

The Power of the Next-Action Decision

I HAVE A personal mission to make "What's the next action?" part of the global thought process. I envision a world in which no meeting or discussion will end, and no interaction cease, without a clear determination of whether or not some action is needed—and if it is, what it will be, or at least who has responsibility for it. I envision organizations adopting a standard that anything that lands in anyone's "ten acres" will be evaluated for action required, and the resulting decisions managed appropriately. Imagine the freedom that would allow to focus attention on bigger issues and opportunities.

Over the years I have noticed an extraordinary shift in energy and productivity whenever individuals and groups installed "What's the next action?" as a fundamental and consistently asked question. As simple as the query seems, it is still somewhat rare to find it fully operational where it needs to be.

When a culture adopts "What's the next action?" as a standard operating query, there's an automatic increase in energy, productivity, clarity, and focus.

One of the greatest challenges you may encounter is that once you have gotten used to "What's the next action?" for yourself and those around you, interacting with people who aren't asking it can be highly frustrating. It clarifies things so quickly that dealing with people and environments that don't use it can seem nightmarish.

We are all accountable to define what, if anything, we are committed to make happen as we engage with ourselves and

others. And at some point, for any outcome that we have an internal commitment to complete, we must make the decision about the next physical action required. There's a great difference, however, between making that decision when things show up and doing it when they *blow* up.

The Source of the Technique

I learned this simple but extraordinary next-action technique twenty years ago from a longtime friend and management-consulting mentor of mine, Dean Acheson (no relation to the former secretary of state). Dean had spent many prior years consulting with executives and researching what was required to free the psychic logjams of many of them about projects and situations they were involved in. One day he just started picking up each individual piece of paper on an executive's desk and forcing him to decide what the very next thing was that he had to do to move it forward. The results were so immediate and so profound for the executive that Dean continued for years to perfect a methodology using that same question to process the in-basket. Since then both of us have trained and coached thousands of people with this key concept, and it remains a foolproof technique. It never fails to greatly improve both the productivity and the peace of mind of the user to determine what the next physical action is that will move something forward.

Creating the Option of Doing

How could something so simple be so powerful—"What's the next action?"

To help answer that question, I invite you to revisit for a moment your mind-sweep list (see page 113). Or at least to think about all the projects that are probably sitting around in your

psyche. Do you have a sense that they haven't been moving along as consistently and productively as they could be? You'll probably admit that yes, indeed, a few have been a little bit "stuck."

If you haven't known for sure whether you needed to make a call, send an e-mail, look up something, or buy an item at the store as the very next thing to move on, it hasn't been getting done. What's ironic is that it would likely require only about ten seconds of thinking to figure out what the next action would be for almost everything on your list. But it's ten seconds of thinking that most people haven't done about most things on their list.

For example, a client will have something like "tires" on a list.

I then ask, "What's that about?"

He responds, "Well, I need new tires on my car."

"So what's the next action?"

At that point the client usually wrinkles up his forehead, ponders for a few moments, and expresses his conclusion: "Well, I need to call a tire store and get some prices."

That's about how much time is required to decide what the "doing" would look like on almost everything. It's just the few seconds of focused thinking that most people have not yet done about most of their stuff.

It will probably be true, too, that the person who needs tires on his car has had that on his radar for quite a while. It's also likely that he's been at a phone hundreds of times, often with enough time and/or energy only to make just such a call. Why didn't he make it? Because in that state of mind, the last thing in the world he felt like doing was considering all his projects, including getting tires, and what their next actions were. In those moments he didn't feel like thinking at all.

What he needed was to have already figured those things out. If he gets that next-action thinking done, then, when he happens to have fifteen minutes before a meeting, with a phone at hand, and his energy at about 4.2 out of 10, he can look at the list of options of things to do and be delighted to see "Call tire store

for prices" on it. "That's something I can do and com-
 plete successfully!" he'll think, and then he'll actually be
 motivated to make the call, just to experience the "win"
 of completing something useful in the time and energy
 window he's in. In this context he'd be incapable of
 starting a large proposal draft for a client, but he has
 sufficient resources for punching phone numbers and
 getting simple information quickly. It's highly probable
 that at some point soon he'll look at the new set of tires
 on his car and feel on top of the world.

*The secret of
 getting ahead is
 getting started.
 The secret of
 getting started is
 breaking your
 complex
 overwhelming
 tasks into small
 manageable tasks,
 and then starting
 on the first one.*

Defining what real doing looks like, on the most
 basic level, and organizing placeholder reminders
 that we can trust, are master keys to productivity
 enhancement.

These are learnable techniques, and ones that we can con-
 tinue to get better at.

Often even the simplest things are stuck because we haven't
 made a final decision yet about the next action. People in my
 seminars often have things on their lists like "Get a tune-up for
 the car." Is "Get a tune-up" a next action? Not unless you're walk-
 ing out with wrench in hand, dressed for grease.

"So, what's the next action?"

"Uh, I need to take the car to the garage. Oh, yeah, I need to
 find out if the garage can take it. I guess I need to call the garage
 and make the appointment."

"Do you have the number?"

"Darn, no ... I don't have the number for the garage. Fred
 recommended that garage to me, and I don't have
 the number. I knew something was missing in the
 equation."

*Without a next
 action, there
 remains a
 potentially infinite
 gap between current
 reality and what you
 need to do.*

And that's often what happens with so many
 things for so many people. We glance at the project,
 and some part of us thinks, "I don't quite have all the
 pieces between here and there." We know something is
 missing, but we're not sure what it is exactly, so we quit.

"So, what's the next action?"

"I need to get the number. I guess I could get it from Fred."

"Do you have Fred's number?"

"I have Fred's number!"

So the next action really is "Call Fred for the number of the garage."

Did you notice how many steps had to be tracked back before we actually got to the real next action on this project? That's typical. Most people have many things just like that on their lists.

Why Bright People Procrastinate the Most

It's really the smartest people who have the highest number of undecided things in their lives and on their lists. Why is that? Think of how our bodies respond to the images we hold in our minds. It appears that the nervous system can't tell the difference between a well-imagined thought and reality.

To prove this to yourself, picture yourself walking into a supermarket and going over to the brightly lit fruit-and-vegetable section. Are you there? OK, now go to the citrus bins—oranges, grapefruits, lemons. Now see the big pile of yellow lemons. There's a cutting board and a knife next to them. Take one of those big yellow lemons and cut it in half. Smell that citrus smell!

It's really juicy, and there's lemon juice trickling onto the board. Now take a half lemon and cut *that* in half, so you have a quarter lemon wedge in your hands. OK, now—remember how you did this as a kid?—put that quarter of a lemon in your mouth and bite into it! Crunch!

Bright people have the capability of freaking out faster and more dramatically than anyone else.

If you played along with me, you probably noticed that the saliva content in your mouth increased at least a bit. Your body was actually trying to process citric acid! And it was just in your mind.

If your body responds to the pictures you give it, how are you likely to feel physically when you think about, say, doing your taxes? Are you sending yourself "easy," "let's go," completion, success, and "I'm a winner!" pictures? Probably not. For just that reason, what kinds of people would logically be the most resistant to being reminded about a project like that—that is, who would procrastinate the most? Of course, it would be the most creative, sensitive, and intelligent people! Because their sensitivity gives them the capability of producing in their *I am an old man* minds lurid nightmare scenarios about what might *and have known a* be involved in doing the project, and all the negative *great many* consequences that might occur if it weren't done perfectly! They just freak out in an instant and quit! *troubles, but most of them never happened.*

Who doesn't procrastinate? Often it's the insensitive oafs who just take something and start plodding forward, unaware of all the things that could go wrong. Everyone else tends to get hung up about all kinds of things. —Mark

Do my taxes? Oh, no! It's not going to be that easy. It's going to be different this year, I'm sure. I saw the forms—they look different. There are probably new rules I'm going to have to figure out. I might have to read all that damn material. Long form, short form, medium form? File together, file separate? We'll probably want to claim deductions, but if we do we'll have to back them up, and that means we'll need all the receipts. Oh, my God—I don't know if we really have all the receipts we'd need and what if we didn't have all the receipts but we claimed the deductions anyway and we got audited? Audited? Oh, no—the IRS—JAIL!!

And so a lot of people put themselves in jail, just glancing at their 1040 tax forms. Because they're so smart, sensitive, and creative. In my many years of coaching individuals, this pattern has been borne out more times than I can count—usually it's the brightest and most sophisticated folks who have the most stuck piles, in their offices, homes, and heads. Most of the executives I work with have at least several big, complex, and amorphous

projects stacked either on a credenza or on a mental shelf. There always seem to be hobgoblin thoughts lurking inside them—

"If

Ceasing negative we don't look at or think about the projects, maybe
imaging will always they'll stay quiet!"

cause your energy So what's the solution? There's always having a
to increase. drink. Numb it out. Dumb it down. Notice what happens to many people when they get a little alcohol on the brain. It should drop their energy immediately, because it's a depressant; often, though, the energy lifts, at least initially. Why? The alcohol *is* depressing something—it's shutting down the negative self-talk and uncomfortable visions that are going on in these folks' minds. Of course my energy will increase if I stop depressing myself with overwhelming pictures of not handling something successfully. But the numb-out solutions are temporary at best. The "stuff" doesn't go away. And unfortunately, when we numb ourselves out, we can't do it selectively—the source of inspiration and enthusiasm and personal energy also seems to get numbed.

Intelligent Dumbing Down

There is another solution: intelligently dumbing down your brain by figuring out the next action. You'll invariably feel a relieving of pressure about anything you have a commitment to change or do, when you decide on the very next physical action required to move it forward. Nothing, essentially, will change in the world. But shifting your focus to something that your mind perceives as a doable, completeable task will create a real increase in positive energy, direction, and motivation. If you truly captured all the things that have your attention during the mind-sweep, go through the list again now and decide on the single very next action to take on every one of them. Notice what happens to your energy.

No matter how big and tough a problem may be, get rid of confusion by taking one little step toward solution. Do something.

—George
F.

You are either attracted or repelled by the things on your lists; there isn't any neutral territory. You are

either positively drawn toward completing the action or reluctant to think about what it is and resistant to getting involved in it. Often it's simply the next-action decision that makes the difference between the two extremes.

In following up with people who have taken my seminars or been coached by my colleagues or me, I've discovered that one of the subtler ways many of them fall off the wagon is in letting their action lists grow back into lists of tasks or subprojects instead of discrete next actions. They're still ahead of most people because they're actually writing things down, but they often find themselves stuck, and procrastinating, because they've allowed their action lists to harbor items like:

"Meeting with the banquet committee"

"Johnny's birthday"

"Receptionist"

"Slide presentation"

Everything on your lists and in your stacks is either attractive or repulsive to you—there's no neutral ground when it comes to your stuff.

In other words, things have morphed back into "stuff-ness" instead of staying at the action level. There are no clear next actions here, and anyone keeping a list filled with items like this would send his or her brain into overload every time he/she looked at it.

Is this extra work? Is figuring out the next action on your commitments additional effort to expend that you don't need to? No, of course not. You can only cure retail but you can prevent wholesale. If you need to get your car tuned, for instance, you're going to have to figure out that next action at some point anyway. The problem is that most people wait to do it until the next action is "Call the Auto Club for tow truck!!"

So when do you think most people really make a lot of their next-action decisions about their stuff—when it shows up, or when it blows up? And do you think there might be a difference

in the quality of their lives if they handled this knowledge work on the front end instead of the back? Which do you think is the more efficient way to move through life—deciding next actions on your projects as soon as they appear on your radar screen and then efficiently grouping them into categories of actions that you get done in certain uniform contexts, or avoiding thinking about what exactly needs to be done until it *has* to be done, then nickel-and-diming your activities as you try to catch up and put out the fires?

Avoiding action decisions until the pressure of the last minute creates huge inefficiencies and unnecessary stress.

That may sound exaggerated, but when I ask groups of people to estimate when most of the action decisions are made in their companies, with few exceptions they say, "When things blow up." One global corporate client surveyed its population about sources of stress in its culture, and the number one complaint was the last-minute crisis work consistently promoted by team leaders who failed to make appropriate decisions on the front end.

The Value of a Next-Action Decision-Making Standard

I have had several sophisticated senior executives tell me that installing "What's the next action?" as an operational standard in their organizations was transformative in terms of measurable performance output. It changed their culture permanently and significantly for the better.

Why? Because the question forces clarity, accountability, productivity, and empowerment.

Clarity

Too many discussions end with only a vague sense that people know what they have decided and are going to do. But without a clear conclusion that there *is* a next action, much less what it is

or who's got it, more often than not a lot of "stuff" gets left up in the air.

I am frequently asked to facilitate meetings. I've learned the hard way that no matter where we are in the conversation, twenty minutes before the agreed end-time of the discussion I must force the question: "So what's the next action here?" In my experience, there is usually twenty minutes' worth of clarifying (and sometimes tough decisions) still required to come up with an answer.

This is radical common sense—radical because it often compels discussion at deeper levels than people are comfortable with. "Are we serious about this?" "Do we really know what we're doing here?" "Are we really ready to allocate precious time and resources to this?" It's very easy to avoid these more relevant levels of thinking. What prevents those issues from slipping away into amorphous "stuff" is forcing the decision about the next action. Some further conversation, exploration, deliberation, and negotiation are often needed to put the topic to rest. The world is too unpredictable these days to permit assumptions about outcomes: we need to take responsibility for moving things to clarity. *Talk does not cook rice.*

—Chinese

You have to have some experience of this to really know what I mean here. If you do, you're probably saying to yourself, "Yes!" If you're not sure what I'm talking about, I suggest that in your next meeting with anyone, you end the conversation with the question, "So what's the next action here?" Then notice what happens.

Accountability

The dark side of "collaborative cultures" is the allergy they foster to holding anyone responsible for having the ball. "Mine or yours?" is unfortunately not in the common vocabulary of many such organizations. There is a sense that that would be impolite. "We're all in this together" is a worthy sentiment, but seldom a reality in the hard-nosed day-to-day world of work. Too many meetings end with a vague feeling among the players that something

ought to happen, and the hope that it's not their personal job to make it so.

The way *I* see it, what's truly impolite is allowing people to walk away from discussions unclear. Real "togetherness" of a group is reflected by the responsibility that all take for defining the real things to do and the specific people assigned to do them, so everyone is freed of the angst of still-undecided actions.

Again, if you've been there, you'll know what I'm talking about. If you haven't, test it out—take a small risk and ask "So what's the next action on this?" at the end of each discussion point in your next staff meeting, or in your next "family conversation" around the dinner table.

Productivity

Organizations naturally become more productive when they model and train front-end next-action decision-making. For all the reasons mentioned above, determining the required physical allocation of resources necessary to make something happen as soon as the outcome has been clarified will produce more results sooner, and with less effort.

There are risks and costs to a program of action, but they are far less than the long-range risks and costs of inaction.

—John
F.

Learning to break through the barriers of the sophisticated creative thinking that can freeze activity—that is, the entangled psychic webs we spin—is a superior skill. "Productivity" has been touted for decades as a desirable thing to improve in organizations. Anything that can help maximize output will do that. But in the world of knowledge work, all the computers and telecom improvements and leadership seminars on the planet will make no difference in this regard unless the individuals involved increase their operational responsiveness. And that requires thinking about something that lands in your world *before* you have to. One of the biggest productivity leaks I have seen in some organizations is the lack of next actions determined for "long-term" projects. "Long-term" does not mean "Someday/Maybe."

Those projects with distant goal lines are still to be done as soon as possible; "long-term" simply means "more action steps until it's done," not "no need to decide next actions because the day of reckoning is so far away." When every project and open loop in an organization is being monitored, it's a whole new ball game.

Productivity will improve only when individuals increase their operational responsiveness. And in knowledge work, that means clarifying actions on the front end instead of the back.

Empowerment

Perhaps the greatest benefit of adopting the next-action approach is that it dramatically increases your ability to make things happen, with a concomitant rise in your self-esteem and constructive outlook.

People are constantly doing things, but usually only when they have to, under fire from themselves or others. They get no sense of winning, or of being in control, or of cooperating among themselves and with their world. People are starving for those experiences.

The daily behaviors that define the things that are incomplete and the moves that are needed to complete them must change. Getting things going of your own accord, before you're forced to by external pressure and internal stress, builds a firm foundation of self-worth that will spread into every aspect of your life. You are the captain of your own ship; the more you act from that perspective, the better things will go for you.

Asking "What's the next action?" undermines the victim mentality. It presupposes that there is a possibility of change, and that there is something you can do to make it happen. That is the assumed affirmation in the behavior. And these kinds of "assumed affirmations" often work more fundamentally to build a positive self-image than can repeating "I am a powerful, effective person, making things happen in my life!" a thousand times.

Is there too much complaining in your culture? The next time someone moans about something, try asking, "So what's the next action?" People will complain only about something that

People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can't find them, - make them.
—George Bernard Shaw

they assume could be better than it currently is. The action question forces the issue. If it can be changed, there's some action that will change it. If it can't, it must be considered part of the landscape to be incorporated in strategy and tactics. Complaining is a sign that someone isn't willing to risk moving on a changeable situation, or won't consider the immutable circumstance in his or her plans. This is a temporary and hollow form of self-validation.

Although my colleagues and I rarely promote our work in this way, I notice people really empowering themselves every day as we coach them in applying the next-action technique. The light in their eyes and the lightness in their step increase, and a positive spark shows up in their thinking and demeanor. We are all already powerful, but deciding on and effectively managing the physical actions required to move things forward seems to exercise that power in ways that call forward the more positive aspects of our nature.

When you start to make things happen, you really begin to believe that you can make things happen. And *that* makes things happen.