

The Vital Few

Distinguishing the vital few from the trivial many.

Thoreau: it is not enough to be busy, so are the ants; the question is what we are busy about. Peter Drucker put the same knife in from the other side: there is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all.

That is the entire problem with productivity advice, and it is why this session comes before the ones about systems and tools. Efficiency applied in the wrong direction just gets you to the wrong place sooner. The ladder against the wrong wall does not care how fast you climb it.

You will arrive

- Become a student of inevitability. Without kidding yourself: if you keep your current daily practices, where does that put you in ten years?
- Five years from now you will arrive somewhere. That part is not optional. The only question is whether the destination was designed or undesigned, and an undesigned destination is how people end up living somewhere they did not choose, doing something they did not pick.
- The good news is that this is unusually reversible for a law of nature. A person can live one way for five years, tear up the script, and live an entirely different way for the next five.
- The question that quietly changes behavior, asked in the moment rather than in the abstract: is what I am about to do a step toward what matters, or away from it?
- Arnold Bennett described the alternative a century ago as that innumerable band of souls who are haunted, more or less painfully, by the feeling that the years slip by, and slip by, and slip by, and that they have not yet been able to get their lives into proper working order.

Working out what matters

Two exercises, both of which people resist and neither of which takes long.

- **The deathbed exercise.** You are at the end, at home, surrounded by the people you love, reviewing the whole thing. What are you glad about and sad about in your working life? In your relationships? In what you gave away? In what you did for pleasure? Now imagine the person who knows you best is at the bedside and is being completely honest. What do they say to you? What do you say to them? What do you ask them? And what is your last wish?
- The Stoics did this deliberately and called it *memento mori*, a reminder of death, not as morbidity but as a sharpening tool. Seneca: let us prepare our minds as if we had come to the very end of life, postpone nothing, and balance the books each day; the one who puts the finishing touches on his life daily is never short of time. Marcus Aurelius, more bluntly: you could leave life right now, so let that determine what you do and say and think.
- Steve Jobs said remembering he would be dead soon was the most important tool he ever found for making the big decisions, because in the face of it all the external expectations, the pride, and the fear of embarrassment simply fall away, leaving only what is actually important.
- **Resume virtues against eulogy virtues.** The resume ones are accomplishments, work ethic, skills, performance, promotions, and most of us spend twenty years chasing them. The eulogy ones are love, relationships, service, kindness, bravery, honesty, faithfulness. Nobody at the bedside talks about the first list, and everybody organizes their calendar around it.
- The regrets people actually report are consistent and worth reading before you need them: I wish I had lived a life true to myself rather than the one others expected. I wish I had not worked so hard. I wish I had expressed my feelings. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends. I wish I had let myself be happier.

The three economies

- You are running three at once: **health, wealth, and time.** Two of them can be rebuilt. Time cannot.
- Time is gloriously regular and cruelly restrictive. Everyone gets twenty-four hours and nobody gets more, and there are no trust fund babies in the wealth of time. Every slice you spend is taken from another slice.
- Which means that in the end you do not have priorities, you have a calendar, and the calendar is the honest record of what you actually valued.
- Look at the arithmetic for a life of 78 years. Sleeping, working, media and social networks, chores, eating, education, grooming, shopping, childcare, commuting. After all of that, roughly nine years are left over.
- **And nine years go to television, games, and social media.** That is the number worth sitting with. You could double your discretionary life from nine years to eighteen by mostly eliminating the trivial. The next time you say you do not have time, reconsider what you mean.

Cutting the obvious waste is easy. What is hard is cutting the things you genuinely care about but that are not truly important, because those are easy to justify and they are the ones that actually derail you. Every behavior has a cost. Even a neutral one is not neutral, because it occupies time and attention that something better could have had.

The vital few

- Pareto noticed in 1906 that a fifth of Italians owned four fifths of the land, then found the same lopsidedness in the pea plants in his garden. The principle generalizes: a small share of inputs produces most of the output.
- It is counterintuitive because we assume causes carry roughly equal weight, so we treat them equally. When you learn the real ratio it is almost always more imbalanced than you guessed.
- Its evil twin is **Parkinson's law: work expands to fill the time available for its completion**. Left alone, the available space fills with whatever is handy rather than whatever is valuable. The cure is the same in both directions: decide what is most valuable and put that in the space first.
- Einstein described his own method as learning to scent out what leads to fundamentals and to turn aside from everything else, from the multitude of things that clutter up the mind.

The avoid-at-all-cost list. Warren Buffett's pilot, Mike Flint, was talking through his career with Buffett, who gave him an exercise. Write down your top twenty-five goals. Now circle the top five. Flint did, and said he would start on the five immediately and work on the other twenty intermittently, since they were still important. Buffett stopped him. Everything you did not circle just became your avoid-at-all-cost list. No matter what, those get no attention from you until you have succeeded with the top five.

Which is why Jobs said that focus does not mean saying yes to the thing you are focusing on. It means saying no to the hundred other good ideas. The hard part was never picking the winner. It is declining the runners-up.

Questions that find your vital few

The quality of an answer is limited by the quality of the question, so these are worth real time, uninterrupted, with something to write on.

- What is the one thing I could do such that by doing it everything else becomes easier or unnecessary?
- How can I be sure I will be successful and happy in my work, that my relationships with family and close friends become an enduring source of happiness, and that I live a life of integrity? (Clayton Christensen asked his graduating students exactly this.)
- What might I regret when my time is over? Time with family, service, a risk not taken, travel?
- What are my core values, chosen deliberately rather than absorbed?
- What was I born to do, and what are my actual gifts?
- What do I know now that I wish I had learned ten years ago, and what can I start learning now so I do not say that again in ten years?
- What am I ready to let go of that is no longer serving me?

Weniger aber besser. Less, but better.

Three core truths sit underneath all of it. **I choose. Only a few things matter. I can do anything, but not everything.**

Write it down

- A personal mission statement provides focus, simplifies decisions, and holds you accountable to something you actually chose. It is also the single most-skipped step in this entire course.
- Four questions build it. What are your values, which is the foundation? Who do you want to be, which is character? What do you want to do, which is contribution? What are your talents, which is method?
- The shape: **to** [what you want to do] **by** [how you will do it] **so that** [the impact you hope to have]. Mine reads: to serve and bless my family and community, by the disciplined development and joyful sharing of my unique talents. Underneath it sit the enabling commitments, which are the actual work.
- Avoid three things while writing it: analysis paralysis, perfectionism, and comparison. As Sertillanges put it, if I cannot rise to the height of what I admire, I can always rise to my own height, and that is my only goal. Many lives are finer than mine, but none is finer for me.

If a statement of purpose feels too abstract, borrow a form instead. Benjamin Franklin kept a list of thirteen virtues with a one-line definition of each, and worked on one per week, thirteen weeks at a time, for years. A few of them: *Order*, let all your things have their places and each part of your business its time. *Resolution*, resolve to perform what you ought and

perform without fail what you resolve. *Industry*, lose no time, be always employed in something useful, cut off all unnecessary actions. *Tranquility*, be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable. It is a mission statement written as a set of operating instructions, which for some people is the version that actually gets used.

One last thing, which is really the whole session. Charles Francis Adams, grandson and son of presidents, kept a meticulous daily journal and had his children keep them too. One entry reads: went fishing with my son, a day wasted. His son Henry, aged eight, wrote of the same day: went fishing with my father, the most glorious day of my life. You are choosing, constantly, and you do not always know which of the two entries you are living.

TRY THIS

- Do the twenty-five goals exercise, circle five, and name the avoid-at-all-cost list out loud.
- Add up your own week honestly and find the nine years.
- Answer one of the key questions on paper, not in your head.
- Write a first draft of a mission statement and accept that it is bad.
- Ask, once today: is this a step toward what matters, or away from it?

Five years from now you will arrive. The only question is whether the destination was designed.

Resources

A starting list of core values

Circle ten, then cut to five. The cutting is the exercise.

- Achievement, adventure, authenticity, autonomy, authority
- Balance, beauty, boldness, challenge, citizenship
- Community, compassion, competence, contribution, creativity
- Curiosity, determination, fairness, faith, friendship
- Fun, growth, happiness, health, honesty, humor
- Influence, inner harmony, justice, kindness, knowledge
- Leadership, learning, love, loyalty, meaningful work
- Openness, optimism, peace, poise, recognition
- Respect, responsibility, security, self-respect, service
- Spirituality, status, success, trustworthiness, wisdom

Referenced in this session

- Henry David Thoreau, on the ants.
- Peter Drucker, on efficiency in the wrong direction.
- Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, on *memento mori*.
- Steve Jobs, on death as a decision tool, and on focus as saying no.
- David Brooks, for the resume and eulogy virtues distinction.
- Bronnie Ware, for the regrets of the dying.
- Erma Bombeck, "If I had my life to live over."
- Vilfredo Pareto, 1906. C. Northcote Parkinson, 1955.
- Warren Buffett and Mike Flint, the avoid-at-all-cost list.
- Clayton Christensen, the three questions he asked his students.
- A. D. Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life*.
- Arnold Bennett, *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day*, 1910.

Reading

- *Essentialism*, Greg McKeown. Where "less but better" comes from, at length.
- *The One Thing*, Gary Keller. The focusing question, and how to use it.
- *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey. Still the best single framework, and the source of the mission statement exercise.
- *The Road to Character*, David Brooks. The resume and eulogy distinction developed properly.

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