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# declutter for clarity

Get organised, get clear, get a life

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## How to use this Guide

This process is designed to take one day of your time or less. It works best when you work with someone else. Two heads are invariably better than one. This is the great irony of the so-called “self-help” revolution. Most techniques rarely work effectively if we are in charge of both the help and the self.

The guide was developed for use with consultants trained in the process. Their experience adds huge leverage in generating the best results. We recommend you use them.

For those unable to do so, I still recommend that you work with someone else. It will help you see the things you may not see and to do the things you might not do. A third party is always helpful in any personal development work. Both parties will gain from this process.

Although it only takes about 25 minutes to read through this ebook, many people can take up to six hours to work through the process. That may sound like a lot, but the results will be amazing. People often go longer when they get the hang of the progress they are making.

What's more, it will be a highly productive day. You will actually get a lot of things done. You don't just do the process; you also do your job. You will achieve more in these few hours than you have in the last six months. At the end, you will see why.

*You will achieve  
more in these  
few hours than  
you have in the  
last six months*

*The rules are simple:*

- Allocate the day & ensure you have privacy
- Set your start time
- Work for two hours, then break for 10 minutes.
- Work for another two hours, then break for lunch for one hour
- Work your final two hours
- End the session with a review of your plan for the next day

As we said, this is very simple.

Approach this process with open enthusiasm. The more you put into each part of it, the more you will get out of it.

Leave your sceptic and cynic behind. You have been held back before. Don't be held back this time.

Stick to the facts. Make decisive commercial decisions. Bin things enthusiastically. Answer emails concisely.

Delete with determination. Tomorrow will be a clear day.

*You have been  
held back before.  
Don't be held  
back this time.*

# 1. The Power of One Step

## How to start taking action

In 1995 I was running an international equities team in New York. We marketed Asian securities to US institutional investors. I had transferred there from Hong Kong, sent to boost our US presence at a time when American investment thinking was increasingly focused on emerging markets. Asia was a preferred target. In the three years from my arrival, we had partnered up with a US investment bank, boosted our own resources, grown our team, opened on the West Coast and significantly increased our market share. We were one of the most profitable divisions in the company. I was the managing director.

I was also a member of our global management team. I sat on our main board, which usually met in London, and on our Management Committee, which usually met in Hong Kong. Following a management buy-out, I was one of the major shareholders and the value of my shares was comfortably rising. I had a lovely home in Connecticut, several investment properties, a wonderful wife and three beautiful daughters. I sailed on the weekends while the family rode horses at the local hunt club. We had friends and acquaintances who complimented us on our success. It appeared, by and large, to be an organised life in which everything had its place and everything was going according to plan.

Yet to my eye, it looked like a mess. It wasn't, but I thought it was. There seemed to be no connection between my management style and the success we were having. I had no idea of any strengths I might have, either obvious or implicit. But when it came to weaknesses, I could silently roll off to myself a list of inadequacies that to me spelt failure. Deep down, I felt like a fraud.

*Just like a  
computer, we all  
need a reboot*

What changed? Well a lot things, and in all areas – financial, geographic, personal and career – over the next decade. But one of the key turning points for me came when I answered a small advertisement in The New York Times classifieds. I do not remember all the precise details. I am not even sure if it was The New York Times. For some reason, the classified caught my eye. From memory, it simply asked the question: “Do you feel disorganised?” For me, in the midst of a particularly stressful week, it was like lighting a touchpaper. My answer was overwhelmingly “Yes!”

Whether or not I really was “disorganized” had nothing to do with it. Disorganised was how I felt. I called the number and spoke to a woman whom I will never forget but whose name I cannot remember. She simply said that there was a way through all that, that the way was simple, that it was unlikely that I could do it alone, and that it would probably work if I did it in partnership with someone else.

### The mystery woman asks: how important is it?

That someone else turned out to be her. I told her I needed help now. Luckily, she had a cancellation and she came up from Washington the next morning and was in my office at 8am. She did one very simple thing. She asked me to pick up the first piece of paper in my in-tray and ignore everything else. She asked me whether there was any reason why I shouldn't throw it in the rubbish bin. Just how important was that item and what ever it was about? I hesitated. She asked how anything about that piece of paper was good for the firm in a way that it would justify me spending any more time on it. It was a subscription form for an information service I thought might be useful. It had been in my in-tray for some time. If it was that important, she said, why had I not done anything about it? If we subscribed to it, would I read it, or would it end up lying on the sideboard in the pile of magazines opened at unread, must-read articles that dated back to the previous year? And if I was ever that desperate for that information, wasn't it only a search engine away? By now the fate of that piece of paper was clear. It ended up in the bin.

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in the bin.

We spent the entire day doing nothing more than picking up the next piece of paper and refusing to do anything else until we had disposed of it. Mostly via the rubbish bin, often by giving it to someone else, very rarely (yet most importantly) actually doing something about it, or if we really couldn't let it go, making note of it and sending it off for filing.

The rubbish bin won hands down. That's where over 90 percent of the items in my office ended up. We filled my standard bin; we brought in empty cardboard boxes and filled them; we ended up using plastic garbage bags, which we stacked up outside my office. We worked well as a team. It was a long day and a massively productive one. I thanked my mentor profusely at the end of it. She returned to Washington that night. I never saw her again.

### Leave nothing unattended

The overall result was an epiphany. When I surveyed my office early that evening, I felt entirely liberated. Not because it was clean, but because I could see nothing I had not attended to. I felt complete, organised, clear and positive. I knew exactly what I had to do in the next week and had diarised time to do it. I felt comfortable about my job and my ability to do it. I knew that nothing was really wrong, and that everything would be OK.

I travelled home to Connecticut that Friday night with a new lightness ahead of one of the most enjoyable weekends that I had spent with my family for many a year.

That all happened almost three decades ago. I have since examined and tested many different management techniques in various businesses. I have managed a seed capital portfolio which has exposed me to an enormous range of industries from investment banking, through IT to manufacturing. I have applied many popular and well-tried techniques – many of them quite complex – to a variety of business situations from the individual executive, through to the team and divisional levels, and on to corporations as a whole.

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But through all of that, I would have to say that the most productive day for me was that day in 1995 when the unknown woman from Washington showed me just how simple it could be.

*The two things I will always remember from that session:*

- **Management is not rocket science. It just isn't.**  
Management is really simple stuff done in the here and now.
- **It is very hard to do management alone.**  
The buck may stop with you, but you don't have to be in isolation when it does.

*Adding someone  
else's thinking  
is the beginning  
of leveraging  
your way out*

There is huge leverage in undertaking focused management practices with your colleagues or advisers, either individually or as a team, working with those above, below or equal to you. If you are feeling disorganised despite your best efforts, it is likely that your own best thinking got you there. Adding someone else's thinking is the beginning of leveraging your way out, even if all they do is pass you the ladder and you do the climbing.

Over the years I have refined this and other processes into workable formulae to help executives, teams and companies become more comfortable with their roles. The result is always a quantum leap in efficiency and productivity. But more importantly, the most rewarding result is seeing the stress levels drop away and the core strengths of each individual come to the fore. I find this exciting, empowering and fulfilling.

In the next few pages we will work our way through the most basic building blocks of organising your business, your career and your life.



## 2. Why It Starts With You

### Clear up your launch pad

We have all seen, heard or experienced many of the processes that are now employed in business and executive planning. You start with defining your mission. You articulate your objectives, examine your resources and analyse your current business situation. This invariably leads to a proposed strategy, a list of actions and a time-line to implement the overall plan that results from the process.

All of this is rewarding, and it is crucial to developing a focused, successful and profitable business. As a business consultant, I often implement these processes. I have developed various creative ways of working with firms to action them, and, on many occasions they have proved remarkably successful.

They do not, however, address the immediate issues facing virtually every executive.

Major strategic reviews are all well and good but they do little to get business, career and personal priorities right. They do not address someone's key strengths or identify the unique contribution that he or she can make to the organisation. They don't help them do their job better, or make them happier, or more efficient, or calmer or any other items on a long list of desired outcomes.

And yet, without working out these key individual issues, it is virtually impossible to begin the larger planning exercises, be they managing the team toward a long-term goal or implementing a major strategic plan for the firm as a whole.

**That is why it starts with you.**

Strategic  
reviews ... do  
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and personal  
priorities right

You need to have a stable, organised platform from which to operate. One that has already established what you need to do, how you are going to do it, and when it is going to be done. In short, you need to get organised.

The object of **Declutter for Clarity** is to help you get there quickly. We are not looking to re-invent the wheel. We are not rebuilding your computer. Instead, to use a simple IT analogy, we are running a defrag on your operating system and rebooting. What you will end up with is a highly efficient desktop.

**It is time to introduce the first simple idea behind this process.**

### The One & Only Plain Book

*Theoretically, modern technology revolutionised personal organisation. The Blackberry was a good example. Properly used and configured, it effectively operated as a virtual office. Its key contribution was not so much its communication wizardry but the fact that it put everything in one place. That is the key to personal organisation.*

*Most people have now moved onto a smartphone. If you are using such a device – and, crucially, **if it is working for you** – I would recommend you keep doing so.*

*Not everyone, however, feels that comfortable with always-on technology. For many, mobiles are a source of constant distraction and overloaded email inboxes. Others find the search and navigation functions still too cumbersome. And we all see phone addicts constantly scrolling. Some people just don't want one; others shouldn't have one.*

The object of  
Declutter for  
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*There is a very simple alternative which uses the same principle. Let's call it the Plain Book. Not a great title but it works for the purposes of this process for two reasons. One, we have to call it something, and two, because that's what it is. A plain notebook, preferably a robust one, available everywhere with nothing special about it. No dates, tabs, colours or pictures. They usually cost around a dollar fifty.*

*The instructions are simple. Buy one of these and keep everything in it – **Everything**.*

*There is huge leverage in this simple idea. Essentially, your Plain Book is your constant companion. Any idea you have, telephone number you want to keep, website that might be helpful, restaurant your spouse recommended, today's To Do list – it can all be put in your single Plain Book. You might occasionally write the date as you start a new page, but that's about the only thing resembling a "navigation system" that you need to incorporate.*

*I can't emphasise how much time and stress is saved by this simple idea. Only use one at a time. Wait until it fills before you buy another one. They are available everywhere.*

*As I said, put anything and everything in it. On Mondays, look back over it and highlight anything that catches your eye. If you use it properly, you will never lose another telephone number or have trouble finding that password for that useful but rarely used website you joined last year. When you get to the end, write the start and end date on the front cover and file it. I am now on Plain Book #21. I have never lost one.*

*That's because I fully comprehend their value. I rarely consult them, but on occasion they have proved their worth, showing me where and what I was doing at such and such a time, and even once providing legal evidence for an agreement I had reached with a business partner.*

The instructions  
are simple. Buy  
one of these and  
keep everything  
in it – and I  
mean everything

*We are about to begin a process in which you will be encouraged to slash and burn many of your responsibilities. So, if you are in the process of binning something, or putting it in the filing tray, but you really want some record of what it was, put a note in your Plain Book.*

*Put any idea you have in it. Stick business cards in it. Staple expense receipts to its pages. Take the post-it notes off your desk and put them in your book.*

*Keep it on your desk. Take it with you when you go home or travel. It will become a key part of your organised life. Wherever you go, everything you need will be with you. If you are sitting in a coffee shop in a different time zone on the other side of the world waiting for a delayed flight and you suddenly remember something that really needs doing now, your Plain Book will probably have the information you require to go ahead and do it.*

*I once completed a global transaction during a three-hour wait in Abu Dhabi airport thanks to this practice.*

*The Plain Book is Organisation 101. Even if you don't want to do this forever, do it for the purposes of this process.*

*It will become a  
key part of your  
organised life*

## 3. It's All About Action

### Preparing the first step

Today, we not only want to get organised. We also want to do something. There is no point in doing this process if it does not lead to some action. The next step is to identify some key actions that you need to take. This is not a fundamental rearrangement of your life. That can come later. What we need to do now is work out some of the things that aren't working for you – only some – and see what we can do about them. We don't want an exhaustive list because that would take more time to work up than it would to implement the plan. In this first step, we will isolate some key actions and use these as working examples as we make our way through the process.

In the next section, you will find a **Personal Assessment Worksheet**. This is an extremely simple template. You can draw one in the back of your diary, or on a pad or any sheet of paper. Best of all, you can put it in your Plain Book. (If you want something more formal, [download the template](http://www.alanhargreaves.com/workshop) and associated instructions from [www.alanhargreaves.com/workshop](http://www.alanhargreaves.com/workshop). It's free.)

The worksheet lists seven different areas of everyday life. There are probably others – in fact there are – but for most human beings, most of the things that are important to them are included in this list of areas. There are endless aspects to each one, and each of you will focus on different issues. You will shortly be asked to rate your current performance in these areas between 1 and 10. But first, peruse the categories and get a feel for what each one entails.

*This is not a  
fundamental  
rearrangement  
of your life.  
That can come  
later.*

The list below might assist in stimulating your thoughts in any one area:

HEALTH & FITNESS	<p>Few people score 10 in this area. Many healthy people desire improvements in their fitness or changes in their lifestyle. They may want to stop smoking, drink less, run more, lose weight, put on weight, recover from injury or illness or address emotional and mental issues that are holding them back. Maybe you just want more rest or to schedule idle, stress-free time. Or read a book. How do you feel about your health and fitness now?</p>
CAREER & BUSINESS	<p>Is your career progressing well? Is it taking you where you want to go? Do you want to get there faster? Are you in the right business? Do you want to be in business at all? Do you lack skills that would improve your score? Do you feel disorganised or unmotivated? Do you like your work environment? Do you want a fundamental change in this area? Are you planning a change in employer or industry? How do you feel about your career or business now?</p>
FINANCIAL SECURITY	<p>Tough one this. Legend has it that when asked “How much is enough?” John D Rockefeller answered “A little bit more.” Very few people accept their financial condition, be it excellent or poor. Exactly what yardstick do you want to put in place? And where do you stand now relative to that yardstick? What is required to get you to your goal? Is it realistic? Would you just like to stop worrying about it and get on with your life? Do you have specific financial difficulties that you need to address? What is going right, financially? What financial things do you do well? How do you feel about your financial security right now?</p>

<b>PERSONAL GROWTH</b>	<p>Are you developing as a person? Do you need to? Are you fine the way you are? Really? Personal growth can mean many things to different people. Do you feel underqualified? Is there anything you can do about it? Do you have personal issues that you need to resolve? Do you want to develop spiritually? How's your mental health. Your anger? Do you want to be calmer, or more active? Do you think there is more change, development or personal growth ahead of you, or have you peaked?</p>
<b>INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS</b>	<p>This can include any relationship that matters to you. Your wife, children, extended family, friends, your boss, work colleagues, neighbours – just about anyone. Are any not working? Can you pinpoint why? How do you feel about your relationships with other people now?</p>
<b>COMMUNITY</b>	<p>How do you interact with your community – do you help at school, church, sport, charity, club or pub? Do you avoid your community? Does lack of involvement limit your choices or curb your opportunities? Do you like it that way? Why? How do you feel about your participation in the community now?</p>
<b>RECREATION &amp; LEISURE</b>	<p>The areas covered in this worksheet are not exhaustive, but they encompass most of the aspects of our lives. They are like spokes in a wheel. Some strength or focus on each one is required to keep the wheel balanced. There will be times when one area is more important than others, but none can be ignored entirely. This process aims to focus your attention on areas where action now would bring greatest benefit and in which some effort is required to restore balance. Remember that recreation and leisure, no matter how defined, can play a crucial role in maintaining a balanced life. It may be that you just want to play more golf. Or less. How do you rate the part that recreation and leisure play in your life now?</p>

## 4. Choosing the First Step

### Using the Personal Balance Assessment

A worksheet for this process is included below. As we said before, you can simply draw your own. It is often useful for the person you are working with to undertake the same process. This will often spark more ideas than you will have on your own. Using the template, begin as follows:

#### **NOW**

In the first column (headed NOW), quickly rate your current performance in each area with a number between 1 (Poor) and 10 (Excellent). Do not dwell on this. The first intuitive number that comes into your head is likely to be very close to the mark. Do not be concerned that some of the areas do not feel of importance to you. Just rate yourself in the category and move on to the next.

#### **POSITIVES**

Now skip across to the column headed POSITIVES. In this column, list at least one, but no more than three, strengths that you have in this area. Unless you have scored yourself at zero, you must have some capability, natural talent or skill in that area because you have actually got a rating. In fact, even if you rated your performance zero, it is likely that you have strengths in this area but are simply not using them at the moment. If you scored 1 and above, ask yourself what is it that got you to that number? Scoring only 2, for example, might look like poor performance, but something got you to two. What was it?

#### **GOAL**

In the column headed GOAL, write down the level at which you would really like to perform in each area. This doesn't always have to be an advance. Many people are happy with their level of fitness or the state of their business. Others aren't. Some gym junkies would like to cut back their training sessions but find they just can't.

*Something got  
you to two ...  
what was it?*



But there will be other places where you feel you really would like to see some improvement. In these cases, choose a rating which is a goal, not just the next step up. Be optimistic and do not hold yourself back. When choosing your goal, be prepared to stretch yourself.

## **RANK**

Next, deduct your Now rating from your Goal rating in each category to generate a priority ranking for each area. Circle the three highest-ranking areas. If you find you have more than three categories running equal first, choose the three in which you feel the most confident in your strengths. Clearly, the higher the ranking, the more important it is to you to do something about it. It is an area where you have specific strengths yet you are underperforming. Often it is in our strongest areas where you are in need of the biggest stretch – usually because you are concentrating on areas where you are not as strong. It is on these three areas that we are going to focus in this process.

## **ACTION**

We now come to action, and, oddly, at this point, we need to stop and rest. We have rated our performance and our situation. We have identified where we want to get to, and we have acknowledged we have strengths in all areas. Looking at these issues often reminds us of the treadmill we are on. We need to get off it for a moment and rest. At this point, simply sit back, close your eyes, take three deep breaths and relax.

With your eyes closed, imagine you have just woken up and you have reached your goal in one of your chosen areas. It is an exciting and pleasing state to be in. Whatever it is you have meant to achieve, you have done so. You are pleased with the outcome. So are your colleagues. So are your family and friends. What does success look like? What does it feel like? What is something you can look at, feel, touch, smell or see? It may be a person, a thing, a process or anything imaginable. Calmly think about the things you have done to get to this place.

What does  
success look  
like?  
What does it  
feel like?

Now, choose the first action you can take that will help move you toward that day. Don't overcomplicate it. It may be as straightforward as making a telephone call you have been putting off, or instructing someone to carry out a particular task, or booking a squash court or buying some flowers.

### Keep it simple

Unless your goal is within very easy reach, we may not get there, or even near there, today. What we want to do is take at least one step towards it. Choose a simple, achievable action that you can actually take now – one that will take you further towards your goal.

**I cannot stress how simple this step should be.** In the first Superman movie, Clark Kent had to bring Lois Lane back to life. His solution was to use his somewhat remarkable powers to reverse the rotation of the earth for so long as it took to move back in time to a point prior to the demise of Miss Lane. A big ask, you might say. But what was the first thing he had to do? It was the same thing he always has to do before he does anything. He had to find a phone box. Even Superman has to do things in steps. So do you.

When you have identified that action, write it in the ACTION column. You can have more than one, but no more than three. If it's a big ask, break it down into small steps and use them.

If you have identified another two areas that you would like to increase your rating on, repeat the exercise for them and note the simple, first step you can take toward reaching your goal.

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achievable action  
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will take you  
further towards  
your goal

*At the end of this process, four things will be apparent. You will have:*

1. a list of actions, that
2. you are capable of achieving, in
3. three priority areas, where
4. you will gain the most leverage in improving your overall balance.

## Personal Assessment Worksheet

AREAS	NOW	GOAL	RANK	POSITIVES	ACTION
Change to suit personal profile	(A) 1-10	(B) 1-10	(B - A)	List your strengths in this area	What could help you achieve your goal?
Health & Fitness					
Career & Business					
Financial Security					
Personal Growth					
Intimate Relationships					
Community					
Recreation & Leisure					

## 5. The Myth of the Messy Desk

### The Power of the Trash Bin

There is a character who will be familiar to you in many novels and movies. You recognise him the moment he enters the scene. He is indeed a character, and usually a lovable one. His hair is a mess. He dresses in an absent-minded fashion and shuffles around his office or laboratory with a preoccupied air of deep thought. His shelves are overflowing and his desk is covered with piles of books and folders. Papers are stacked on every available flat surface and the pictures on the wall are slightly crooked. And for some reason, he is always a genius. He is the lovable, eccentric boffin, often the hero, or at least the hero's mentor and invariably someone's grandfather. Humble as he seems, he always knows the solution.

### Einsteins need clarity

I don't know if these people actually exist. I do know a lot of people whose office and personal appearance approach what I have described, but unfortunately, it hasn't been clear to me that they are geniuses. They have often been intelligent. And yes, often very creative. But they haven't gone on to shake the world with their intellectual breakthroughs or their astounding productivity. This is not to deny the role of the genius in history. Einstein shook the world, and perhaps looked a little like the person I have described – and may even have been the model on which the ubiquitous “boffin” is based – but photographs of his office don't show him to be particularly messy. The most prominent object in his office was a blackboard – something you have to wipe clean every time you want to use it. There is much to be said for a blank canvas and the creativity it can unleash. Einstein was not only a genius. He was also hugely productive.

*There is much  
to be said for a  
blank canvas and  
the creativity it  
can unleash*

It has been my experience that the two things go together. By that, I do not mean high intelligence and productivity go together. What I do mean is that a clean desktop and productivity regularly travel in tandem. In both managing and consulting with executives, I have yet to find a highly productive manager who (i) is comfortable with his responsibilities, (ii) manages his team well, (iii) feels fulfilled in his job or business, and (iv) runs a messy office.

There are those who, despite the state of their surroundings, are okay with one or two of those attributes. Maybe even three. But there never seems to be someone who can tick all four. This might sound a touch corny, or too much like your mother talking, but I have found it to be true. Tidy operations tend to be more productive. They are generally more focused, certainly calmer and a lot less stressful. As it turns out, there are some very good reasons why this is so.

### The problem with distraction

A great deal of research has been carried out in the last 30 years on the subject of Attention Deficit Disorder, or ADD. I am not referring to the more commonly publicised ADHD (Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder), which tends to manifest most obviously in overactive children who feature on news magazine programmes about uncontrollable kids. Nor can I comment on the issue of whether ADD is simply a personality type rather than a disorder. There is strong logic on both sides of that argument. But various research projects note that most of us can act in a distracted manner at some time, and that the ADD sufferer is in fact just like everyone else, only more so.

This is not only to the extent to which the person with ADD is easily distracted. One of the common symptoms of the disorder is also the ability to hyper focus for prolonged periods of time when their brain is stimulated. ADD sufferers are great crammers at exam time, but dreadful planners and executors of term papers set months in advance. They are also often more creative, capable of more enthusiastic energy, and – on the flip side of being

Most of us  
can act in a  
distracted  
manner at  
some time

easily distracted – they are constantly monitoring their environment. They make good securities traders and deadline journalists – anything that requires constant change, curiosity and the stimulation of time pressure. They also are frequently good drivers thanks to their strong peripheral vision and ability to anticipate – although this is partly offset by their tendency to drive too fast.

The ADD person is the person most likely to have the messy desk, and also the one most likely to be distracted by it. But that by no means makes them unique.

### Why just about everyone procrastinates about something

The core problem of the messy desk is very simple: the reason we leave things in our sight is because we don't think we have finished with them. This very sensible and simple statement is generally why most people, not just ADD sufferers, tend towards the messy desk. We may have the best intentions as to what we will do with these things. We may even try to manage them rationally. We put them in a must-do pile, or stack them on the sideboard, or put them back in the in-tray. We keep these items at the ready because in our brain we know that there is more to do on this or that thing but we do not have the time, resources or people to manage it at the time. This is the very beginning of procrastination. The desire to keep things in view reflects not only a lack of confidence in our ability to remember to complete them, but also a lack of clear priorities as to what should be completed and in what order.

Unfortunately, once we have “filed it in the pile”, we have also filed in our mind that this was a task that required some extra effort to complete. As the pile builds, so does our view that it is full of things that are actually hard to do, or will take time you haven't got, or are simply irksome.

The overflowing in-tray gradually takes on proportions far greater than the actual effort required to eliminate it. In the messy office, every pile, every magazine opened at a must-read article, every folder full of creative ideas,

As the pile  
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that are actually  
hard to do

every post-it note, every telephone memo, is a reminder of something we haven't finished. This is hugely distracting and can have a devastating impact.

You don't even have to be in your office to be depressed by it. You just have to think of going into work tomorrow and, Thud! you remember all that stuff that seems too hard for you to do and you haven't got around to doing. Don't expect to be too happy at home when this is going on at work.

In extreme cases, it can cripple personal morale and sap energy. Even those of us who can methodically work our way through an overload will find unattended items a source of distraction. At best, time will be set aside to address them. At worst, the executive will find it almost impossible to focus as they move from one task to another as their attention constantly shifts between things that need action. In short, the messiest desk is usually the least productive one, no matter what they say about the creative but absent-minded professor.

## Restoring focus

The need to focus on one thing at a time is not a new notion. It has been reborn – and to some extent reinvented – in recent years by various commentators and advisers. Management mentor Stephen Covey's excellent book around this subject is aptly called First Things First. Popular new-age guru, Eckhart Toile, in his best-selling Power of Now clearly demonstrates the sheer power of focusing only on what is in front of you now.

There may indeed be people who can find peace and focus in a highly distracting environment, but it has been my experience that few of us can. Instead, we need to create a powerfully clear space, in which distraction is limited and the mind is able to focus on the task at hand.

Admitting to needing such an environment is not failure. It is the beginning of personal clarity. Think of Einstein's blackboard.

We need to  
create a  
powerfully  
clear space



In order to give myself greater skill in this area, I learned to meditate. My teacher, the highly respected TM mentor, Thom Knowles, once related the importance of environment to me in a beautifully humble anecdote.

Every few years, Thom would make the pilgrimage to his guru who lived high in the mountains of northern India, presumably in a state of constant bliss. It was a long journey to get there. It was tiring just to get to the base of the foothills, let alone ascend the mountain. It took days of travel. On reaching the man, Thom spent time with him, honouring him, listening to him, absorbing his wisdom during the course of his visit. Throughout, however, Thom wondered whether he would ever reach the level of calm that his ultimate teacher seemed to have reached. Eventually, he asked that very question. Responding, the wise old man acknowledged the power of Vedic wisdom and the practice of meditation but said, frankly, it's hard enough up here in relative peace and quiet. It'd be tough to get there if you live down where you do.

Or words to that effect. The point is that even with the greatest ability to be calm and focused, we will achieve far greater heights if we create an environment which brings out the best in us, not the worst.

So, first to the rubbish bin.

Create an  
environment  
which brings out  
the best in us,  
not the worst

## 6. Start Managing Now

### Amen to all that

The first and most important step in managing your situation is to be decisive about what it is you are trying to achieve. The simplest way to get started is to put everything on your desk or surrounding your workspace into one pile, or into your in-tray if you have one. Do not worry about the order. Just pile it up. You will also need space for a second pile, or out-tray, plus a pen and your Plain Book.

#### ABANDON IT

##### Bin it Now; Achieve Freedom

Now, pick up the first piece of paper. Ask yourself, is this item crucial to the functioning of my job or my business? If it is so important, why haven't I done anything with it already? Check thoroughly and decisively on the importance of this item and the activity it generates. Is the best result for all concerned actually that its final destination is the rubbish bin? If so, the sooner it gets there the better. The less of your business or career time you waste on peripheral activity, the better for everyone concerned. If there is any doubt, throw it out. Be decisive and ruthless. Enjoy binning. Inspire yourself with your sense of abandon. Take your first step toward freedom and clarity. That is our aim. Don't lose sight of it.

#### MANAGE IT

##### Start Delegating Now

Now, the law of averages says that sooner or later, you will pick up something that you will think is absolutely essential to your career, your business or your personal life. But is that something you have to do yourself? This brings us to the true art of management – effective delegation.

Is the best  
result for all  
concerned  
actually that  
its final  
destination is  
the rubbish bin?

I have worked with many good managers over the years, but if I had to single out one who always seemed to be completely on top of the administration of our business, it was my friend and colleague, Tim Kilpatrick. Along with myself and two others, Tim was a Managing Director of our firm. We were an Asian-based investment bank with a dozen offices spread around the region, plus London and New York. We were highly successful, in a constant growth phase and enjoyed favourable economic and financial conditions. Given the nature of the industry, we were not without our regular crises but somehow we seemed to handle them. I held various positions over that period. I did a reasonable job of most of them but could not come anywhere near the level of personal organisation that Tim seemed to bring to his job.

One day sitting in his office, I was, as usual, astounded by the tidiness and the organisation. The in-tray was clear. His diary was on the desk – closed, not open. And his one single notebook sat beside the in-tray. For someone like me who had an office littered with a far more intriguing array of in-trays and must-do piles, it was if anything, slightly depressing. It also looked a bit boring. But I had to acknowledge the denial in that view because there was no way of denying that Tim was ruthlessly productive. Things got done the way they should get done, by the people who should do them, and by the time they should be done. I asked the simple question: “How do you do it?”

His answer was equally simple: “When a piece of paper lands in my in-tray, I pick it up and ask myself: Who is the best person in this organisation to handle this piece of paper?” Management. It’s that simple.

“When a piece of paper lands in my in-tray, I pick it up and ask myself: Who is the best person in this organisation to handle this piece of paper?”

## Delegation is management

Delegation is the essential art of managing. In fact, you can make a strong argument that the ultimate manager never actually does anything else. He simply manages everyone else to implement his vision. There is a lot to be said for this and if you are wondering how you will find time to manage, the answer is: find the time to delegate. People who don't do this will invariably spend too much time doing the things they are weak at – and it takes a lot longer to do a half-way decent job of something you're not good at than it does to do an excellent job of something that uses your strengths. Do you want to be someone who does a lot of half-way decent jobs, or do you want to be someone who does a lot of excellent ones?

*Here is what will happen to you if you do not manage by delegation and decide to do too much by yourself. You will:*

- Lose the respect of your colleagues because nothing will be done on time
- Fail to develop the capabilities of your team and your colleagues
- Find you simply do not have the time to do what you think is your job
- Spend very little time doing the things you are good at
- Become mired in stress and frustration
- Be overtaken on the management ladder
- Lose your confidence, and maybe your job

So, if you are holding that piece of paper in your hand, ask yourself:

- Am I the best person to handle this item?
- Is managing this item myself the best use of my time?

If the answer to either of the questions is no, then ask yourself Tim's question:

- Who is the best person to handle this?

This will raise all sorts of questions about the skill level of your colleagues or the capability of the firm. And remember, the best person may not even be in the firm. They might be a supplier, an acquaintance, a service, a consultant, a friend, a relative, a firm that specialises in out-sourcing that particular task, or someone you haven't yet hired. The most important thing now, however, is to get that piece of paper off your desk.

Many people think of delegation only in terms of major projects, but even if you are giving that piece of paper to your personal assistant to file, that is delegation.

*All the criteria for successful delegation start with "W":*

- You have nominated **Who** is the best person to do it (*your PA*)
- You have explained **What** it is you want done (*have the paper filed*)
- You can make it clear **Why** (*you have decided to have a clear desk*)
- You have nominated **When** (*now*)

This is no different to what is required to delegate the most complicated task. You may need to take time to choose who is the right person. Maybe a team will be required, as well as a team leader. Exactly what needs to be done may need closer examination and team discussion, as may why and when. But if you focus on being very clear on each of the Ws, you will have exercised very precisely the most powerful skill in the executive toolbox.

Type “delegation” into your search engine and you will find no shortage of suggestions on how to manage people. It is common to check the process using a number of popular management acronyms. SMART is probably most in vogue.

*Does the task you are delegating meet the following criteria? Is it:*

- **Specific** – very clearly defined
- **Measurable** – able to be monitored and assessed
- **Agreed** – all parties must buy into the project
- **Realistic** – actually achievable
- **Time bound** – has a specific start and finish date

This is a handy acronym, but in the interests of simplicity and speed in clearing your desk today and getting on with management now, the four Ws will get you managing quicker. There is a **Delegation Worksheet** on my website if you want one, but it is quicker and more efficient to simply jot down the four Ws in your Plain Book now – for use whenever you are assigning something – and move on. If you want to work through this notion more thoroughly, run through the table below.

## The Four W's

<b>Task</b>	<p>Define the project or task and give it a sensible title.</p> <p>Check that it is SMART (Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic, Timebound)</p>
<b>Who</b>	<p>Remember that effective delegation not only frees management time, it also allows the manager to manage.</p> <p>Who is the best person to handle this task? Do they have the right skills? Is further training required? If so, what? Does it fit with their level of responsibility? Does it “stretch” them? This is often an excellent way of encouraging or challenging people. But be careful. Some people are not in need of stretching.</p>
<b>What</b>	<p>In very precise terms, what exactly needs to be done? Are there established ways of doing this within the firm, or within the industry?</p> <p>What are the criteria for the assignment's success? Explain these to the assignee. All employees will do things differently. Are there any specific items you want done in a certain way?</p>
<b>Why</b>	<p>Why is it important that this task be done? How is it good for the firm or the team? Explain this to the employee. Why have you chosen them? Let them know. Will this enhance their role in the firm? How will it help you?</p> <p>The most effective delegation occurs where it not only contributes to the smooth organisation and running of the business, but also nurtures an inclusive culture in which all employees feel recognised and motivated.</p>
<b>When</b>	<p>When must the project be completed? Why? Explain this to the employee. How will it be monitored? Can the project form a useful part of their next performance appraisal?</p> <p>Diarise a time to check on progress. Stress that it is okay to ask for help. Agree on the completion date and diarise.</p>

Properly executed, management delegation can play a key part in deciding what your personnel policy should be, whom you should be hiring, how you are monitoring your business, what yardsticks you incorporate into performance appraisal systems and how you motivate those around you.

For executives, it provides a means of handling tasks at which they do not excel. There is no shame in this. Too many of us underestimate the importance of our strong suits. We think because we are good at them, most people are.

The reality is, most people are not. They are good at something else. You might be an excellent football player, but on Thursdays it's cricket and at best you are a middle-order batsman. You might wonder: "Why, then, am I captain?" It's because someone saw your strengths and promoted you.

It is impossible to have a cricket team without a middle order. Your skill set is essential to the task at hand. Delegate the job of opening batsman to the best person for the job. Revel in his success. Thank him publicly for his effort. He may never be captain, but then, opening batsmen rarely are. But when it's time for football, don't hold back. Go ahead and shine.

## **EXECUTE IT**

### **Act on your Strengths**

Now let's get back to that piece of paper. If you have not by now binned the offending article, or given it to someone else to handle, it may be that you will be required to do something with it yourself. But let's check one more time: for the purpose of what we are going to achieve today, it is important that you are absolutely sure that this item is important to you and your business. It is so important, it cannot be binned and no other person can do it. Be clear about this. If it is taking your spouse out to dinner, only you can go. But someone else can book the table.

Many of us  
underestimate  
the importance  
of our strong  
suits



Okay, so it is something only you can do. Next question: how long will it take to do it? If it is that important that only you can do it, and it can be done in less than 15 minutes, DO IT NOW. Don't do anything else until it is done.

If it cannot be done without someone else's presence or input, make an appointment with them now. Diarise now the amount of time it will take to complete. Break it down into do-able chunks if necessary. Block off the time in your diary then hand the piece of paper to your PA for filing. Get it off your desk now.

The time you have set aside to attend to it may be tomorrow, or next week, but when the time arrives, do absolutely nothing else until you have completed the task. Make this a religion, even in areas where you may not think it necessary to structure your time. Too many executives do not honour their strongest skill sets. If you are good at making presentations but find you are not doing many, diarise a time to just think about one. When the time comes, take your Plain Book, close your door, or go to a private room, and just think about it. You will be amazed how much you will start to apply your best attributes to your career and your business.

### Give strengths a chance

There are many examples of how we fail to shine in our daily work life. If a news item has reminded you of a key point you want to make at the next sales conference, this is your strength trying to get into action. Give it a chance. Cut out the item (don't keep the whole paper), stick it in your Plain Book and set aside a time in your diary to develop the idea. You can only do this if you set aside the time. You must take that action now. And you will only have the time to allot to the task if you start binning most of the things in your office and delegating the rest. Your level of disorganisation may indicate that you are in fact a very creative person. It is now time to free that creativity and give it a chance to be productive.

You will be  
amazed how  
much you will  
start to apply  
your best  
attributes

At the beginning of this book, we listed several simple actions that we felt would significantly improve our personal balance and well-being. Look at that list now. Is there any activity on it that can be executed in its entirety in less than 15 minutes? If there is, DO IT NOW.

When you have done that, look at the list again. Is there anything else that can be done quickly? If so, DO THAT NOW.

If there are things that will take longer, think what you need to do to get them started. Draw a timeline in your Plain Book. What you can do now is organise the action, identify the steps and schedule them. Work out what is required to execute each individual action. Arrange it, set aside the time required and schedule it in your diary beginning tomorrow. Work your way through your list and use the same process. Anything you can do now, do it now.

When scheduling time, do not crowd your diary out with back-to-back action. You will find you need time to address things that arise during the day. Remember that if someone comes to your door and is told, sorry, I am not available at the moment, you will have to have time to come back to them later to address their query. Leave some flexibility in your schedule, but do not be flexible in executing your schedule.

## NOTE IT

### Filing for Fun and Freedom

If you have got to this point and that piece of paper is still in your hand, it is probably because it is just not relevant at this point in time. It might be a tax invoice that you need to keep for compliance reasons. Or a report that might need to be referred to at the end of next financial year. Whatever it is, ask whether it is important to the firm's welfare, whether it can be referenced on the net at any time, or found somewhere else in the firm. In other words, take one last chance to bin it. If it is something that has to be kept, put it in the out-tray for filing and just

Leave some flexibility in your schedule, but do not be flexible in executing your schedule

get it out of your workspace. You may want to make a note of it in your Plain Book. By all means do so, but just make sure you get rid of its physical presence now.

Making a quick note and filing is the fourth and final option you have for handling anything that is on your desk or cluttering up your work environment. It is the simplest alternative to the other three things you can do. You can abandon and bin, manage and delegate, execute and act, or, finally, you can make a note about that piece of paper, and then file it. For everything that is not abandoned to the bin, managed by delegation or executed through action, give it a file name and put it in the out-tray.

By now, you should be able to clearly see the colour of your desktop. You have probably filled your existing rubbish bin. You will likely have already emptied it. Whatever you do, get everything out of your office. Use plastic bags if necessary. But it is essential that you get it all out of your office. Take out your filing pile and give it to the person who does filing. If that is you, put it out of sight and diarise the time when you will file it. When that time comes – yes, that's right, do nothing else until it is done. On your desk will be your Plain Book, your diary, an empty in-tray and an empty out-tray. In your diary will be several scheduled activities that need to be done, can be done, and will be done. You are moving forward on every key task.

## Exhaust the process

Now, stand back from you desk or go to the door of your office. Look for anything to do with your career and business that you have not attended to today. If you see something, pick it up and abandon it, manage it, execute it or note it. Go back to the door and do it again. And again. Until there is nothing.

I have never seen someone not get to the end of this process. It may take a few hours longer than they thought – usually due to a failure to bin or delegate with sufficient determination. The results are invariably positive. Your desktop will be clear and ready for the next day. Your work environment will be distraction-free.

By now, you  
should be able  
to clearly see  
the colour of  
your desktop

Your insurmountable in-tray will have been surmounted. You will know that everything has been attended to. Several actions will have already been completed. You will have a plan on what you will do next, and in what order. You will have moved closer towards your personal, career and business goals.

It will also be good for those around you. They will know more about what is expected of them. Rather than being overwhelmed by the filing pile, personal assistants and colleagues are usually overjoyed by the arrival of tidy organisation. People will ask if you could work the same miracle with them. You are now ready to manage from a clear platform.

You can stop now if you wish. Go home. Rest. Sleep. Be happy.

You will have  
moved closer  
towards your  
personal, career  
and business goals

You may have noticed by now that this process of has a simple acronym:

**AMEN**

- **A**bandon
- **M**anage
- **E**xecute
- **N**ote

## 7. The Next Step

### Start Building from your Clear Platform

For many people, the purpose of this process is to break out of a rut. Sometimes, that is all it takes. If you feel you have accomplished what you needed to do, then there is no need to go further. It is important to remember, however, that just like your computer, you have to reboot every now and then – especially when there is change. Just as you restart your PC after downloading the latest upgrade to some software, you need to review your own operating system if business or management conditions change. It is a healthy habit to schedule one day a month to carry out the process we have just gone through. It will keep your management skills finely honed, and it will maintain your focus and your priorities. But even better, make it your modus operandi. Then you will never have to do it. I've never managed to stay in the zone 24/7 for weeks on end, but I know some who seem to. Maybe one day? In the meantime, I'll have to continue with my regular reboots.

### For more information visit my website [www.alanhargreaves.com](http://www.alanhargreaves.com)

Hi, I'm Alan Hargreaves. I specialise in simplifying complex business problems. In over 35 years as a business executive, I have never found an issue that cannot be addressed through identifying the essential but simple steps required to make any problem manageable. It might be your career, your firm, your team or your strategy. It doesn't matter. All hurdles can be lowered through dispassionate analysis, and all executives can embrace simple processes to take them forward. Using these techniques, I have helped hundreds of people through the various stages of their business or career development. It may be the challenge of taking on new responsibilities; it could be the task of managing a business you have created yourself; it may be handling a difficult team in the midst of major change. I use a straightforward combination of key principles to get results: collaboration, adaptation, simplification and action. You can contact me anytime at [alan@alanhargreaves.com](mailto:alan@alanhargreaves.com).

