

To Do or Not to Do

By

Scott Friedman, CSP

That is the question...whether 'tis nobler to spend eighteen hours a day trying frantically to wipe out your "to do" list, or to throw in the towel and admit that not even an army of ants could get it all done. You're zipping along in the fast lane of life. You've got e-mail, voice mail, a pager, a cell phone, and a lap top computer-- all supposedly designed to bring you convenience and flexibility. Along with all that convenience are 53 unanswered e-mails, a pile of voice mails delivered at midnight, and a page sounding in the middle of your child's soccer game. What's worse is that we have come to accept this high-speed rat race as the norm. Humor me and answer these questions:

- Do you have things on your "to do" list from last week, last month, last year?
- Do you go into withdrawal if you forget your cell phone?
- Do you routinely work at home in the evenings or on weekends?
- Have you considered having your pager implanted on your arm?
- Do you fantasize about putting this message on your voice mail:

"Hi, this is Barb in Marketing. I can't take your call right now because I'm busy having a nervous breakdown. I'm sure that the reason you called is very important. I hope to call you back sometime this decade if I don't die of exhaustion. Have a terrific day. Beeeeeeeeep."

It's no surprise if you answered yes to any of those questions. An article in *Fast Company* magazine entitled, "Don't Manage Time, Manage Yourself" by David Beardsley states that the average businessperson has a chronic backlog of 200 to 300 hours of uncompleted work! That's a month or more! It's impossible to catch up-- that's the bad news. People everywhere are routinely a month behind.

That brings us to the \$63,000 question. If we can't get it all done, how do we actually live with the pressure of always being behind? The answer just may lie in the wisdom of the Tao Te Ching. This ancient Chinese book reminds us to seek simplicity, to let go. The Tao states, "In letting go, it all gets done. The world is won by those who let it go." The good news is that when you surrender to the reality that you can't do it all, your stress level goes way down and your quality of life goes way up.

Am I saying just forget about your responsibilities and walk away? No, ignoring things won't make them go away. I'm saying take some time and look at yourself and your life and figure out what you need to let go of to feel good. Maybe you need to let go of the belief that in order to go home from work you must have your work finished, or have a very good handle on it. Perhaps you need to let go of the idea that you have to be in total control all the time. With change being flung at us constantly, we have a tendency to hold on tighter because of our fears. Yet, if we could only let go and live with uncertainty, we'd actually be a lot happier.

It's tough letting go because we feel out of our comfort zones and even incompetent at times. I know I get nervous when I feel like I'm in completely new territory and nothing seems familiar. I had a Macintosh computer ever since I can remember. Many of my friends and colleagues switched to an IBM platform because the Mac was no longer meeting their needs. I shared some of the same frustrations, yet I didn't want to switch. I had never even turned on a PC before. Finally, my frustration got so high that I made the switch. At first, the learning curve was painful, but now I look back and I can't believe I waited so long.

Don't we frequently say that after we've made a major switch in our lives? Once we released the fear and took the plunge—whatever it was—we often say, "I wish I had done it sooner." The other great bonus in letting go of fear and making a change is the learning that comes from it. It's revitalizing. It's energizing.

Staying energized is tough if you feel like you are always behind. Living faster and harder does not improve quality of life; living with more focus does. You can't be focused and energetic if you are running nonstop, trying to do everything. Instead of adding every event, project, goal and opportunity to your list that comes your way, you must become discriminating. You need to become a connoisseur of possible "to do's." Reframe the way you think about your "to do" list. Instead of viewing your list as an endless list of obligations, it should be a reflection of your passions and priorities. It should be an honor to get on your list.

The key to creating a Grade A list is to really take some time to affirm your priorities. To be effective, this requires honest soul searching about some difficult choices. A fast track at the office, involved parenting, a serious hobby, volunteering, and season tickets to 81 home baseball games is probably too much to juggle. You can't avoid making these choices. You have to set your priorities.

Once you have decided what's important your world gets a whole lot clearer. When you ask yourself, "Is chairing this committee in alignment with my priorities?" you'll know whether to accept or not. You will be able to let go of other potential distractions and unwanted commitments. Jeffrey Miller, former CEO of Documentum said it well when he stated, "There is always too much work to do and not enough time to do it. In order to prevent insanity, frustration and burn out, we need to develop our own pace and then develop laser-like focus on your priorities."

Day in and day out it's still tough to keep track of priorities. I have found something that really helps keep my priorities in focus. Every night, the last thing I do before I end my workday is to make a realistic list for the following day. Don't make your list too long to achieve. Stick to four to six items. Through trial and error, I have discovered that it's best to allow for the unexpected. I leave open some unscheduled time to build in for distractions that invariably crop up. The other element I include is time for important long-term projects. I spend a set amount of time working on one component of a big project. This is true whether it's a work-related project or a personal goal.

The other tools I regularly use are three questions I repeat like a mantra. They are:

- What's important? This reminds me what my priorities are because sometimes it's hard to decline appealing invitations that are not reflective of my priorities.
- What's important now? What has to be done now, today, and this week? This keeps me from getting distracted and focusing on good things at the wrong time.
- What's important, not? I phrase this one with the "not" at the end because so often we think something is important and then belatedly realize it's not.

Once you determine what's important and establish your priorities, it becomes much easier to eliminate the clutter that can cloud your vision. Once we let go of what isn't important and what we can't control, we can enjoy the wild ride. Maybe you can even let go and ride "no-handed!"

Reprinted with permission from Scott Friedman. Scott Friedman is a motivational humorist who speaks on sales, service, change and humor. Check him out at www.FunnyScott.com.