

## What Should You Stop Doing?

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When we attend staff meetings, planning meetings, and business reviews, we inevitably leave with a list of actions to put on our to-do list. We are generally good at figuring out what we need to do and putting plans in place to do them. The problem is that our to-dos often exceed our capacity to do them. When we add up all that we hope to accomplish, we end up with a list well above the 100% we have to give. It is a rare occurrence in our 24x7 always on, always working world that we don't have too much to do and too little time to do it in.

If we can give only 100% of our capacity, why do we put more than 100% on our to-do list? If we expect to give only 50-60 hours a week to our work, why do we tell ourselves, and others, that we can complete 80-90 hours of work? Not only are we disappointing people including ourselves as we run perpetually on the *treadmill of busyness as usual*, we are stressing out and burning out. The importance has never been greater than now for people to learn to prioritize their time and decide what they need to not do rather than merely think about what they need to do.

There was a time in my life when I had a senior level corporate job, owned two small businesses, owned four homes, and supported five children. When I look back on those years, I wonder how I did it. In retrospect, I'm not sure I did it very well. Not until I learned to consciously decide what not to do did I become truly productive, effective, and balanced. Not until I consolidated my material possessions, focused my work on fewer meaningful outcomes, said "no" to some of my pastimes, and put constraints on what I did say yes to did I find time to achieve what I needed to achieve.

How about you? Are you finding it all but impossible to get everything done? Are you quick to take on more assignments and to-dos, but struggle to find time to complete them all? Are you adding more products and services to your product portfolio, but unwilling to kill the old ones that languish? Are you committing to more charitable activities without resigning from those that you need to resign from? Are you saying yes to requests for help without considering the opportunity costs of what you won't be able to do? Do you lack a healthy work/life balance? Are you chronically late to your children's sporting events, meetings, and appointments? Do you struggle to get out of bed in the morning because you worked late the night before? If so, consider that it's time to start thinking about what you should stop doing.

Saying no, like stopping a habit, is difficult. It takes courage, self-control, and confidence to tell people that you can't accommodate their request. It takes discipline to not allow the urgent to displace the important. It takes mental toughness to let go of an enjoyable pastime, special project, or long-standing tradition. It also takes intelligence. While you might be tempted to pack more activities into your already overbooked schedule, a little thinking helps you realize that you can't do it. So stop trying.

Here are ten principles to follow in determining what to do, what not to do, and how to achieve more in less time:

- 1. Plan** – Create a plan with specific goals, actions, and incremental milestones that you can track. Define your goals in terms that create a positive vivid mental picture of your desired end-state. Written goals help you establish clarity and provide accountability. Regularly review them and your progress against them. Like going on a trip, you will arrive at your destination much faster and easier when you have preplanned the best route.
- 2. Focus on the Important** - With the many communications channels and other distractions vying for your attention, staying focused is a constant challenge. Don't let the urgent, convenient, or loudest distract you from the important. Stay focused on reaching the milestones that support your goals. Create the habit of working intentionally. Make a "not to-do" list and adhere to it. Minimize your distractions. Turn off your notifications except during the time you have allotted to review them.
- 3. Set Your Own Standards** - Don't mindlessly follow social and cultural norms. Set your own example. Lead. Be proactive. Follow your own values. Establish your own principles and philosophies. Define the core guidelines by which you will operate your business and your life. Let them guide you instead of following the latest fads and over-hyped products.



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**4. Learn to Say “No”** – You can’t do everything. You can’t attend every meeting or social function you are invited to. You can’t attend every family gathering. You might like to, but there aren’t enough hours in the day. Learn to say no. Or if an event is truly worthy, learn to use “yes, if ...” instead of “yes”. In other words, put conditions on your commitments like adding “if we can shorten the meeting to 30 minutes” or “if you can have food brought in and we can meet during our lunchtime.”

**5. Delegate** – Just because there are activities you can’t say no to doesn’t mean you have to be the one who does them. No one is successful on their own. Solicit the help of others. Outsource the activities that others can do as well as or better than you. Delegate responsibilities to people who have more bandwidth than you. If you have a house to clean and a teenager at home who needs some spending money, pay them to clean. If you were hit by a bus tomorrow and had to spend the next month in a hospital, consider who would do your work and start delegating it to them now.

**6. Be More Productive at What You Do** – For those activities you must do yourself, find ways to be as efficient as you can. Your time is your most valuable resource. Don’t squander it. Create reusable templates for repeated tasks. Fully utilize your tools and productivity applications. Streamline your processes and eliminate time wasted on activity that doesn’t add value directly.

**7. Get Organized** – You can’t be your most productive if you’re not organized. Stacks of inbound correspondence mixed with reference material and time sensitive documents aren’t conducive to quick reference and follow-up. Establish a filing system that enables immediate access. Set up a “one-touch” approach to dealing with emails, letters, messages, invoices, reference materials, and approval requests. Follow the “do, delegate, delete, date, or file” principle.

**8. Maintain Your Energy** – Being tired deprives you of the energy you need to stay productive and focused. Obtain a good night’s rest of uninterrupted sleep – seven hours if possible. Eat a balanced diet and follow good nutritional guidelines. Take vitamin and mineral supplements. Exercise at least 30 minutes three times a week at your doctor’s recommended cardio level. Exercise increases the capacity of your body’s power supply.

**9. Don’t Worry** – Take your work one day at a time. Give each day your best and be satisfied that you did enough. Don’t worry about what you have left to do. Worrying causes chronic stress that creates health issues and decreases your energy. Studies find that 92% of what people worry about won’t happen, has already happened, or won’t change what happens. Channel your energy into more productive uses. Go exercise instead.

**10. Maintain Some White Space on Your Calendar** – Operate as if there isn’t as much availability on your calendar as it appears. Allow time for breaks. Leave time for reflection. The cliché that your best ideas come while in the shower is more fact than fiction. When relaxed, your brain is free to tap into its vast resources and capabilities. Albert Einstein, Sir Isaac Newton, Archimedes of Syracuse, and countless others were relaxing when they came up with their world-changing innovative ideas.

**Bonus: Consolidate Your Possessions** – Possessions are great when they enable your productivity, comfort, and enjoyment, but are not so great when they require maintenance, cleaning, protection, and upgrades. Realize that the value of your stuff might be less than the time, money, and worry you put into it. Consider renting, borrowing, or doing without. Just because you want something and can afford it doesn’t make it a good purchase decision.

Follow these principles to achieve your top priorities and a healthy work/life balance. Good luck!

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This article adapted from content in Mike Hawkins’ book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches. Mike is award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* ([www.activatingyourambition.com](http://www.activatingyourambition.com)), and president of Alpine Link Corp ([www.alpinelink.com](http://www.alpinelink.com)), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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