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The Power of the Collection Habit

THERE'S MUCH MORE to these simple techniques and models than may appear at first glance. Indeed, they offer a systematic method to keep your mind distraction-free, ensuring a high level of efficiency and effectiveness in your work. That in itself would be sufficient reason to implement these practices.

But there are even greater implications for the fundamental principles at work here. What follows in the next three chapters is an accounting of my experience, over the last twenty years, of the subtler and often more profound effects that can transpire from the implementation of these basic principles. The longer-term results can have a significant impact on you as an individual, and they can positively affect larger organizational cultures as well.

When people with whom you interact notice that without fail you receive, process, and organize in an airtight manner the exchanges and agreements they have with you, they begin to trust you in a unique way. Such is the power of capturing placeholders for anything that is incomplete or unprocessed in your life. It noticeably enhances your mental well-being and improves the quality of your communications and relationships, both personally and professionally.

The Personal Benefit

How did it feel to go through the collecting and downloading activity? Most people say it feels so bad, and yet feels so good. How can that be?

If you're like most people who go through the full collection process, you probably felt some form of anxiety. Descriptive terms like "overwhelmed," "panic," "frustration," "fatigue," and "disgust" tend to come up when I ask seminar participants to describe their emotions in going through a minor version of this procedure. And is there anything you think you've procrastinated on in that stack? If so, you have guilt automatically associated with it—"I could have, should have, ought to have (before now) done this."

At the same time, did you experience any sense of release, or relief, or control as you were did the drill? Most people say yes, indeed. How does that happen? Totally opposite emotional states showing up as you're doing a single exercise, almost at the same time—anxiety and relief; overwhelmed and in control. What's going on here?

When you understand the source of your negative feelings about all your stuff, you'll discover, as I did, the way to get rid of them. And if you experienced any positive feelings from collecting your stuff, you actually began the process of eliminating the negativity yourself.

The Source of the Negative Feelings

Where do the not-so-good feelings come from? Too much to do? No, there's always too much to do. If you felt bad simply because there was more to do than you could do, you'd never get rid of that feeling. Having too much to do is not the source of the negative feeling. It comes from a different place.

How have you felt when someone broke an agreement with

you? Told you they would meet you Thursday at 4:00 P.M. and never showed or called? How did that feel? Frustrating, I imagine. The price people pay when they break agreements in the world is the disintegration of trust in the relationship—a negative consequence.

But what are all those things in your in-basket? The sense of anxiety and guilt doesn't come from agreements you've made with yourself. Your negative feelings are simply the result of breaking those agreements—they're the symptoms of disintegrated *self-trust*. If you tell yourself to draft a strategic plan, when you don't do it, you'll feel bad. Tell yourself to get organized, and if you fail to, welcome to guilt and frustration. Resolve to spend more time with your kids and don't—voilà! anxious and overwhelmed. having too much to do; it's the automatic result of breaking agreements with yourself.

How Do You Prevent Broken Agreements with Yourself?

If the negative feelings come from broken agreements, you have three options for dealing with them and eliminating the negative consequences:

- Don't make the agreement.
- Complete the agreement.
- Renegotiate the agreement.

All of these can work to get rid of the unpleasant feelings.

Don't Make the Agreement

It probably felt pretty good to take a bunch of your old stuff, decide that you weren't going to do anything with it, and just toss it into the trash. One way to handle an incompleteness in your world is to just say no!

You'd lighten up if you would just lower your standards. If you didn't care so much about things being up to a certain

level—your parenting, your school system, your team's morale, the software code—you'd have fewer things to do.*

I doubt you're going to lower your standards. But once you really understand what it means, you'll probably make fewer agreements. I know I did. I used to make a lot of them, just to win people's approval. When I realized the price I was paying on the back end for not keeping those agreements, I became a lot more conscious about the ones I made. One insurance executive I worked with described the major benefit he derived from implementing this system: "Previously I would just tell everyone, 'Sure, I'll do it,' because I didn't know how much I really had to do. Now that I've got the inventory clear and complete, just to maintain my integrity I have had to say, 'No, I can't do that, I'm sorry.' The amazing thing is that instead of being upset with my

Maintaining an objective inventory of your work makes it much easier to say no with integrity. refusal, everyone was impressed by my discipline!"

Another client, an entrepreneur in the personal coaching business, recently told me that making an inventory of his work had eliminated a huge amount of worry and stress from his life. The discipline of putting everything he had his attention on into his

in-basket caused him to reconsider what he really wanted to do *anything* about. If he wasn't willing to toss a note about it into "in," he just let it go!

I consider that very mature thinking. One of the best things about this whole method is that when you really take the responsibility to capture and track what's on your mind, you'll think twice about making commitments internally that you don't really need or want to make. Not being aware of all you have to do is

*It has been a popular concept in the self-help world that focusing on your values will simplify your life. I contend the opposite: the overwhelming amount of things that people have to do comes *from* their values. Values are critical elements for meaning and direction. But don't kid yourself—the more you focus on them, the more things you're likely to feel responsible for taking on. Your values may make it easier for you to make decisions, but don't think they'll make things any simpler.

much like having a credit card for which you don't know the balance or the limit—it's a lot easier to be irresponsible.

Complete the Agreement

Of course, another way to get rid of the negative feelings about your stuff is to just finish it and be able to mark it off as done. You actually love to do things, as long as you get the feeling that you've completed something. If you've begun *Out of the strain of the doing, into the peace of the done.* to complete less-than-two-minute actions as they *—Julia Louis Woodruff* surface in your life, I'm sure you can attest to the psychological benefit. Most of my clients feel fantastic after just a couple of hours of processing their piles, just because of how many things they accomplish using the two-minute rule.

One of your better weekends may be spent just finishing up a lot of little errands and tasks that have accumulated around your house and in your personal life. Invariably when you capture all the open loops, little and big, and see them on a list in front of you, some part of you will be inspired (or creatively disgusted or intimidated enough) to go knock them off the list.

We all seem to be starved for a win. It's great to satisfy that by giving yourself doable tasks you can start and finish easily.

Have you ever completed something that wasn't initially on a list, so you wrote it down and checked it off? Then you know what I mean.

There's another issue here, however. How *It's a lot easier to complete agreements when you know what they are.* would you feel if your list and your stack were totally—and successfully—completed? You'd probably be bouncing off the ceiling, full of creative energy. Of course, within three days, guess what you'd have? Right—another list, and probably an even bigger one! You'd feel so good about finishing all your stuff you'd likely take on bigger, more ambitious things to do.

Not only that, but if you have a boss, what do you think he or

she is going to do, after noticing the high levels of competency and productivity you're demonstrating? Right again—give you more things to do! It's the catch-22 of professional development: the better you get, the better you'd *better* get.

So, since you're not going to significantly lower your standards, or stop creating more things to do, you'd better get comfortable with the third option, if you want to keep from stressing yourself out.

Renegotiate Your Agreement

Suppose I'd told you I would meet you Thursday at 4:00 P.M., but after I made the appointment, my world changed. Now, given my new priorities, I decide I'm *not* going to meet you Thursday at four. But instead of simply not showing up, what had I better do, to maintain the integrity of the relationship? Correct—call and change the agreement. A renegotiated agreement is not a broken one.

It is the act of forgiveness that opens up the only possible way to think creatively about the future at all.

—
Father

Do you understand yet why getting all your stuff out of your head and in front of you makes you feel better? Because you automatically renegotiate your agreements with yourself when you look at them, think about them, and either act on them that very moment or say, "No, not now." Here's the problem: it's impossible to renegotiate agreements with yourself that you can't remember you made!

The fact that you can't remember an agreement you made with yourself doesn't mean that you're not holding yourself liable for it. Ask any psychologist how much of a sense of past and future that part of your psyche has, the part that was storing the list you dumped: zero. It's all present tense in there. That means that as soon as you tell yourself that you should do something, if you file it only in your short-term memory, there's a part of you that thinks you should be doing it *all the time*. And *that* means that as soon as you've given yourself two things to do, and filed them only in your head,

you've created instant and automatic stress and failure, because you can't do them both at the same time.

If you're like most people, you've probably got some storage area at home—maybe a garage that you told yourself a while back (maybe even six years ago!) you ought to clean and organize. If so, there's a part of you that likely thinks you should've been cleaning your garage twenty-four hours a day for the past six years! No wonder people are so tired! And have you heard that little voice inside your own mental committee every time you walk by your garage? "Why are we walking by the garage?! Aren't we supposed to be cleaning it!?" Because you can't stand that whining, nagging part of yourself, you never even go in the garage anymore if you can help it. If you want to shut that voice up, you have three options for dealing with your agreement with yourself:

- 1 | Lower your standards about your garage (you may have done that already). "So I have a crappy garage . . . who cares?"
- 2 | Keep the agreement—clean the garage.
- 3 | At least put "Clean garage" on a "Someday/Maybe" list. Then, when you review that list weekly and you see that item, you can tell yourself, "Not this week." The next time you walk by your garage, you won't hear a thing internally, other than "Ha! Not this week."

I'm quite sincere about this. It seems that there's a part of our psyche that doesn't know the difference between an agreement about cleaning the garage and an agreement about buying a company. In there, they're both just agreements—kept or broken. If you're holding something only internally, it will be a broken agreement if you're not moving on it in the moment.

The Radical Departure from Traditional Time Management

This method is significantly different from traditional time-management training. Most of those models leave you with the impression that if something you tell yourself to do isn't that

important, then it's not that important—to track, manage, or deal with. But in my experience that's inaccurate, at least in terms of how a less-than-conscious part of us operates. It *is* how our conscious mind operates, however, so every agreement must be made conscious. That means it must be captured, objectified, and reviewed regularly in full conscious awareness so that you can put it where it belongs in your self-management arena. If that doesn't happen, it will actually take up a lot more psychic energy than it deserves.

In my experience, anything that is held only in "psychic RAM" will take up either more or less attention than it deserves. The reason to collect everything is not that everything is equally important, it's that it's *not*. Incompletions, uncollected, take on a dull sameness in the sense of the pressure they create and the attention they tie up.

How Much Collection Is Required?

You'll feel better collecting *anything* that you haven't collected yet. When you say to yourself, "Oh, that's right, I need to get butter next time I'm at the store," and you write it on your grocery list, you'll feel better. When you remember, "I've got to call my banker about the trust fund," and you write that down someplace where you know you'll see it when you're at a phone, you'll feel better. But there will be a light-year's difference when you know you have it *all*.

When will you know how much you have left in your head to collect? Only when there's nothing left. If some part of you is even vaguely aware that you don't have it all, you can't really know what percentage you have collected. How will you know when there's nothing left? When nothing else shows up as a reminder in your mind.

This doesn't mean that your mind will be empty. If you're conscious, your mind will always be focusing on something. But if it's focusing on only one thing at a time, without distraction, you'll be in your "zone."

I suggest that you use your mind to think *about* things, rather than think *of* them. You want to be *adding* value as you think about projects and people, not simply reminding yourself they exist. To fully realize that more productive place, you will need to capture it all. It takes focus and a change of habit to train yourself to recognize and download even the smallest agreements with yourself as they're created in your mind. Doing the collection process as fully as you can, and then incorporating the behavior of capturing all the new things as they emerge, will be empowering and productive.

When Relationships and Organizations Have the Collection Habit

What happens when everyone involved on a team—in a marriage, in a department, on a staff, in a family, in a company—can be trusted not to let anything slip through the cracks? Frankly, once you've achieved that, you'll hardly think about whether people are dropping the ball anymore—there will be much bigger things to occupy your attention.

But if communication gaps are still an issue, there's likely some layer of frustration and a general nervousness in the culture. Most people feel that without constant baby-sitting and hand-holding, things could disappear in the system and then blow up at any time. They don't realize that they're feeling this because they've been in this situation so consistently that they relate to it as if it were a permanent law, like gravity. It doesn't have to be that way.

I have noticed this for years. Good people who haven't incorporated these behaviors come into my environment, and they stick out like a sore thumb. I've lived with the standards of clear psychic RAM and hard, clean edges on in-baskets for more than two decades now. When a note sits idle in someone's in-basket unprocessed, or when he or she nods "yes, I will" in a conversation

but doesn't write anything down, my "uh-oh" bell rings. This is unacceptable behavior in my world. There are much bigger fish to fry than worrying about leaks in the system.

Bailing water in a leaky boat diverts energy from rowing the boat. I need to trust that any request or relevant information I put on a voice-mail, in an e-mail, in a conversation, or in a written note will get into the other person's system and that it will be processed and organized, soon, and available for his or her review as an option for action. If the recipient is managing voice-mails but not e-mail and paper, I have now been hamstrung to use only his or her trusted medium. That should be unacceptable behavior in any organization that cares about whether things happen with the least amount of effort.

When change is required, there must be trust that the initiatives for that change will be dealt with appropriately. Any intact system will ultimately be only as good as its weakest link, and often that Achilles' heel is a key person's dulled responsiveness to communications in the system.

I especially notice this when I walk around organizations where in-baskets are either nonexistent, or overflowing and obviously long unprocessed. These cultures usually suffer from serious "interruptitis" because they can't trust putting communications into the system.

Where cultures do have solid systems, down through the level of paper, the clarity is palpable. It's hardly even a conscious concern, and everyone's attention is more focused. The same is true in families that have instituted in-baskets—for the parents, the children, the nanny, the housekeeper, or anyone else with whom family members frequently interact. People often grimace when I tell them that my wife, Kathryn, and I put things in each other's in-baskets, even when we're sitting within a few feet of each other; to them it seems "cold and mechanical." Aside from being an act of politeness intended to avoid interrupting the other's work in progress, the practice actually fosters more warmth and freedom between us, because mechanical things are being

handled in the system instead of tying up our attention in the relationship.

Unfortunately, you can't legislate personal systems. Everyone must have his or her own way to deal with what he or she has to deal with. You can, however, hold people accountable for outcomes, and for tracking and managing everything that comes their way. And you can give them the information in this book. Then, at least, they'll have no excuse for letting something fall through the cracks.

This doesn't mean that everyone has to do everything. I hope I have described a way to relate to our relatively new knowledge-based world that gives room for everyone to have a lot more to do than he or she *can* do. The critical issue will be to facilitate a constant renegotiation process with all involved, so they feel OK about what they're not doing. That's real knowledge work, at a more sophisticated level. But there's little hope of getting there without having bulletproof collection systems in play. Remember, you can't renegotiate an agreement with yourself that you can't remember you made. And you certainly can't renegotiate agreements with others that you've lost track of.

When groups of people collectively adopt the 100 percent collection standard, they have a tight ship to sail. It doesn't mean they're sailing in the right direction, or even that they're on the right ship; it just means that the one they're on, in the direction it's going, is doing that with the most efficient energy it can.