

The Daily To-Do List

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Many of us manage our time reactively. We check our inbox to find out what actions to take. A request in the hall turns into an emergency meeting. Long term priorities and difficult tasks “fall off our plate.” The result is an ongoing feeling of scrambling. This can result in organization wide chaos. The daily to do list is one tool that can help with reducing reactivity.

Using a daily to-do list enables you to name and write down the action items that must be done today. It is a tool for 1) taking action 2) learning about time and planning and 3) pinpointing patterns of avoidance. With your list in front of you, you can see more clearly how you take action and what you avoid. As you use the daily to do list over time, you begin to see patterns of intention, action and completion.

Creating the Daily To-Do List

Carve out five to ten minutes at the end of the prior workday or early in the day in question. Ask yourself the following.

- What must I accomplish tomorrow (or today)?
- What phone calls do I need to make?
- What e-mails do I need to send?
- What pieces of work do I need to start, work on or finish?
- What conversations do I need to have?
- Looking ahead, what do I need to do today to accomplish future goals?
- Do I have any incompletions from yesterday or earlier days?

Next, identify how much time you project that each activity will take. This is important so that you can learn how much time things tend to take over time. Then, identify at what time you will take these actions. If you have back to back meetings, there should be close to nothing on your to-do list. You simply don't have time. If you have a lot of “must-do's” you can't go to all of the meetings.

A cautionary note: The daily to-do list is a list of actions that you absolutely intend to do that day. It is not a list of everything that you need to do over the next week.

Using the Daily To-Do List

Keep your list nearby. It may be on your computer, your Blackberry or you may have a handwritten list in your planner or on a 3x5 card. As you take action on the items, cross

off the action. As other “today” items appear, write them down. As you avoid taking action on certain items, note this and determine how to take action.

- Is there a piece of information missing?
- Is that action item too big or too time consuming?
- Do you have to chunk it down so that you are willing to take action?

Pay attention to what you use as distractions. This is a tool for observing your pressures and choices in action.

Self-Talk for Taking Action

- “I can wait to check my e-mail. There is nothing urgent right now.”
- “I intend to take this action. What is getting in my way?”
- “I’m avoiding this action, what kind of help do I need?”
- “How am I managing my stress right now?”
- “I will be relieved if I just go ahead and do this difficult thing.”

Learning from the Daily To-Do List

There it is in stark display. Here is the list of what you intended to do and a realization of what you actually did. You can stop the self-flagellation right now. It’s about learning about the wonderful process of intention and action.

Here are some things that you can learn about:

- How long things take
- Your patterns of procrastination
- Your unrealistic thinking
- How you intensify your sense of stress by proposing to yourself that you do more than in humanly possible.

You can also learn more about how to make the endless tradeoffs that present themselves all day long. If I say yes to this, I have to say no to that. We simply cannot do everything that we set out to do.

Using this approach, the to-do list becomes an active tool for learning about action. No longer a testament to our failure to do the things we want, it is now an active support in taking action on what matters in a proactive way.