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BUILD THE ORGANIZATION HABIT

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Some people were born with an organization gene and other weren't. I worked with a woman whose desk looked like a recycling station—papers, books, candy wrappers piled on top of each other. But she knew where everything was, was never harried and most importantly, never missed a deadline.

So being disorganized isn't necessarily a problem. But if being disorganized is having a negative effect on your work or home life then it's time to do something about it.

Here's the secret to getting more organized—it's a habit or a series of habits. It's about creating a routine that allows the good organization habits to become deeply ingrained in your life.

How long does it take to create a habit?

Well, that depends. For me a bad habit takes a nano-second to insinuate itself into my daily life. But those good habits ... Conventional wisdom says it takes 21 days. But many researchers will tell you that it's not true. It's dependent. That's why you want to work on establishing a routine. You want these organization habits to become so deeply ingrained you do them on autopilot.

HABIT #1: START SMALL

It's a natural tendency when we want to change that we want to change everything at once. You wake one morning and say "Okay. This is the day I'm going to get organized." Big mistake.

Start with one thing—create one new habit. What is the one thing that gets your day off to a bad start? If you spend every morning looking for your keys, your eyeglasses, your cell phone or your bag—always, and I mean always, put your keys, cell phone, etc. in the same place. Make it visible. Same goes for your handbag. Pick a place in your home that is reserved for handbag parking. Put a big note on your fridge: From now on I will leave my _____ (fill in the blank). Visual clues are very helpful in helping you get into the habit-forming routine.

Or if getting the kids out of the house and you to the office on time has become an unwinnable challenge, isolate what's causing the problem. Do lunches need to be made the night before? Kids' clothes selected the night before? Again, start with one job—make the lunches the night before. Have that become a habit. Then move on to helping the kids build their habit of getting ready for school the night before. Post a menu on the fridge. Place labels on the kids' dresser drawers showing what clothing is inside. If the kids don't read, post pictures.

Isolate the other things that are having a negative effect and take steps to build the new habit that will help you feel less stressed and more organized

HABIT #2: DECLUTTER—LIKE GOES WITH LIKE

Clutter leads to disorganization. But again break your decluttering tasks into small bites. What's the biggest clutter trap that is getting in your way of getting things done? Start with that. For example, if your desk is a black hole—you spend hours looking for the bills that need to be paid NOW—set aside a limited amount of time each day to get the desk cleaned up.

But before you start organizing, throw away the things you are not using. Be on the lookout for anything that doesn't fit in its current space - unworn clothes, unused items. Move these where they will be used, given away or tossed NOW.

The key to getting organized is that "like goes with like." This is another habit that you have to spend time building. Unpaid bills go in one folder. Paid bills in another. Have a big label for each in a bright color—another visual spur.

Always think about how you use something and what else you use with it. You probably wouldn't put your canned food with your dishes, right? The same goes for books, papers, magazines.

Post a plan for organizing with a schedule. You can't do it all in a day.



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HABIT #3: TAKE CARE OF IT NOW

Everyone talks about multi-tasking as if it's proof that we're busy and important. More often than not for many of us, multi-tasking leads to having a bunch of unfinished jobs staring us in the face. I've been there. I've been working on one assignment. I reach a stumbling block. I decide to start another task. You know where this is going. By the end of the day I have several uncompleted assignments.

BUILD THIS HABIT: FINISH WHAT YOU START.

If it's a large assignment, break it into manageable chunks and set a goal that you will spend x minutes/hours working on it. When you hit a stumbling block, don't start another project. Instead get up from your desk and take 10 minutes to stretch, walk around, or get a glass of water. Then get back to your project. You'll be amazed how a short break will help your thought process. And stick to your goal. Finish what you said you were going to finish. If you're not satisfied with the outcome, put it aside and take another stab later.

Here's another bad habit that can lead to frustration: Do you ever finish working on an assignment and leave all the papers and resource material you used piled on your desk? Do you ever do the laundry and leave it heaped on a chair? Pretty soon all of that gets out of hand. Finish and put away. That will clear the decks (or desk) for the next project. Putting your materials away, folding the clothes or whatever else it is usually only takes a short amount of time but will, in the long run, save you oodles of time.

HABIT #4: WRITE IT DOWN

We all have too much going on but writing things down will help you to get the things done that need to be done. Technology can really help here. No more sticky notes plastered all over everything. Instead use your phone and your computer and keep your notes and to-dos available.

One strategy: have a list for life's everyday tasks—get the dry cleaning, pick up milk, etc. That way you won't let something slip. But you're not giving those tasks more importance than they deserve. They're errands not major projects.

Then create a list of the important things that you have to do—the tasks that will give you a sense of accomplishment and move you forward in your career and life.

HABIT #5: DON'T LET TECHNOLOGY BE IN CONTROL

I hear people groan about their email inbox. But how many of those emails are really important? If you're not reading those blogs or special shopping offers, don't just delete them but unsubscribe.

Organize your electronic documents into files so you're not sorting through long lists to find the report you drafted last week.

The goal is to create routines and habits that will let you get on with your life effectively and productively.

Here's to getting organized and to your continued success!