

The Power of Outcome Focusing

THE POWER OF directing our mental and imaginative processes to create change has been studied and promoted in thousands of contexts—from the early "positive thinking" books to recent discoveries in advanced neurophysiology.

My own interest has been in applying of the principle in terms of practical reality: Does it help get things done? And if so, how do we best utilize it in managing the work of our lives? Can we really use this information in ways that allow us to produce what we want to have happen with less effort? The answer has been a resounding yes.

Focus and the Fast Track

Over the years I have seen the application of the method presented in this book create profound results for people in their day-to-day worlds. As you begin to use it habitually as your primary means of addressing all situations—from processing e-mails, to buying a house or a company, to structuring meetings or having conversations with your kids—your personal productivity can go through the roof.

Many of the professionals I have worked with who integrated this method now find themselves experiencing enhanced or even new jobs and careers. These processes really work in the arena of the ordinary things we must deal with daily—the stuff of

our work. When you demonstrate to yourself and to others an increasing ability to get things done "in the trenches," you probably won't stay in the same trench for very long.* It's been inspiring for me to learn and coach others how to deal with the immediate realities down where the rubber hits the road—and how to tie in the power of positive imagery to practical experiences in all our daily lives.

The "fast track" alluded to in the section heading above is a bit of misnomer. For some, slowing down, getting out of the squirrel cage, and taking care of themselves may be the major change precipitated by this methodology. The bottom line is it makes you more conscious, more focused, and more capable of implementing the changes and results you want, whatever they are.

"Create a way to regularly spend more time with my daughter" is as specific a project as any, and equally demanding of a next action to be determined. Having the vague, gnawing sense that you "should" do something about your relationship with your daughter, and not actually doing anything, can be a killer. I often work with clients who are willing to acknowledge the real things of their lives at this level as "incompletes"—to write them down, define real projects about them, and ensure that next actions are decided on—until the finish line is crossed. That is real productivity, perhaps in its most awesome manifestation.

The Significance of Applied Outcome Thinking

What I want to emphasize now is how learning to process the details of our work and lives with this clear and consistent system

*Of course, the people who are *most* attracted to implementing *Getting Things Done* are usually already on a self-development track and don't assume that they'll be doing the same thing a year from now that they're doing now, anyway. But they love the fact that this method gets them there faster and more easily.

can affect others and ourselves in significant ways we may not expect.

As I've said, employing next-action decision-making results in clarity, productivity, accountability, projects and next and empowerment. Exactly the same results happen when you hold yourself to the discipline of identifying the real results you want and, more specifically, the projects you need to define in order to produce them.

It's all connected. You can't really define the right action until you know the outcome, and your outcome is disconnected from reality if you're not clear about what you need to do physically to make it happen. You can get at it from either direction, and you must, to get things done.

As an expert in whole-brain learning and good friend of mine, Steven Snyder, put it, "There are only two problems in life: (1) you know what you want, and you don't know how to get it; and/or (2) you don't know what you want." If that's true (and I think it is) then there are only two solutions:

- Make it up.
- Make it happen.

This can be construed from the models of yin/yang, right brain/left brain, creator/destroyer—or whatever equivalent works best for you. The truth is, our energy as human beings seems to have a dualistic and teleological reality—we create and identify with things that aren't real yet on all the levels we experience; and when we do, we recognize how to restructure our current world to morph it into the new one, and experience an impetus to make it so.

Things that have your attention need your intention engaged. "What does this mean to me?" "Why is it here?" "What do I want to have be true about this?" ("What's the successful

Life affords no higher pleasure than that of surmounting difficulties, passing from one step of success to another, forming new wishes and seeing them gratified.

—Dr.

Samuel

outcome?") Everything you experience as incomplete must have a reference point for "complete."

Once you've decide that there is something to be changed and a mold to fill, you ask yourself, "How do I now make this happen?" and/or "What resources do I need to allocate to make it happen?" ("What's the next action?").

Your life and work are made up of outcomes and actions. When your operational behavior is grooved to organize everything that comes your way, at all levels, based upon those dynamics, a deep alignment occurs, and wondrous things emerge. You become highly productive. You make things up, and you make them happen.

The Magic of Mastering the Mundane

My clients often wonder how I can sit with them in their offices, often for hours on end, as they empty the drawers of their desks and painstakingly go through the minutiae of stuff that they have let accumulate in their minds and their physical space. Aside from the common embarrassment they feel about the volume of their irresponsibly dealt-with details, they assume I should be bored to tears. Quite the contrary. Much to my own surprise, I find it to be some of the most engaging work I do with -people. I know the release and relief and freedom that sit on the other side of dealing with these things. I know that we all need practice and support and a strong, clear focus to get through them, until we have the built-in standards and behaviors we need to engage with them as they demand. I know how significant a change these people may experience in their relationships with their bosses, their partners, their spouses, their kids, and themselves over the next few hours and (we hope) days and years.

It's not boring. It's some of the best work we do.

I'm in the focus business. As a consultant and coach,

Multilevel Outcome Management

I ask simple questions that often elicit very creative and intelligent responses from others (and even myself!), which can in turn add value to the situation and work at hand. People aren't any smarter after they work with me than they were before—they just direct and utilize their intelligence more productively.

The
marry high-level
idealistic focus to
the mundane
activity of life. In the
end they require the
same thinking.

What's unique about the practical focus of *Getting Things Done* is the combination of effectiveness and efficiency that these methods can bring to every level of your reality. There are lots of inspirational sources for the high-level "purpose, values, vision" kind of thinking, and many more mundane tools for getting hold of smaller details such as phone numbers and appointments and grocery lists. The world has been rather barren, however, of practices that relate equally to both levels, and tie them together.

"What does this mean to me?" "What do I want to have be true about it?" "What's the next step required to make that happen?" These are the cornerstone questions we must answer, at some point, about everything. This thinking, and the tools that support it, will serve you in ways you may not yet imagine.

An idealist believes that the short run doesn't count. A cynic believes the long run doesn't matter.

A realist believes that what is done or left undone in the short run determines the long run.

The Power of Natural Planning

The value of all this natural project planning is that it provides an integrated, flexible, aligned way to think through any situation.

Being comfortable with challenging the purpose of anything you may be doing is healthy and mature. Being able to "make up" visions and images of success, before the methods are clear, is a phenomenal trait to strengthen. Being willing to

have ideas, good or bad, and to express and capture all of them without judgments is critical for fully accessing creative intelligence. Honing multiple ideas and types of information into components, sequences, and priorities aimed toward a specific outcome is a necessary mental discipline. And deciding on and taking real next actions—actually moving on something in the physical world—are the essence of productivity.

Being able to bring all these ingredients together, with appropriate timing and balance, is perhaps the major component of professional competence for this new millennium. But it's not yet the norm in professional behavior; far from it. It's still a daunting task to apply this awareness to all the aspects of personal and professional life. But even when only portions of the model are inserted, tremendous benefit ensues.

The feedback I have gotten over the years in my consulting, teaching, and coaching with this model has continued to validate that even the slightest increase in the use of natural planning can bring significant improvement. To see brainstorming about almost every aspect of their lives becoming a standard tool for many people is terrific. To hear from executives who have used the model as a way to frame key meetings and discussions, and have gotten great value from doing that, is gratifying. It all just affirms that the way our minds naturally work is the way that we should focus to make anything happen in the physical world.

The model is simply the basic principle of determining outcomes and actions for everything we consider to be our work. When those two key focus points become the norm in our day-to-day lives, the baseline for productivity moves to another level. The addition of brainstorming—the most creative means of expressing and capturing ideas, perspectives, and details about projects—makes for an elegant set of behaviors for staying relaxed and getting things done.

Shifting to a Positive Organizational Culture

It doesn't take a big change to increase the productivity standards of a group. I continually get feedback indicating that with a little implementation, this method immediately makes things happen more quickly and more easily.

The constructive evaluation of activities, asset allocations, communications, policies, and procedures against purposes and intended outcomes has become increasingly critical for every organization I know of. The challenges to our companies continue to mount, with pressures coming these days from globalization, competition, technology, shifting markets, and raised standards of performance and production.

"What do we want to have happen in this meeting?" "What is the purpose of this form?" "What would the ideal person for this job be able to do?" "What do we want to accomplish with this software?" These and a multitude of other, similar questions are still sorely lacking in many quarters. There's plenty of talk in the Big Meetings that sounds good, but learning to ask "Why are we doing this?" and "What will it look like when it's done successfully?" and to apply the answers at the day-to-day operational level—that is what will create profound results.

Empowerment naturally ensues for individuals as they move from complaining and victim modalities into outcomes and actions defined for direction. When that becomes the standard in a group, it creates significant improvement in the atmosphere as well as the output. There are enough other problems to be concerned with; negativity and passive resistance need to continually give way to a focus on the desired results at the appropriate horizons.

The microcosm of how people deal with their in-baskets, e-mail, and conversations with others will be reflected in the macro-reality of their culture and organization. If balls are dropped, if decisions about what to do are resisted on the front end, if not all the open loops are managed responsibly, that will be

*A vision without
a task is but a
dream, a task
without a vision is
drudgery, a vision
and a task is the
hope of the world.*
—From a church
in
Sussex, England,
ca. 1730

magnified in the group, and the culture will sustain a stressful fire-and-crisis siege mentality. If, in contrast, individuals are implementing the principles of *Getting Things Done*, the culture will expect and experience a new standard of high performance. Problems and conflicts will not go away—they remain inherent as you attempt to change (or maintain) anything in this world. The operational behaviors of this book, however, will provide the focus and framework for addressing them in the most productive way.