



Simple Steps to Personal Effectiveness

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We would all like to be more effective – to get the really important stuff done effortlessly, to simply do the things that we don't like doing or want to do without any distraction, to get much more done to the very best of our ability in far less time and have plenty more time to do all the things that we keep promising ourselves that we will do – spend much more time doing the things that we really and truly enjoy. There you have it – my definition of personal effectiveness.

How far removed is that from your ordinary daily life? Let's start with the first big stumbling block that most of us have in our lives: we all have things that we know that we have to do but that we keep putting off. A classic example: a client, his company's Chief Executive, has to write his CEO Report for his Board every three months. He knows that he has to do it, he knows when it has to be done, so he starts working on it two weeks before each deadline. Wrong! He starts thinking that he must do it, thinking that he really finds it a big bore and knowing, like every other quarter, he will rush it in the hour before the deadline. This doesn't stop him taking out the notes and reports he needs a couple of weeks beforehand. It doesn't stop him putting them in his briefcase night after night, feeling guilty each following morning that his briefcase returns with him to the office unopened, gradually feeling more and more stressed out at the level of his own ineffectiveness, until he has no choice but to sit down and do it. It takes him around sixty minutes – but how much time has he wasted, how much energy has he poured down the drain in the days and weeks that he agonizes over writing the damn thing?

Which is better – to do something or to think about doing it (or worse, to think about how you don't like doing it)? A child in kindergarten knows the answer to that question! But it seems that we adults don't – we'd prefer to let our mind play tricks on us, because that's what's going on when you entertain useless, counter-productive thoughts about stuff that you should simply just do. So, when you find yourself prevaricating over something that you know you have to do, stop, clear your mind and either do it or decide when you're going to do it and do nothing about it in the meantime. (We'll talk about "clearing your mind" in a minute – I've decided not to do it just yet!!!)

Secondly, we all have really important things to do – that includes work, business and personal – but we often fill our time with crap. We'd prefer to read emails, that were written for no one to read,

instead of taking a sensible and enjoyable lunch hour (I think the busier that we think we are, the more needed we feel). We wallow in the newspaper's inner pages – where we read about assaults, murders, rapes, child abuse, stuff that no one should bother reading – instead of getting our work done and, as a result, we're always late picking up our children from crèche. We fool ourselves when we tell ourselves that our family and health are our priorities – but then do absolutely nothing about it because we don't have the time. You do have the time – you're just wasting it. You have your own unique set of bad time wasting habits – you know what they are, write them down. Anytime that you find yourself drifting into any of those habits, stop, clear your mind, decide which one of your key priorities needs your attention today and do something concrete about it.

Even after we've stopped wasting energy thinking about things that we don't like doing, putting off things but wasting energy thinking about them, even after we've stopped ourselves in our tracks to try to get something done in relation to one of our major priorities, there's still an awful lot of crap that most of us have to work through – from reading those emails, to doing our small business accounts, to putting the dishes in the dishwasher, to doing the laundry. All this mundane crap still has to be done. First of all, no it doesn't – never read an email that's been copied to everyone in the office – if the writer wants your feedback, let them ask you personally. Never take other people's work onto your shoulders – know when to say “no”. Never let the office gossip embroil you in their sad little world. But, what of the mundane stuff that needs doing? It's only mundane because you think it's mundane and that thought wastes your energy and slows you down. If you find yourself thinking like this, stop, clear your mind and do the mundane task paying it complete attention. Then, the mundane task becomes, in itself, a mind-clearing exercise.

Which leads me nicely to what I mean by clearing your mind. Your mind is full of useless thoughts – we've talked about some of them already. These thoughts stunt your personal effectiveness – at best, they slow you down – when I work with depressed people I find that useless thought grinds people to a full stop. You've got to get out of the habit of paying attention to these energy sapping thoughts and the best way to do that is to pay attention to something that is real and present – the here and now. When I say “stop” – I mean find somewhere quiet (you'll only need a couple of minutes) sit down, close your eyes and listen to how the sounds around you become magnified, notice how the feelings in your hands, feet, forehead, wherever you like, become more tangible. Your senses are telling you what's real – clearing your mind is as simple as coming to your senses.