Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity

*This week, Life Training Online will be reviewing **Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity** by David Allen, the third of fifty-two books in the **52 Personal Development Books in 52 Weeks** series.*

For those involved in learning about personal productivity, the GTD (Getting Things Done) phenomenon is probably nothing new to you and this week's review will probably be old hat. But if you've never heard of it, be prepared to learn some skills that will simplify your life and cause your personal productivity to take a quantum leap!

The GTD following has become so huge that, according to Wired Magazine, it is "the new cult for the information age". There are even entire sites built upon the principles David Allen sets forth in his book. Some notable ones being **43 Folders** and **LifeHack.org**.

The main principle behind GTD, which I will cover in detail, involves moving your tasks out of your mind by recording them somewhere. That way, the mind is freed from having to remember everything that needs to be done, and can concentrate on actually performing those tasks.

Although it might seem that Allen's system was created solely for today's "knowledge worker" in the professional environment, you will see that it is just as applicable to one's home environment and projects as well. So stay tuned…

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Getting Things Done: The Art of Getting Things Done

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Today we'll be visiting the first three chapters that make up the first part of GTD: The Art of Getting Things Done

A New Practice for a New Reality

As society changes from the industrial-age model to the age of the "knowledge worker", new tools and ways of executing one's day-to-day tasks are required. And paradoxically, as we find our quality of life increasing and discover more time, we end up taking on more tasks than we have the resources to handle. This combined with our jobs becoming less and less specific as to what our role entails, we take on even more responsibility and are left with too much input and not enough throughput. All of which leaves our productivity far from optimal, and our lives and our minds over-cluttered, overworked, and overstressed.

The solution to this problem, can found in Allen's methodology on Getting Things Done (GTD): First, capture everything you need to accomplish somewhere outside of your brain and second, discipline yourself to make decisions about these tasks as they are added to your workload.
Optimal productivity can then be found when the mind is clear, free of what he calls "open loops" – the things you commit to do but remain unfinished, putting a strain on your unconscious mind. Allen compares the mind to a computer's RAM, where too much stuff stored in your short-term memory can blow a fuse. The conscious mind is intended as a focusing tool, not a storage space.

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

In order to take back control of your life (if you ever were in control 😊), you must learn the five stages of mastering workflow: to collect, process, organize, review and do.

During the Collection stage, your main goal is to gather all the tasks that you have on your plate, get them out of your head, and put them into "Collection Tools" – items such as your physical in-basket, paper-based and electronic note-taking devices, voice-recording devices and email. In order to be successful during the Collection stage, Allen specifies three rules that must be followed: 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.

During the Process stage, you start going through and emptying those buckets – a process that he outlines throughout the book in great detail.
Here's an overview:

- What is it? Is it actionable?
- If not, trash it, put it in a tickler file (I'll be talking about this tomorrow) or put it in a reference file.
- If so, what's the next action? The next action is defined as the next physical, visible activity that needs to be engaged in, in order to move the current reality toward completion.
- Will next action take less than 2 minutes?
- If yes, do it.
- If no, delegate it or defer it.
- If it will take longer than 2 minutes, consider it a project (defined as requiring more than one action step) and put it in your project plans which will be reviewed for actions.

The Organize stage becomes the input of the previous stage's output. As you are processing each item from your various buckets, they will end up in one of eight categories of reminders and materials: trash, incubation tools, reference storage, 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.

You then use the Review stage to frequently visit the categories where your items are stored (except the trash can smarty pants), and finally use the fifth stage — Do — to complete the next most applicable item.

Getting Projects Creatively Under Way: The Five Phases of Project Planning

Rarely do you always get items coming into your life that only take one step to

complete. For example, this is the "create a nursery for new baby" or "take wife out for anniversary" type of tasks – they both require planning. Projects — what Allen refers to as tasks that take multiple steps to complete — require a more "vertical" or big-picture view in order to complete them.

To be fully effective at project planning, Allen suggests using your brains natural five-step planning model:

1. **Define the purpose and principles behind your project:** Your purpose answers the question "why?" Why do you want to carry out this project? And the Principles create the boundaries of the plan and define the standards that you require for successful completion.

2. **Outcome visioning:** This answers the question "What?" What do you envision to be the final result? By doing this, Allen says that you activate the Reticular Activating System within the brain. This System, acts like a search engine, filtering out and bringing to your attention those things that match your vision (not unlike **The Law of Attraction**).

3. **Brainstorming:** Brainstorming answers the question, "How?" Here's where you identify how you will get from here to there, using techniques such as mind-mapping to generate lots of ideas. By writing these ideas down, you allow the brain to empty and continually feed you new ideas.

4. **Organizing:** This is where you logically organize the results of the brainstorming stage by 1. Figuring out which of those things have to happen and 2. In what order should they be carried out for you to create the final result you're looking for

5. **Identifying next actions:** These are your immediate next-action steps that you need to take in order to get the ball rolling.

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Getting Things Done: Practicing Stress-Free Productivity

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This is where we get to put Allen's principles to the pavement and discover if they truly have some merit for our lives. In this the second part of his book, Allen disects in detail exactly how you go about implementing these concepts. So without skipping a beat, let's dive in:

Getting Started: Setting up the Time, Space and Tools

First of all, if you think you can grab a mocca latte and curl up next to Fido while scanning through this chapter, you're sorely mistaken. Allen stresses that this chapter — as well as the entire second part of his book — requires action. In fact, he suggests doing these exercises on a weekend where you can dedicate an entire two days, back-to-back, to get started.

The first thing you'll need, in order to create an effective personal management system, is a proper working area. Preferably, one that you can call your own. This doesn't have to be super fancy, just make sure that you have a writing surface as well as room for an in-box.

The next step is having the right tools. Without the right tools, you'll perform like a hair stylist with hedge-clippers — doing some serious work without providing any benefit (unless of course, you're going after that Edward-Scissorhands look 🙂). This includes some typical processing tools such as: paper-holding trays, plain paper, post-its, paper clips, a stapler, a labeler that is yours and yours alone, letter size file folders (nothing special — the manilla ones will do), a calendar, wastebasket/recycling bins, and possibly an organizer to "manage your triggers externally" (such as a planner or a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA)).

Lastly, setup a good general-reference filing system. This is key to the success of a personal management system. For successful filing, use these tips: keep files at hand's reach, use one A to Z alphabetical filing system, have lots of fresh folders, keep the drawers less than three-quarters full, label folders with an auto labeler, buy high-quality file cabinets, get rid of hanging files if you can, and purge your files at least once a year.

Collection: Corralling Your "Stuff"

After you've properly set up your working environment and you're feeling pretty comfortable, don't think it's time to sit down, because the real work is about to happen! This chapter will help you get all your incompletes, all that "stuff" you have all over the place and bring it into your "in-box" where you will process it (covered in the next chapter). Allen says that this initial collection period usually takes from 1 to 6 hours!

There are three reasons Allen has you collect everything in one fell swoop before you can start processing it:

1. It helps to know just how much stuff you're dealing with

2. You know where "the end of the tunnel" is

3. You won't be able to process as effectively with the distraction of knowing there is still more stuff to gather

So what are you supposed to collect? Everything but the kitchen sink? Not quite, but you're not too far off either. Allen says you should gather pretty much everything except for supplies (stationary, staples, paper clips…), reference materials (manuals, take-out menus, dictionaries…), decoration (pictures, artwork, plants etc.), and equipment (computer, fax, printer…). This includes all the crap you've been gathering on your desktop and countertops, in your drawers and cabinets and so on. No doubt you'll have some things that are too large to go in some in-basket. No problem, just make a note on a piece of paper about what it is and stick that in your in-basket. That piece of paper will represent the item.

You also need to do some mental gathering or what Allen refers to as the "mind-sweep". This is where you take out a stack of paper and for each thought, idea, project or thing that has been hanging out in your "psychic RAM", you write it out on its own sheet and place it in your in-box.

Now that you've got all the stuff in "in" you now will work on getting "in" to empty.

Processing: Getting "In" to Empty"

The processing stage doesn't necessarily mean completing all the actions on each

item that is in "in"; it means figuring out what to do with each item in the "in-box". At the end of this stage, all of these items will be either trashed, completed (if it takes less than two minutes to do), delegated, identified as a multi-step project, or deferred (recorded in your organizer as a reminder of an action that takes longer than two minutes).

As you go through this processing stage, there are a few rules that need to be followed: First, process the top item first. Second, process each item one at a time. And third, never put anything back into "in".

As each item is "processed", your main question should be, "what's the next action?" If none, the item is trashed, incubated to a "Someday/Maybe" list or "tickler" file, or put in reference material. If there is an action, make it specific. Then do it (if it takes less than two minutes), delegate it (and add it to the "Waiting For" list) or defer it.

Organizing: Setting Up the Right Buckets

Now that you're done processing, you'll need a way to organize all those outputs. For this, Allen lists the seven key areas to place your processed items: A "Projects" list, project support material, calandared actions and information, "Next Actions" lists, a "Waiting For" list, reference material, and a "Someday/Maybe list.

Calandared items are those that must be done on a certain day and/or particular time. "Next Actions" should be organized by context — such as, while running errands, calls to be made, at the office, while at home, etc. — and can be done as soon as you get to them, working around your other calendared items. Your "Waiting For" list includes all the items that you have delegate out for which you are waiting on someone else to finish.

The "Projects" list provides a one-stop location where you can review all your open projects. This doesn't contain any plans or details about the projects themselves, nor does it list any actions associated with the projects. Instead, it is to be reviewed at least weekly so you can extract needed action steps to put in you "Next Actions" list. You continue doing this until the project is completed whereupon you can delete it from this list.

Allen goes on to explain that it is just as important to organize nonactionable items — which includes reference materials and "Someday/Maybe" lists — as it is to manage action and project reminders. Your general reference items are those included in general-reference file folders, rolodexes, libraries, and archives.

If you have items that are not quite ready for action, you can keep them on "Someday/Maybe" lists, trigger them on you calendar or placed in a **Tickler File**, for later review.

Reviewing: Keeping Your System Functional

In order for you to maintain an effective personal management solution, you'll need to trust it. This trust is generated when your system is kept up-to-date and reviewed often. Allen suggests that your most frequent review will be your daily calendar and tickler folder. After these, you then move on to the "Next Actions" list.

The real magic that sustains this system is found in the Weekly Review. Every week you go through the five stages of workflow management - collecting, processing, organizing, reviewing (this step), and doing. This will allow you to reevaluate and reprocess those things that you have on your plate, keeping you in balance with your overall purpose. It also sharpens your focus on your important projects as you deal with the flood of incoming tasks and potential distractions.

Doing: Making the Best Action Choices

When your faced with multiple choices of things to do, how do you choose what to do next? In this chapter, Allen focuses on three models that help in making the right choices given our current circumstances (beyond his simple answer of trusting your intuition). Here's two of them:

The Four Criteria Model for Choosing Actions in the Moment uses the criteria of context, time available, energy available, and priority. Based on where you are or how much time or energy you have or what kind of priority that task is, should help you decide what the next best action is.

The Six-Level Model for Reviewing Your Own Work is related to altitude and is used to get ever increasing levels of perspective on the task:

. 50,000 + feet: Life

. 40,000 feet: Three to five-year visions

. 30,000 feet: One to two-year goals

. 20,000 feet: Your areas of responsibility

. 10,000 feet: Your current projects

. Runway: Your current actions

Starting with a bottom up approach, you begin with the task and ask yourself, as you move ever higher up the altitude, how does this task fit in with my overall project? Then moving up, how does this project fit in my overall area of responsibility? And so on, until you reach your overall life.

Getting Projects Under Control

In the final chapter of the second part of Allen's book, he explains how to begin organizing and managing the list of projects that you've collected.

Instead of using some of the more formal project-planning tools such as a GANTT chart, Allen favors a more informal approach and tools to capture creative and proactive thinking.

For projects that require more planning beyond the next actions that you've determined for it, Allen suggests brainstorming and informal meetings as excellent methods for ferreting out additional tasks and requirements.

For the other type of projects where ideas just pop into your head at random places (such as writing a fiction novel) you'll need tools that support the capturing of those ideas. Carrying around a small notebook, PDA, or even a digital voice recorder is an excellent habit to have if you want to make full use of those "One Million-Dollar Ideas".

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Getting Things Done: The Power of Key Principles

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Allen saves the last three chapters of his book to recount some of the more subtle, but powerful effects that can occur in those who implement his principles. Here they are:

The Power of the Collection Habit

In this chapter, Allen begins to delve into the psychological aspects of his system. Basically what his methodology offers is not only an excellent way to efficiently and effectively get things done, but as a natural side-effect, it will increase the trust people have in you. Very similar to what Stephen Covey refers to as the "**Emotional Bank Account**", when we keep our commitments with others (process and complete what's in our "in-boxes") we make deposits into their emotional bank accounts, thereby building our balance of trust with them.

This also applies to our own self trust. We feel bad about our own unprocessed "in" items, not because we think we're lazy or "unproductive" but instead because these incomplete items represent broken commitments to ourselves — we lack trust in ourselves. And it is through the habit of regular collection and processing, that our "in" stays empty and our trust stays high.

The Power of the Next-Action Decision

If there is one question that we could ask ourselves on a regular basis that would improve our productivity, it would be "What's the next action?" Allen had noticed that individuals and organizations that regularly installed "What's the next action?" as a fundamental and frequently asked question in their meetings and throughout the day,

would see a major shift in their productivity, clarity, focus and energy.

The reason this question is so important is that it moves us to action. A common mistake people make when putting a "to-do" item on a piece of paper or even in their high-priced planners is the lack of clarity that they specify for that to-do item.

For example, if you needed to get new tires for your car, your to-do might read, "Get new tires put on car". This seems clear enough, doesn't it? Well, actually it's not. If I was to ask you some more questions like, "Who's going to change the tires?" You might answer, "A friend recommended me a quality tire place nearby". I might dig deeper, "So, what's the number of the place?" For that you might respond, "Well, I have to get the number from my friend."

So the next action that you need to take before you can make progress with getting new tires on your car is to call your friend and ask her what the name and number of that place is. This is what Allen means by the Next-Action Decision. You dig deep and keep digging until you find exactly what the next action is that you need to do in order to bring this project one step closer to completion. This is the power of the Next-Action Decision.

The Power of Outcome Focusing

The final key principle that makes up the last chapter of this book is called Outcome Focusing. This is where you use the power of your imagination to clearly see what you desire the intended outcome of your "project" to be. As you focus on the end result of the tasks you are engaged in — whether that is a bunch of emails, buying a new house, or speaking with your kids — you will begin to notice your productivity go through the roof. The reason "Outcome Focusing" is so effective is because it keeps your mind away from getting bogged down in the daily minutia of your tasks. By keeping it locked on the end prize, your mind is free to be creative and provide greater value to the overall project.

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Getting Things Done: Final Thoughts

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Looking back at this week, I can already say that this book has and will continue to change my life for the better. I don't often come across a book which does this, but as I worked through the exercises — Collection, Processing, Organizing, Reviewing and Doing — with my own "stuff" this week, I've already seen marked improvements in my productive throughput.

David Allen's simple, yet powerful, system is a perfect match for me. For the longest time now, I've struggled to find a personal management system that worked. I've tried everything from the Day Runner planning system (which I couldn't stand) to simple daily to-do lists (just seemed to lack purpose). It wasn't until I discovered Stephen Covey's Franklin Planner system that I thought I found the Cadillac of all planners.

Covey's planner is excellent. However, its value-based and big-picture approach often left much to be desired in the trenches of my day-to-day work. With it, my values and goals were in the right place, but I sometimes felt I was trying to chase down a squirrel with a Mack Truck - I had much too cumbersome of a tool to deal with the fast moving and ever-changing "knowledge work" that I was required to do. Allen's system on the other hand, deals with this "trench warfare" quite nicely.

I will continue to use Covey's planner to make sure my "big picture" is painted correctly, but for the day to day, Allen's system is the way to go.

Getting Things Done is a highly recommended and definite must read…'nuff said.

Next week, we'll be shifting gears and taking a look at what many consider to be THE authoritative work on the Law of Attraction - **Ask and It Is Given: Learning to Manifest Your Desires**, by Esther and Jerry Hicks…so stick around!

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