

A New Practice for a New Reality

IT'S POSSIBLE FOR a person to have an overwhelming number of things to do and still function productively with a clear head and a positive sense of relaxed control. That's a great way to live and work, at elevated levels of effectiveness and efficiency. It's also becoming a critical operational style required of successful and high-performing professionals. You already know how to do everything necessary to achieve this high-performance state. If you're like most people, however, you need to apply these skills in a more timely, complete, and systematic way so you can get on top of it all instead of feeling buried. And though the method and the techniques I describe in this book *Anxiety is caused* are immensely practical and based on common sense, *by a lack of control,* most people will have some major work habits that *organization,* must be modified before they can implement this *preparation, and* system. The small changes required—changes in the *action.* way you clarify and organize all the things that com- · —David mand your attention—could represent a significant shift in how you approach some key aspects of your day-to-day work. Many of my clients have referred to this as a significant paradigm shift.

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

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

This book offers a proven method for this kind of high-performance workflow management. It provides good tools, tips, techniques, and tricks for implementation. As you'll discover, the principles and methods are instantly usable and applicable to everything you have to do in your personal as well as your professional life.* You can incorporate, as many others have before you, what I describe as an ongoing dynamic style of operating in your work and in your world. Or, like still others, you can simply use this as a guide to getting back into better control when you feel you need to.

The Problem: New Demands, Insufficient Resources

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

A paradox has emerged in this new millennium: people have

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

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

Work No Longer Has Clear Boundaries

A major factor in the mounting stress level is that the actual nature of our jobs has changed much more dramatically and rapidly than have our training for and our ability to deal with work. In just the last half of the twentieth century, what constituted "work" in the industrialized world was transformed from assembly-line, make-it and move-it kinds of activity to what Peter Drucker has so aptly termed "knowledge work."

Time is the quality of nature that keeps events from happening all at once. Lately it doesn't seem to be working.
—Anonymous

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

Now, for many of us, there are no edges to most of our projects. Most people I know have at least half a dozen things they're trying to achieve right now, and even if they had the rest of their lives to try, they wouldn't be able to finish these to perfection. You're probably faced with the same dilemma. How good could that conference potentially be? How effective could the training program be, or the structure of your executives' compensation package? How inspiring is the essay you're writing? How motivating the staff meeting? How functional the reorganization? And a last question: How much available data could be relevant to doing those projects "better"? The answer is, an infinite amount, easily accessible, or at least potentially so, through the Web.

Almost every project could be done *better*, and an infinite quantity of information is now available that could make that happen.

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

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

Our Jobs Keep Changing

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

But few have that luxury anymore, for two reasons:

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

*—Eric
Hoffer*

- 1 | The organizations we're involved with seem to be in constant morph mode, with ever-changing goals, products, partners, customers, markets, technologies, and owners. These all, by necessity, shake up structures, forms, roles, and responsibilities.
- 2 | The average professional is more of a free agent these days than ever before, changing careers as often as his or her parents once changed jobs. Even fortysomethings and fiftysomethings hold to standards of continual growth. Their aims are just more integrated into the mainstream now, covered by the catchall "professional, management, and executive development"—which simply means they won't keep doing what they're doing for any extended period of time.

Little seems clear for very long anymore, as far as what our work is and what or how much input may be relevant to doing it well. We're allowing in huge amounts of information and communication from the outer world and generating an equally large volume of ideas and agreements with ourselves and others from our inner world. And we haven't been well equipped to deal with this huge number of internal and external commitments.

*The burner I go,
the behinder I get.*
—Anonymous

The Old Models and Habits Are Insufficient

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

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

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

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

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

The "Big Picture" vs. the Nitty-Gritty

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

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

the bar of our standards, making us notice that much more that needs changing. We are already having a serious negative reaction to the overwhelming number of things we have to do. And what created much of the work that's on those lists in the first place? Our values!

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Life is denied by
lack of attention,
whether it be to
cleaning windows
or trying to write
a masterpiece..*

—
*Nadia
Boulanger*

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

across the whole spectrum of your life and work. You *can* experience what the martial artists call a "mind like water" and top athletes refer to as the "zone," within the complex world in which you're engaged. In fact, you have probably already been in this state from time to time.

It's a condition of working, doing, and being in which the mind is clear and constructive things are happening. It's a state that is accessible by everyone, and one that is increasingly needed to deal effectively with the complexity of life in the twenty-first century. More and more it will be a required condition for high-performance professionals who wish to maintain balance and a consistent positive output in their work. World-class rower Craig Lambert has described how it feels in *Mind Over Water* (Houghton Mifflin, 1998):

Rowers have a word for this frictionless state: swing. . . . Recall the pure joy of riding on a backyard swing: an easy cycle of motion, the momentum coming from the swing itself. The swing carries us; we do not force it. We pump our legs to drive our arc higher, but gravity does most of the work. We are not so much swinging as being swung. The boat swings you. The shell wants to move fast: Speed sings in its lines and nature. Our job is simply to work with the shell, to stop holding it back with our thrashing struggles to go faster. Trying too hard sabotages boat speed. Trying becomes striving and striving undoes itself Social climbers strive to be aristocrats but their efforts prove them no such thing. Aristocrats do not strive; they have already arrived. Swing is a state of arrival.

The "Mind Like Water" Simile

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

totally appropriately to the force and mass of the input; then it returns to calm. It doesn't overreact or underreact.

The power in a karate punch comes from speed, not muscle; it comes from a focused "pop" at the end of the whip. That's why petite people can learn to break boards and bricks with their hands: it doesn't take calluses or brute strength, just the ability to generate a focused thrust with speed. But a tense muscle is a slow one. So the high levels of training in the martial arts teach and demand balance and relaxation as much as anything else. Clearing the mind and being flexible are key.

Anything that causes you to overreact or underreact can control you, and often does. Responding inappropriately to your e-mail, your staff, your projects, your unread magazines, your thoughts about what you need to do, your children, or your boss will lead to less effective results than you'd like. Most people give either more or less attention to things than they deserve, simply because they don't operate with a "mind like water."

Can You Get into Your "Productive State" When Required?

Think about the last time you felt highly productive. You probably had a sense of being in control; you were not stressed out; you were highly focused on what you were doing; time tended to disappear (lunchtime already?); and you felt you were making noticeable progress toward a meaningful outcome. Would you like to have more such experiences?

And if you get seriously far out of that state—and start to feel out of control, stressed out, unfocused, bored, and stuck—do you have the ability to get yourself back into it? That's where the

If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything.
—Shunryu Suzuki

Anything that causes you to overreact or underreact can control you, and often does.

There is one thing we can do, and the happiest people are those who can do it to the limit of their ability. We can be completely present. We can be all here. We can . . . give all our attention to

the opportunity before us.

—
Mark

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

The Principle: Dealing Effectively with Internal Commitments

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

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

It's likely that you also have more internal commitments currently in play than you're aware of. Consider how many things you

Anything that does not belong where it is, the way it is, is an "open loop" pulling on your attention.

feel even the smallest amount of responsibility to change, finish, handle, or do something about. You have a commitment, for instance, to deal in some way with every new communication landing in your e-mail, on your voice-mail, and in your in-basket.

And surely there are numerous projects that you sense need to be defined in your areas of responsibility, as well as goals and directions to be clarified, a

career to be managed, and life in general to be kept in balance.

You have accepted some level of internal responsibility for every-

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

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

The Basic Requirements for Managing Commitments

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

- First of all, if it's on your mind, your mind isn't clear. Anything you consider unfinished in any way must be captured in a trusted system outside your mind, or what I call a collection bucket, that you know you'll come back to regularly and sort through.
- Second, you must clarify exactly what your commitment is and decide what you have to do, if anything, to make progress toward fulfilling it.
- Third, once you've decided on all the actions you need to take, you must keep reminders of them organized in a system you review regularly.

An Important Exercise to Test This Model

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

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

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

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

Got the answer to that? Good.

Was there any value for you in these two minutes of thinking? If you're like the vast majority of people who complete that drill during my seminars, you'll be experiencing at least a tiny bit of enhanced control, relaxation, and focus. You'll also be feeling more motivated to actually *do* something about that situation you've merely been thinking about till now. Imagine that motivation magnified a thousandfold, as a way to live and work.

Think like a man of action, act like a man of thought.
—Henry Bergson

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

But what created that? The answer is, *thinking*. Not a lot, just enough to solidify your commitment and the resources required to fulfill it.

The Real Work of Knowledge Work

Welcome to the real-life experience of "knowledge work," and a profound operational principle: *You have to think about your stuff more than you realize but not as much as you're afraid you might.* As

Peter Drucker has written, "In knowledge work ...

the task is not given; it has to be determined. 'What

are the expected results from this work?' is ... the *The ancestor of every action is a thought.*

key question in making knowledge workers productive. And it is a question that demands risky decisions. There is usually no right answer; there are choices instead. And results have to be clearly specified, if productivity is to be achieved."

—Ralph
Waldo

Most people have a resistance to initiating the burst of energy that it will take to clarify the real meaning, for them, of something they have let into their world, and to decide what they need to do about it. We're never really taught that we have to think about our work before we can do it; much of our daily activity is already defined for us by the undone and unmoved things staring at us when we come to work, or by the family to be fed, the laundry to be done, or the children to be dressed at home. Thinking in a concentrated manner to define desired outcomes is something few people feel they have to do. But in truth, outcome thinking is one of the most effective means available for making wishes reality.

Why Things Are on Your Mind

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

- you haven't clarified exactly what the intended outcome is;
- you haven't decided what the very next physical action step is; and/or
- you haven't put reminders of the outcome and the action required in a system you trust.

That's why it's on your mind. Until those thoughts have been clarified and those decisions made, and the resulting data has been stored in a system that you *absolutely* know you will think about as often as you need to, your brain can't give up the job. You can fool everyone else, but you can't fool your own mind. It knows whether or not you've come to the conclusions you need to, and whether you've put the resulting outcomes and action reminders in a place that can be trusted to resurface appropriately within your conscious mind. If you haven't done those things, it won't quit working overtime. Even if you've already decided on the next step you'll take to resolve a problem, your mind can't let go until and unless you write yourself a reminder in a place it *knows* you will, without fail, look. It will keep pressuring you about that untaken next step, usually when you can't do anything about it, which will just add to your stress.

This constant, unproductive preoccupation with all the things we have to do is the single largest consumer of time and energy.
—Kerry

Your Mind Doesn't Have a Mind of Its Own

At least a portion of your mind is really kind of stupid, in an interesting way. If it had any innate intelligence, it would remind you of the things you needed to do *only when you could do something about them*.

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

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

It seems that most people let their minds run a lot of the show, especially where the too-much-to-do syndrome is concerned. You've probably given over a lot of your "stuff," a lot of your open loops, to an entity on your inner committee that is incapable of dealing with those things effectively the way they are—your mind.

*Rule your mind or
it will rule you.*

The Transformation of "Stuff"

Here's how I define "stuff": anything you have allowed into your psychological or physical world that doesn't belong where it is, but for which you haven't yet determined the desired outcome and the next action step. The reason most organizing systems haven't worked for most people is that they haven't yet transformed all the "stuff" they're trying to organize. As long as it's still "stuff," it's not controllable.

We need to
transform all the
"stuff" we're trying

Most of the to-do lists I have seen over the years (when people had them at all) were merely listings of "stuff," not inventories of the resultant real work that needed to be done. They were partial reminders of a lot of things that were unresolved and as yet untranslated into outcomes and actions—that is, the real outlines and details of what the list-makers had to "do."

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

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

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

The Process: Managing Action

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

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

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

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

Managing Action Is the Prime Challenge

What you *do* with your time, what you *do* with information, and what you *do* with your body and your focus relative to your

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

That may sound obvious. However, it might amaze you to discover how many next actions for how many projects and commitments remain undetermined by most people. It's extremely difficult to manage actions you haven't identified or decided on. Most people have dozens of things that they need to do to make progress on many fronts, but they don't yet know what they are. And the common complaint that "I don't have time to ____" (fill in the blank) is understandable because many projects seem overwhelming—and *are* overwhelming because you can't *do* a project at all! You can only do an action related to it. Many actions require only a minute or two, in the appropriate context, to move a project forward.

*The beginning
is half of every
action.*

—Greek

In training and coaching thousands of professionals, I have found that lack of time is not the major issue for them (though they themselves may think it is); the real problem is a lack of clarity and definition about what a project really is, and what the associated next-action steps required are. Clarifying things on the front end, when they first appear on the radar, rather than on the back end, after trouble has developed, allows people to reap the benefits of managing action.

Things rarely get
stuck because of
lack of time. They get
stuck because the
doing of them has
not been defined.

The Value of a Bottom-Up Approach

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

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

Getting current on and in control of what's in your in-basket and on your mind right now, and incorporating practices that can help you *stay* that way, will provide the best means of broadening your horizons. A creative, buoyant energy will be unleashed that will better support your focus on new heights, and your confidence will increase to handle what that creativity produces. An immediate sense of freedom, release, and inspiration naturally comes to people who roll up their sleeves and implement this process.

You'll be better equipped to undertake higher-focused thinking when your tools for handling the resulting actions for implementation are part of your ongoing operational style.

There are more meaningful things to think about than your in-basket, but if your management of that level is not as efficient as it could be, it's like trying to swim in baggy clothing.

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

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

Horizontal and Vertical Action Management

You need to control commitments, projects, and actions in two ways—horizontally and vertically. "Horizontal" control maintains

coherence across all the activities in which you are involved. Imagine your psyche constantly scanning your environment like police radar; it may land on any of a thousand different items that invite or demand your attention during any twenty-four-hour period: the drugstore, the housekeeper, your aunt Martha, the strategic plan, lunch, a wilting plant in the office, an upset cus-

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

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

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

The Major Change: Getting It All Out of Your Head

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

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

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

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

There is no reason
ever to have the
same thought twice,
unless you like
having that thought.

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

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

The short-term-memory part of your mind—the part that tends to hold all of the incomplete, undecided, and unorganized "stuff"—functions much like RAM on a personal computer. Your conscious mind, like the computer screen, is a focusing tool, not a storage place. You can think about only two or three things at once. But the incomplete items are still being stored in the short-term-memory space. And as with RAM, there's limited capacity; there's only so much "stuff" you can store in there and still have that part of your brain function at a high level. Most people walk around with their RAM bursting at the seams. They're constantly distracted, their focus disturbed by their own internal mental overload.

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

The big problem is that your mind keeps reminding you of things when you can't *do anything* about them. It has no sense of past or future. That means that as soon as you tell yourself that you need to do something, and store it in your RAM, there's a part of you that thinks you should be doing that something *all the time*. Everything you've told yourself you ought to do, it thinks you should be doing *right now*. Frankly, as soon as you have two things to do stored in your RAM, you've generated personal failure, because you can't do them both at the same time. This produces an all-pervasive stress factor whose source can't be pinpointed.

It is hard to fight

an enemy who has

outposts in your

head.

—Sally Kempton

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

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