandwich crosses your mind and your body happily follows that path. It's downhill from there. The run is history and the path of least resistance wins again.

For many people, email is the path of least resistance. Reading, responding to and filing emails gives them a sense of productivity. It usually requires minimal brainpower and it's a ready-made, auto-refill excuse for avoiding the Boulders. It's no wonder why so many people stay busy checking their emails: they are either in avoidance

of harder work (think Boulders) or are uncertain what to work on next, so emails provide a convenient way to get busy.

It always seems counter-intuitive at first, but doing less (of the wrong work that keeps you busy) means you can do more (of the right work and be less busy).

Your goal should be to use email as a tool, but not to let it control your day. Remember: “Those who don’t have goals are ruled by those who do.” If you do not have a clear sense of what is important (your Action Plan), email will always be an attractive distraction.

This is a good time to think about your time goals (remember these from the *TIME MANAGEMENT SELF-ASSESSMENT* on page \*\*\*?). What are you saving time for? Will you fill your newfound minutes with more busy-ness? Or are you seeking more value time for reflection, planning, connecting etc.? Either way, your goals should be clear. Getting off your email in the morning only becomes a win if your alternative use of that time is valuable.

### **What is the Pain?**

One of the basic principles of creating lasting change is that we must always start with our current reality. Only by being clear about what our ‘pain’ (cost) is will we have a big enough reason to put in the effort to change and seek more ‘pleasure’ (benefit). It’s no different from needing to fix your car, your health, a relationship or your bank account; the more accurate your understanding of what is wrong and what this is costing you, the more motivated you can be to fix it.

Let’s start with a quick calculation of the time you are spending on email now. If you suspect that you could improve how you



manage your email, then a good place to start is with a look at how much time is being used up for this activity.

In the space provided below, record the number of emails you open, read and respond to in the course of a day (for this exercise consider that deleting or filing an email counts as a response).



Then make an estimate of the average time you spend per email (e.g.: one and one half minutes/email). Finally, calculate the total time per year that you spend on email (again, we will use the estimate of 250 days worked per year in our calculation) and divide it by 60 to find the total hours per year (if want to really get depressed, divide this number by 40 to get a total number of weeks per year spent on email).

(a) Average number of emails received per day that you look at:

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(b) Average time spent on each email: \_\_\_\_\_

Total time per year = (a) \_\_\_\_\_ × (b) \_\_\_\_\_ × 250:  
/60 = \_\_\_\_\_ hours/year

Here's a typical example:

$$\text{Total time per year} = (a) 35 \times (b) 1.5 \times 250 = 13,500/60 = 225 \text{ hours/year}$$

$$\text{Total time: } 225 \text{ hours/year} / 40 = 5.6 \text{ weeks/year!}$$

Imagine what a difference small improvements in your email management systems might make if repeated day after day. If you receive an average of fifty emails every day, and you are able to either reduce your viewing time by ten minutes or save at least ten seconds per email, you can recover about one full workweek every year.

That is a serious saving.

### Email Tips and Tricks

The following tips and tricks are the best I have found, taught and used myself for quickly reducing time on email. Use any one of these techniques, and you could easily be saving as much as half an hour a day (the average for our students is one hour per day saved). Practice using these techniques for thirty days and I know you will have more freedom – and people will be coming around to find out your secret.

- 1) **Check your email less often.** If there is one change that everyone should make, it is this. Check your Inbox less frequently. By simply going to your Inbox fewer times, you will have more time to work on your Boulders. You will be able to focus more on completing tasks, and you will feel less frantic at the end of the day.<sup>18</sup> Here is the formula I use:

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18. Obviously, if your work depends on being on email all day that's simply the way it has to be. However, we constantly work with people who have terrible habits with email and who let email run their day. Be careful with what you assume to be essential time on email.

- **8:45 am** – After checking my Day and Action Plans I check email, but only to respond to emergencies, clients, or client-related work that I know was left over from the day before. I delete, click and drag email to Tasks or Calendar (see below), or move to a folder (if I don't already have a Rule created for that sender (again, see below about Rules). Total time: twenty minutes.
- **10:30 am** – Check email (fifteen minutes).
- **1:45 pm** – Check email (five minutes). This is a quick check for returned messages and any important new messages.
- **3:30 pm** – Check email (thirty minutes). I spend more time composing longer responses and cleaning up the Inbox.

Total time is about seventy minutes. I know that this might be much higher than you experience now (or much lower, of course). But for me, it is about one-half of the time that I was formerly spending on email. The main difference now is that I make my Action Plan my priority.

### No Temptations

One of the easiest and most reliable ways to stay off your email and focus on your Boulders is to simply not have Outlook open. As soon as you click 'exit' you are declaring that this is uninterrupted focus-time and you are working under your direction. No pop-ups, no temptations, just set your timer and get to work.

Two things that might surprise you: you get a lot done (and you may notice your ability to focus and think deeply has improved), and how emails will wait! Yep, they are right there in my Inbox when I returned.

- 2) **Set Outlook to start with Calendar and Tasks.** This is a great way to start your day by focusing on important appointments and tasks without email distractions. Go to *Tools > Options > Other > Advanced Options*. Under *General Settings*, next to the *Startup* button in this folder box, click *Browse* and select *Calendar*. Even better is to not open Outlook at all when you boot up in the morning. If you are a morning person – this is precious time to protect and avoid the distraction of a blinking Inbox.
- 3) **Use the right medium.** Like the carpenter that only has a hammer and starts to see everything as a nail; it's easy to fall into the habit of using email for most of your communication. In recent years there have been cases of companies announcing staff layoffs by email, or embarrassing inter-office email correspondence being used as court evidence. Just because you have email and they have email does not mean that this is the best communication medium. Often we are replacing good old-fashioned face-to-face conversations with email to our detriment.

Here is a good rule of thumb: if the message involves emotions (attempts to motivate, complaining, or expressing dissatisfaction about a person or about work) or is complex in nature (multi-faceted, requires dialogue, is contentious, etc.) don't use email.

- 4) **Use the subject line creatively.** If you are involved in a series of emails on one topic (like sending out a document for others to review) change the subject line every time you respond. For example “re: agenda for review” becomes “re: agenda for review II.” Or “re: agenda for review – HM's comments”. Here are two more tips for using the subject line effectively:

**Create codes:** FYI = for your information, NNTR = no need to respond, EOM = end of message, etc.

**Change the subject line:** If you receive an email that you know you will need to find later (a quote from a supplier, your airline confirmation, the agenda for a meeting, etc.) simply retype the subject line, click Escape, and click Yes when asked “Do you want to save changes?”. Your email is resaved with the new subject line and, presto, you’ve customized the email to find later.

- 5) **Turn notification of new messages off.** I think that when this default option was built into email software the average person must have been receiving ten emails per week. Now I don’t know anyone that would benefit from having this option on. With exceptions to maybe day traders on the stock market or newspaper reporters most folks will be much better served to visit their email on their schedule, not that of the sender. If you have notifications turned on for email and/or instant messenger and were to watch for just one day I think you would be amazed at the number of notifications you were receiving that can wait. Remember your number one priority at work is to get the highest ROI (Return On Investment) work completed. And these are exactly the kind of jobs that require the most focused, time-consuming concentration. Every time your notification pops up on the screen (or worse yet, you hear the notification sound) you are visually and mentally pulled away from your work. This just doesn’t make any sense.

Turning your notifications off will make a dramatic difference to your day, right away. Check your mail on *your* schedule, not theirs. Go to *Tools > Options > Preferences > Email Options > Advanced Email Options*. Under “*When new items arrive in my Inbox,*” unclick all options.

- 6) **Less is best.** Email is a dynamite tool for simple, non-emotional information. It also works well as a way to organize information. But when you invest an hour to compose an in-depth dissertation

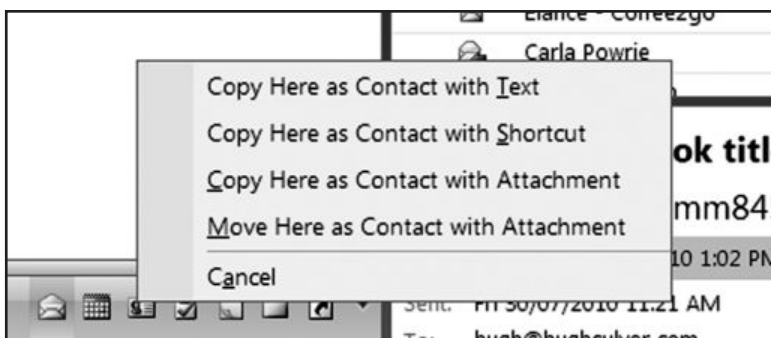
that would make your business professor proud you've not only created a lot of work for you, but also the poor reader.

Two strategies that can make email a more useful tool: keep you content brief and your responses even briefer. Yes, less is best might be a second theme to this book. Remember, it often might be faster and simpler to call the person, leave a voice mail message or arrange a short meeting.

- 7) **Color-code your email.** A simple way to highlight important mail from a client or person you work with is to have Outlook color-code the unread email when it arrives. Click on an email from that person and go to *Tools > Organize*. Click on the *Using Colors* option on the left. Look for the instruction line *Color Messages*. Choose *from* (check that the person's name is in the box), choose a color and click on *Apply Color*. Note: you can also color emails sent directly to you (as opposed to you were cc'd) in a unique color so they stand out.
- 8) **Park emails.** If you receive an email that doesn't need your attention immediately, right click and drag it to the Tasks bar (bottom left of screen). Now here's the trick: once your mouse pointer is over the destination you want (Calendar, Contacts or Tasks) release your right click button on your mouse and a small window will open giving you four choices (three for Tasks). If you choose one of the *Copy* options a copy of the email will be created and the unread email will remain in your Inbox. The *Move* option will create a new Task and remove the email from your Inbox:
  - Copy Here a Contact with Text
  - Copy Here a Contact with Shortcut
  - Copy Here a Contact with Attachment
  - Move Here a Contact with Attachment

If you are creating a new Task from the email, select the date you need to respond to the email or take action, choose the Category the email belongs to, turn the reminder off, and presto! you have a new task with a copy of the email in the body of the Task and a copy left in your Inbox.

Use the same technique to create a calendar entry from an email. Suppose that someone is sending you a confirmation about the meeting date you talked about or it is an announcement for an event you plan on attending. Simply right click and



drag the confirmation email to the Calendar bar (bottom left of your screen). You now have a new Calendar entry with the content of the email in the text body.

You can also drag the email from a new contact into Contacts, and it will automatically start to build the contact information for you. Often you can Copy/Paste the rest of their contact information from the Notes box into the appropriate content fields.

Note: the trick here is to release the right button on your mouse once your pointer is hovering over the destination icon (Calendar, Contacts or Tasks).

- 9) **Don't open an email until you are ready to deal with it.** Avoid the habit of opening an email, thinking about it and then marking

it ‘unread’. This is the twenty first century version of the sage advice ‘only touch a piece of paper once’. All you are doing is delaying the inevitable. When you preview an email, make an immediate decision to reply immediately, delete it, right-click and flag for future action, forward it, or drag it to Tasks or Calendar (see ‘Park emails, above). You will feel more productive and have fewer ‘unread’s’ staring at you from you Inbox.

- 10) Don’t repeat yourself.** Do you find that you are often typing the same information over and over again when responding to emails? If found that this most often happened when we received requests for information about our seminars and keynotes, or dates for upcoming events, or hotel information for events or what A/V needs I have for presentations. I hate retyping something that I have already created, plus it means the response is delayed if I have to rethink the composition or dig it out of a past email. There is a better way.

When you have created a block of text that you know you could reuse for future emails (standard replies, dates of events, descriptions of services, disclaimers, directions to your office and so on) highlight them and store them in AutoText, Signatures or in Office 2007 QuickParts. The next time you need that text it is right there in your email software ready to be used.

Here’s how:

- Click and highlight the text you want to copy, then hit *CTRL+C* (Control + copy).
- *Click on Tools > Options.* Click on *Mail Format*, then on *Signatures*. Click on *New*, and enter a name for your new entry. Next, paste the entry with *CTRL+V* (Control + paste). Finish with *OK > OK*.
- In Office 2007, go to Quick Parts in the Insert menu. You can



easily load this up with logos, directions, product descriptions, images, anything!

There are other techniques as well:

- Once you send the original response email with the text you want to reuse in the future, simply find the email in your “Sent Items” folder, click and drag it to drafts and there it is for future use. Next, open that email, change the Subject Line to something you will easily recognize for future use, Click Esc and you will be asked if you want to save changes to this message, Click Yes. Note the next time you want to reuse this message simply *Forward* the email to a new email address and the original one will stay in Drafts for the next use.
- Copy the text of the email you want to reuse and open a new Note CTRL+SHIFT+N, paste the text in the new Note. The first line of a Note becomes the displayed name of the Note, in other words, if you change the first line to change the name of the Note.

**11) Create Folders in Outlook.** Imagine not having even a basic filing system in your office – crazy, right? Now look at how you are using your email software. Do you have filing system for those hundreds of emails you get weekly?

To organize your Inbox, Folders and Rules are a dynamite combination that makes the software serve as a gatekeeper for incoming emails. Because the folders are organized by subject or sender, you have an instant way to prioritize what emails you will read and which ones can wait until later. *This one idea alone can easily save you two to five hours a week spent needlessly wading through unfiltered emails.*

First, create your folders (right click on your Inbox and click on New Folder). I use folders for client projects, staff, sub-

contractors and suppliers (such as my web design folks). Avoid embedding one folder inside another (in other words, always right click on 'Inbox' when creating new folders). If the main folder is closed you won't be able to tell if the sub-folder has new emails.

A favorite folder I have is labeled 'News' – this is for e-zines, newsletters, advertisements, etc. I am interested in what these companies and authors are sending, but only on my schedule. About once a month I look at the 300 to 400 emails in there, quickly read the ones I'm interested in, and then delete them all. That's 300 to 400 emails that never land in my Inbox and that I can deal with in less than fifteen minutes once a month. Nice.<sup>19</sup>

Once you have created your folders, you are ready to create rules to automatically move the new emails into their folders.<sup>20</sup>

Right click on a new email that you want to go into a folder. Choose *Create Rule*, and click on the checkbox *From [sender]*, then click on the checkbox *Move the item to folder*. Click on *Select Folder* and choose the appropriate folder. Finish with *OK > OK*.

A window will appear asking if you want to run your new rule on all messages in the current folder. Click the checkbox and select *OK*.

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19. Here's another favorite – "Special People". Yep, you know who they are. Create rules for all those folks who love to 'keep you in the loop' and send their missives to your new "Special People" folder. This way if you need to know when their garage sale is happening, you've got it.
  20. If you want to change the order of your folders simply right click and rename a folder to move it higher in order of alphabet.



*The following one-time change will create a rule that will instruct Outlook to store your reply in the same folder that the new email was moved to: Go to Tools > Options > Preferences > Email Options > Advanced Email Options and check In folders other than the Inbox, save replies with original message.*

Now your complete conversation with a colleague, client or committee is stored in one folder.

Once you have these folders set up you need to change your habit to check folders first. When you open Outlook, look for folders that are 'lit up' with a blue number beside them (indicating the number of emails unread). Based on the relative importance of the folders, decide which ones to read first and which ones to ignore.

My typical routine is to read email in client folders, then office folders, then project folders, in that order. Then I scan recent additions to my Inbox. By then I've addressed the highlights, everything else can wait. This puts new emails on *my schedule*, not that of the sender.

**12) Improve your typing speed.** Okay, I admit this suggestion might not be popular – but trust me, it will be worth it.

Do the math: how much time could you be saving every day if you could increase your typing speed by even ten percent? The average adult types at about 38–40 words per minute, whereas a professional typist would crank out the words and 70–80 (and some hit warp speed numbers like 100–110 words per minute). Here are reasons why learning to type faster makes sense.

We all have to type. Other than your phone, which might not allow you to use more than your thumbs to compose a message, we are on our keyboards off and on all day. Even you IT

folks that think you use your mouse more than the keyboard would do well to actually observe how often you have to send off a quick reply to a customer or compose some copy for a FAQ document. It's simply makes sense, if you type faster you can get more done with less effort.

If you can type faster you can allocate more brainpower to composition and less to the mechanics of finding the 'h' when you just hit the 'j' by mistake. This means you will write better, spend less time editing and produce better results from your writing. A good example is a blog or article. The more focused you can remain as you compose the first draft the less time will be spend editing and re-editing. Now extrapolate that same exercise over the course of a year and see how much effort you can save.

Here's some simple math. Suppose that you type at about 30–40 words per minute now. And with just a little bit of practice you increase this to 60 words per minute. This is not super fast, but obviously 50% faster than before. Now if you were typing for just one hour per day (many people we work with are typing at least three times more than this a day) this increase in speed would save you some two and one half weeks a year (based on a 200 day working year), just in typing time! That's got to convince you that this is a great investment.

With inexpensive software that you can download for about \$20, you are almost guaranteed to get that ten percent improvement. For most people this would be the equivalent of about one hour saved every week.<sup>21</sup>

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21. A fun way to get started is to Google "free typing test" and see what your current speed is. Make a goal to increase your speed by at least ten percent. If you practice just a few times, you will be amazed at how quickly your speed increases.

## Learn Shortcut Keys

Shortcut keys can cut your time on email by another ten percent. With shortcut keys, you avoid having to search for the pull-down menus by going straight to the command you need. If you are right handed you will notice that most shortcut keys are combinations found in the lower-left hand corner of the keyboard. This means you can be using the mouse with your right hand while moving quickly to where you want to go with the other hand. Here are the most popular shortcut keys. Print this list out and keep it by your keyboard until you have them memorized.

These are quick ways to negotiate in Outlook. Use these to jump to the action you want without going through drop downs or clicking icons:

- CTRL+SHIFT+K (new task in Outlook)
- CTRL+SHIFT+M (new email message in Outlook)
- CTRL+SHIFT+C (add new contact in Outlook)
- CTRL+SHIFT+A (add new appointment in Outlook)

To negotiate emails faster – practice these shortcuts:

- CTRL+F (forward)
- CTRL+R (reply to Sender)
- CTRL+SHIFT+R (reply to All)
- ALT+S (Send)

These are the universal Microsoft edit shortcuts. You can use them in virtually all M/S products:

- CTRL+C (copy)
- CTRL+V (paste)
- CTRL+X (delete)
- CTRL+D (delete)

**13) The Some Day test.** Still stuck with a couple of hundred emails in your Inbox? I like to put these to the ‘One Month’ test. Here’s how: first create a new folder in your Inbox titled ‘One Month Hold [date] (add the date one month from now)’.

Next, change your view to show only unread emails by selecting *View > Current View > Unread Messages in This Folder*. Select all emails that show up as unread (CTL+A). Then click and drag all selected emails to your new folder. Change your view back to show all emails (*View > Current View > Messages*). And voila, you have parked your unread emails out of sight. The date on the folder will let you know when to revisit the content (you can also create a flag with a bring-forward date).

I wait for one month and then either just delete the whole folder, or quickly scan for any emails that need a response. It is amazing how few emails I find that actually need a response. Besides, if it’s really important someone will usually remind me or resend the message.

## Creating a Team Solution

I’ve just provided the best solutions I know of for you to reduce your time on email, but what about a team approach? More and more I am hearing of team-wide or corporate-wide approaches to reducing time spent on email. In my opinion this is a ‘must-do’ for any group that is experiencing anything more than minor time inconvenience from email volume.

Getting together to explore strategies that everyone could benefit from will not only give permission for folks to change their ways, it is also a great way to raise awareness about what is acceptable practice and what is not preferred.

One of the first corporate-wide email solutions I read about was from Pfizer Canada. As an experiment vice president Jon Coleman

sent out an email to ten direct reports at 10:00 am on a Sunday morning requesting some feedback on a client issue. Within one hour eight people had responded. He was shocked by this ‘always on’ attitude “Many people judge their productivity based on how many emails they’ve responded to,” said Coleman. “That’s a ridiculous measure.”

The new Pfizer policy is called ‘Freedom six to six’ bans email between 6 pm and 6 am and on weekends. They also brought in trainers to teach staff how to be efficient with email.

Other team or organization-based solutions could include:

- Provide training on the basics for using your email software (M/S Outlook, Mail, etc.). I’m constantly amazed how few people have taken time to learn even the basics such as shortcut keys, folders, signatures, search, or attachments
- Black-out Fridays – no emails are sent or read
- Forwarding of enterprise-wide status reports and announcements to RSS subscriptions
- Use No Reply Needed (or NRN) in the subject field. This will help cut down on those “thank you/you’re welcome” emails that gum up your Inbox.
- Agreements on email etiquette covering topics such as: appropriate email use (don’t use email for conflict resolution or talking about the boss); professionalism; protection from liability; use of attachments; proofreading; copy vs. blind copy (cc vs. bcc); use of capitals, and so on.
- “Quiet time” – a block of the day when email and IM notifications are turned off, with email checked once every hour instead.
- Posting staff newsletters on an intranet site instead of using email for distribution.

- Free typing lessons (really!). Hey, I know I'm harping on this, but doesn't it make sense? If you are paying someone \$60,000 plus bonuses, that's about \$1 per minute. Don't you think a \$20 investment to download a typing lesson is worth it?

### **Ban Excessive CC'ing**

If Mary was working on a document and wanted to have seven colleagues offer editing comments she could email all of them. No problem so far. But what if everyone on that list decided to share their comments, edits and thoughts with the whole group by using Reply All? Obviously, that would generate seven times seven, or forty-nine responses. To continue with this scenario, if Mary was then to take their suggestions, make changes to the document and re-circulate it for comments two more times and each time 'Reply All' was used by all respondents, the total number of emails generated could be as much as 168 (the original three emails from Mary, times seven sent out, plus three times forty-nine), depending on how many replied.

Take this simple scenario and extrapolate it across the whole company, and you have a tsunami of pointless replies and cc'ing being generated daily between staff.

Of course using reply all or cc'ing extra people is not done with mal intent (or is it)? People often just want to keep others informed, or seek their input. The downside is more email volume. And when Inboxes are already full, being cc'd by a colleague on something you really don't need to know immediately, becomes more of an irritation than a benefit.

A friend who teaches at a university often complains that internal email from colleagues and others on campus is so riddled with barbeque announcements and unrelated staff policy updates that he now rarely reads any of it. If these unwanted 'nice-to-know' emails are filling *his* Inbox, imagine the impact across the whole campus.



I recommend that you start with your own practices and be more aware about when and when not to CC others. Next get some support from senior staff on how to support this policy. Third, create some simple, easy to remember formulas to use for decision-making. For example, one client of ours has agreed that if including others in a message is essential then they will only include the other email addresses as blind carbon copies (BCC) in this way it is impossible to reply to all.

### **Go to the Source**

One of the simplest solutions is to go to the source and have a look at why staff are sending so many emails. As an exercise, go through an average day's email and group them into categories: need-to-know; client-related; chatting; communication about people at work; scheduling; etc. There will be obvious groups. This will be true of most everyone. The next question is: which groups are being used excessively, and how can you reduce this?

For most organizations the need-to-know and nice-to-know chatter are obvious culprits. Just one meeting with your team about this could be the start of a dramatic reduction of lost time. Rest assured that no one is going to vote for wasting more time; they will all want to know how to spend less time on low-value communications.

For any kind of team debrief process I like to always start by recognizing what is working. Draw a line down the center of a piece of flip chart paper and label the left-hand column with a large plus symbol ('+') and label the right-hand column "delta" (for change). Ask the group for a list of what is going well with team communications, including electronic communications. Make this list in the left-hand column. Don't stop until you feel like there is a healthy record of what is working well.

Next, ask the group for a list of what could be improved. Record

everything, even if the suggestion might be unrealistic (e.g. we all work from home in our pajamas and all email is banned), record it. Once you have a good list, reduce the obvious duplications and then have the team rate the suggestions from most realistic and valuable to least realistic and valuable. And, finally, have a discussion about how to make these changes happen and how to make them stick.

I used this process with a team recently and it was exciting to see the ideas flying onto the flip chart. After only ten minutes we had a list of changes that included: posting meeting minutes on the company Intranet for later retrieval, having a one page email length rule, agreeing to include a necessary action in every email and to not send emails to colleagues after 12:00 noon on Fridays.

### **Encourage Human Moments**

John works in a forestry department and relies heavily on email to communicate with colleagues, many who are either in the field or at remote offices. One day he was working on a report that was due that week and he needed some current statistics from a colleague. So he did what most of us would do: he sends an email request.

One day passed without a response, so he again sent an email with the same request. With his frustration increasing, the next day he sent a second reminder email – this time with the ‘urgent’ flag. Still, no response.

Finally, on the third day, completely perplexed and frustrated, he stood up, leaned over the cubicle wall, and said, “Can I please have those statistics!”

Sometimes we just need to get off our butts, walk down the hall, and connect.

Edward Hallowell, author of *Human Moments* and *CrazyBusy*, calls for more of what he terms “human moments” in the workplace. These are the moments when people actually meet and talk, face to

face. “I believe that it has started to disappear from modern life,” says Hallowell, “and I sense that we all may be about to discover the destructive power of its absence.”<sup>22</sup>

He warns that our addiction to electronic communications (cell phone, email, conference calls, Skype, voice mail, etc.) lessens the quality of communications and is a negative contributor to social and individual health in the workplace.

Meet with your team, start a conversation about electronic vs. human moments and create agreements on simple, easy strategies to encourage more of the latter and much less of the former. You might be surprised to find out how many other people are experiencing the same frustrations and anxiety about these issues.

### **A Word about Social Media**

It has only been a few years since Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn and the growing family of social media sites started their exponential growth into the Broadband and into our lives. What was once a novelty is now considered as normal as using the telephone (or more normal for many). According to Facebook’s own statistics, one half of their 400 million users log on every day with the average user spending fifty-five minutes there – every day. According to the Radicati Group, this shows up as eight percent of their workday, or thirty-eight minutes. According to a separate study, some corporations are finding that as much as 12% of their company’s Internet bandwidth is being gobbled up by use of social media sites.

22. Harvard Business Review, Reprint 99104. Both books, *Human Moments and Crazy-Busy*, are quick, entertaining reads. Hallowell likens some symptoms he sees in the workplace as being similar to Attention Deficit Disorder in adults.

Whether you are sneaking a post to friends or twittering about your great sandwich at lunch, time on social media sites at work is obviously wrong (of course, for a rare few people this is their job). And if you are an entrepreneur, you should really question the volume of time you spend in this arena.

I still blog and enjoy the conversations that get started there. And I send out tweets, but only to let people know about some of my recent thoughts, upcoming events or free materials I'm offering. But check with me in a year – I sure the social media scene will have all changed by then.

**Email Worksheet**

To reduce my time on email and to be in more control of how my email is processed, I need to:

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The one-time changes I need to make (set up folders, turn off the notification for new emails, etc.) are:

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The new habits I need to adopt (stop checking email throughout the day, use shortcut keys, etc.) are:

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# 5



## Clearing the Clutter

*For the first twenty-five years of my life, I wanted freedom.*

*For the next twenty-five years, I wanted order.*

*For the next twenty-five years, I realized that order is freedom.*

—WINSTON CHURCHILL, British politician

The last of the four large rolling recycling bins was being rolled down the hall, and the end was in sight. It had taken a total of twelve hours over the last two weeks, and Jerrod had seen enough planning documents, rolled maps, reports and consulting reports to last a lifetime. He was tired and his back ached, but he felt a growing enthusiasm as he looked around him.

Two weeks earlier, his office had been the joke of the floor. The stacks of disorganized reports and papers had been piled high on every conceivable flat space. Maneuvering a body within the confines of this fifth-floor office took a gymnast's skills, and nothing seemed to have an order or a system. And yet it had been Jarrod's home for eight hours, five days a week for the last eight years.

After today, however, things were going to be different. Jarrod,

as an assignment for a leadership program I was instructing, had cleared the clutter. The benefits he will enjoy go far beyond just being able to find the paper he is looking for. In Jarrod's assessment, "This will add years to my life."

Workspace clutter is a silent killer of effective work and healthy mental attention. Clutter distracts you, confuses your thinking, exhausts your work capacity and sets a poor example for others. And here's the bottom line: in addition to the obvious benefit of finding what you are looking for, you will get wonderful, perhaps unexpected, benefits from clearing the clutter from your life.

Everyone who takes this advice is surprised by the positive effect it has on their work, their attitude and even their health. However, it can be one of the hardest changes to make happen and to stick with. So first let me first convince you why it's worth the effort.

In a study of 800 Hewlett-Packard employees, half the group was asked to work in an overcrowded and disorderly work environment, while the second half worked in an area that was open and bright. While neither group thought their situation was unusual, either in terms of being able to get work done or being interrupted, that is where the similarity ended.

On every metric measured, the second group outperformed their counterparts; and the differences in performance were nothing short of extraordinary. Productivity was up 400%, stress levels were down 50% and IQ scores went up 28%. In addition, blood pressure went down, short-term memory improved, and participants retained 33% more information.

The conclusion: clutter and disorganization are silent barriers to success and a healthy workplace that can have enormous debilitating effect, over time.

## Continuous Partial Attention

The changes to our habits are only harbingers of what is to come. Ex-Apple executive Linda Stone has turned her attention from growing world leadership in technology to writing about the impact of this same technology on humans. In 1998 she theorized that our constant multi-tasking was actually impacting our ability to focus, converse and make decisions. She coined the expression ‘continuous partial attention’ (CPA).<sup>23</sup> As we are motivated by our desire to do more and be more efficient “CPA lets you cast a wider net,” but the downside, as she explains is, “it also runs the risk of keeping you from really studying the fish.”

Nicholas Carr goes one evolutionary step further in his book *The Shallows*<sup>24</sup> and presents a convincing (and somewhat scary) argument that our mind is already being altered by our intense use of the Internet and all of its multifarious services. He argues that just as previous ‘tools of the mind’ like the clock, printing press, and maps changed how we processed information, the Internet is no different. And while we are more adept at ‘rapid, distracted sampling of small bits of information from many sources’, we are losing our capacity for concentration, contemplation and reflection.

While there is no turning back time, it is always possible to turn back the speed of life and to take time for simple conversations, downtime and single tasking.

23. <http://en.wordpress.com/tag/continuous-continuous-partial-attention/>

24. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2010





In addition to distracting us from what we are working on, interruptions can come with a mental cost. In a rather unique comparison study, psychiatrist Glenn Wilson at King's College in London found that when juggling email interruptions at the same time as the rest of their work, the IQ of office workers fell by a “shocking” ten points.

This drop is the equivalent of missing a night's sleep, or more than double the mean drop found in pot smokers! “We have found that this obsession with looking at messages, if unchecked, will damage a worker's performance by reducing their mental sharpness,” Wilson reports. “This is a very real and widespread phenomenon.”<sup>25</sup>



*When you have clutter on your desk, on the floor, around your computer monitor or on your brain, you force your thinking process to attempt to multi-task. Here's my rule of thumb: If you can see or are aware of unfinished work, your brain will think about it. This covers everything from a report you are working on to the unreturned pink phone slips or the stickie note reminding you of some login password. If you are thinking about it (even for a moment) while trying to work on something else, you are multi-tasking. Like a juggler trying to keep his plates from crashing*

25. MacLean's Magazine, Jan., 2006.

*to the floor, this synapse leaping from one distraction to another and then another is exhausting. We may do it because we can, but we're simply not designed for it – no one is.*

## **The Temptation to Multi-Task**

Bear with me as I give you a scenario that you might recognize:

You've just arrived at your desk for the day and have started to work on your emails. With a fresh cup of coffee and your plan updated you feel confident and determined to get lots of work done today.

After looking at about six emails and responding to two or three you see one that refers to a file you worked on earlier that year. The answer you need is in the file, so you get up and head to the other room to fetch the file.

Once there, a vague feeling of uncertainty washes over and you realize that you are at a sudden loss for why you are in this room (readers under the age of fifty please skip to the next paragraph, I assure you this won't make any sense to you). "Ah, yes!" you exclaim to yourself "the file – that's why I'm here." Slightly reassured, you return to your desk to continue your response to the email.

No sooner do you sit down, that the phone rings. Another department is calling to ask for changes to a report you are working on. Slightly frustrated and with one eye on the newfound file and your email, you make notes about the call on a note pad.

Already you are feeling frustrated. Your Day Plan is becoming derailed, your desk is accumulating piles of partially finished work and your computer screen is decorated with more stickie reminders for the day.

The call finished, you notice two phone message slips from yesterday and a brochure for an upcoming industry conference you are considering attending.

Determined to complete something, you start to read the brochure and circle workshops that look interesting. Only two minutes into this new task, you notice a small pile of business cards you brought back from the last client presentation. One of the cards is from a vendor you are interested in and promised to follow up with. You pick it up and decide to have a quick look at the vendor's website to see if the product pricing is listed. After a fruitless eight minutes on the website, you remember the client's email that you were already working on. You turn back to the original email, but notice a new email from your boss that might need immediate attention.

You open it to look, realize it can wait (so you mark it unread), and decide to have a quick peek at the website of the conference you were just looking at. Just then, Anne-Marie sticks her head in the doorway and asks: "Have you got a minute?" Arrggh!

Does this sound familiar? Your attention is scattered between multitudes of unrelated tasks, more attention-grabbing distractions are coming in every few minutes, and you feel like you are spinning your wheels but going nowhere.

Here's a quick quiz: in the scenario above, how many subjects or items are now open in your brain? Three? Five? Seven? Nine? The correct answer is at least nine. According to George Miller's classic 1960s studies at Harvard you have a thinking capacity of about seven items, plus or minus two.<sup>26</sup> This means that, with nine items on your mind, your mental RAM<sup>27</sup> is beyond capacity. No wonder you feel frustrated if the phone rings or someone drops in for advice!

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26. This research completed at Harvard was coined the "magic number seven, plus or minus two" and was apparently influential in the origin of the seven-digit phone numbers created by AT&T.

27. Sorry for the computer jargon: RAM stands for Random-Access Memory and provides a great analogy for the cerebral capacity we have. There's lots of capacity until you start opening a lot of software, or in our case, start thinking about loads of projects, people, and potential problems.

Multi-tasking, or the attempt to deal with a number of tasks at once, is not only inefficient, it typically leads to increased stress levels, a greater chance of making mistakes, and a general feeling of being overwhelmed. As Hallowell warns, “It may be convenient or necessary to multitask, to talk on the telephone as you write an e-mail and watch the stock prices stream across your computer screen; or to put clothes in the dryer as you play with your toddler and talk to your real estate agent on the phone. However, you will not be doing any of those tasks as effectively as you would if you were doing them one at a time.”

You might be surprised to learn that your attempts to complete a number of tasks all at once are actually doing you a great disservice. “As it turns out,” states an article in *Scientific American Mind* magazine,<sup>28</sup> “the human brain cannot truly ape the computer’s knack of crunching data in the background while toggling among processing windows . . . trying to juggle various jobs, rather than completing them sequentially, can take longer overall and leave the multi-taskers with a reduced ability to perform each task.”

The temptation to multi-task has never been greater with our increased use of computers, social networking sites, smart phones and wider access to the Internet at work, at home and wherever we travel. We can be always connected and conversations follow us electronically and wait to fill all our available minutes. Yet there is a growing resistance to the always-on lifestyle.

A study by Families and Work Institute in New York City found that some 45% of US workers believe they are asked or expected to work on too many tasks at once. And in a study by the US National Association of Professional Organizers, 91% of workers say they’d be more efficient if their workspace was better organized. More than a quarter said they would save more than an hour a day by being more organized at work.

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28. *Scientific American Mind* magazine, January 2005.

### Generation X is No Better

It turns out that the X-Box generation, although terrific at shooting down space aliens while focusing on five other things, hasn't developed the ability to transfer those skills to the workplace (unless of course, your work involves shooting down space aliens).

A study at Stanford University found that Generation X (the first true high-tech age cohort, born between 1961 and 1981), chronic media multi-taskers actually have difficulty focusing and are unable to ignore irrelevant information. "We knew that multi-tasking was difficult from a cognitive perspective," Stanford symbolic systems professor Eyal Ophir said. "We thought, 'What's this special ability that people have that allows them to multi-task?' Rather than finding things that they were doing better, we found things they were doing worse."<sup>29</sup> The surprise is that multi-tasking at high speed on video games doesn't seem to lead to skills for focused attention to detail or for deliberating on a single, important decision. Strike one up for the Boomers!

Researchers also believe that the stress associated with multi-tasking may contribute to short-term memory difficulties. In short, multi-tasking can result in inefficiency, sloppy thinking and mistakes. Isn't it bizarre that firms still place help-wanted ads listing "ability to multi-task" as a desirable skill? Perhaps I can convince you of the negative side effects of physically attempting to do multiple activities at once, but what about mental multi-tasking?

29. "Multi-taskers of media 'lousy' at everything," by Clare Baldwin. For more information on this study go to <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2009/august24/multi-task-research-study-082409.html> Calgary Herald, August 25, 2009.

## Mental Distraction in a Box

When we moved into our new office a few years ago and finished unpacking, I noticed one banker's box on the floor unopened. "No problem," I told myself. "I'll get to it when I have a few minutes."

Every time I got up for a cup of tea or to meet with staff I'd spot that orphan box and remind myself of my promise: "Someday I'm going to take a few minutes and empty that box." Over and over again throughout the day and the week, this became my mantra.

Ten months of mental nagging later, the box was still there – an icon of cardboard-clad guilt. Every time I glanced over at the box, another anchor for my procrastination was dropped into my subconscious. This is not the kind of programming I need, and I certainly don't need the mental distraction!

Finally, one Friday as I was about to head home, I stopped in front of the dreaded box and opened the lid. Out of sheer frustration I decided to put an end to this distraction routine. And I started going through the contents. Nothing! There was literally *nothing* of value in the box.

Most of the contents went into recycling.

I haven't done the math, but my guess is that over those ten months I must have thought about that box, even if for just a passing moment, some half dozen times a day. That's over 1,000 mental detours that were completely unnecessary and only took seven minutes to resolve.

Of course that is just one example of a distraction. If you are in an office or room that you work in, look around right now. How many half finished books, reports, minutes from meetings or files litter your desk space and steal your precious attention?

Not convinced? There is a brilliant self-test created over half a century ago by John Ridley Stroop, a professor of psychology, that should get your attention and prove that multi-tasking slows your computation time as well as distracts your thinking.

Here is a mini version of the Stroop test to whet your appetite.<sup>30</sup> In this exercise you simply have to concentrate on saying to yourself the color of the letters (don't read the word). For example, for the first one you would say 'black', and so on.

Did you notice how difficult and slow it is to try to process the two bits of information: the color of the font and (although you were not asked to) the word itself. Remember: *If you can see or are aware of unfinished work, your brain will think about it.*

Try this next time you are working on a report or project that requires all of your concentration. Turn on a radio station with music that you don't like and notice what happens to your concentration. You might be one of those rare people who can be completely oblivious to external noise distractions. But I doubt it.

It's no wonder that we are seeing a growing ban on the use of cell phones while driving. The distraction we experience while using a cell phone when driving is just one more example of how our cognitive abilities are quickly hijacked by even the slightest attempts to multi-task.

Now I want you to consider your workspace. Take a moment to visualize the desk that you spend so many hours at or, if you are at your desk, stand up and step back five feet and actually take it in:



30. I have posted a larger, color version of this test at [www.HughCulver.com/BreakBook](http://www.HughCulver.com/BreakBook).

- 1) How organized is your desk and the area around it?
- 2) Do you see papers that haven't been touched for months (moving them around on your desk doesn't count)?
- 3) Are there files on the floor or on top of filing cabinets that are collecting dust?
- 4) Are the stickie notes surrounding your computer monitor competing to steal your attention?

I have become convinced that getting my workspace organized and keeping it that way is one of the most powerful (and simplest) ways for me to stay focused and be more effective. But it does require ongoing attention (gravity has a nasty way of defying your best efforts).

If you think you need to clean up your act and stop multi-tasking, here are some quick remedies that will lead to better performance and less stress.

### **The Five-Minute Purge**

Here's where you need to start. Take five minutes at the end of every day to put paperwork in its place. Your goal should be to remove from sight anything that will draw your attention away from the





immediate task (this includes stickie notes, telephone messages, brochures and anything that no longer belongs on your desk).

Start with recycling brochures, trade magazines and that article someone suggested you read two months ago. Make a decision to toss them all into recycling. Trust me, if anything is really important someone will let you know (I doubt that will happen, though – they are all too busy going through the papers on their own desks).

Next, consider your filing systems. Put any files or notes that belong in filing cabinets in their place. You will end up with papers that don't have a place. Have faith! Read on to learn how to give these orphans a home.

### **Picture This!**

Lately I have been using the camera on my phone to help reduce clutter. When I am travelling I love to create mind maps and making notes about future projects, or designs for marketing campaigns. But when I return to the office I don't have files for these random thoughts or barely started book outlines. So instead of allowing them to litter my desk for who-know-how-long I simply take a picture, email it to myself and then file it in a clearly labeled file folder on my computer and recycle the paper original. If it's a bring forward I just create a task in Outlook with the picture attached. It's simple, quick and totally convenient for when you do want to pick up where you left off when the plane landed. In fact my new web design was created just this way.

One client that took our advice cleaned off her desk, created a new filing system for Bring Forward items, and initiated a program to spend time coaching her staff. "I am so proud of myself,"

she said when asked about the results. “When I made these simple changes, I began to feel different about my day. I have more time for what is important, and I don’t feel the tension by mid-afternoon that I used to feel. It’s like I have a new office and a new outlook on my work.”

### **The Banker’s Box Test**

When you first purge your office space, you will likely come across a number of items that have questionable value. These could be hand-written notes you took at some brainstorming meetings, information from suppliers, brochures from a conference you attended some months back, or research information on your industry. In an ideal world, you would take time to look at all of these things, sort and then file them.

But you haven’t got the time, and now they are distractions that clutter your mind with more must-do items.

Here’s a neat idea I use from time to time that saves a lot of grief and gives me instant clutter relief.<sup>31</sup> Start a new banker’s box. Label it WAS (Wait-and-See) and mark it with a date exactly one month later. Next, put all those errant, miscellaneous and questionable papers, reports, notes and what-have-you in the box and store it out of sight.

In your Day-Timer or in Outlook Tasks, pick the one-month-later date and enter, “Check status of WAS box.” Then forget about it, and get back to work. In one month you can retrieve the box, quickly scan through the contents and toss anything that has no value. My guess is that just about everything will go.

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31. This idea is similar to the “The Some Day test.” on page 93.

## **The Habit of Completion**

I can remember as a youth watching staff in my father's accounting office working on a client file. Rarely were they interrupted by people or the phone; they simply work on the file in front of them until it was complete or until they couldn't proceed further because some information was missing. But that was in the twentieth century!

In the new era of distraction, completion of anything is a luxury. And yet it is completion of our plans and goals that is the true measure of success.

When you catch yourself bouncing from your Day Planner to unfinished emails to paper on your desk – stop! Remind yourself that your goal is to work on the highest priority task at hand, and to complete it before moving on to the next task.

I know I can easily let a well-planned morning run amuck as I switch from working on a proposal to responding to a phone call request, then to check how that will work with our shopping cart, which leads to a phone call to our tech person after which I . . . you get the picture, right?

Your new habit will be to turn off the email (minimizing the screen is a good start), turn away from other distractions, and work diligently on one task until you get it done. And when a new request comes in you either prioritize it and tackle it later or use your Two Minute rule to do it now.

A large Boulder probably won't get completed in one sitting, but you can definitely complete pebbles that get you going in the right direction. After that, note what needs to be done next and when, and then move on to the next task.

## **Take Reset Breaks**

Just like a reboot for your computer, sometimes to improve performance you need to clear the clutter in your mind. Continually jumping from one task to another tires the brain, creates stress

and makes decision making difficult. Latent thoughts and worries have a nagging habit of popping up when you need to be focused on your work at hand. Reset breaks allow you to switch synapse gears to less worrisome thoughts so that you can return to work with full concentration restored.

It's like taking your car to get serviced, yes you have to stop using it for a short while, but when you get it back it's ready to roll again at full performance.



*Just taking a five-minute break to walk, get a drink of water and stretch can be enough to reduce the stress load and allow you to refocus on priorities with renewed energy. According to Dr. Brent Coker, a professor in the Department of Management and Marketing at the University of Melbourne, “People need to zone out for a bit to get back their concentration, which in turn leads to a more productive workforce.” It’s another of the ironic wonders of nature: often you need to do less, in order to do more.*

I used to think that the best way to take a break was to grab a bunch of notes and a notepad and head off to the local café to work from a more creative location. While the physical change of environment does improve my concentration, I find I can reproduce this same effect by simply thinking about something different for a few moments.

For example, I might read part of a novel or a magazine article, doodle on a note pad, or just sit quietly and daydream. It amazes me how quickly my mind can feel refreshed and ready to refocus on work with renewed energy. As some sage once said: **“A change is as good as a break.”**

Much research has been done on the effect of music on our brain

waves and relaxation. The results, as you would probably expect, are that music can be pretty distracting; enough so to make it actually difficult for you to do your work effectively. If you have a habit at work of tuning in to a local radio station you can expect that your productivity and ability to concentrate are now competing with the Top 40 hits and invitations to the weekend furniture warehouse sale. We all know that radio stations survive by selling advertising. And in order to make advertisers happy you have to be very good at getting peoples' attention – that's you.

Meanwhile music can be used to relax you and even stimulate centres of the brain. Daniel Levitin, professor of psychology and behavioral neuroscience at McGill University, recommends having three- to four-minute music reset breaks to stimulate the brain and relax. The choice of music, obviously, is important. Baroque music (think Vivaldi, Bach, Handel, etc.) is widely considered to be the *de facto* choice with its sixty beats per minute closely matching our resting heart rate. I find that listening to Baroque late in the evening is soothing without being a mental distraction, and perfect for concentrating on reading or writing.

### **Give Your Orphans a Home**

Now that you are valuing your workspace, it's likely that you will find that some items don't have a home. They don't belong in your filing system, but you don't want to see them every day. These could be brochures for upcoming conferences, notes from phone conversations, and reports to be completed, and even mail to be read. Go into most any office and you can spot these attention-stealing culprits. Little piles on top of filing cabinets, small stacks on the carpet or tucked away on the side of the desk. We call these orphans.

If you leave your orphans in view they will constantly tempt your attention to think about them. Here's a list of common orphans

people have on their desks. Just for fun, put a checkmark beside any that are typically found on yours:

- Stickie notes with phone numbers you want to remember user-names and passwords
- Brochures for conferences you are considering attending
- Requests for information that you can't complete immediately
- A Request for Proposal (RFP) you are trying to complete
- Notes from a seminar you attended (two months ago)
- A magazine article someone dropped off for you to read
- Client files that you are working on
- Ideas you scribbled on your last flight
- Receipts from a trip
- Staff scheduling forms
- Staff schedules
- Bring forward items that will need your attention in the future
- Notes for a presentation you are working on
- Your sales targets for the month
- Notes from a meeting you need to review
- Business cards you want to enter into your data base
- Unread mail
- Notes from a phone conversation
- A committee file that you need to review and work on every two weeks

Got a long list of check marks? Great, now read on for solutions . . .

## Action Filing System

I have been using the Action Filing System<sup>32</sup> for about five years, and it has literally transformed my office space. It allows me to handle more projects without feeling like I am sinking in worry and details. This simple system also allows me to tie all my miscellaneous pieces of work with my Outlook Tasks. Here's how it works:

Identify all the paperwork that fills your flat spaces (see your list above) and doesn't have an obvious home. Before you move a piece of paper into this new system, consider its value and make a decision: **Do it, Defer it, Delegate it, or Dump it**, or move it into the Action Filing System.

Create a simple A-Z Action Filing System by dedicating one drawer in your desk for this (or get a portable accordion-style file folder). You need to have A-Z tabs to organize all of the various orphans.

For each piece of paper, report, DVD, magazine, or whatever that doesn't seem to have a home, follow these steps:

- Put the item in one of the A-Z hanging folders or slots in the filing unit under a letter that relates to the topic. For example for a conference you are thinking of attending, file it under 'C' for conference.
- Record the action in your Outlook Tasks list (or wherever you record long-term Pebbles) as, "Decide on conference in Vancouver AF-C." The 'AF-C' indicates that this paper is in Action File drawer 'C'.

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32. This idea came from *To Do Doing Done!* by Lynne G Snead and Joyce Wycoff (Fireside, 1997).

- If you are using Microsoft Outlook remember to select a Category for your task so that you can have an organized list in Tasks.
- Enter the date that the decision needs to be made on, or the action taken.

Presto, you're done! Now enjoy not seeing that distraction every day and knowing that it's recorded and you will be reminded only when you need to be.

Once you get into the habit of using this system, you will be amazed at all the annoying pieces of paper, handwritten notes and brochures that finally have a home. And remember that not only are you doing yourself a favor by getting all of those trivial thoughts out of your RAM, you are setting a great example for your staff.





**Clutter Worksheet**

Cleaning up the clutter in your workspace can help you lower your stress level, become more productive, and feel better about your work.

I am committing to the following one-time system changes to how paper comes into my workspace (set up an Action Filing System, etc.)

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I am committing to the following new habits that will keep the clutter to a minimum (the five-minute purge, etc.)

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*“Simplicity is the key to brilliance.”*

—BRUCE LEE, actor and cultural icon

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## Before You Move On . . .

*Have you got some unfinished business?  
Is there something holding you back?  
Are you thinking for your self  
Or are you following the pack?*

—BOB DYLAN, 'Are you ready?',  
songwriter, artist

**H**ow are you doing? Since you have reached this point in the book, you are already in the top five percent of readers in the world who actually get beyond half way in a business book. Congratulations!

Before I move onto Part III, *Habits* (one of my favorite topics), I want to give you an opportunity for a quick review. This is a chance for you to review what we have already covered and to look again at what will create real value for you. In most cases the strategies I am recommending require less than a ten-minute commitment to get started. So there's no excuse.

## **Planning**

This is about working from an Action Plan and a Day Plan and using goals to stay on track. The big lesson here is to plan ahead and to think one week at a time (your Action Plan). Stay focused on achieving just a few objectives that move your Boulders ahead each week. Stay away from low-value distractions and return to your Action Plan after interruptions.

## **Managing Interruptions**

Remember: “Those who don’t have goals are ruled by those who do.” Block time, close your door, coach others and create resources for them to get their answers without you. It’s not the individual interruptions today that count, it’s the same pattern continuing all year that has the real cost.

## **Put Meetings on a Diet**

Start with a review and then focus on one to three small improvements to your meetings – or eliminate them all together. When you have awareness and buy-in about the need to change, almost immediately you should start to see improvements. If you work in a team, have the team design the changes. The more they own the solutions, the better the solutions will be long term.

## **Get Your Email under Control**

Ten minutes a day saved equals one week a year of new-found time – that should be a good motivator! Check your email less often, set up folders with rules, and learn shortcut keys. Don’t allow email to be your default time-filler and you will be on your way to saving ten minutes a day, or more.

## **Clean Up the Clutter**

This is a no-brainer. Take fifteen minutes every Friday afternoon and purge, push or pull everything off your desk (and floor). You are doing this for your brain, not just because it's a nice thing to do. Try this for one month and I guarantee you will feel more creative, relaxed and taller (at least two of these will happen).

Throughout this book, you have been making notes in the worksheets at the end of each chapter (you have, right?). For each system, look at the action steps you want to make. Are the required steps clear? Is it clear when you are going to take these steps? Who can you get to support you?

Take a few minutes now to transfer these ideas over to your Boulders list and your Action Plan. Get the plan created and immediately start to use it.



# Part III



## HABITS

**Daily actions to  
ensure your success**

*Well, it's 1 am. I'd better go home  
and spend some quality time with the kids.*

—HOMER SIMPSON, philosopher



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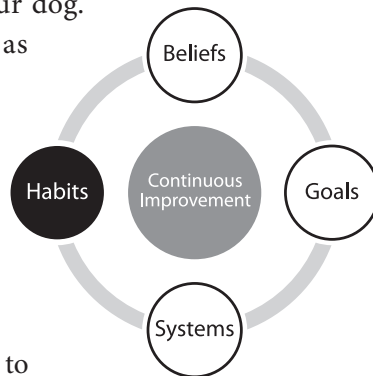
# Habits of Heroes

*The difference between what we are doing  
and what we are capable of doing  
would solve most of the world's problems.*

—MAHATMA GANDHI, spiritual leader of India

**H**ow did you wake up this morning? Did you turn off the alarm, stand up and stretch, switch on the coffee maker and fetch the morning paper? Or maybe you went from coffee to email to walking your dog.

Some research suggests that as much as 90% of what we do is habit-driven. It makes sense – we couldn't possibly think through everything we do in a day. The multifarious decisions about where to go, what to eat, what to say and how to act would immobilize us if they had to





be done consciously. Instead, we go with well-worn patterns and routines to save time and reduce the mental grind.

What about at work? Do you have a routine so well practiced that you are often on autopilot; going through a pattern that unconsciously unfolds throughout the day?

Some habits serve us well, like taking health breaks (walking, stretching or refueling with a healthy snack), or taking good notes in a meeting that still make sense a week later. Equally so, some habits don't serve us.

According to The Nielsen Company the average North American watches between fifteen and thirty hours of television each week,<sup>33</sup> whereas research by Thomas J. Stanley, author of the best-selling series *The Millionaire Next Door*, found that the average millionaire watches a measly four hours or less. Hmmm, do you think there could be a connection there?

Here's another example: Like most people, your habit is to entertain yourself on your commute to and from work by listening to music in your car or maybe on your MP3 player as you take the train, cycle or walk. But did you know that at sixty minutes per day (assuming a thirty-minute commute each way),<sup>34</sup> in three years you will have spent about the same amount of time commuting as a student spends in class earning a college degree? That's a lot of learning opportunity invested in the local DJ's patter about top-forty hits and furniture sales ads.<sup>35</sup>

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33. According to The Nielson Company's 2009 survey, Americans watch more television every year (141 hours a month per person). The number of TVs per household is also increasing, with an average of 2.86 televisions for every 2.5 people (54% of households own three or more sets).

34. The average commute in Canada, where I live, is thirty minutes each way. If you live in near a large city, like Vancouver, Toronto or Montreal, your commute is around sixty minutes each way.

35. Check out my online reference section for suggestions on audio books and inspiring lectures.

## Podcasts and Downloads

I have become a huge fan of downloading podcasts for my commutes, runs and walking the dog. I can combine a little light learning with some exercise or travel and it is incredibly easy and, for the most part, free. You can get weekly podcasts, interviews, lectures and entire books read by the author. I find it is one of the most convenient ways for me to get some new ideas and have them archived so I can review later. If you have an iPhone or other device that allows for note taking it makes it easy to jot a note for when you get back to your computer to follow up on. When I was working on this book there were a number of recordings that helped to formulate my content.

If you are not into this habit and you are doing a lot of commuting or walking/running I would suggest you check out the Products section for my list of great downloads [www.HughCulver.com/BreakBook](http://www.HughCulver.com/BreakBook)

If it's true that we are habitual by nature, then it follows that much of our success in life (our happiness, finances and health), as well as our failures and disappointments, are largely a result of habits.

It's a simple cause-effect relationship: **change a habit; change your results.**

At work you may have habits that continually trip you up, such as answering that last phone call instead of getting to the meeting on time, or constantly checking your email even though you have important work to complete.

In this chapter we will look at habits that can immediately help you become more effective at work – and become better at making time work for you.

We have been teaching these habits to our seminar participants, and the results have been impressive. By just adopting one new habit, participants have been able to free up enormous amounts of time each week, take better care of their health, and arrive at work with the kind of energy and attitude that makes every day great.

Your job is to find the habits that work for you, and to practice them for at least thirty days.

Here's a quick overview of what I will be covering:

- 1) **Jump-Start your DAY** – habits to get your day off to a great start
- 2) **Honor the Mundane** – how to actually enjoy routine, boring tasks
- 3) **Go with the Flow** – learn how to match your task to your energy to make work easier.
- 4) **Make it the Day Before Vacation** – strategies to adopt a “must-do” attitude.
- 5) **Put Procrastination on Pause** – once and for all, learn to overcome avoidance.
- 6) **Make time for Me-Time** – practice actively refueling, recharging and restoring your energy.
- 7) **Start a Stop-Doing List** – clear the space for what is most important by removing what isn't.
- 8) **Celebrate Success** – be your own cheerleader and teach your brain to anticipate a pay-off.

# 1



## Jump-Start Your Day

*I'm good enough, I'm smart enough  
and doggone it, people like me!*

—STUART SMALLEY, *Saturday Night Live*

Can you imagine a high-performing athlete showing up for a competition thinking, “I’ll just see how it goes”? It would be ludicrous!

We all know that every athlete needs to properly prepare for a competition. They make sure they get enough sleep, eat well, check their equipment and repeatedly envision a successful competition. Most coaches would say that the attention to preparation could easily make or break the competition.

So why should preparation for work be any different?

We spend about one-third of our working years at work. Don’t you think that is too much time to leave to chance?

Every day we choose how we come to work, either consciously, or unconsciously. We may think that the quality of our day is determined by outside circumstances: how people drive on their

morning commutes, the line-up at Starbucks, or how heavy our workload is. In fact, what determines the quality of our day, more than anything else, is our *intention and choices*.

When you jump-start your day, you consciously pre-empt the day with a clear picture of the success you look forward to creating. You choose to see the big picture, instead of short-term frustrations. You choose to stay focused on your goals and to continually make good decisions that allow you to complete tasks. You plan on creating the best possible success for yourself and for others, despite whatever crisis others find themselves in. In short, you don't leave your day to chance. In the words of Abraham Lincoln, "... your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other one thing."

### True Confessions

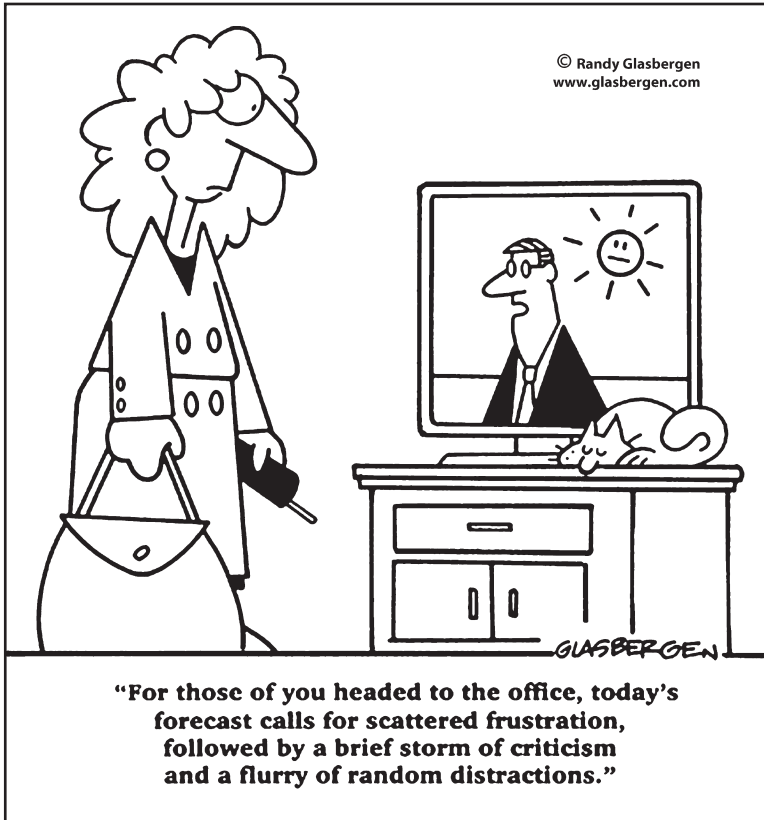
For many years my morning routine between waking and leaving for work was admittedly a disaster. Every morning I wanted to pack in as much work, exercise and time with my family as I could, but



it wasn't working. My unrealistic expectations just left me frustrated and my family resigned to my chaotic rushing.

About eight years ago I decided to take a close look what wasn't working and I found someone to blame (guess who?). I realized that while I aspired to enjoy productive mornings where I was free to focus only on what I wanted to work on, I was delusional in my planning. Instead of enjoying both my time *and* family time, I wasn't enjoying either. I was typically absent from breakfast and, instead, either frantically trying to finish some work or halfway through a workout.

It was a recipe for disaster, and I was the chef.



My first change was to go to bed earlier (I am usually comatose after about 10 pm so this was an easy commitment to make). Then I experimented with my routine and settled on rising at 5 am,<sup>36</sup> staying off the email, and being more realistic with my goals. I also became religious about planning the first two hours of the morning the night before.

This last change was no big deal – all it took was a couple of

36. Okay, I'm aware the getting up at 5 am isn't for everyone – this just happens to work for me. The important point is that one new habit has led to years of positive benefits.

minutes to scratch out a quick note of my plan for the morning. On a typical morning it might read:

- Finish proposal
- Blog
- 6:15 paddle
- 7:15 walk Riley
- Kate needs ride

But the payoff has been huge. I now have almost two hours every morning to read, write, and work on Boulders and exercise. My morning time has become sacred space and incredibly important for my sense of achievement and peace. It is the one time of the day when I can think and write, guaranteed that I will not be interrupted. How is your morning routine working for you?

Let's look at four other strategies for jump-starting your day.

## **Envision Success**

Just like athletes, we can create more success by envisioning the best possible outcomes for ourselves. If you have a heavy workload or tough meeting planned for the day, spend a minute to see it going well. Your prediction for success will lift your mood and help create a positive attitude.

This isn't 1990s positive thinking; your brain is actually hard-wired to spot more of what you want. Let me explain.

Prehistorically we were constantly on the lookout for our survival needs. That would have been food, a mate, safety and shelter (of course, not always in that order). Through natural selection, we evolved to have this built-in radar for what we want, be it that certain model of Toyota, the new iPhone, or a sunny vacation destination.

Even though we're not running around the Savanna half-naked fighting for our survival, our highly attuned internal radar is busy at work. Once you create the focus on what you want you will become more aware of examples of it around you. You could be driving along the highway at high speed thinking about work, and suddenly you spot the model of car you like. Out of hundreds of cars and in only a split second you picked one car, four lanes away and noticed it. You even noticed the tinted windows or paint color you like. That's a pretty powerful focus.

This classic self-fulfilling prophecy (I tend to get more of what I am looking for) can also be put to work for positive results.

Moments before I step on stage to give a speech I create a powerful mental focus on how *I want to feel* in front of the audience. I know I want to feel calm but excited. I want to feel resourceful and ready to share, and I want to feel light and quick on my feet. I create the image in mind and allow my body to respond emotionally.

Within seconds of stepping on stage I start to notice examples of feeling pretty good and even having fun. I see someone in the audience having a good time listening to my crazy story about flying to the South Pole. I notice my body feels relaxed and loose. I realize that I've just delivered one of my lessons and wasn't using my notes (which I always take as a sign that I'm comfortable).

As I notice these clues, I remind myself that everything is working: I'm relaxed, the audience is engaged, the timing is good – it's working. I think to myself: '*I can be giving a speech and having a heck of a good time!*' Perfect! Now I'm in the state I need to be to perform at my best. No longer am I fixated on cables, PowerPoint and timing details; I'm in the moment, doing my thing and getting rewarded for it.

Envisioning success is also a great exercise for your morning commute. Take just a moment to envision the sales meeting going well and getting the 'Yes' you are looking for. See your Day Plan



becoming smaller as you cross Pebbles off your list. Envision enjoying that afternoon walk and feeling successful and happy with your accomplishments.

It might only take a few minutes, but the impact could last all day and make the difference between having just another day at work or feeling powerful, successful and in control.

## Prepare for the Games

*Only after you take care of yourself  
can you take care of other business.*

—ELLEN DEGENERES, comedian, TV show host.

Are you taking care of the basics? Get enough sleep, exercise regularly and eat a good breakfast. All the mental machinations in the world can't overcome the drag of an engine that's running on empty. It's pretty simple: if you neglect your body you will pay the price in terms of concentration, energy, emotions and health. The trick is to pay attention to how you fuel your engine with a routine. If it's convenient, affordable and enjoyable, you'll probably stick with it. Here are some of the basics.<sup>37</sup>

**Stay hydrated.** Coffee and tea don't hydrate you; in fact they are diuretics that draw water out of your cells. You maybe noticed that drinking more tea can actually leave you with a dry mouth. Pounding back the mugs of java or sipping your favorite leaf brew makes for sluggish circulation – your heart has to work harder, and your body starts to redirect blood away from areas not vital for survival (like the brain). A simple solution is to start the day with a large glass of water. That will get you off to a great start. Then, you need to match every cup of coffee or tea with a glass of water.

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37. Obviously, you need to always seek professional medical advice before attempting any significant change in diet or fitness.

**Exercise at least thirty minutes per day.** Okay let's get real about exercise. First fact: most people are never going to commit to a regular exercise routine. Second fact: people will commit to something they enjoy. No wonder TV wins over exercise, and so does reading, eating, Internet and a host of other distractions.

It may not be a scientifically accurate research study, but every time I ask an audience if they would like to be in better physical shape virtually all hands go up. This leads to the third fact: almost everyone wants to be in better physical shape.

So the desire is there, but not the will. The mismatch is that exercise sounds like work, not something to be enjoyed. The solution should be obvious: make exercise something you enjoy. First make a commitment to a goal. What's it going to be: look better in the mirror, run that ten-kilometre race, complete the cycling tour or just feel better in the morning? Next start a new routine that you actually look forward to enjoying. Combine listening to an audio book or podcast with your walk or while on the stationary bike. Join a riding club, sports team or hiking group. Or stretch your self (literally) with yoga, Tai Chi or Karate. There are hundreds of options that provide alternative ways to exercise in unique ways.

Once you have the 'why' clearly defined, you just need to stick with your plan. Three steps: pick the goal, commit, start and don't stop. It's like an Olympic athlete once said, "There's only two times you need to exercise to be prepared for the Olympics: when you want to and when you don't."



### Walk a Dog, It's Good for You

After over twenty years of training for marathons and pretty consistent long workouts Riley made me cut back on my workouts. Riley is our new dog and dogs (as I quickly learnt) need a lot of exercise. So my runs and long bike rides have turned into morning and night walks – every day. And here's the surprise: sixty to ninety minutes of brisk walking (we run together on weekends) is a lot of exercise. And, even though, it wasn't the regular, more intensive workouts I was used to it was more consistent and it was a lot of hours with a leash. So I did some research.

It turns out those thirty minutes of brisk walking, just five days a week is a fantastic fitness program! In a longitudinal study of 72,000 female nurses<sup>38</sup> this amount of exercise is associated with a thirty to 40% lower risk of heart disease, reduced risk of breast cancer and type 2 Diabetes. A similar study<sup>39</sup> related this level of exercise to a twenty to 30% lower risk of gallstone surgery in women and half the risk of strokes in men.<sup>40</sup> And the list goes on for general health benefits, like: lower risk of hip fracture, arthritis, colon cancer, mood swings, impotence, depression and osteoporosis.<sup>41</sup>

Not bad results for the equivalent time as watching the evening news.

**Eat for long energy.** In the morning skip the pop tarts and go for complex carbohydrates (whole grain bread, cereal) with protein

38. Based on the twenty year Nurses' Health Study of 72,000 female nurses.

39. A Harvard study of more than 60,000 women ages 40 to 65.

40. According to a Harvard study of more than 11,000 men.

41. Be sure to check with your doctor on the level of exercise that's best for you.

(yogurt, cottage cheese or skim milk) and fruit. Stay off the high-sugar-content sweets, cereals or pastries. There is a reason why ‘sugar’ is first on the list of ingredients for most of these goodies and it’s not because they are good for your health.

Your objective is to fuel up for the next four to five hours, so think long-term. The quick hit of pastry or muffin with coffee might work short-term, but you’ll be hitting an energy low soon after.

**Sleep to recharge.** The jury is out on how long, but the verdict is that long term too little is obviously not good, but nor is too much either. If you aren’t getting the sleep you need you need to get it right and you probably need a professional’s advice. When you get this one right, it is a catalyst for all aspects of your health.

**Pack a snack.** Here’s quick re-frame my wife gave me years ago: muffins, that staple of mid-morning snacks, are nothing more than cake wrapped in paper. Yuck, that re-frame has stuck with me for years, and has kept my paws off many a treat. Let’s face it: most snacks we eat during the day aren’t designed to give us slow-burn energy. Healthier alternatives, like fruit, nuts and raw vegetables have to be more convenient than the vending machine. Every day (even when travelling) bring an interesting variety of healthy goodies and experiment to find what makes you feel best when you need to be at your best.

### **Avoid the Rush**

Do you find yourself rushing to get to meetings on time, rushing to finish that phone call before your next appointment and then, topping it all off, rushing to get home on time? Constant rushing can cost you in terms of mistakes made, appointments missed, elevated stress and setting a poor example for anyone watching. Maybe it’s time to look at what is simply habit and can be changed.

Here are four solutions that will help you slow your jets and still get it all done. Don't believe me? Read on.

**Don't start rushed.** Allow enough time to get to work early, get settled in and review your plans for the week and for the day. Pilots don't jump in the seat just before takeoff and neither should you.

**Start the day prepared.** At the end of every day, prepare your plan for the next day and update your Action Plan. Just taking ten minutes for this ritual can mean less worry on the drive home, being more organized in the morning and being more decisive all through the day.

**Allow enough time.** You know that a thirty-minute meeting will actually take forty-five minutes by the time you get ready for it, attend, and return to your desk, so block the time needed. Underestimating time needed for meetings, appointments and Pebbles just sets you up for more rushing and stress.

**Plan to get back on track.** I find that in the late morning and mid-afternoon I need ten minutes to revisit my plan, take a break and refocus. It's not a big investment of time, but it makes a world of difference to what happens next.

### Keep the Focus

By now you should know I'm a big advocate for minimizing distractions and starting at full speed. A critical first step is to protect the first ninety minutes of the day.<sup>42</sup> If you are like most people, this is the most productive time in your day. Stay off the email, focus on your Day Plan and keep interruptions short. This is the time to

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42. I cover this idea more on page \*\*\* in the Chapter *Go With The Flow*.

move Boulders forward, have difficult conversations, make decisions and cross Pebbles off your list.

And now that you are excited about Jump Starting your Day let's have a close look at some of the inevitable work – the somewhat dull duties that often cross our path and yet have to get done.

# 2



## Honor the Mundane

*If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.'*

—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., civil rights activist

**I**t happens every day: the mundane, boring, humdrum and ordinary tasks that don't belong in the life of a successful person like you. Shouldn't your rise to success mean you never have to pay another bill or take out the garbage? Think again, you're human and everyone has to put in his or her time groveling in the ordinary. In fact, I think it's an essential part of keeping life real and should be celebrated.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting hanging onto tasks that someone else or some nifty software can do just so you can cross them off your list. But there will always be tasks that can't be outsourced, automated or dumped, and someone (like you) has to do

them. Try looking at those tasks as more than an unwanted irritation. Instead they could be a time to be mindful and even grateful to be doing something simple and easy for a change.

As Stephan Rechtschaffen warns in *Timeshifting*, “If we push away the mundane, we push away the present. And when pushing away becomes our habitual pattern, we’re likely to push away the extraordinary moments too – unable to fully savor them in our rush to ‘get on.’”

What is on your list of ‘mundane’? This could be a good time to see them more as a gift, a chance to focus on the simple, rather than always trying to unload unwanted tasks. Yours might include:

**Opening the mail.** With the wide scale of adoption of electronic billing and email it’s become a bit of a novelty to read mail that comes with a stamp. Once a week I go through the mail: total time about fifteen minutes. The mechanics of the exercise (slice open the envelope, read, assess, toss, respond, pay the bill or file) requires little effort, but it can actually be a welcome change of pace to complete such a simple task. Sometimes I even get ideas to use for marketing or improvements for our own correspondence.

**Updating records of progress.** We use a number of tools to track our progress in sales, type of sales (by industry and month by month to previous years), web site analytics, etc. Each tool requires a few minutes of attention each week to keep current. It’s not work I relish, but I find the ritual of entering the data and paying attention to empirical results (as opposed to my overly optimistic assessments) very grounding. Many of our best marketing decisions came from taking the time every week to keep these records up to date.

**Writing thank you cards.** I know, I know, they love you and you know it. Right. Thanking people for their business or their help



with your business is another task that competes with your burning priorities, but it also could be one of the best investments in five minutes you make.

I remember author and retired CEO James Autry saying that one of the best investments he ever made as the leader of a national printing house was to start every morning by writing a *Thank You* card to a staff person. As he explained, it always seemed like nothing at the time, but invariably, months later, Autry would visit one of his plants and a worker would approach him to thank him for the card that he still kept. It's mundane, it's routine, but it's a great use of time.

**Planning a trip.** How often have you procrastinated about organizing your flights and hotels for a conference or sales trip only to find that prices had gone up since you first checked and your favourite hotel is now full? I'm sure Brad Pitt doesn't book his flights, but you need to and the sooner you act the sooner you get the satisfaction that comes with completion.

The steps are basic: a little research on-line, one or two phone calls and the deed is done. No late registration charge on the conference, a good rate on the flight and you got the corporate rate at your favourite hotel. Don't think of it as a 'hassle', instead think of it as a simple (in fact, probably one of the simplest tasks you will do all day), twenty minute investment that saved you money.

At my daughter's karate lesson the class always starts by washing the floor of the dojo. Even though the class before them had washed it just one hour before, the new class repeats the same ritual. It's mundane, routine and completely essential for bringing energetic young students into a calm, attentive state for the Sensei.<sup>43</sup>

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43. I'm sure I'm not alone as I marvel at the enthusiasm a twelve-year-old can have for being bent over pushing a rag ahead of them back and forth across some else's floor when, at home it's a battle to get them to even pick up their clothing!

When I'm on the road there are many travelling rituals I must endure: packing and getting to the airport on time, waiting for flights, taxi rides, waiting to check-in at hotels as well as all the steps needed to prepare for a presentation. It's part of the package that comes with the privilege of being able to speak to audiences.

One of these travel rituals has, surprisingly, become a favorite meditative moment. When I am on an airplane all day travelling, my workday is usually reserved to the evening hours before the event the next morning. I usually spend two to three hours in final preparation and catching up on other work. The last ritual I have before packing it in for the day is ironing my clothes for the morning. I don't want to leave this task for the morning when I know I will be doing my final preparation, getting some exercise and concerned about being on time.

Instead of dreading my visit with the ironing board, I actually look at it as a kind of meditation. After all, this is one of the simplest things I will have done all day, so it may be as close to being meditative as I will get.

For about fifteen minutes I carefully prepare my clothes. I pay close attention to details and intentionally think about nothing else. I notice I am very relaxed and unhurried. As I complete the task I quietly acknowledge my efforts during the day and give thanks for all the gifts that I have received.

The Buddhist monk, peace activist and author Thich Nhat Hanh describes it this way:

"If I am incapable of washing dishes joyfully, if I want to finish them quickly so I can go and have dessert, I will be equally incapable of enjoying my dessert. With the fork in my hand, I will be thinking about what to do next, and the texture and flavor of the dessert, together with the pleasure of eating it, will be lost. I will always be dragged into the future, never able to live in the present moment."

Take a moment now and consider a task that you often procrastinate about or you tend to do it begrudgingly. How could you reframe your motivations and see the process as something richer than a burden or irritation or, perhaps, even as a gift to be honored.

Have you ever hit an afternoon slump or leave the hardest work to the end of the day? Let me show you how to avoid this by going with the flow.

# 3



## Go With The Flow

*Knowing when not to work hard  
is as important as knowing when to.*

—HARVEY MACKAY, businessman and author

It is 2:30 in the afternoon and I feel like my brain has gone on holiday. I just caught myself re-reading a paragraph in a report I'm working on for the third time (and it still doesn't make any sense). I have two other projects on hold in front of me and I'm not getting traction on any of them. I don't know if I should keep ploughing ahead, hoping my synapses have enjoyed their mid-day nap, or try a brew of caffeine. Neither choice seems likely to succeed; I'm in the afternoon doldrums with no wind in sight.

Sound familiar?

I think a common fallacy is that we should be able to focus and produce the same results throughout the day; like we are electrical motors – just plug us in and we produce. Minute after minute, hour after hour, we should be focused, concentrating on completion, and pleasant to everyone who crosses our path. Yeah, right.

Of course we know this doesn't happen. We have energy highs, lows and in-betweens. Our bodies respond to what we eat, when we ate and how long it's been since we've seen our pillows. There is also the natural fatigue that comes from working hard at thinking for six, seven or eight hours.

### Personal Energy Chart

A better approach is what I call: Go with the Flow. First ask yourself when are you the most energetic, optimistic and ready to tackle the tough stuff on your list? And when do you catch yourself semi-comatose reading the same paragraph for the third time?

Maybe you notice that often around 1:30 or 2 p.m. you are searching for a chocolate bar, pouring another coffee, or snacking on something you will regret later. It feels like your brain has stopped firing and your reaction is to try to give it life support.

And just like it's natural to need sleep, it's also natural for your body to cycle through energy highs and lows. Rather than trying to jump-start your synapses during an energy slump, a better solution is to *work with* your energy patterns and not fight what is natural. First, let's see what your energy pattern at work really is.

In the chart below, imagine that the horizontal line represents your time at work. The left-hand star represents when you arrive at work, midday is represented by the small triangle, and by the end of the day, when you go home, is indicated by the right-hand star. The vertical column represents your energy at a given moment. The higher up the chart, the more energy you have and the easier it is to get work done while being optimistic, productive and creative. Conversely, the lower you are on the chart, the less energy you have and the more difficult it is to concentrate on work or complete tasks.

Now think about your energy during the day.

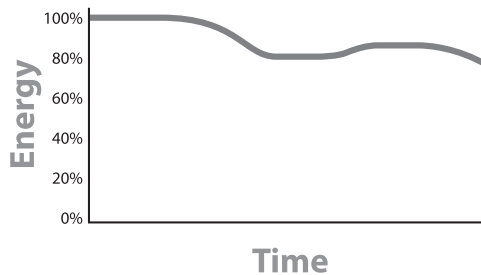
- When are you the most energetic, focused, optimistic and resilient?
- When does your energy wane and you start searching for a sugar snack?

On Chart #1 draw a curve, from left to right, to represent your typical energy flow in a day. Again, the higher the line, the more energy you normally have at that time of day, and the lower the line, the lower your energy level.



The Chart #2 I am showing an average energy curve based on a study of over 2,200 Canadian workers (conducted by Accutemps) with two high-energy periods in the day.

Don't fret if your chart doesn't match; this is just an example. What is important is to distinguish between the 'highs' and 'lows'.



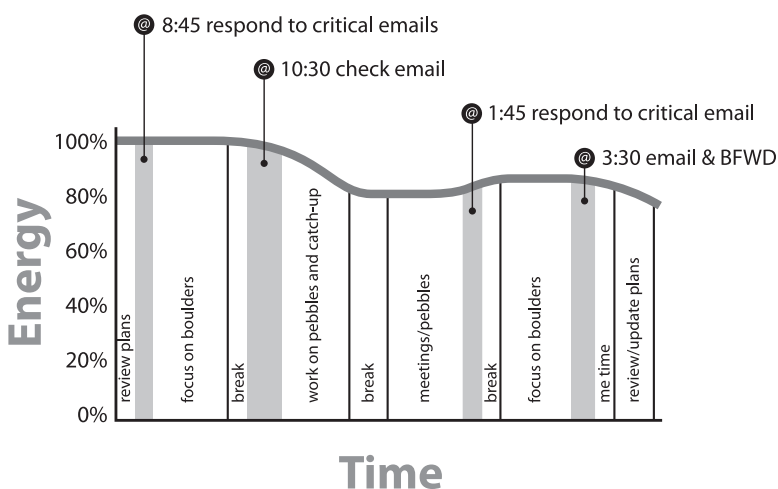
in the day. If you are like most people, one peak time is in the morning, usually for about ninety minutes, and one shortly after lunch lasts about one hour. Again, it doesn't matter if this is true for you – I want you to just focus on where you have 'highs' and 'lows'.

At our high-energy times our thinking is clear, we have positive energy and we are more creative. Work is easier, we are happier doing it, and we are far more likely to be efficient and successful at completing it.

But how are you using your high-energy zones? And what are you doing in your low-energy zones? If you are like most people, you choose what to work on based on what is routine or most urgent day (other than scheduled events, like meetings, of course).

One common pattern I see in almost every group I work with is starting the day with email (low energy work) in what is most people's high energy zone and then trying to attack Boulders (high energy work) in low energy zones later in the day. It's completely backwards and counterproductive. It's also easily fixed.

In Chart #3 I am presenting what an 'ideal' day could look like.



I'm suggesting this formula because, in fact, this is what I strive for when I have a day in the office.

Here is a break-down of the plan for the day:

- First up is a review of my plans. This is when I update what I recorded the night before or on Friday when I left for the week-end. Having quiet focused time for fifteen minutes as soon as I arrive will guarantee a less stressful, more successful day.
- You might recall that in the Chapter *Exorcise your email* I suggested having about four email visits a day. Here is that list again:
  - **8:45 am** – After checking my Day and Action Plans I check email, but only to respond to emergencies, clients, or client-related work that I know was left over from the day before. I delete, click and drag email to Tasks or Calendar or move to a folder. Total time: fifteen to twenty minutes.
  - **10:30 am** – Check email (fifteen to twenty minutes).
  - **1:45 pm** – Check email (fifteen minutes). This is a quick check for returned messages and any important new messages.
  - **3:30 pm** – Check email (thirty minutes). I spend more time composing longer responses and cleaning up the Inbox.

Total time is about one hour to one and one half hours.

- I have two crucial periods dedicated to Boulder work: before 10:30 am and before 3:30 pm. Each session will be about forty five minutes to one hour.
- There are a couple of undedicated flex time slots built into the day for scheduling conference calls, or catching up on client work.



- The end of the day is important Me-Time for setting the stage for the following day. I like to have thirty minutes to do some reading, wrap up some Boulder work or make appointments.
- I finish with my planning ritual: check my Action Plan, update my Day Plan and acknowledge what I have accomplished. The more I focus on what is going well with my work and progress towards my goals the more excited I am about returning to it the next day.

Consider the routines you have now. Are you making the best use of your high energy zones and your low energy zones? Chances are that your energy patterns are predictable, so it just makes sense to work *with them*, instead of against.

### **Is Your Work Really Unpredictable?**

Simon oversees procurement in a food processing company that makes fruit juices and snack bars. He often finds himself responding to immediate needs from suppliers and staff as well as negotiating long-term contracts for the supply of fruit. When I showed him this model, at first he was skeptical. The unpredictable nature of his job had convinced him that he needed to be in reaction mode all day. At the same time, he complained that he frequently found himself struggling to do financial planning when his energy was low.

We all have repetitive work (reading email, returning phone calls, making sales calls and filling in forms or schedules), and we have some unpredictable work (receiving phone calls, managing interruptions and attending impromptu meetings). Once you identify the nature of the various tasks, you can start to plan for them to be scheduled at your high-energy times (if they require your full concentration) or low-energy times when the work is routine and less taxing.

Simon now blocks his day with large chunks of time for his

high-energy work and for routine work in his low-energy time slots. For example, he makes calls to suppliers before 10:30 am, when his energy is up and he knows they will be in their offices. He does the bulk of his email work after 10:30 am and between 2 and 3 pm, when his energy is low, and he leaves most of the afternoon for emergencies and paperwork.

“It’s not a perfect system,” Simon reported after one month working with the new system. “Stuff still comes up, but I feel like I have a game plan and, even when my energy is low, I am still being productive.”

## **Harness Your High-Energy Zones**

Here are some strategies to harness your high-energy zones and get more work done in less time:

- **Protect your high-energy zones.** If you are a morning person, minimize your time on email for the first ninety minutes, close your door, and let people in your office know that mornings are when you need uninterrupted time to work on your Boulders. This time zone could represent 80% of your work if you plan for it.
- **Reschedule meetings.** Move meetings to outside your high-energy periods. Unless they are brainstorming or problem-solving meetings, you will do everyone a favor if you hold routine meetings just before or just after lunch. If it is a creative-thinking meeting, try to schedule it before 11 am.
- **Cluster similar tasks together.** For low-energy times, plan on clustering routine work together (email, reading reports, sending invites for meetings). Similarly, cluster your high-energy work together.
- **Make a plan.** Always make a Day Plan for the next day before

leaving the office. Make sure you know what you will work on first thing in the morning and block that time on your calendar.

- **Complete tasks.** Before moving on to other tasks, finish the task you are working on. Avoid multi-tasking (especially in low-energy periods), focus on completion, and work on getting the Pebbles off your Day Plan.
- **Be realistic.** Get into a habit of setting realistic targets for each time slot. Only thirty minutes? Plan for twenty-five minutes of work and actually complete it before moving on.

The following Pebbles are great candidates to include in your high-energy zones:

- Creative planning with your team or committee
- Checking on a committee's progress since the last meeting
- Making critical phone calls that require your full attention
- Resolving a relationship issue
- Writing thank-you cards
- Making sales calls of any kind, or follow-up calls to clients
- Feedback, coaching and performance reviews for staff
- Interviewing job applicants
- Composing a critical communication by letter or email
- Planning an event
- Making critical budget or staffing decisions

Here's a good rule-of-thumb if you tend to procrastinate about

some Pebble, whether it is repetitive or not, it belongs in your high energy zones. This is where I put my writing assignments, proposal writing and calls with clients. It feels great to cross the tough tasks off my list and cruise into some flex time knowing that the hard push is behind me.

Now it's time to look at how to go on vacation . . . for free!

# 4

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## Make It The Day Before Vacation

“That’s a nice tan,” I commented to the woman to my left at a project steering committee meeting. “Have you been on vacation?”

After she described her time in Mexico, I asked her the question I was *really* curious about. “What was work like the day *before* vacation?”

“It was crazy,” she exclaimed as a mischievous grin crossed her face. “I was so determined to complete everything on my list that nothing got in my way. Even my desk was clear for the first time in months.”

How interesting! She had created a new experience at work and yet she hadn’t gone anywhere. “It was a great feeling to see what was possible in one day,” she said.

Has this ever happened to you?

I call this “The Day Before Vacation” phenomenon. It’s the experience of being totally focused on completion, incredibly resilient to challenges, optimistic and energetic – yet nothing has physically changed. It’s still you at the same job, with the same work demands, but having a completely different experience. You are focused on an exciting goal, and you won’t let anything get in your way.

Another client described this experience as, “One of the most productive days of my year. My desk was clear, loose papers were gone and my list was complete – it simply had to be!”

The reality is that we can create whatever experience we want, whenever we want. We could certainly do this as children. Watch children at play, and see how quickly they can change their moods from happy to sad to concerned to curious and back to happy. As adults, we are simply out of practice.

*It's not what we don't know that prevents us from succeeding; it's what we know that just ain't so that is our greatest obstacle.*

—JOSH BILLINGS, author

Richard Restak, in his book *Mozart's Brain and the Fighter Pilot*, explains the value of choosing positive thoughts. “Since the brain can only feature in the foreground one thought at a time, our choice of a positive thought and our concentration on it robs the painful thought of its sting.”

Remember that whatever experience you create in your mind, you will naturally look for evidence to prove it's true. If you think you have too much work to do, guess what you'll notice? And if you worry that you can't seem to complete any work with all the distractions in your day, then guess what you are going to get more of?

What if, for a change, you decide to feel productive, effective and decisive? You hold an image of yourself cheerfully completing work and crossing it off your list. Now guess what evidence you will start to notice?



*The key principle is that you can create whatever experience you want at work. You just need to make the choice, change your actions and then notice the evidence that supports your way of thinking.*

*Remember that once we make up our mind for what we want we look for evidence to prove we are right.*

Try these simple ideas to get that Day Before Vacation experience anytime you want:

- **Envision what you want.** On your way to work, take two minutes to envision what you want the day to look like. Use adjectives like successful, energized, and skilful. Remember, the conscious brain can only focus on one thought at a time, so give it a powerful, convincing picture.
- **Make your goals visible.** Organize your workspace so that your Day Plan and Action Plan are always visible. These two lists are your anchor to what is most important. Every afternoon update your Day Plan from your Action Plan. Review the lists often, look forward to crossing items off, and revise your priorities as necessary.
- **Avoid distractions.** Start your day determined to complete the tasks on your Day Plan first. Focus on one task at a time, complete each one before moving on, and notice your success building.
- **Do the hardest work first.** Sales calls, proposal writing, staff performance issues and tough decisions should all be tackled first thing in the day. Getting buried in emails is just avoidance of the inevitable. Do yourself a favor and start the day ready to tackle the hardest work first.
- **Break work into small chunks.** When you break Pebbles into smaller chunks, the steps you need to take become obvious. You can more easily complete them and cross them off your Day Plan. For example, if you need to plan a meeting, break that down into:

- secure meeting room
  - send out meeting invitations
  - review agenda from last meeting
  - create draft agenda
  - circulate agenda for feedback
  - order food, etc.
- **Return to your goals.** A great trick I learned when I started to work from a Day Plan and Action Plan was to always return after an interruption or meeting to my Action Plan, not to my Day Plan. The objective is to keep a focus on the long term, while keeping track of progress on the current work.

### The Joy of Completion

I love crossing Pebbles off my Day Plan and seeing the growing examples of my focus on completion working. The more the crossed out items on the list the better I feel and more I want to keep going. Sometimes I even break down single Pebbles into smaller pieces just so I have more to cross off my list. So that completing some project planning expands into six individual tasks I can start to cross off.

I've even put Pebbles on my list that were routine but again gave me more to cross off, like: check the mail, put away past financials and "go to the bathroom".

### Exercise Your BOAs

In thirty years of triathlons, road races and marathons I've never been passed by a bunny, especially not one sporting the markings '3:15' in thick black lines on its ears. This bunny was a very fit looking



runner trailing ten more runners and its ears were a bright pink pair of fuzzy ears strapped to his hat.

To add insult to injury, not only did they quite handily pass me about ninety minutes into my marathon race, they also appeared to be comfortably chatting with each other and having a good time!

A few seconds after passing me they suddenly slowed to a brisk walking pace.

Ah! My ego was already planning revenge by passing them and regaining my lead. But something wasn't right. The walking looked planned, not the result of the exhaustion that you would typically see this far into a marathon race.

I had no idea that many runners now train to run as a pack following a 'bunny' (it turns out, the numbers on his ears were the groups' planned race finish time). Their strategy is to run for ten minutes and walk for one. Rather than being slower, this strategy has proven to extend athletic endurance and to produce faster finish times. By the way, after about twenty minutes the pack was so far ahead of me they were out of sight (and still chatting)!

Just like the runners, research has found that we are most effective when we focus for what I call 'Bursts of Attention' (BOAs). Just like a boa constrictor that squeezes its prey and then relaxes, a BOA is an intense period of focus followed by a short break.

If you are going to tackle a big project, work with your full attention for about twenty minutes, then stand and take a break. The trick is to relax just as fully as you focus. I find that a short bit of activity helps me unwind and get centered again. Something as simple as standing up and walking across the office to refill my water glass shifts my energy and allows me to refocus.

Avoid the temptation to go back to email, or get distracted by the paper on your desk. A break is a break. Savor the few minutes of respite, distract your thinking with light reading or a walk and then mentally plan to re-engage.

Balance between short BOAs and energy breaks, and you will be amazed at what you can accomplish, and how focused you will become.

### Refocus on the Big Picture

The first rule in a skid, when your car loses traction and starts to slide, is to look where you want to go. However, anyone that has lost control of the car on an icy or wet road knows full well that your instinct is to become fixated on what you *want to avoid*. Strangely, this instinct won't serve you very well.

Rather than helping you to maneuver around the obstacle, staring at what you want to avoid actually tends to draw you closer. This explains why more often than you would expect the lone driver on some remote country road manages to crash into the only telephone pole in sight.

Try this while driving your car (when you have full control over it). After taking your eyes off the road for a few seconds, try returning your focus to the road *immediately in front* of your car. You will quickly realize that, unless you are crawling along in a school zone, you can't navigate this way. When we drive we need to focus on *where we need to go* and far enough in the future to make all the necessary small adjustments to get there. In fact, the faster you drive the further down the road you should focus.

The solution in a 'skid' at work (when you are overwhelmed with distractions) is to refocus on the big picture, not on the minutiae that fills your day. Similarly, the busier you are, the more you should be looking at your Action Plan.

When you look at the big picture in your Action Plan, you shift your attention and work to your priorities and away from low-value distractions. So it makes sense that the Action Plan should be the anchor in your day, and that you should constantly refocus on it.

Periodically stop what you are doing and review your progress.

What is going well? What have you accomplished? Are your time estimates for remaining tasks realistic? What do you need to change in your priorities? Harvey Mackay, author of *Swim with the sharks without being eaten alive*, had a habit of reassessing his plan throughout the day, looking at what could still be completed, what needed to be moved and what could be delegated or dropped. His triage approach to planning and the big picture view is always going to be more successful than staying fixated on the immediate issue that you are on a collision course with.

### Act Like an Optimist

Your mind has a curious habit of following the lead of your body. If you are dragging yourself around the office feeling low energy and acting like you need a nap, your mind will pick up on these clues and start to focus on how tired you are. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy started by how you carry your body. The more you act tired ('Gee,

I'm feeling tired'), the more you will feel tired.

*Habits of thinking need not be forever. One of the most significant findings in psychology in the last twenty years is that individuals can choose the way they think.*

—MARTIN SELIGMAN, author and director of the Positive Psychology Center

Often in my seminars I give participants an experience of a mind-body disconnect. First I ask the group to take on a physiological position of being tired, despondent and or hopelessness.

Some people will slump over in their chairs and put their heads in their hands, others will put their heads on the table. Just watching their exaggerated performances usually makes *me* feel sleepy.

Next I instruct the group to freeze in this physical position and to hold it for three minutes. Once I see that they are completely sunk into their self-imposed stupor I tell them to immediately switch to feeling intense happiness and joy. After some initial shock, I start to hear a growing wave of snickering and laughter. While their brain

is sending instructions to the body to feel good, there isn't a lot of cooperation coming from the body.

It's like the Charlie Brown cartoon where Charlie, slumped over and looking thoroughly dejected, says to Lucy, "This is my depressed stance." Charlie goes on to explain. "It makes a lot of difference how you stand. The worst thing you can do is to stand up straight and hold your head high. Because then you'll start to feel better. If you are going to get any joy out of being depressed, you have to stand like this."

One of the simplest ways to adopt the Day Before Vacation attitude is to sit up in your chair, hold your head high, push your shoulders back, look up, smile and act like an optimist. When you walk into a meeting, or go to get a glass of water, walk with determination and focus. The more you act like a successful person, the more your mind will tune into clues that prove you are right. In fact, psychologists claim that the phenomenon of 'state-dependent memory' will bring to mind thoughts and memories from when you experienced the same emotion in the past.<sup>44</sup>

To explain the strategy a bit more succinctly: Fake it until you make it!

Notice how most people seem to be going through the motions of moving their body without much attention. It's a zombie-like psychosis adopted over years and left unchecked. Now notice successful people around you, and watch how they carry themselves. Someone moving with determination and a spirit of confidence is unconsciously programming his or her mind for success.

Paying attention to how you carry *your body* and intentionally feeling optimistic can launch you into that Day before Vacation anytime. It may not compare to a week in Cancun, but it's available all day every day, and you don't have to worry about losing your luggage.

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44. <http://www.trans4mind.com/life-coach/life-challenge10/kraus.shtml>

# 5



## Put Procrastination on Pause

*I don't wait for moods. You accomplish nothing if you do that.  
Your mind must know it has got to get down to work.*

—PEARL S. BUCK, author and Nobel Prize winner

“I can always go for a walk tomorrow.”

“I’m pretty busy getting caught up; I’ll make some sales calls next week.”

“Today isn’t a good time; I’ll apologize to her tomorrow.”

“It’s only one donut and after all I’m starting my diet this week-end.”

“I’ll call later in the day, when I have more time.”

Sound familiar?

Admit it: you procrastinate . . . and I do – we all do. But my experience has been that it rarely serves me.

The word procrastinate is formed from two Latin words – *pro*, meaning forward, and *crastinus*, meaning belonging to tomorrow. So, procrastination is the act of putting something into tomorrow

and, of course, it suggests that the something is always ‘in tomorrow’ – in other words, it never gets done.

We pay our taxes late and are penalized, even though last year we swore we wouldn’t. We put off starting the diet because it’s ‘not a good time’ or because everyone else ordered the cheesecake with fresh strawberries. We fuss with the minutiae of designing the meeting agenda, instead of returning the calls from customers and then blame that same customer for shopping around for new quotes. Or we avoid being honest with the co-worker who interrupts our work to chat because ‘I don’t want to hurt his feelings.’

We have a natural tendency to avoid the pain of hard work, to put it off and take the path of least resistance. This habit of procrastination can undermine all of our planning, team commitments and good intentions.

And it is all in your head.

Just as you made up the idea that a task is important (of course the fourth email in capitals from your boss is pretty good evidence!) you can also make up the idea that it will take a lot of effort, or that maybe if you avoid it you won’t have to do it. Essentially, procrastination is a story we tell ourselves to avoid some perceived pain.

So the co-worker is oblivious to the irritation we feel when he comes by our desk to talk about last night’s hockey game. We avoided the anticipated uncomfortable feeling that comes from sharing a little honesty, and now we get to relive the same interruption day after day.

Here’s a mental re-frame for you: when you procrastinate, you are not actually idle. *Procrastination is the act of doing something.* It just happens to be the wrong thing. For example, when you slack off in the afternoon and spend an hour wading through unread emails even though you knew you had some critical work that should have gotten done, *you have still been active.* The path of least resistance

diverted an hour of your precious time away from your goals. And you avoided the sting of guilt by staying busy.

It stands to reason, then, that if you are actually active when you procrastinate, then the path to more success is to simply redirect that activity to a better choice.



When I return from a meeting I am often tempted to open my computer and try to reduce the 40 new emails that have come in since I left.

The reality is that most of these emails have little value – they’re certainly not as important as my Day Plan.

Instead, I make a conscious decision to take only fifteen minutes to scan and respond to critical client emails and then I turn my attention to work on the next Pebble from my Day Plan.<sup>45</sup>

It’s simply about staying in motion with better choices.

### Reducing the Big-P Temptation

Similarly, when I return to my hotel room after delivering a speech I am usually spent. I’ve had a long day, given it my all on stage, spent time talking to dozens of people and I just want to crash in front of the television and ‘veg out’. But what if my plan was to get a workout at the gym? Even as I made that goal in the morning I knew that the Big-P (procrastination) temptation would be there.

So, instead, I trick my brain to choose the workout instead of TV. Before leaving my room I lay out all my workout gear on the bed. That way when I return to the room I see my gear, remember

45. A great technique is to set an alarm for fifteen minutes. Many of the new phones have alarms built in or see [www.eggtimer.com](http://www.eggtimer.com)

my commitment and head off to the gym. Remember I'm going to be active anyway; I might as well be active on the right thing.

Procrastination is a habit and the best antidote to habits that don't serve you well is to create better habits that do, notice evidence that supports this change and then repeat the new habit.

Please don't read this as a lecture on positive thinking. As much as I am a fan of being an optimist and seeing the best in yourself, this is about *strategies*. Sometimes it takes more than a positive outlook to change a pattern we have had for years.

I'm going to suggest seven proven strategies that you can employ right now. I'm sure there are loads more, but these are the ones that I use and I know that any one of them will turbo charge your activities by reducing the Big-P temptation.

As always, you need to commit to at least one of these for a minimum of thirty days and notice any differences in your results. This isn't about *perfect*; it is about gradual improvement that gets you more of what you want.

- **Take responsibility for each delay.** Add up the time you spent thinking about starting that Pebble or Boulder you have been procrastinating about. Now ask yourself what one change in your thinking or actions would create better results. *Then take your own advice, and do it!*

When I catch myself scanning my Day Plan and still not taking action – I recognize it for what it is – procrastination. My solution is to pick one quick win, do it and then cross it off the list and start another one. By staying in motion, from one success to another, my mood soon improves as does my focus on completion.

- **Skip the perfection.** It doesn't have to be perfect (with exceptions, of course, for heart surgeons and airline pilots) – it just has to be good enough to get the work done and satisfy those



involved. When you catch yourself fussing over the exact timing on the agenda or margins on a report, remind yourself that you might be the only one who cares. Seeking perfection is just another form of procrastination, and when the meeting is over and the report is on the shelf, nobody cares.

- **Rewrite your negative beliefs.** Recognize the beliefs you have about yourself that don't serve you ("I rarely complete what I start," or "I work better under stress," etc). Instead, create beliefs that do serve you ("I am organized," or "I do what is most important first," or "I enjoy seeing projects completed," etc).

When you catch yourself slipping into old, negative self-talk, stop and restate what you are thinking as a positive affirmation of what you do well ("I do complete what I start," or "I enjoy working at my own pace, ahead of schedule."). Remember a chorus of neurons are eavesdropping on your mental machinations and being programmed. You are your biggest cheerleader, and sometimes even a cheerleader needs coaching.

- **Chunking.** Break down projects into manageable pieces that can be accomplished in short amounts of time. Even fifteen minutes is enough time to rough out a table of contents for your new report, book a meeting room, send a query note to a colleague or review a proposal.

I like to think in terms of moving Boulders ahead with small pushes done frequently, rather than waiting for the perfect time to do it all. Building your successes effectively rewrites your story from someone who avoids hard work to someone who gets things done.

- **Do the most difficult task first.** You know that procrastinating on important work will inevitably come back to bite you. Instead, highlight the most important tasks in your Day Plan and start

to work on them first thing in the morning. Remember that you have different energy periods during the day and generally the morning is the most productive time. Always plan to tackle the most difficult tasks in high-energy time zones and leave the less-taxing work for low-energy zones.

- **Reward yourself.** Your brain learns best through experience so give it good ones to record. Give yourself a reward for starting the project, and for every milestone you reach. It could be a walk to the local café, sitting outside reading for a few minutes, five minutes of stretching or hanging out in the staff room. Yes, it's mental manipulation ('I promise myself that I will reward myself if I work hard and get something done'), but it works.

When you consistently create a reward for your accomplishments, even a small one, you burn a synapse pattern that there is a payoff for stepping past the Big-P temptation and getting things done.

- **Create an un-schedule.** Psychologist Neil Fiore suggests mapping out your week showing all the commitments you have. What is left is your 'un-schedule' where you can allocate your Pebble-work. The un-schedule will help you to be realistic and to prepare for the chunks of time where you need to be focused. It may be that you only have two or three time blocks, but if that's all you have, it's important to prepare to get the most from what you have.

Now that we've looked at your productivity habits you're ready to get unproductive!

# 6

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## Make Time for Me-Time

*Each of us needs some time that is entirely our own . . .  
Just make sure your time alone is not interrupted  
by your To-Do list, or anyone else's.*

—STEPHAN RECHTSCHAFFEN, author  
and co-founder of the Omega Center

**I**f I get to pee twice, it's a good day."

That's how the division director of a national investment firm describes a typical day at work to me. Scheduled and impromptu meetings, panicked consultants needing her attention and calls from her own clients usually pack every available minute.

It's ironic. All our efforts to do things faster so we will have more time often leaves us feeling burnt out and time poor. At the end of a crazy-busy day of returning phone calls, responding to emails and putting out fires I start to feel like I'm on a treadmill with no end in sight. "The problem with the rat race" Lily Tomlin once said, "is that even if you win, you are still a rat."

Stephan Rechtschaffen, co-founder of the pioneering self-development Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York, wrote eloquently

about the need for us to resist becoming an ultra-efficient ‘doing machine’ in his book, *Timeshifting*. “The time management taught at business seminars is essentially designed to make you more materially productive.” warned Rechtschaffen. “If God could take the seventh day off to rest, then a half hour a day doesn’t seem much to ask of ourselves.”

Here is a quick exercise to check in on how your time is getting used. Read the following list and put a checkmark beside the symptoms that you might recognize feeling in a typical day at work:

- Other people’s agendas are driving my day.
- My typical day is so chaotic and unpredictable that my plans quickly become meaningless.
- Interruptions run my life; I have a hard time finding five minutes for myself.
- I feel guilty if I’m not always busy.
- As soon as I finish one task or meeting I always go straight into another.
- I feel like I am on a treadmill, and the days don’t seem to change or improve.
- I find I am checking email on my Blackberry at restaurants and at home when I should be enjoying time off.
- I know I should be taking more time to think and plan, but I don’t.



- I work through the weekend, that's the only time when I can finally get work done.
- I notice my attention span is getting shorter and I'm having trouble focusing for more than a few minutes.
- The only quiet time I get is in the washroom.

If any of these statements describe you, then I am going to suggest that you are not operating at your full potential. Constantly going faster, packing more into your day and rushing from task to task is not a receipt for success. In fact, something must be getting sacrificed.

I like to create what I call 'Me-Time' in my day. Me-Time is like a pit stop; it is your opportunity to slow down, take stock, recharge and get focused for what lies ahead. You can use it to do nothing and relax, or to tidy up your work area or to check on your plans. This is your time to use in a way that will make the next hour and the one after that more effective and more enjoyable.

Sometimes I use this time simply to get re-oriented to my Action Plan for the week and check on my plan for the rest of my day. Or I can use it for brainstorming and getting creative about some new direction I want to take the company. But more often than not I use it to do nothing but relax into a meditative state and quiet my thoughts.

Here are some simple ideas for how you can build Me-Time into your week:

### **Schedule Regular Me-Time**

Regardless of the focus, you will have more success if you *schedule* Me-Time and not leave it to the whims of attitude or the mercy of others. I know scheduling time for yourself may sound somewhat regimented, but ask yourself how many times did you *intend* to take

a break in the day, but instead kept on working? In fact, a colleague once commented that most people are never late for a meeting with another person, but they will often skip a meeting with themselves. It's time to change that prioritization.

Maybe a little discipline is not such a bad thing once in a while.

Remember the financial planner who told me he didn't take appointments on Thursday afternoons? Rather than hoping some free time would appear, he actually blocked research time into his schedule. We should all do the same.

My technique is to schedule at least thirty minutes (one hour is better) of Me-Time every week in my Action Plan. When you do this, be specific about the goal you want to work on and set the time, just like a meeting you might book with a client. It can be in smaller chunks, but it should add up to at least thirty minutes.

Let others know that this is a meeting you are booked for and do not let anyone override it.<sup>46</sup> By scheduling this time you send an important message to your subconscious that you are important enough to have time just for you.

## **Book Yourself Out of the Office**

I love those 360-degree real estate tours where you move your mouse and get to view the whole condo or living room in a house. You get to see everything that's there and get a quick impression of what the room is like. Do that now: slowly spin around in your chair and take in your office space. Are you surrounded by reminders of work that needs to be attended to: reports to be read, papers to be filed, phone message slips, voice mail waiting for you, emails to be read, etc? Just being in that environment can be distracting.

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46. One client of mine color codes her Me-Time by using categories in Outlook Calendar. This way her staff and colleagues know what is negotiable time in case of emergencies.

To create Me-Time I often cross the street to a café, order a tea, and just let my mind relax and take the attention off the unfinished work.

I don't take my cell phone, just my laptop.<sup>47</sup> The only commitment I make is that I will focus on just one Pebble that needs my attention and I will reach some kind of conclusion. For example, I might edit a chapter in this book, work on a new feature for my web site, some committee work, notes on a draft proposal or do a mind map for a new project.

When you're on  
top of everything  
it's hard to get  
to the bottom  
of anything.

—LINDA STONE, coined  
the phrase “continuous  
partial attention”

I look forward to these little escapes; they make me feel more productive, even though I am only working on one thing. And I return to my office feeling refreshed and re-focused.

## Take a Me-Time Walk

As an avid runner I know that physical activity of any kind stimulates centers in our brain that allow for creative thought and increased positive mood. A brisk walk of even fifteen minutes will increase your heart rate, release endorphins that reduce pain and give you a feeling of well-being. Heading out for a quick four-block tour in the middle of the day can turn your dull feeling of work pressure around and return you to the office feeling more positive and focused.

In his book, *Walking Your Blues Away: How to Heal the Mind and Create Emotional Well-Being*, Thom Hartman promotes the value of walking for changing the emotional energy around a

47. One trick I have learned is to not go online. First, you can easily lose fifteen minutes fooling around with café passwords and Wi-Fi connections, and second, going online invites the distractions of email and Internet. Resist the habit, avoid the distraction and get something done you'll be proud of.

problem and for finding new solutions. He recommends that you choose one topic or challenge and stay focused on it throughout your walk. When you find yourself drifting off topic, remind yourself to refocus on that one topic.

As you walk, notice how your issue begins to morph and change. It could be a subtle change in feeling or a new solution begins to bubble to the surface. Toward the end of your walk, anchor your new feeling or solution by recording the new direction or action you are going to take.

I was doing this one day as I ruminated about a staffing issue. I had just received notice that my main employee was going on maternity leave – permanently. She was the glue that held together hundreds of details and her departure would be a huge loss.

The usual remedies started to come up: replace her, look at temp services, etc. As I walked I allowed these knee-

jerk solutions to quiet and I chose instead to just be with the question, “What do I really want?” and not, “What is the solution?” It was freeing to not jump into solution-creating mode. I started to notice the walk more, taking in the fresh air, enjoying the physical movement and feeling my feet as they carried me into a nearby park.

After about ten minutes, the thought of replacing her began taking a back seat to envisioning my ideal day – what I really wanted. I started to picture simpler surroundings at work, with less paper and fewer filing cabinets, fewer wires and boxes humming away doing who-knows-what. It was freeing!

By the time I was returning to my office, I was convinced that the solution was not about replacing my employee; it was about becoming free of the complexity of my current office set-up. Within a few days and with her help we had crafted a plan to sell or give away all the furniture, phones, most of the computers, to take any

*If you're not getting  
better, you're  
getting worse.*

—PAT RILEY, philosopher  
and NBA coach



non-essential papers and files to recycling, and to move the company to a one-person office. We also made a new work plan for the operation of the company, and began actively outsourcing as much work as possible.

I'm convinced that none of these solutions would have come to me if I had stayed in my office making lists. I needed to break free from my usual patterns of problem solving and to ask a different set of questions.

It only took ten minutes of walking to get the process started but it opened a new world for my company. Two weeks later virtually all the unnecessary furniture, phones, fax machine and computers were either sold or given to charity. I also hauled more than twelve huge bags of old files, records, reports and paper out of the office to be recycled. It was like a metaphor for mental clarity: the more paper that was removed, the freer my thinking became.

The moral of the story is: when in doubt, take a hike.

By the way, walking is also a wonderful alternative to a traditional sitting meeting. I have found that there can be less tension, more positive energy and even more honesty in a walking meeting.

## Create Mini Me-Time Breaks

*We often treat our days as a series of highlights –  
the big meeting, a good meal, an outing with the kids –  
while ignoring the time in between. But the  
in-between moments are the bulk of our lives.*

—THICH NHAT HANH, author and peace activist

When the workload is up and your Day Plan is bulging with demands on your time, you can use these simple techniques to create mini Me-Time breaks throughout the day:

- When the phone rings, use that as a cue to relax. Take a deep breath, center your focus on only that moment, release any

anxiety or worries and allow your thoughts to quiet. It only takes a moment, but it can make a world of difference to you and how you sound on the call.

- Set your arrival time for appointments to five minutes early. Instead of rushing to arrive on time to meetings, plan to arrive early. Use this free time to compose your thoughts, update your daily planner or plan the outcomes you want from the meeting. Do this and you may notice that you are one of the few people grounded and thinking clearly for the first ten minutes.
- After you finish one task, pause for a moment before beginning another. One habit I have picked up this year is to enjoy a mini-celebration after a particularly difficult task has been accomplished. I just take a moment to stand, stretch and pause to reflect on what was accomplished, and to feel pride for overcoming my procrastination habit and getting it done. It doesn't have to be a big deal, but allow your conscious mind a moment to register the good feelings associated with the extra effort you put in getting the work done.
- Stay focused on the present. While waiting for a website to load up, your computer to reboot, an elevator to arrive or a light to turn green, simply notice what is going on around you and inside you.

Are you tense? How is your breathing? What are your thoughts? The act of focusing will bring you to a new level of awareness. You will find that you are less scattered in your thinking and more able to truly attend to the task at hand or the person you are meeting with.

You are the author of your day – if you choose to be. Or as mega-author Wayne Dyer puts it, “Our lives are the sum total of the choices we make.” The trick, it seems, is to make more conscious choices

that are designed to create more success for us and others, rather than unconscious choices based on habit, fear or resistance.

And now that you are pumped to make more conscious choices, how about choosing to get some things off your list?

### **Stop the Busy-Ness**

If you've ever watched someone arrive at a café, order their food and drink, get to a table, open their laptop, get out their phone, hook up to the WiFi, start checking their email, while eating their food you know what busy-ness look like. Busy-ness is a disease of our always-on culture that keeps us doing and away from simply being present. It's most obvious in places like airport lounges, hotel lobbies, office elevators, bus stops and other public places where the excuse to ignore other people and what is going on around you is more tempting. But it also happens while people are driving their car, in conversations, on the phone or even at home with your partner or family.

Here's an exercise that you might find both challenging and interestingly revealing: do nothing. Go to a bookstore or café or any public space and simply sit quietly and just be there. Avoid the temptation to check email, make a call or read the paper; just be there and take in what is going on all around you and inside you.

I know if my mind is full of thoughts from the day at work it can be a challenge at first to slow down and just be present. You may find that this is, in fact, quite easy for you. Regardless, it can be a welcome pause and a refreshing departure from busy-ness.

# 7

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## Start a Stop-Doing List

*Civilization had too many rules for me,  
so I did my best to rewrite them.*

—BILL COSBY, comedian

**F**or at least twenty years I have been signing cheques. In every business I have started or managed it was just one of those responsibilities that went with the territory, or so I thought. After all, shouldn't the manager have ultimate responsibility for how the income was being spent?

About three years ago I took note of all the mail and invoices on my desk when I returned from a speaking tour. It was substantial. Even though we try to have regular bills (telephone, utilities, etc.) paid automatically on our corporate credit card there was still a small pile on my desk every day that needed my attention. Contractors needed to be paid, which required matching their work to payment from clients, one-off bills needed to be checked, staff needed paying, and on it went. It would take me at least twenty to thirty minutes just to check all the bills and then a few more

minutes to file everything. It was a distraction I didn't need when I should have been working on client-focused tasks.

I decided to fight my habits and for the first time give my manager signing rights to our account. My plan was to create a prudent compromise: she would deal with items under \$500, and I would sign off on larger items.



As we walked to the bank to sign the necessary signature cards, we discussed the new plan. At that moment it dawned on me that setting such a low signing limit would still keep me busy, plus I wanted her to know that I trusted her. After all, if I trust her to signing every small item

then I must trust her enough to sign all of the cheques. Whether it's \$200 or \$2,000 the checking, payment, mailing, filing process necessitates the same level of scrutiny and attention.

So I decided to increase the limit to \$1,500. Again, it was a compromise that still tied me to the process.

Finally as we reached the doors of the bank it dawned on me how dumb this was. Here I was trying to get rid of responsibility, but I was still hanging on to it. It was time to not only delegate the task, but to give complete autonomy along with it.

So I removed the signing limit completely.

Now with full authority to deal with any payment (on paper and online) delegated to my manager, I had a real solution. Every week I give thanks for that decision. Not only have I reclaimed the time and hassle, it is one less task on my list and one less pile on my desk. I should have done it ten years ago.

So far we have covered a lot of material about what you can do to make time work for you. But what about what we don't need to do? Jim Collins, author of the mega bestseller *Good to Great* and

co-author of *Built to Last*, once shared how he puts a stop to work and responsibilities that you are not passionate about, not genetically encoded for, or that don't make economic sense (or what I like to refer to as Just-Plain-Dumb).<sup>48</sup>

## Just-Plain-Dumb

*Earnestness is stupidity sent to college.*

-P. J. O'ROURKE, journalist and author

If you are ever going to truly increase your success, you need to first increase your capacity. Like trying to cram more clothes into your suitcase, there are always some non-negotiable limits on life. And those limits won't increase until you either buy a new suitcase (expensive) or reduce your pile of clothes (never easy). Think of it this way: when you empty your must-do vessel of real, assumed or Just-Plain-Dumb obligations and duties, you naturally allow new and better opportunities to flow your way.

The must-do disease plagued me for years and I was continually filling my bucket of responsibilities faster than I could empty them. This never-ending cycle of complete-one-add-two more tasks often led to chaos, poor decisions, stress and missed appointments. I couldn't see, much less entertain, different, more selective and strategic approaches when I was in survival mode all the time.

But just like the feeling I get when I donate clothing I haven't worn in years to charity, when I purge my list of unnecessary burdens it is like a weight has been lifted. Almost immediately I can start to contemplate new and better directions.

Now consider your habits, are you a list builder, or do you intentionally create gaps in your schedule? Are you growing your

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48. [http://www.jimcollins.com/article\\_topics/articles/best-new-years.html](http://www.jimcollins.com/article_topics/articles/best-new-years.html)

success by pushing harder to accomplish even more in a day or are you increasing your capacity?

### Doing Less to Get More

Here is my current Stop-Doing list. Take what you want from it, and create your own. Have fun with this. Look for repetitive tasks that someone else can do, that you don't have to do, or that you simply don't want to do ever again. And then find a new solution for getting them off your list, permanently.

- 1) **Working through breaks.** It's a mind trick: you think if you work continuously you get more done (and people who take breaks aren't team players). Watch NBA or NHL players – how long would they last if there were no breaks? Learn from the pros and use breaks to maximize your results.
- 2) **Anchored to email.** Don't fill gaps in your day checking your Inbox. No one is impressed and you are just keeping yourself busy instead of productive. Remember, "Those who don't have goals are ruled by those who do." If email is your vice, you have given your power over to the sender (re-read the Chapter *Exorcise Your Email*).
- 3) **Worrying.** Don't get me wrong, I pay attention to what's important and I become concerned at times for what needs to be changed, but I avoid worry. Repeatedly worrying about what might or might not happen is a wasted investment. If I screwed up, I'll deal with it. In the meantime I choose to live in the present. We always have a choice; I choose to not worry.
- 4) **Seeking perfection.** The first iPod was far from perfect, yet Apple now owns more than 70% of world MP3 market share. It's the same for any success story. Perfection is a luxury that should be pursued by musicians, rocket scientists and surgeons;

all the rest of us are measured by quantity, quality and, we hope, innovation.

- 5) **Faking delegation.** It's counter-intuitive but people want more responsibility and autonomy; they just don't always show it. Get out of your own way and pass the ropes over to the person doing the work. You are free to work on other things and they are happier campers.<sup>49</sup>
- 6) **Needing to finish books and magazines.** There are over 23,000 new books published every month in the US alone – does it really matter that you didn't finish one of them? Here's my rule of thumb: if it's taking me longer than a week to finish the book it's either not good enough, not interesting enough, or I don't need it enough.
- 7) **Procrastinating about my health.** It's no wonder that one out of four men and one out of three women who survive a heart attack will die within the following year, most often of cardiac arrest or another heart attack – they are still procrastinating about their health. It takes less effort and time than you think. Make it easy, convenient and fun and make it a habit as soon as possible.
- 8) **Bringing work home.** Set aside days of the week that are *No Guilt Days*. No work comes home, and you enjoy total family time and down time. You will be more refreshed and ready for the next day and have less guilt (admit it: most nights you don't do all that you planned anyway).
- 9) **Staying busy.** Between busy with this and busy with that is true potential for growth. Ask yourself: "What is keeping me

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49. Daniel Pink's new best-seller *Drive: the surprising truth about what motivates us* is a refreshing new look at motivation at work – it's a necessary read for every leader.



so busy and is it worth it?” Notice *busy-ness* and choose to step back and get curious about different strategies.

- 10) Stop reading the news.** In a study completed over ten days, researchers carefully recorded both negative and positive statements used in the evening news. Not surprisingly, they found there were ten times more negative statements than positive ones in every broadcast. So why would you want to hear what’s going wrong in the world as you start your day or as you are winding down in the evening? Instead, I have a solution: if you want to know what is going on in the world, guess – you’re probably right.

*It’s amazing that the amount of news that happens in the world every day always just exactly fits the newspaper.*

—JERRY SEINFELD, comedian

And if you are curious about other areas in your life to create a Stop-Doing commitment, here are some more ideas:

- Watching excessive TV
- Spending time on the computer at home
- Chairing meetings instead of passing the baton to another person
- Attending meetings you don’t really need to be at
- Over eating or eating food that you know doesn’t serve you
- Multi-tasking while pretending to be engaged in conversation
- Trying to look important by constantly checking, talking, emailing and surfing on your dumb (oops, I meant smart) phone
- Driving when you could walk or use public transit

- Skipping opportunities for Me-Time because of some misguided obligation to staying busy
- Saying Yes too often without considering the impact on you and your family
- Getting stuck thinking you are right.

# 8



## Celebrate Successes

*The difference between what we are doing and what we are capable of doing would solve most of the world's problems.*

—MAHATMA GANDHI, spiritual leader

**Y**ears ago I created a little habit to celebrate exercising, and I continue it to this day (despite how strange it may sometimes look). After a run or a workout, as I am heading to the shower, I always reach across my left shoulder and give myself a little pat on the back. It is my simple way of saying, “You did it! You got your butt out the door and did what you said you would do.”

Sometimes it feels a little strange to be executing my self-congratulatory ceremony as I walk through a public gym but, to me, it's important. I want to reinforce my belief that I am a promise-keeper and that I make my health a priority. And I think that the next time I am convincing myself to get ready for the workout it will be just a little easier because I know there is a small reward waiting for me.

But why is it that we don't celebrate more often?

We work hard, take risks, accomplish a success and then quickly move on to the next task. It seems that guilt plays a role in our dedication to staying busy and our habit of reward avoidance. At some time in our life we must have learnt that celebrating was either self serving or unnecessary.

Good! And that is why we *should do it*, because it is self serving and unnecessary!

Once we finish the task or project or overcome our resistance and accomplish what we set out to do it is no longer about ‘necessary’ – it should be about relief, rejoicing and restoring our faith in hard work and perserverance.

It would seem strange for a football team to skip the high five’s and bum slaps after a touch down. Or how about a tennis player landing that perfect out-of-reach corner shot and not taking a moment to raise their fist up in celebration.

It’s important to remind ourselves that we are successful and that our hard work is paying off, even if the results aren’t always obvious. Like a video camera that is always on, our brain constantly records and processes our experiences and creates new synapse connections recording our version of what happened. Every experience either reinforces an existing connection (think of a well-established river stream where water naturally wants to flow) or creates a new one.

When you put in extra effort but there is little reward, you reinforce the brain’s ‘story’ that says work is unrewarding. This unconscious action-reaction response influences future decisions. Work? Ugh – there’s no reward in hard work!

On the other hand, when you take a moment to savour the feeling of success after working hard, you program your brain to make a connection between working hard and feeling good. It’s basic Skinner Stimulus-Response theory at work, without the rats in a maze!

However you choose to celebrate, be spontaneous, make it fun and make it happen on a regular basis. Here are some ideas for how you can celebrate your own successes:

- Stop in the middle of day, notice some specific accomplishments you have made (however minor in the big picture) and congratulate yourself.
- Cross each task off your list with a thick felt pen and enjoy seeing your Day-Timer fill up with signs of accomplishment.
- Go for a quick walk outside. Allow yourself to completely take your mind off work, focus on the experience of the walk, and simply enjoy the break.
- Indulge yourself with a favorite treat at a local café. But don't fill the space with fussing over your latest emails, just enjoy the celebration.
- Reward yourself with a stretch. Remind yourself that this stretch represents your celebration and that you are enjoying the feeling of closing one task to start another.
- Take ten minutes to read an article you've wanted to read but haven't been able to. Stay focussed and enjoy single-tasking.

## Habits Worksheet

New habits that stick include a commitment to practice for at least thirty days. This means everyday thinking about the new habit, consciously practicing it, and doing your best to stick with it.

I am committing to the following habit:

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.....

I am committing to the following habit:

.....

.....

I am committing to the following habit:

.....

.....

Here is how I am going to support myself in keeping this new habit:  
(e.g. I will put a note in my Day-Timer or on my home page, I will review my progress every afternoon as I plan the next day, I will reward myself by . . .)

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*\*Recommendations: copy this page and post it in your day planner, your bathroom mirror, your car dashboard, or your refrigerator, any place where you will frequently see it and be reminded of it.*

# Part IV



## THIS IS THE TIME

### Commitment to owning your success

*Here you leave today and enter the world of  
yesterday, tomorrow, and fantasy.*

–Message greeting visitors to Disneyland

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## It Doesn't Stop Here

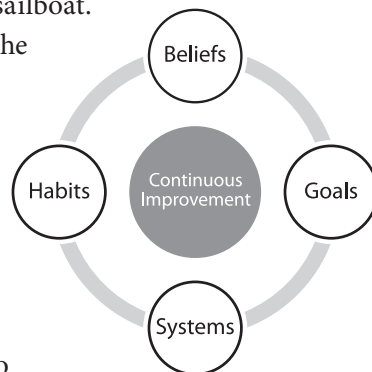
In a quarterly retreat I was leading with a group of high-achieving managers, I asked for a show of hands. “How many of you have more distractions from interruptions, crisis, emails, staff, conflicting time demands and meetings than you had one year ago?” I asked.

With a collective groan, all thirty-three hands went up.

Next, I asked who had adopted a specific new strategy this year to reduce these distractions. Only four hands went up. That means almost 90% of these high-achievers were continuing to use the same tools and techniques to deal with work distractions – even though they had plenty of evidence that this wasn't working.

It's like having a leak in your sailboat. You are working furiously to bail the water out with a small bucket. You might be keeping up with the flood of incoming water, but you still haven't fixed the leak and you're distracted from what you should be doing, which is sailing the boat.

I've designed this book to





provide tools that I know work for you and for creating more success with your time. But (sorry) it doesn't stop there. To gain the maximum benefit from this knowledge, you also have to com-

*If your actions inspire  
others to dream more,  
learn more, do more  
and become more,  
you are a leader.*

—JOHN QUINCY ADAMS, sixth  
president of the United States

mit to an *attitude of continuous improvement*. The *ongoing* process of awareness, reflection, change and commitment is the source of all real improvement.

Imagine being part of a business that never changed or improved.

Feedback from clients was ignored, errors were often repeated, and inefficiencies were overlooked. Of course it's a disastrous strategy and it's no different with our own performance.

We need to continually learn and discover new ways to do this thing called 'work'. I want this book to challenge you to find efficiencies you didn't enjoy before and to rethink old assumptions. And from this learning, two types of change are possible: the processes and systems that support you in getting your work completed (think planning tools, meetings, office design, client service processes, etc.) and the individual actions you take (think habits and one-time changes).

Every week, when you are creating your new Action Plan, take a few minutes for your own weekly review. This doesn't have to be a complete analysis, just look for what worked (how can I repeat this?) and what didn't work (how can I avoid that the next time?).

Here are three power questions to ask yourself every week:

- 1) Where have I succeeded this week and what can I do to repeat that success? (Think about a system opportunity.)
- 2) Where have I failed this week? This could include being unprepared or late to a meeting, or missing a deadline. (Think about a new habit opportunity.)

- 3) Where do I need to improve? This could include being more disciplined about sticking to your Day Plan in the morning, or blocking more time to work on your Boulders. (Think about a new learning opportunity.)

## That Feeling of Déjà Vu

*It is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education.*

—CHET ATKINS, country recording artist

Do you ever have a stressful week, and then recognize that this week is probably no different from the previous week? Your feeling of déjà vu is a clue worth paying attention to. A pattern of frustration, stress or just plain fatigue means that there is an opportunity and a need to create a better approach.

Scott is a successful mortgage broker with a growing business. He makes his money by attracting individual home buyers and closing their mortgage deal. And in his business it's all about numbers. The more Scott can apply his time to finding new clients and processing the minutiae of bank applications, the more success he enjoys.

As a high achiever who always wants to get going on to the next deal, one of Scott's frustrations was processing the necessary forms to approve, and then processing the mortgage application for the bank of credit union. The online forms were especially frustrating as they were often slow (depending on the volume the site was handling) and laborious to complete.

Week after week Scott was filling his funnel with new enquiries only to be held up by the time to process the application. The solution was to let go of controlling the whole process and to focus only on the work that really demanded Scott's time and expertise.

First he made a list of all the steps required to process a mortgage application. The list was long and very detailed. On the list were about thirty steps specifically about filling in application forms on

paper or online. This was a perfect opportunity to delegate or out-source. Next, he placed a help-wanted ad for assistance three days a week from 9:30 am to 2:30 pm (a perfect time for stay-at-home mothers with school-age children). Despite offering a relatively low wage, he was flooded with enquiries. A part-time staff person was hired and trained, and Scott has never looked back.

How you do your work is a reflection of all the subtle nuances of what creates your day: your productivity, your procrastination, your successes, your failed attempts, your stresses and your happiness. Attending to small changes in how you plan and how you move through your plan, will be reflected in ongoing improvements in your productivity and your sense of fulfillment.

Here are some continuous improvement areas you can invest in:

- **How you organize meetings** – is there wasted, unproductive time that frustrates you? Are you getting the results you want? What would the team members say if they were invited to share open feedback on meeting quality?
- **How you learn** – do you buy the latest business book only to give it room beside your bed for the next six months, never to be finished? Or are you wasting time reading endless blogs and e-zines that don't seem to directly help you with your work? It could be you need to cancel some subscriptions, practice skimming instead of reading, and experiment with the convenience of podcast downloads or e-books.
- **How you manage your energy** – have you made any improvements recently to better manage your energy in the day? Have you looked at replacing some high-sugar snacks with healthier options? Maybe you need to drink more water, take two short

walking breaks, or intentionally stand up and move between tasks more often.

- **How you manage interruptions** – are you honest with people when you really don't have time? Do you return to your Action Plan after interruptions or are you 'pin balling' to other tasks that grab your attention? You might need to practice blocking time, saying No, and closing a real or proverbial door to your space more often.

Continuous improvement can be as simple as learning a shortcut key in M/S Outlook for opening a calendar appointment, or a bigger investment into delegating entire tasks off your list to someone else. It's all about sanity; trying new solutions until you get more of what you are looking for.

And it all starts by asking the question: "What have I improved this week?"



# It Is Time

*An ounce of performance is worth pounds of promises.*

—MAE WEST, comedienne, actress and writer

**H**ow did you approach this book? Did you work your way through the chapter exercises or breeze by those pages and rush off to the next chapter? Maybe you experimented as you were reading some of the chapters on making the change. Or maybe you wanted to get all the information and *then* decide on your plan and now you are at the end and starting to do that (notice that I'm not giving you the Do-Nothing choice?).

My guess is that in over 50,000 words there had to be something that got your attention. Here's the bottom line. If you are going to keep working for let's say another ten years and you make one change now that you stick with and it saves you some twenty minutes a day or makes you twenty minutes a day more productive, that's the equivalent of five months reclaimed over ten years.<sup>50</sup> The

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50. Ten minutes a day is about one forty hour work week a year.

average time reclaimed by my students is one hour a day, or the equivalent of one work year of over ten years!

Still not committed? Here is a quick review to refresh your memory and get you thinking about what value you want to take from this book.

**Beliefs** – believe that you are the master of your time, and not the victim of other peoples’ agendas. Notice the recurring thoughts that percolate up when you find yourself procrastinating or running frantically from meeting to email to meeting again. Remind yourself of what you do well and then ask yourself, “What do I know I am capable of and good at?” Focus on that new answer and let the nagging doubts dissolve in the more powerful belief.

*Only dead fish go  
with the current  
all the time.*

–LINDA ELLERBEE,  
journalist

**Goals** – have career goals and life goals that excite you and get you out of bed in the morning. Don’t hold back – if you aren’t stretched by your goals there’s no motivation to reach them. *Remember: those that don’t have goals are ruled by those that do.*

**Systems** – improve your systems and reap the benefits every day and every year. Maybe your meetings are dysfunctional or your paperwork has a life of its own. Think about these changes as investments in your health. One small improvement now to your meetings, your paper management or your email will reward you long-term with better work-health. You can get more work done with less effort and less stress. That’s healthy.

**Habits** – we are creatures of habit. This can either work for you or against you. The trick, it seems, is to be aware of your habits and to be selective about which ones you keep. It’s actually a fun exercise

to just notice habits for one week. Keep a journal of all the habits that you have, such as your morning routine getting ready to go to work, or the pattern that unfolds when you first sit at your desk. Make the choice to keep, kill, or change your habits.

**Continuous improvement** –Ask yourself everyday: What work am I doing? How am *I doing* the work? The latter is all about efficiencies, process, personal beliefs and habits. Continuous improvement is all about focus and asking good questions to stimulate awareness, action and change. You always have the ability to create change, even if it is just the way you think about a situation.

How you experience work, and how you experience the present moment, is always within your control. Little adjustments will result in measurable improvements.

You are the author of your day. Now it's up to you to make it the way you want it to be.



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## About the Author

**Hugh D. Culver, MBA, CSP**

**H**ugh has been presenting his special blend of street smarts, humor and passion since 1991 to more than 450 business organizations and to a number of universities and colleges. The owner of Marathon Communications, a corporate training company, he has an MBA degree, is a Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) and Certified Facilitation Professional (CFP).

Hugh spent fifteen years as a professional whitewater guide and manager of the largest adventure travel company in Western Canada. With his brother Dan, he pioneered whitewater rafting adventures and eco-sailing tours of the Queen Charlotte Islands. He also directed and co-owned the world's first tourist flights to the South Pole, mountain-climbing expeditions, and even skiing across Antarctica.



In addition to his training work, Hugh launched the largest *Spirit in the Workplace* conference in Canada for business leaders as well as the *Dare2Dream*<sup>™</sup> youth leadership sea kayaking program on the West Coast of British Columbia.

Hugh also likes to create big wins in his personal life. He is a four-time Ironman competitor, ten-time marathoner, past demonstration skier and nationally ranked whitewater kayaking competitor. He has climbed the highest peaks in Canada and the United States, held the running record for the Chilkoot Pass Trail in the Yukon, and golfed at the North Pole.

Hugh lives in Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada with his wife, Kirsten, and their two daughters.

To learn more about Hugh or to request that he speaks at your event please visit [www.HughCulver.com](http://www.HughCulver.com) or call 1.800.313.0799.

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