

# effective environments newsletter



CONSULTANTS TO NONPROFITS, SMALL BUSINESSES & ENTREPRENEURS

## TO SAIL A TRUE COURSE, LIST!

### REMEMBER WHAT'S IMPORTANT

In a "Frank and Ernest" cartoon many years ago, one man on a park bench turns to another and observes, "Christmas is almost at our throats!" As cynical as that may sound, the holiday season is now widely touted as "stressful," and "lacking in traditional spirit." If we simply jam more into already heavily-scheduled days, and if we forget to focus on the outcomes that really matter to us, stress is an inevitable result. As with all other aspects of life, our experience of the holidays is ours to generate. This is a good time to remember that, moment by moment, we have a choice about how we will live our lives.

### OVERWHELMED BY PARTICLES?

Regardless of the time of year, when we have several major projects under way at once, we risk becoming unorganized or losing track of the real priorities. With many commitments and multiple tasks, we need a system of personal management that supports us in establishing an order of attack and ensures that we don't drop anything out. At **effective environments**, we call that system an "Action Manager."

### WHAT'S AN ACTION MANAGER?

Your Action Manager is one master list of all the actions you are committed to taking that you will not be taking TODAY. It is drawn from all possible sources of "things to do," including your notes, stray thoughts, papers on your desk and, especially, a reference to your commitments in life as reflected in your weekly priorities.

### HOW IT WORKS

There are three key practices that allow an Action Manager to become a pivotal tool for your effectiveness:

1. List everything there is to do on your Action Manager — and **ONLY** on your Action Manager. Be sure that each item includes a verb indicating the action required.
2. Put a date next to each item, indicating when it will either be done or be rescheduled.
3. Review and update your Action Manager list at least once each day, deleting completed items, adding new ones and

ensuring that all remaining items are assigned due dates that are in the future.

### A FEW EXTRA TIPS

1. Don't write anything on your Action Manager that cannot be completed within a couple of hours or, at most, one day. Break up projects and jobs to be done into milestones that can be scheduled and completed.
2. Use a highlighter to cross off completed or abandoned items. This makes it easier to see what actions are complete and which still need attention. Highlighting also gives you a sense of accomplishment about how much you have gotten done.
3. It is fine to maintain different pages of your Action Manager for different areas of your life. For example, you may wish to have one page (or more) of actions related to home and family, one page for actions relating to marketing or clients, etc.
4. Don't save old Action Manager pages. Write down any information on them that is worth saving in the place where you keep similar information. For example, put



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telephone numbers in your address directory, directions in a separate file.

#### ACTIONS THAT LINGER

If you notice that one or more items tend to remain on your list, getting postponed again and again, here are some possible remedies:

First, confirm that this is an action you are really committed to taking, and that it **WILL** make a difference. If it is really just a “good idea,” move it to a “good idea list.” Then, reschedule yourself to do it when you are ready to take it on.

Confirm that this action is really one for **YOU** to take, and not someone else’s job. Look to see if there is anyone in your life who might support you with all or part of it.

Try rephrasing the action, to make it fresh and new. Or, break it into two or more smaller actions, listed separately, to give yourself an opportunity to accomplish a piece of it quickly and generate momentum.

If all else fails, get support from a partner, buddy or coach and explore together what is needed to complete your incomplete item. It is true that “two heads are better than one, “ and two commitments are definitely more effective than one mind stuck in the morass.

An Action Manager can differ from a typical “to do” list in several key respects:

1. It is comprehensive: Every action is captured in one place, rather than on various lists, message slips, and other scraps of paper. With this system, your computer won’t look like Big Bird, feathered in post-it notes, and you won’t discover forgotten reminders on a napkin in your coat pocket.
2. It is “action-oriented”: Every item on your list includes a verb, thereby focussing your intention and your thinking on a specific action to take. (For example, “car repair” or “transmission problem” are far less likely to spur us to constructive action than “schedule an auto service appointment.”)
3. It supports effective planning and actual fulfillment. *Because* each action is scheduled, you begin right away to envision it complete and to see, in your mind’s eye, approximately *when* it will be completed. Getting the thing done is no longer just a good idea, or something that will happen “someday.” It is part of a plan. In addition, because different actions have different due dates, a sifting of relative priorities begins to occur and it is easier to identify the actions that call out to be taken first.
4. It contributes to peace of mind. Because your Action Manager includes a “due date” for each action, tasks are no longer lumped together, daunting in their volume and indistinguishable in time. Now, everything doesn’t

have to happen at once, so there’s less likelihood you will feel overwhelmed. Each action takes its turn, according to a plan that is workable, and every deadline is in the future, so you are never “behind.”

5. It allows you to clear off your desk (and every other flat surface for miles around). With a single master list of actions to take, you are assured that everything you need to do is displayed in one place. A daily scan of “due dates,” and editing to ensure that each date is a *future* date, will assure that nothing is ever forgotten or dropped out. Therefore, there is no need to keep papers in sight as “reminders” of things to be done. Enter the actions on your Action Manager and then put away the corresponding paperwork until it is time to work on it.

#### CONCLUSION

The worst place to keep anything is in your head. List what there is to do, create a plan for it, and enjoy the freedom of focusing on each task in turn, knowing that you will get to each item in its

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