

You Need a System

But keep it simple.

The last session was about deciding what matters. This one is about the machinery that keeps you pointed at it once Monday arrives, because a mission statement in a drawer changes nothing.

Strategy and tactics

- Strategy is the what. Tactics are the how. Sun Tzu: all men can see the tactics I use to conquer, but what none can see is the strategy out of which great victory is evolved.
- That is why copying visible behavior so rarely works, and why marketing depends on it. Wear the turtleneck and you are not Steve Jobs. Buy the shoes and you are not the athlete. The visible part was never the part that mattered.
- Sun Tzu again, and it is the line to keep: strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory, and tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.
- Underneath both sits a distinction worth being precise about. **Values are internal and chosen. Principles are external and indifferent to you.** Your values govern your behavior; principles govern the consequences. The winning move is to align the first with the second, and no amount of sincerity substitutes.
- Oliver Wendell Holmes: I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my right arm for the simplicity on the other side of it. A good system is the second kind, and it always looks obvious once someone else has done the work.

Two more things follow from that. The first is that you can see something before it exists, which is a genuinely strange human capacity and the entire basis of planning. Somebody saw the building before there was a building. Applied to a life, it means the design happens once, in your head, before any of it is built. The second is blunter: if you want a particular result, work out the price and then pay it. That sounds trivial and it is most of the distance between people who get what they wanted and people who did not.

Seven reasons people do not have a system

1. **I do not have time for a system.** This is usually a way of saying you do not want to work out what it should be. A system means you stop deciding what to do next, you do the right things instead of the loud ones, and you eliminate the wasted hours and the last-minute drama that were costing you the time in the first place.
2. **Systems are rigid.** This confuses strategy with tactics. Your strategy holds; your tactics adapt weekly. A system that cannot flex was a bad system, not evidence against systems.
3. **Busy equals productive.** In the absence of any real measure, knowledge workers fall back on an industrial one: doing a lot of visible things. Busyness is a proxy for productivity in exactly the way that noise is a proxy for music.
4. **Multitasking works.** What it produces is continuous partial attention: always on, anywhere, any time, with an artificial sense of constant crisis. It degrades reflection, decision-making and creative thought, and it leaves you overstimulated and unsatisfied. We have become so accessible that we are inaccessible.
5. **Systems kill creativity.** Creative work is still work, and a system creates hours you did not previously have. Nobody ever wrote a book in the gaps between notifications.
6. **My lack of a system is my system.** The problem is not that it fails, it is that it cannot improve, and it generates unnecessary drama that everyone around you also absorbs.
7. **Following a system is too hard.** It is a few principles and a few tools. You have learned considerably harder things by accident.

Consider what the alignment actually looks like. If you value achievement, the principle underneath it is the law of the harvest, and the harvest does not negotiate about the planting. If you value strength and resilience, the principle is opposition: the load is what builds the capacity. If you value personal productivity, the principle is planning and process, not effort and adrenaline. In each case the value is what you want and the principle is what the world will actually charge you for it.

The weekly review

One ritual holds the whole system together, and if you take one thing from this session, take this. Put it in the calendar as a real appointment, give it at least an hour, and go somewhere you will not be interrupted, ideally somewhere you do not associate with work. Bring your calendar, your lists, and something to write with.

1. Prepare your mind. Three to five minutes of slow breathing, or music that lifts you, or prayer or reflection, and then reconnect to your mission. The point is to arrive at the planning as the version of yourself that wrote the mission statement,

not the version that just closed the inbox.

2. Evaluate last week. What went well? What did not? What could I do better? What am I doing wrong that needs fixing? What new thing should I start doing to move life in the direction I actually want?

3. Review your roles. Go through them one at a time, ask what each needs this week, and then schedule the answers rather than merely noting them.

4. Preview the week ahead, in three moves.

- **Empty your head.** Everything you are carrying goes onto paper or into the system. Your mind is for having ideas, not for holding them.
- **Review the calendar,** and guard the morning for work that needs concentration. Then **plug in the important and not urgent** before anything else can take the space: planning, exercise, personal finance, learning and writing, and the people you love. Make them standing appointments. Nothing external will ever schedule these for you, which is exactly why they vanish.
- **Review your lists,** and run each item through four questions.

The four questions

Does this bring me closer to the life I want? (Is it important?) Must I do it, or could someone else? (Delegate.) Is there a way to do it more efficiently or less often? (Optimize.) What happens if I simply do not? (Delete, and this should always be on the table.)

The not-to-do list

As real as the to-do list and more useful. Things that distract me. Things that stress me. Things that drain me. Things I merely feel obliged to do. Things that do not actually need doing. Things I cannot control. Things I could hand off.

Two habits make the review survive contact with a real week. **Guard the morning** for whatever needs actual concentration, because that hour is the only one nobody else has claimed yet and it is the first thing you will trade away. **Use the calendar as a tickler file:** anything you need to be reminded of on a specific future date goes on that date rather than into a list you will have to re-read forty times before it becomes relevant.

Mine, concretely: do not check email or the phone first thing. Do not answer calls from numbers I do not recognize. Do not sacrifice exercise time. Do not multitask. Do not spend time on social media. Do not over-volunteer. Do not micromanage. Do not use the phone at home.

How to keep it from collapsing

- **Do not carry too many tasks.** Three to five a day. A list of twenty is a list of none, and it teaches you to ignore your own system.
- **Do not be strict about the process,** and do not be overly ambitious. Bennett again, from 1910, and he is right every time: most people who are ruined are ruined by attempting too much. Avoid at any cost the risk of an early failure. A glorious failure leads to nothing, while a petty success may lead to a success that is not petty.
- **Do show up** for the review, every week, including the weeks it feels pointless. Especially those.
- **Do track what you finished.** Keep a done list alongside the to-do list, including the unplanned things that ended up being the day. Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer found that of everything that lifts emotion, motivation and perception during a working day, the single most powerful is making progress in meaningful work. People give up because they measure the distance remaining instead of the distance covered.

Where the system actually gets tested

- Not in the review. In the moment of choice, usually a small one, usually involving a person. The system exists so that the choice has already been made once, calmly, by someone with more information than you have at 4pm on a Thursday.
- The four guiding principles, if you want them on one line each. Think about what you are trying to achieve and about the next action that most moves you toward it. Remove the inessential clutter. Think backwards from what you want to avoid. Stay adaptable, because the conditions will change and the strategy should not have to.

TRY THIS

- Put the weekly review on the calendar right now, with a time and a place.
- Show up to the first one even if you have no idea what to do in it.
- Write your not-to-do list before you touch your to-do list.
- Make one important and not urgent thing a standing appointment this week.
- Start a done list, and read it on Friday.

Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat. (Sun Tzu.)

Resources

The weekly review, on one card

- **Prepare.** Calendar appointment, an hour, somewhere quiet, tools in hand.
- **1. Prepare your mind.** Breathe, music, prayer or reflection, reconnect to the mission.
- **2. Evaluate last week.** What worked, what did not, what to fix, what to start.
- **3. Review roles.** Ask what each needs, then schedule the answer.
- **4. Preview the week.** Empty your head, review the calendar and plug in the important and not urgent, then process the lists through the four questions.

Referenced in this session

- Sun Tzu, on strategy and tactics.
- Oliver Wendell Holmes, on simplicity on the other side of complexity.
- Linda Stone, who named continuous partial attention.
- Cal Newport, on busyness as a proxy for productivity.
- Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, "The Power of Small Wins."
- Arnold Bennett, *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day*, 1910.
- Chip and Dan Heath, *Switch*, for the elephant, the rider and the path.

Reading

- *Getting Things Done*, David Allen. Where "empty your head" comes from, and the closest thing to a standard reference.
- *Deep Work*, Cal Newport. Why concentration is now both rare and valuable.
- *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey. First things first, roles and goals, and the weekly review itself.
- *When*, Daniel Pink. Timing treated as a science rather than an instinct.

Theme: thinking well. From my course *Getting Stuff Done*. The companion sessions are on priorities, tools, and defending your attention.