CHAPTER 5

Use the To-Do List Effectively

There's nothing new about the to-do list. Folks have been jotting down lists of things they need to do and then checking each item off the list as they do them for a very long time. The more you need to do, and the more pressure you feel to do it, the more helpful the list can be.

Alan Lakein spelled out the uses and misuses of the to-do list in his groundbreaking 1973 book, *Time Management: How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life*. He showed us how to prioritize those to-do items, making sure we tackled the essential items first. Lakein's idea was to use the list to get everything done, starting with the important. But the overall goal was to live a happy, healthy, well-rounded life. Thankfully for us, Lakein had the wisdom to consider rest, recreation, and relationships as important components of the full life.

Other time management coaches take the tack that more and better organization leads to greater productivity, which is our true goal. David Allen's *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* offers a complete system for capturing and dealing with every task in a straightforward, prioritized manner allowing us to eliminate clutter and stay focused.

Time management consultant Anne McGee-Cooper points out the dangers of too much focus in her book *Time Management for Unmanageable People: The Guilt-Free Way to Organize, Energize and Maximize Your Life*. When you try to get more done in the same amount of time, she counsels, you run the risk of overload, a phenomenon known in computer lingo as "thrashing," when the computer gets too many commands at once and gets stuck trying to decide what to do first.

There are other dangers inherent in developing a list of tasks the night before or during the morning of each workday. To illustrate those dangers, let's look at a sample to-do list, one that makes just about every possible mistake. Here, then, is:

THE TO-DO LIST FROM HELL

We'll impose a mid-level of organization, less than a minute-by-minute script but more than a simple list of tasks.

To do before work
Exercise: 100 situps, 50 pushups, 25 squats
Review agenda and materials for staff meeting
Read *The Wall Street Journal*
Morning commute (17 minutes)
Listen to motivational self-help CD on time management
Morning
Answer faxes, overnight mail, voice mail, e-mail (8 a.m.–9 a.m.)
Staff meeting (9 a.m.–10:30 a.m.)
Organize research for quarterly report (10:30 a.m.–11:45 a.m.)
Drive to lunch meeting (15 minutes)
Lunch meeting (noon–1:30 p.m.)
Afternoon
Write draft of quarterly report (1:45 p.m.–3:00 p.m.)
Meet with committee on workplace expectations (3 p.m.–4:30 p.m.)
Afternoon commute (18 minutes—pick up dry-cleaning)

That's it. There's your workday, all laid out.

Do all that and you'll likely be laid out, too.

Notice that your ability to accomplish all the tasks on your list depends on split-second timing. Everything must go perfectly—no traffic jams, no emergencies, no interruptions.

When's the last time you had a perfect day—no traffic jams, no emergencies, and no interruptions?

That's what I thought.

THE DAY AS YOU REALLY LIVE IT

You sleep through the snooze alarm twice. (You're exhausted from your wrestling match with yesterday's to-do list.) No time for exercise or, for that matter, breakfast—which didn't even make it onto the original list. You're down two, feeling guilty and grouchy before you've even gotten started.

You glance at your meeting notes, skim the left-hand column on the front page of the *Journal,* and sprint to the car. You're in luck. The car starts, even though you've put off getting it serviced—no time. No idiot ruins your day by getting into an accident ahead of you, and traffic flows fairly smoothly.

Even so, the commute takes 18.5 minutes, so you're already running ninety seconds behind. You didn't get to listen to your motivational CD, either, because the CD player in the car jammed. (Better put "get CD player fixed" on your future to-do list.)

You can anticipate the rest. (You don't have to anticipate it. You've *lived* it.) You don't even get close to going through all the voice mail, let alone the e-mail. The meeting starts late and runs long—don't they always? It's too late to tackle the quarterly report, and you spend the rest of the morning answering the phone and battling e-mail.

After a lunch you didn't taste and a meeting you didn't need, you finally get a few minutes for those notes for the quarterly report. You're tired, grouchy, full of a chicken enchilada that refuses to settle down and let itself be digested, and preoccupied with the meeting you've got to get to in a few minutes. No wonder the report refuses to organize itself.

Another meeting (starts late, runs long), another snarling, gut-wrenching commute, a wasted stop at the dry-cleaners (in your rush this morning, you left your claim ticket on the bureau).

Another day shot.

And now it's time to start the second shift, the workday put in at home sweet home.

Pretty dismal scene, isn't it? And not really that much of an exaggeration.

Did the to-do list help? Sure. It provided a record of what you *didn't* get done while you were doing other things, and it helped you to go to bed guilty and frustrated by every unchecked item.

What went wrong? You failed to plan for the unplanned. You weren't realistic about your own capacities or about the real time required to do things. You left important stuff off the list that needed to be done, and spent too much time on low-value busywork.

In short, this wasn't a to-do list. It was a wish list, a fantasy, an unattainable dream, an invitation to frustration and fatigue.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CREATING A HEALTHY TO-DO LIST

The following list of suggestions incorporates some effective techniques for creating an effective to-do list. If some of the suggestions seem to contradict others, it's because they do. It is hoped that some techniques will appeal to certain readers. Embrace those that work for you.

1. Don't Put Too Much on It

This is fundamental. Master this one, and everything else falls into place.

Be realistic in your expectations and your time estimates. Make a real-world list, not an itinerary for fantasyland. Otherwise, you'll spend the day running late, running scared, and just flat-out running to catch up. You won't even have time to notice how your efficiency drops as you become cranky and exhausted.

Think about what absolutely needs your attention, tasks that no one else can do, and put those things on your list. Because you've

planned your big projects, calculated how much time they require, and when each stage needs to be completed (haven't you?), put the must-do steps on your list.

But don't jam the list. By putting the absolutely most important, must-do items on your list, you'll find that there is no room for the less important, optional, and even forgettable tasks. That's okay. Let the list help you organize, keep on task, and get the important jobs done.

If by some miracle things take less time than you had allowed for, rejoice! You've given yourself the gift of found time, yours to spend however you want and need to.

To help follow rule #1, follow #2.

2. Put Some Air in It

Overestimate the commute time. Figure in the wait before the meeting, the time spent on hold, the traffic backup. Due to Murphy's Law, planning for a possible traffic jam ensures that it won't occur, and you will arrive early at your destination. Allowing yourself just enough time for your trip, however, guarantees a delay. Now you know.

3. List Possibilities, Not Imperatives

This speaks more to your frame of mind when you make the list than to the specific notations on that list. You're listing those tasks that you hope, want, and, yes, need to finish during the day. You're not creating a blueprint for the rest of the universe, and your plans don't have the force of natural law.

What happens if you don't get to everything on your list? What happens, for example, if you wake up simply too ill to crawl out of bed, let alone tackle the crammed workday?

I'm talking serious sick here, not the borderline sore throat and headache that might keep you in bed on a Saturday but not on a workday. In a way, the serious sickness is easier, because you don't have to decide whether or not to attempt to go to work, and you don't have to feel guilty about staying in bed while the rest of the world is tending to business. (Depending on your tolerance for pain and your level of guilt, you might have to be near death to achieve this state.)

Let's suppose you're sick enough to have to stay flat on your back in bed for two days, and you can barely wobble around the house in bathrobe and slippers on the third. In all, you miss an entire week of work.

Meanwhile, what happened to the stuff on your to-do list?

The meetings went on without you. Folks figured out they could live without the quarterly report for another week. You've got 138 messages on voice mail (sixty-two of them from the same person), 178 e-mails (fifty-two of them copies of replies and replies to replies by multiple recipients on a single question), and a desk awash in memos, faxes, mail, and other unnatural disasters. You take stuff home for a week, trying to get caught up.

That's bad, but it isn't *that* bad. You didn't die. You didn't lose a loved one. Western civilization did not grind to a halt. Commerce and government managed to struggle on without you.

It's too late to respond to some of those urgent e-mails and messages, but it turns out they really didn't need a response after all.

Try to remember that the next time you're relatively healthy but nevertheless falling behind on the day's tasks.

Think you've had a bad day at the office? Consider former Los Angeles Dodger center fielder Willie Davis, who met his own personal disaster during the second game of the 1965 World Series against the Baltimore Orioles. In the top of the fifth inning of a 0–0 tie, with Dodger ace Sandy Koufax on the mound, Davis managed to make three errors in one inning, including two on the

same play, to blow the game. The Dodgers never recovered, losing the series in four straight games.

After his record-setting game, Davis was philosophical. "It ain't my life," he told a vast radio and television audience. "And it ain't my wife. So why worry?"

Another baseball player/philosopher, Satchel Paige, put it this way: "Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you."

> *God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish one from the other.*
>
> —Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), U.S. theologian

But we don't really believe or act on such adages.

None of this is to suggest that what you do isn't important—at least as important as playing baseball. I'm simply saying that you, and I, and everybody else, need to keep things in proper perspective.

4. Schedule Your Tasks

If you can assign a time slot in your day to accomplish a particular task, there is a much greater likelihood that you will actually do it. You will be mentally prepared, committed to tackling the job, and less prone to distractions if it's scheduled with a beginning and end point. With onerous tasks in particular, scheduling a one-hour or just a half-hour period makes the job less threatening.

5. Don't Carve the List in Stone

Your list has to be flexible if it's going to do you any good. You have to be able to change it, digress from it, flip it on its ear, add to it, wad it up and toss it in the recycle bin—if it's really going to help.

Find a flexible format that works for you. If you like an intricate grid system, with squares for every five minutes during the day, go for the grid. If you keep your list on a PDA, complete with abbreviations that only you understand, that's fine. If crayon on butcher paper is more your style, start scrawling.

Don't try to fit a format; none are perfect. Try some or all of them until you find or create a format that works for you.

6. Order Creatively

Make sure the most important tasks get done before you drown in a sea of relative trivia. Answer the e-mail first if it's absolutely the top priority on your list. If it isn't, schedule it for later in the day, or if possible, establish one or two periods at the same time every day to tackle e-mail. Don't do it first simply because it's there, demanding attention, or because it's relatively easy, or because you've gotten into the habit of doing it first. It's too easy to be caught up in an extensive e-mail conversation on a marginal project, and find that half of your morning is shot.

Try to vary your pace, alternating difficult and easy, long and short, jobs requiring creative thought with rote functions. Change activities often enough to keep fresh.

Attack mentally taxing jobs when you're most alert and energetic. For most of us, this means first thing in the morning. If you save them for later, you're admitting that you aren't going to work on them.

7. Turn the Big Jobs into Small Jobs

When large tasks are involved, it's important to define and isolate (divide and conquer) the components of the task. In fact, it's essential to break down a large task into small tasks to understand

what steps are involved and in what order they must be completed in order to finish the larger goal.

If one of your tasks is writing a product development plan, for example, and you know the amount of time and effort it will consume, defining the parts of the plan will make it much more controllable. You may avoid the task if it's "write a product development plan," but "collect competitive data" is much more approachable. By allotting just half an hour to this step, you're more likely to do it and reap that sense of accomplishment towards the overall goal.

8. Schedule Breaks, Time-Out Time, and Little Rewards

Most of us schedule "rest" for last—if we schedule it at all. By the time we get to it, *if* we get to it, it's too late to do us any good.

If you don't put rest on the list, you won't do it. So put it on the list with a start point and an end point. And don't save it for last. Plan the rest for when it will do you some good, before you become too tense or exhausted. Brief rests at the right times will help you maintain a steady, efficient work pace.

Instead of waiting until the end of the day for that 15 minutes of pleasure reading, for example, schedule three five-minute reading breaks during the day. You may even want and need to schedule that game of catch with your kid or that walk around the neighborhood with your spouse. You can even use software that will alert you to your scheduled breaks so you don't have to remember them.

A word of semi-serious caution here, which is best stated by Glasser's Corollary of Murphy's Law:

> *If, of the seven hours you spend at work, six hours and fifty-five minutes are spent working at your desk, and the rest of the time you throw the bull with your cubicle-mate, the time at*

which your supervisor will walk in and ask what you're doing can be determined to within five minutes.

9. Schedule Long-Range Personal Goals

You know you should do some serious financial planning. You know you should have a current will. You know you should create a systematic plan for home maintenance and repair.

If you know all that and never seem to get to it—put it on the schedule. And, again, if you schedule these goals in manageable steps, you'll be much more likely to actually do them.

10. Be Ready to Abandon the List

"If you only write the story that is planned," writer and teacher Ellen Hunnicutt tells her students, "you miss the story that is revealed."

The same goes for the story of your life. The most important thing you do all day, all year, or even all lifetime, may never appear on any to-do list or show up on the day planner. Never get so well organized and so scheduled that you stop being alert to life's possibilities—the chance encounter, the sudden inspiration.

Not all surprises are bad surprises. It just seems that way sometimes.

For a delightful depiction of the dangers of developing list addiction (which surely must have its own twelve-step programs and support groups by now), read "A List," one of Arthur Loebel's delightful Frog and Toad stories for children.

"I have many things to do," Toad realizes one morning. "I will write them all down on a list so that I can remember them."

He writes down "wake up" and, realizing that he's already done that, crosses it off—a great momentum-builder.

Other items include "getting dressed," "eating breakfast," and "going for a walk with Frog."

Disaster strikes when a gust of wind snatches the paper from Toad's hand and poor Toad finds himself incapable of acting without the list to guide him.

Toad's story has a happy ending. You'll just have to make the time to read it for yourself.

11. You Don't Have to Make a List

The to-do list is a tool. Techniques for creating an effective list are suggestions, not commandments. If they help, follow them—adapting and modifying to fit your own circumstances and inclinations. If they don't help, make your own kind of list, or don't make any list at all. If you find yourself spending too much time making and revising the list, for example, or if you never refer to the list once it's completed, then the to-do list may not be for you. You won't have "failed time management." You'll have simply investigated a process that helps some folks and not others, and found that you are in the "not others" category.

Bonus Suggestion: Create a Not-to-Do List

Along with noting and organizing the tasks you'll do, you might also want to write down those things you *won't* do.

I'm not talking about the sorts of epic life-pledges that appear on lists of New Year's resolutions, stuff like: stop smoking, don't nag, and cut consumption of chocolate. You can certainly make that kind of list if you find it helpful. Instead, I'm referring to day-to-day tasks that have fallen to you by custom, habit, or lot, but that should be done by someone else or not done at all.

Examine large tasks (serving on the school board) and small ones (responding to every memo from the district supervisor) to

make sure (1) they need to be done and (2) you're the one who needs to do them. If the task fails on either count, put it on the *not*-to-do list.

Time management isn't just or even primarily about doing more things in the same amount of time or doing the same number of things in less time. Time management involves choosing to do the *right* things.