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

THE CORE PROCESS I teach for mastering the art of relaxed and controlled knowledge work is a five-stage method for managing workflow. No matter what the setting, there are five discrete stages that we go through as we deal with our work. We (1) *collect* things that command our attention; (2) *process* what they mean and what to do about them; and (3) *organize* the results, which we (4) *review* as options for what we choose to (5) *do*. This constitutes the management of the "horizontal" aspect of our lives—incorporating everything that has our attention at any time.

The knowledge that we consider knowledge proves itself in action. What we now mean by knowledge is information in action, information focused on results.
—Peter F. Drucker

The method is straightforward enough in principle, and it is generally how we all go about our work in any case, but in my experience most people can stand significantly to improve their handling of each one of the five stages. The quality of our workflow management is only as good as the weakest link in this five-phase chain, so all the links must be integrated together and supported with consistent standards. Most people have major leaks in their *collection* process. Many have collected things but haven't *processed* or decided what action to take about them. Others make good decisions about "stuff" in the moment but lose the value of that thinking because they don't efficiently *organize* the results. Still others have good systems but don't *review* them consistently enough to keep them functional. Finally, if any one of these links is weak, what someone is likely to choose to *do* at any point in time may not be the best option.

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

I have discovered that one of the major reasons many people haven't had a lot of success with "getting organized" is simply that they have tried to do all five phases at one time. Most, when they sit down to "make a list," are trying to collect the "most important things" in some order that reflects priorities and sequences, without setting out many (or any) real actions to take. But if you don't decide what needs to be done about your secretary's birthday, because it's "not that important" right now, that open loop will take up energy and prevent you from having a totally effective, clear focus on what is important.

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

Collect

It's important to know what needs to be collected and how to collect it most effectively so you can process it appropriately. In order for your mind to let go of the lower-level task of trying to hang on to everything, you have to know that you have truly captured *everything* that might represent something you have to do, and that at some point in the near future you will process and review all of it.

Gathering 100 Percent of the "Incompletes"

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

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

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

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

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

The Collection Tools

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

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

The Physical In-Basket

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

Writing Paper and Pads

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

Electronic Note-Taking

Computers can be used to type in notes for processing later. And as character-recognition technology advances, a parade of digital tools designed to capture data continues to be introduced. Handheld devices (personal digital assistants, or PDAs) and electronic legal pads can both be used to collect all kinds of input.

Auditory Capture

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

E-mail

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

Higher-Tech Devices

Now you can dictate into computers as well as hand-write into them. As more and more communication is morphed into digital and wireless formats, it will become easier to capture ideas (with a corresponding increase in the amount of data reaching us that we need to manage!).

"Computer!"

"Yes, David?"

"I need bread."

"Yes, David."

My needed grocery item has been *collected.* And as the *organizing* part of the action-management process is further digitized, "bread" will automatically be added to my electronic grocery list, and maybe even ordered and delivered.

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

The Collection Success Factors

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

1 | Every open loop must be in your collection system and out of your head.
2 | You must have as few collection buckets as you can get by with.
3 | You must empty them regularly.

Get It All Out of Your Head

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

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

Minimize the Number of Collection Buckets

You should have as many in-baskets as you need and as few as you can get by with. You need this function to be available to you in every context, since things you'll want to capture may show up almost anywhere. If you have too many collection zones, however, you won't be able to process them easily or consistently.

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

Men of lofty genius •when they are doing the least •work are the most active.

— Leonar

Implementing standard tools for capturing ideas and input will become more and more critical as your life and work become more sophisticated. As you proceed in your career, for instance, you'll probably notice that your best ideas about work will not come to you *at* work. The ability to leverage that thinking with good collection devices th at hand is key to increased productivity.

Empty the Buckets Regularly

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

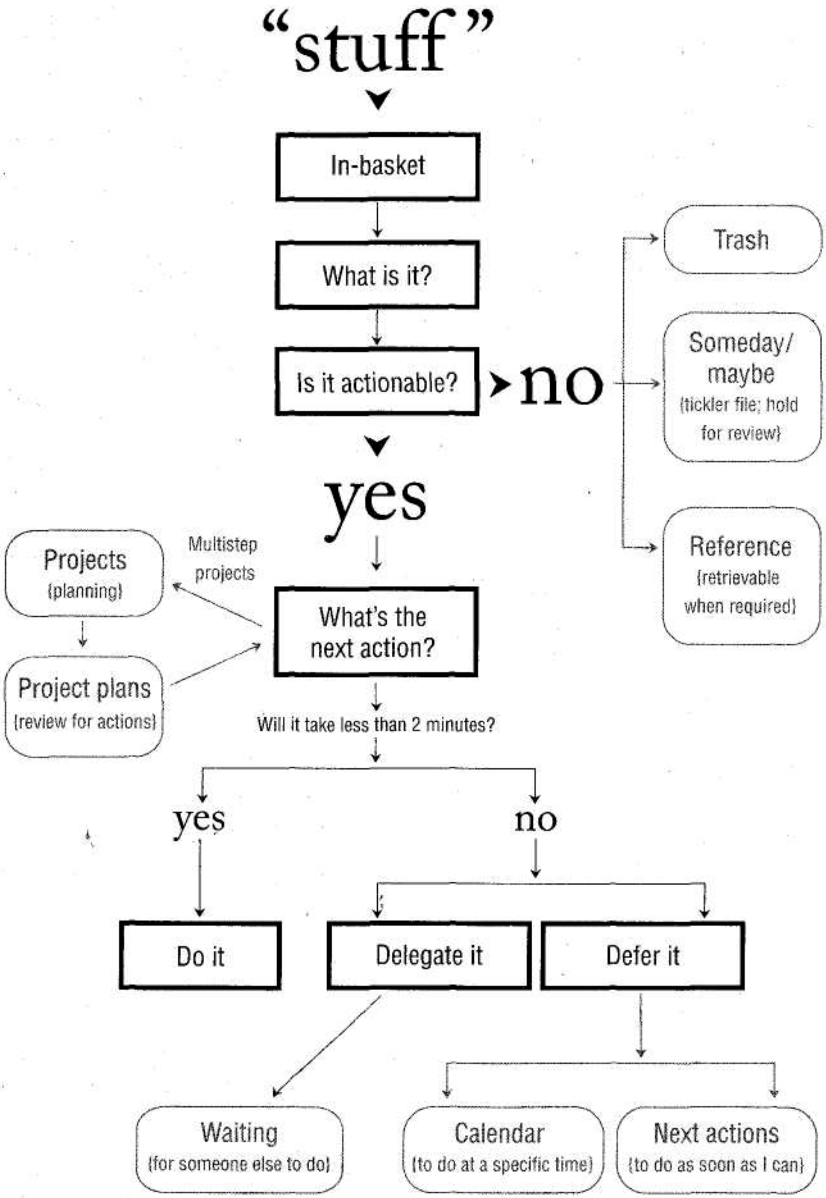
In order for you to get "in" to empty, your total action-management system must be in place. Too much "stuff" is left piled in in-baskets because of a lack of effective systems "downstream" from there. It often seems easier to leave things in "in" when you know you have to do something about them but can't do it right then. The in-basket, especially for paper and e-mail, is the best that many people can do in terms of organization—at least they know that *somewhere* in there is a reminder of something they still have to do. Unfortunately, that safety net is lost when the piles get out of control or the inventory of e-mails gets too extensive to be viewed on one screen.

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

Process

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

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



WORKFLOW DIAGRAM—PROCESSING

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

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

What Is **It?**

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

Is **It** Actionable?

There are two possible answers for this: YES and NO.

No Action Required If the answer is NO, there are three possibilities:

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

These three categories can themselves be managed; we'll get into that in a later chapter. For now, suffice it to say that you need a trash basket and <Del> key for trash, a "tickler" file or calendar for material that's incubating, and a good filing system for reference information.

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

Two things need to be determined about each actionable item:

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

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

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

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

Some examples of next actions might be:

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

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

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

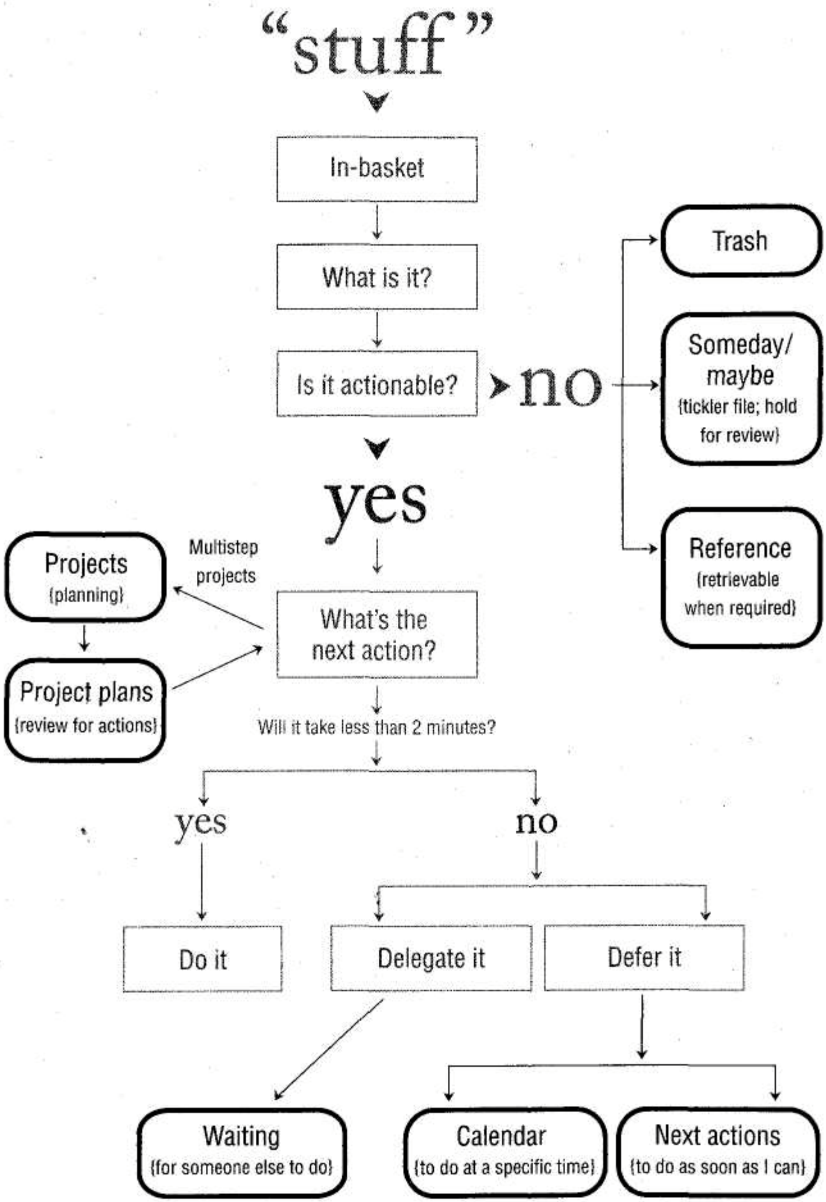
1 | *Do it.* If an action will take less than two minutes, it should be *done* at the moment it is defined.
2 | *Delegate it.* If the action will take longer than two minutes, ask yourself, Am I the right person to do this? If the answer is no, *delegate* it to the appropriate entity.
3 | *Defer it.*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

Organize

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

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

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



WORKFLOW DIAGRAM—ORGANIZING

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

Projects

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

A Partial "Projects"List

Get new staff person on board
August vacation
Staff off-site retreat
Publish book
Finalize computer upgrades .
Update will
Finalize budgets
Finalize new product line
Get comfortable with new contact-management software
Get reprints of *Fortune* article
Get a publicist
Finish new orchard planting
R&D joint-venture video project
Produce new training compact disk
Establish next year's seminar schedule
Orchestrate a one-hour keynote presentation
Get proficient with videoconferencing access
Finalize employment agreements
Install new backyard lights
Establish formal relationships with South American rep
Finalize staff policies and procedures
Get a new living-room chair

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

You don't actually *do* a project; you can only do action steps *related* to it. When enough of the right action steps have been taken, some situation will have been created that matches your initial picture of the outcome closely enough that you can call it "done." The list of projects is the compilation of finish lines we put before us, to keep our next actions moving on all tracks appropriately.

Project Support Material

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

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

I usually recommend that people store their support materials out of sight. If you have a good working reference file system close enough at hand, you may find that that's the simplest way to organize them. There will be times, though, when it'll be more convenient to have the materials out and instantly in view and available, especially if you're working on a hot project that you need to check references for several times during the day. File folders in wire standing holders or in stackable trays within easy reach can be practical for this kind of "pending" paperwork.

The Next-Action Categories

As the Workflow Diagram makes clear, the next-action decision is central. That action needs to be the next physical, visible behavior, without exception, on every open loop.

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

Calendar

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

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

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

Day-Specific Actions These are things that you need to do *sometime* on a certain day, but not necessarily at a *specific* time. Perhaps you told Mioko you would call her on Friday to check that the report you're sending her is OK. She won't have the report until Thursday, and she's leaving the country on Saturday, so Friday is the time window for taking the action—but anytime Friday will be fine. That should be tracked on the calendar for Friday but not tied to any particular time slot—it should just go on the day. It's useful to have a calendar on which you can note both time-specific and day-specific actions.

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

No More "Daily To-Do" Lists Those three things are what go on the calendar, and nothing else! I know this is heresy to traditional time-management training, which has almost universally taught that the "daily to-do list" is key. But such lists don't work, for two reasons.

Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be bent out of shape.

— Michael

First, constant new input and shifting tactical priorities reconfigure daily work so consistently that it's virtually impossible to nail down to-do items ahead of time. Having a working game plan as a reference point is always useful, but it must be able to be renegotiated at any moment. Trying to keep a list in writing on the calendar, which must then be rewritten on another day if items don't get done, is demoralizing and a waste of time. The "Next Actions" lists I advocate will hold all of those action reminders, even the most time-sensitive ones. And they won't have to be rewritten daily.

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

The "Next Actions" List(s)

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

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

If you have only twenty or thirty of these, it may be fine to keep them all on one list labeled "Next Actions," which you'll review whenever you have any free time. For most of us, however, the number is more likely to be fifty to 150. In that case it makes sense to subdivide your "Next Actions" list into categories, such as "Calls" to make when you're at a phone or "Project Head Questions" to be asked at your weekly briefing.

Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.
—Albert Einstein

Nonactionable Items

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

Trash

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

Incubation

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

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

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

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

Typical Partial "Someday/Maybe" List

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

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

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

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

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

Your calendar can serve the same function. You might remind yourself on your calendar for March 15, for example, that your taxes are due in a month; or for September 12, that *Swan Lake* will be presented by the Bolshoi at the Civic Auditorium in six weeks.

For further details, refer to chapter 7.

Reference Material

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

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

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

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

General-Reference Filing The second type of reference system is one that everyone needs close at hand for storing ad hoc information that doesn't belong in some predesignated category. You need somewhere to keep the instruction manual for your cell phone, the notes from the meeting about the Smith project, and those few yen that you didn't get to change at the end of your last trip to Tokyo (and that you'll use when you go back there).

The lack of a good general-reference file can be one of the biggest bottlenecks in implementing an efficient personal action-management system. If filing isn't easy and fast (and even fun!), you'll tend to stack things instead of filing them. If your reference material doesn't have a nice clean edge to it, the line between actionable and nonactionable items will blur, visually and psychologically, and your mind will go numb to the whole business. Establishing a good working system for this category of material is critical to ensuring stress-free productivity; we will explore it in detail in chapter 7.

Review

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

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

What to Review When

If you set up a personal organization system structured as I recommend, with a "Projects" list, a calendar, "Next Actions" lists, and a "Waiting For" list, not much will be required to maintain that system.

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

Review your lists as often as you need to, to get them off your mind.

After checking your calendar, you'll most often turn to your "Next Actions" lists. These hold the inventory of predefined actions that you can take if you have any discretionary time during the day. If you've organized them by context ("At Home," "At Computer," "In Meeting with George"), they'll come into play only when those contexts are available. "Projects," "Waiting For," and "Someday/Maybe" lists need to be reviewed only as often as you think they have to be in order to stop you from wondering about them.

Critical Success Factor: The Weekly Review

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

All of your open loops (i.e., projects), active project plans, and "Next Actions," "Agendas," "Waiting For," and even "Someday/ Maybe" lists should be reviewed once a week. This also gives you an opportunity to ensure that your brain is clear and that all the loose strands of the past few days have been collected, processed, and organized.

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

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

The Weekly Review is the time to

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

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

Most people feel best about their work when they've cleaned up, closed up, clarified, and renegotiated all their agreements with themselves and others. Do this weekly instead of yearly.

Most people feel best about their work the week before their vacation, but it's not because of the vacation itself. What do you do the last week before you leave on a big trip? You clean up, close up, clarify, and renegotiate all your agreements with yourself and others. I just suggest that you do this weekly instead of yearly.

Do

The basic purpose of this workflow-management process is to facilitate good choices about what you're *doing* at any point in time. At 10:33 A.M. Monday, deciding whether to call Sandy, finish the proposal, or process your e-mails will always be an intuitive call, but with the proper preplanning you can feel much more confident about your choices. You can move from *hope* to *trust* in your actions, immediately increasing your speed and effectiveness.

Every decision to act is an intuitive one. The challenge is to migrate from *hoping* it's the right choice to *trusting* it's the right choice.

Three Models for Making Action Choices

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

The answer is, by trusting your intuition. If you have *collected, processed, organized,* and *reviewed* all your current commitments, you can galvanize your intuitive judgment with some intelligent and practical thinking about your work and values.

You have more to do than you can possibly do. You just need to feel good about your choices.

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

1. The Four-Criteria Model for Choosing Actions in the Moment

At 3:22 on Wednesday, how do you choose what to do? There are four criteria you can apply, in this order:

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. The Threefold Model for Evaluating Daily Work

When you're getting things done, or "working" in the universal sense, there are three different kinds of activities you can be engaged in:

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

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

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

Defining Your Work Defining your work entails clearing up your in-basket, your e-mail, your voice-mail, and your meeting notes and breaking down new projects into actionable steps. As you process your inputs, you'll no doubt be taking care of some less-than-two-minute actions and tossing and filing numerous things (another version of doing work as it shows up). A good portion of this activity will consist of identifying things that need to get done sometime, but not right away. You'll be adding to all of your lists as you go along.

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

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

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

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

Let's start from the bottom up:

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

10,000 Feet: Current Projects Creating many of the actions that you currently have in front of you are the thirty to one hundred projects on your plate. These are the relatively short-term outcomes you want to achieve, such as setting up a home computer, organizing a sales conference, moving to a new headquarters, and getting a dentist.

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

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

40,000 Feet: Three- to Five-Year Vision Projecting three to five years into the future generates thinking about bigger categories: organization strategies, environmental trends, career and life-transition circumstances. Internal factors include longer-term career, family, and financial goals and considerations. Outer-world issues could involve changes affecting your job and organization, such as technology, globalization, market trends, and competition. Decisions at this altitude could easily change what your work might look like on many levels.

50, 000+ Feet Life This is the "big picture" view. Why does your company exist? Why do *you* exist? The primary purpose for anything provides the core definition of what its "work" really is. It is the ultimate job description. All the goals, visions, objectives, projects, and actions derive from this, and lead toward it.

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

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

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