

Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less

by Greg Mckeown

Kindle Notes by Dave Kraft

The Wisdom of life consists in the elimination of non-essentials—Lin Yutang

It was like he was majoring in minor activities

“Is this the very most important thing I should be doing with my time and resources right now?”

A newfound commitment to doing only the things that were truly important—and eliminating everything else—restored the quality of his work.

Essentialism: only once you give yourself permission to stop trying to do it all, to stop saying yes to everyone, can you make your highest contribution towards the things that really matter.

Dieter’s design criteria can be summarized by a characteristically succinct principle, captured in just three German words: Weniger aber besser. The English translation is: Less but better

And although many of them may be good, or even very good, the fact is that most are trivial and few are vital. The way of the Essentialist involves learning to tell the difference—learning to filter through all those options and selecting only those that are truly essential.

Essentialism is not about how to get more things done; it’s about how to get the right things done.

The way of the Essentialist means living by design, not by default.

Distinguishes the vital few from the trivial many,

If you don’t prioritize your life, someone else will

The pursuit of success can be a catalyst for failure. Put another way, success can distract us from focusing on the essential things that produce success in the first place.

We have lost our ability to filter what is important and what isn’t. Psychologists call this “decision fatigue

It is not just information overload; it is opinion overload.

Corporate environments talk about work/life balance but still expect their employees to be on their smart phones 24/7/365.

We can either make our choices deliberately or allow other people’s agendas to control our lives.

Once an Australian nurse named Bronnie Ware, who cared for people in the last twelve weeks of their lives, recorded their most often discussed regrets. At the top of the list: “I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.”

Instead of reacting to the social pressures pulling you to go in a million directions, you will learn a way to reduce, simplify, and focus on what is absolutely essential by eliminating everything else.

Studies have found that we tend to value things we already own more highly than they are worth and thus that we find them more difficult to get rid of.

It is a discipline you apply each and every time you are faced with a decision about whether to say yes or whether to politely decline.

It's a method for making the tough trade-off between lots of good things and a few really great things.

Once we accept the reality of trade-offs we stop asking, "How can I make it all work?" and start asking the more honest question, "Which problem do I want to solve?"

Step 1. Explore discerning the trivial many from the vital few

We can conduct an advanced search and ask three questions: "What do I feel deeply inspired by?" and "What am I particularly talented at?" and "What meets a significant need in the world?"

Step 2. Eliminate: Cutting out the trivial many

Drucker said, "People are effective because they say 'no,' because they say, 'this isn't for me.'

So eliminating the nonessentials isn't just about mental discipline. It's about the emotional discipline necessary to say no to social pressure.

Step 3. Execute: Removing obstacles and making execution effortless

Victor Hugo, the French dramatist and novelist, puts it, "Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come."

What if we stopped being oversold the value of having more and being undersold the value of having less?

What if we stopped celebrating being busy as a measurement of importance?

I have a vision of people everywhere having the courage to live a life true to themselves instead of the life others expect of them.

As poet Mary Oliver wrote: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?"

Is it at all likely you will wake up one day and say, "I wish I had been less true to myself and had done all the nonessential things others expected of me"

To embrace the essence of Essentialism requires we replace these false assumptions with three core truths: "I choose to," "Only a few things really matter," and "I can do anything but not everything."

"If you could do only one thing with your life right now, what would you do?"

While we may not always have control over our options, we always have control over how we choose among them.

To become an Essentialist requires a heightened awareness of our ability to choose.

The Unimportance of Practically Everything

I had just learned a crucial lesson: certain types of effort yield higher rewards than others.

Working hard is important. But more effort does not necessarily yield more results. "Less but better" does.

Most people have heard of the "Pareto Principle," the idea, introduced as far back as the 1790s by Vilfredo Pareto, that 20 percent of our efforts produce 80 percent of results. Much later, in 1951, in his Quality-

Control Handbook, Joseph Moses Juran, one of the fathers of the quality movement, expanded on this idea and called it “the Law of the Vital Few.

Sometimes what you don’t do is just as important as what you do.

Certain efforts produce exponentially better results than others.

As John Maxwell has written, “You cannot overestimate the unimportance of practically everything.”

The many good opportunities we pursue are often far less valuable than the few truly great ones.

“A strategic position is not sustainable unless there are trade-offs with other positions.

The reality is, saying yes to any opportunity by definition requires saying no to several others.

We can try to avoid the reality of trade-offs, but we can’t escape them.

Essentialists see trade-offs as an inherent part of life, not as an inherently negative part of life. Instead of asking, “What do I have to give up?” they ask, “What do I want to go big on?” The cumulative impact of this small change in thinking can be profound.

Trade-offs are not something to be ignored or decried. They are something to be embraced and made deliberately, strategically, and thoughtfully.

Explore: Discern the Vital Few from the Trivial Many

To discern what is truly essential we need space to think, time to look and listen, permission to play, wisdom to sleep, and the discipline to apply highly selective criteria to the choices we make.

Without great solitude no serious work is possible. —Pablo Picasso

We need space to escape in order to discern the essential few from the trivial many.

He is my partner in developing a new prototyped class that, in a moment of genius, Jeremy dubbed “Designing Life, Essentially.

I set my e-mail bounce-back to explain that I was in “monk mode.”

It seems obvious, but when did you last take time out of your busy day simply to sit and think?

The faster and busier things get, the more we need to build thinking time into our schedule.

And the noisier things get, the more we need to build quiet reflection spaces in which we can truly focus.

Execute, how to make execution effortless

An Essentialist produces more—brings forth more—by removing more instead of doing more.

Instead of focusing on the efforts and resources we need to add, the Essentialist focuses on the constraints or obstacles we need to remove.

There is power in steadiness and repetition.

A popular idea in Silicon Valley is “Done is better than perfect.

Take a goal or deadline you have coming up and ask yourself, “What is the minimal amount I could do right now to prepare?”

There is something powerful about visibly seeing progress toward a goal.

Of course Olympic athletes arguably practice longer and train harder than any other athletes in the world—but when they get in that pool, or on that track, or onto that rink, they make it look positively easy. It’s more than just a natural extension of their training. It’s a testament to the genius of the right routine.

Without routine, the pull of nonessential distractions will overpower us.

The right routines can actually enhance innovation and creativity by giving us the equivalent of an energy rebate.

So how can we discard the routines that keep us locked in nonessential habits and replace them with routines that make executing essentials almost effortless?

“We always win.” With a record like Highland’s he has the right to make the statement. But he is actually referring to something more than his winning record. When he says, “win,” he’s also referring to a single question, with its apt acronym, that guides what he expects from his players: “What’s important now?”

Multitasking itself is not the enemy of Essentialism; pretending we can “multifocus” is.

If you’re not sure, make a list of everything vying for your attention and cross off anything that is not important right now.

Beware the barrenness of a busy life. —Socrates

Our clarity becomes clouded, and soon we find ourselves spread too thin.

When we look back on our careers and our lives, would we rather see a long laundry list of “accomplishments” that don’t really matter or just a few major accomplishments that have real meaning and significance?

In many ways, to live as an Essentialist in our too-many-things-all-the-time society is an act of quiet revolution.

The Non-essentialist disempowers people by allowing ambiguity over who is doing what.

An Essentialist understands that clarity is the key to empowerment. He doesn’t allow roles to be general and vague. He ensures that everyone on the team is really clear about what they are expected to contribute and what everyone else is contributing.

Non-essentialist communication usually is either too general to be actionable or changes so quickly that people are always caught off guard.