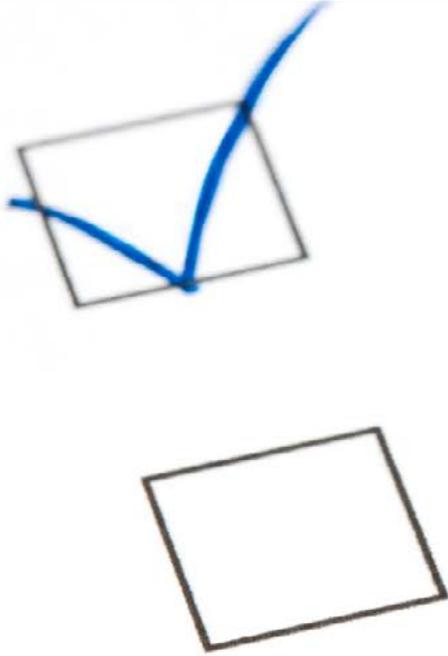


Personal Priorities

Some Practical Guidelines for
Managing Your Work and Your Life



There is no reason to pay attention to the priorities in your life unless you want to be happy and successful. Too many of us drag ourselves out of bed and plod through our days, mindlessly doing what others have decided we ought to do. Reduced to conformist drones, we snap up the latest gadgets, ape the latest fashion trends and glut ourselves on pleasure toxins spewed by digital mind dusters.

by Kendall L. Stewart M.D.

Introduction

There is no reason to pay attention to the priorities in your life—unless you want to be happy and successful. Too many of us drag ourselves out of bed and plod through our days, mindlessly doing what others have decided we ought to do. Reduced to conformist drones, we snap up the latest gadgets, ape the latest fashion trends and glut ourselves on pleasure toxins spewed by digital mind dusters. Just going with the flow, the drifter's mantra, has become a guiding philosophy for many. Such folk read only for pleasure; they will not have read this far.

But you are not content to passively consume, to drift, to adjust, and to accommodate. You are driven to produce something of value, to make a difference in the world. To achieve that, you are willing to set lofty goals, to push yourself hard and to stand apart from the dulled herd. You know that life is short and that your choices matter. You understand that you must continually refocus your efforts to accomplish something significant in the time that remains. You are most contented when your daily life conforms to a blueprint you have drawn, when little time or effort is wasted on matters of scant consequence, and when you are fully engaged in the pursuit of worthy goals. You know that setting clear priorities and conforming to them is the key to your success.

Here you will find some practical observations about an approach to life that is pleasant and easy to imagine but tough to implement. Deciding on the values that will drive your life is relatively simple. Setting daily priorities based on those values is much harder. Behaving accordingly is harder still. Take courage. You need not succeed completely to succeed. Even modest progress toward these worthy goals will permit a clearer perspective, diminish the distractions in your life, produce significant accomplishments and increase the meaning and satisfaction in your life.

Identify your values

Values are the foundation of the disciplined life. Those who have not reflected on what matters most are vulnerable to what matters at the moment. Direction changes on a whim. Feelings call the shots. Resistance to persuasion is minimal, and the environment, not the individual, sets the tone. Fear becomes the controlling emotional authority in one's life. Sailors without value charts, these insecure captains avoid every squall, prefer the easy sailing and look to others for direction during every storm.

Make this modest investment in your own success. Write down the values that mean the most to you, those around which you intend to organize your life. Reflect on these for a time. Make sure that these ideals are the ones you want to spend

the rest of your life pursuing. Arrange the top ten values you have chosen in rank order. With this small step, you have built the foundation for a successful life and aligned yourself with the determined few who have elected to take charge of their lives, to act instead of react, and to chart the arduous course of trying to conduct their lives in accordance with their ideals.

Write clear behavioral expectations

Deciding on the values that will drive your life is a good thing, but you must move from the theoretical to the practical if this exercise is going to mean something. At this point, your enthusiasm for this process may start to flag. Identifying your ideals is fairly easy and calls for little personal commitment. Coming up with specific behaviors that are consistent with these values demands careful consideration, and triggers the realization that you are

making a commitment to behave in certain ways. Knowing the right thing to do is rarely a challenge; doing it is. Write down four or five specific behaviors supportive of each of your ten ideals. Favor positive behaviors. Bussing yourself with doing something positive is the best antidote for negative behavior. Admonishment is a poor motivator, an afterthought instead of a plan. Keep revising these lists of practical behavioral expectations until you can realistically embrace them as the routine activities of your daily life.

Taken together, these 40 to 50 behaviors constitute the blueprint for a successful life. They will assist you in making routine decisions. They will help you decide how to spend your time. If you are doing something that is not on this list or supportive of one of your core values, this blueprint will help you realize that you are off course. When you have identified exactly which behaviors support your values, you will be more comfortable declining requests that are not consistent with your priorities. Over time, others will accept your priorities and stop asking you to do things that are not high priorities for you. Your efficiency will soar. You will begin to experience the sense of meaning that a disciplined life affords. This is no small thing.

This practical strategy may make you uncomfortable. You may think this approach is a little too pat and trite, and that may put you off. While this activity usually produces a simple, one-page document that you will revise as you progress through the stages of your life, most people who actually complete this assessment invest many hours of reflection and introspection. On the other hand, you may conclude that conducting such an assessment is not worth the trouble. It is true that most people will go through their lives without ever reflecting on the values that guide their lives, or on those everyday behaviors that support their values. But just as most business owners wouldn't think of conducting operations without a values-driven strategy, deliberate individuals are not content to drift through their lives without a plan. Think about it.

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Identify measurable outcomes

Many of us conduct our lives with less deliberation than we invest in shopping for a used car. Once you have decided on your energizing values and have drafted the behavioral expectations that derive from this, you should give some thought to exactly what you expect these efforts to produce. This is the preliminary case for identifying the goals you expect to achieve after embracing solid values and conducting your life accordingly. Meaningful goals, rightly decided and relentlessly pursued, are the unfailing instruments of confident flight through the disorienting haze of everyday life.

You will want the most important goals in your life to have more impact than the usual New Year's resolutions. Consider carefully before writing down one or two intended outcomes for each core value and its associated behavioral objectives. Be sure that these goals are measurable. You need to know whether you are making progress. These should be measures that matter to you. They should be realistic and attainable. And make these lists brief. If your values, behavioral objectives and key indicators cannot be included on one page, keep revising them until they can be. With apologies to Shakespeare, brevity is also the soul of intention.

Examine your daily life

Plato's pronouncement that the unexamined life is not worth living has inspired papers, books and entire disciplines of study, but while nodding to his wisdom, few of us conduct our lives accordingly. Contemporary life is a blur of mindless tasks and easy diversions. Urged to become voracious consumers, we suckle contentedly on cultural pap and gradually lose the awareness that things could be different. Confronted with the "no pain, no gain" reality, we soon conclude that gain is probably not that important after all.

If a given activity is not directly supportive of one of your values, it is not a priority and you should stop doing it.

Identifying the chaff in your life might have been an overwhelming task before your core values and specific behavioral expectations were etched in bold relief. Now, deciding what deserves to be thrown out is almost painless. (Actually discarding the dross in your life is much tougher, but it is best to take one step at a time.) Examine what you think and do in a typical day. If a given activity is not directly supportive of one of your values, it is

not a priority and you should stop doing it. Make a list of these distracting items and post it in plain sight. Cross these contaminants off as they are replaced with catalytic pursuits.

Learn to say, “No”

People often say “yes” when they want to say “no.” They persist in doing this even though this habit causes extreme distress. Why? They may be worried about what others think. They don’t want to hurt others’ feelings. They are sometimes afraid that others won’t like them. An unreasonable need to feel loved and accepted by others throttles appropriate assertiveness, compels excessive accommodation and breeds chronic frustration. Shackled by a fear of rejection, these emotional pawns are bullied through life, sentenced to do another’s bidding.

Do others tend to take advantage of your hesitancy to say, “No?” If so, just saying, “No” emphatically may be too steep a first step. One of your fears may be that, having decided to take charge of your life and become more assertive, you will turn into a hateful snake everyone will avoid. While that is not likely to happen, you may want to gradually become more assertive instead of changing overnight. Here are some softened assertions that will help you make the transition to the properly assertive person you long to become. “Let me think about that.” “I’m sorry, I have another commitment then.” “Thanks for asking. I will think about that and get back to you.” “I can’t give that project the full attention it deserves so I am going to decline.” Work up a repertoire of 10 to 20 defensive phrases and practice them so you can switch to autopilot when the need arises. Celebrate your progress; you will not always be successful in resisting the selfish persuasions of others, but every time you take a stand, more of your controlling strings are transferred to your own hands.

Make lists

Consider this. Millions of people are clamoring for your attention every waking minute. Vendors hawk products and services and exploit longings we never knew we had. Bosses and employees press their case for loyalty and responsiveness. Internet entrepreneurs count eyeballs and how long they “stick” to their sites. Our families clamor for attention too. They need money, transportation and a clean pair of socks. Everyone has his or her priority, and one of them is to persuade you to accept theirs.

Every human being in the “civilized” world has become a marketing target. Glance down at the first coffee break and you will see that you are covered with emotional sticky notes detailing what others believe you should do. Too often, this is the way our daily priorities are decided. We respond

to whatever has stuck. Our only defense occurs when incoming demands bounce off parasites already digging in. This is not the best way to order the days of our lives.

List-making is now a small industry with enthusiasts selling books about making them and other books for managing them. Even list-making, a vital time management strategy, can be overdone. Lists can become harsh taskmasters. Use lists. Don’t be held hostage by them. Make four lists. First, write down what should be accomplished today and check off each completed task to generate a sense of accomplishment and to support your efforts to stay focused. Second, keep an up-to-date list of projects that must be completed in the next few weeks. Third, maintain a list of longer-term goals, those accomplishments you expect to reflect on at the end of the year. Finally, keep a list of things you would like to stop doing, those leeching digressions that leave you weakened for the most significant missions in your life.

Discipline yourself

Discipline is the sort of thing we long for in the abstract. Most of us would readily admit that our lives would be more satisfying if we were more disciplined, that self-discipline is hard and demands commitment to dogged perseverance, but we don’t long for it enough to actually embrace it.

If only there were a quick fix for the undisciplined life. Infomercials for the latest exercise equipment notwithstanding, couch potatoes are not likely to sculpt six-pack abs in three weeks, and disorganized shufflers will not suddenly turn into paragons of efficiency after reading this paper. But the cause is not hopeless. Progress toward a more disciplined life begins with the first small step. Small change is possible. Cobble together a few small changes and a more disciplined life will result.

Make up your mind to carve one small but significant change into your life each month or so. This means you will need to stop something you are doing or start doing something else. Given how cluttered our lives have become with the litter of meaningless activity, it is generally best to replace some current distraction with one of the behaviors on your new priority list. Write the new activity on an index card and tape it to the bathroom mirror. Keep it there until the new behavioral pattern is firmly established.

Seek progress, not perfection

Dissatisfaction with oneself occasions a great deal of unhappiness in our lives. The truth is, most of us possess enormous shortcomings. The images that surround us

don't do much to enhance self-esteem or to encourage the acceptance of the hands we have been dealt.

Who can feel talented while watching Tiger Woods or attractive while standing in the checkout line at Kroger with Julia Roberts smiling back from the cover?

Who can match Bill Gates' brains and business success? The glorification of the elite that constitutes so much of popular culture leaves most of us with two easy emotional options. We can embrace chronic dissatisfaction and sullen resentment, or we can assume an attitude of impotent inferiority and join the masses in mind-numbing hero worship, the trifle's preferred pastime.

There is a better option. It is the life gloriously filled with the painful struggle for self-improvement. Only a minority of persons will choose this option, but if you have read this far, you may be one of those. If so, you have discovered that the joy of continuous learning and the slow but steady progress in the pursuit of meaningful goals is the best antidote for resentment's bitter aftertaste. This simple approach to a more satisfying life celebrates headway as well as accomplishment. If you can permit yourself no delight until you have achieved the life lived in complete conformity to your priorities, you will be slogging along with no joy for a long time. However, if you cherish every step you make toward this goal, every day brings a new opportunity to rejoice. This preferred approach will compel you to take the next step, and make your heart glad. And the joy you will shed along the way will enrich the lives of those around you. This is another one of the secrets of a happy life. But many bright and talented people never catch on.

Become more efficient

We have already established that there is more that should be done than can be done. Faced with that truth, one can and must set priorities. But there is another important strategy to consider: becoming more efficient.

Success with this approach begins with the mental attitude that there is always a better way and that you intend to discover it. So long as you keep doing the same things you have always done the same ways you have always done them, you are not likely to discover a better alternative.

Begin by asking, "Why?" a lot. Spend some time planning the best approach before you dive into every task. Try out different approaches to routine tasks in the hope that you will stumble onto a better way. You often will. Apply the multitasking skills you have developed at work to your personal life. Keep a pen and pad handy for jotting down

notes to yourself when flashes of insight interrupt your preoccupations and daydreams. If you put your mind to it, you can continue to improve your efficiency as long as you live. This is another of life's little pleasures not to be missed.

Delegate appropriately

If you insist on managing every detail, you will sink into the bog in short order. If you delegate too much to others, you will lose the opportunity to take the initiative, to set the tone and to lead by example. Mastering the technical details while demonstrating that you are not too good to get your hands dirty will enhance your reputation up to a point; insisting on micromanaging every detail will frustrate those whose growth you have been hired to promote. Like so much else about the successful life, the decision to delegate is both simple and not so simple.

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Whether and how much to delegate depends on the situation and the persons involved. Much has been written about how to do it, but optimal delegation will always remain more an art than a science. You must use your heart and your head. You cannot just do what feels right. When you have previously delegated some matter and that leader has behaved with distinction and asked for additional opportunities, the decision to delegate again is straightforward. Asking permission to delegate is always a good idea. Hesitancy is an early warning signal. Clarifying the desired outcome will reduce uncertainty and minimize the likelihood of miscommunication. Suggesting proven strategies reassures the new ball carrier and reduces the anxiety that he or she alone is responsible for a successful outcome. Leaving the method up to the delegate fosters innovation, personal growth and increases the chance of finding a better alternative. The opportunity to return to you for consultation during the process will help to keep the delegate on track. Justly deserved praise for an outstanding effort in the face of failure keeps aspirants trying again. On the other hand, continuing to delegate to those who have repeatedly failed to deliver—or to be too concerned about it—is just plain stupid.

Avoid distractions

It is not the clutter in the workplace that matters most; it is the obscuring confetti in our minds that prevents our seeing and acting on the vital issues parading right in front of us. It is true that others are always eager to capture our attention with their issues and that these are potentially deadly diversions, but the most important distractions in our lives are products of our own sensitivities and longings. The deluding mist rising from the steam grates of our own unconscious minds is the greater danger.

Overreacting to perceived slights and unleashing disproportionate anger blurs our focus. Emotionally aroused, we waste valuable time and energy on unimportant things, overlooking the important stuff. Our vision thus blurred, the hard edges of our lives appear to soften, and the wincing pain we feel when we blunder into them reminds us too late that we have, yet again, missed a real point.

Self-awareness is the best vaccination against the distraction malady. If you will recognize your own emotional arousal and the distortion that it foments, you can minimize your investment in wasteful distractions. Focus instead on the issues that matter and stop lunging for every lure that persuaders dangle in front of you. Ask yourself several times a day, "How do I feel?" Be honest with yourself. If you are emotionally aroused, you are much more likely to be chasing some distraction. If you are unemotional, you are more capable of focusing on the critical issues.

Try to put all of the stuff that comes into your head during the day into one of three mental hoppers. The biggest hopper is, It's Not My Problem. The second hopper is, It's My Problem, but There is Nothing I Can Do About It. The final hopper is, It's My Problem and I Can Do Something about It. Stay focused on the stuff in this bin. No approach that serves to minimize the disruptions that distractions cause is unworthy of your investment. Life is too precious to be wasted on distractions.

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Deal with information overload

Information, like algae in a stagnant pool, is overgrowing our lives, choking off time formerly spent in thoughtful reflection and dulling the clarity with which we might otherwise consider our options more prudently. And with everyone disguising his or her sales pitch as information critical to our success, it is becoming more difficult to decide what truly matters and what should be ignored. We are even less discriminating when we feel needy, and we grasp for flawed information with all of the discernment of a drowning person clutching a concrete life preserver.

Your list of priorities will assist you in this struggle. If the information in question does not aid you in pursuing the behavioral objectives you have already listed, it is best ignored. Even when you have decided which sources of information are critical to your success, you will still have to reduce the information to the bare essentials. All of us learn in different ways, so you will need to decide which media make the most sense for you. You will be able to consider and digest more essential information if you combine learning with other activities such as exercise or waiting for the clothes to dry. Information not put to regular use doesn't hang around long, so you will want to focus on information that you can put to frequent practical use.

A word of caution is in order. After finishing your formal education, you will naturally avoid new information that is difficult to master. While all learning need not be painful, some important learning is such an effort that you will not force yourself through the rigorous learning process unless you have made a commitment you cannot easily avoid, such as writing a report, giving a presentation or completing a graduate degree. This formal commitment will force you to use the priorities you have established to cope effectively with these new demands.

Invest in good relationships

The important relationships in our lives are the springs that we hope will quench our thirst for meaning and a sense of satisfaction. When the nourishment they provide is clear and sweet, we face our lives with hopeful anticipation; when their water is bitter, sour perceptions poison our lives, contaminate our working environments and cast a shadow of unwelcome wretchedness on everyone around us. Yet, knowing this, too many of us associate with miserable people and then pass their canker along to others.

Take a careful inventory of the relationship investments in your emotional portfolio. Identify those relationships

with little or no potential for paying positive emotional dividends and replace them with relationships that bring joy to your life. This is not as hard as it seems. You know some people who are positive and upbeat. You feel better for just having run into them. Spend more time with them. You know others who can ruin your day in two minutes. Avoid them. If you are cursed with a boss or coworkers in the negative camp, remain civil and limit your emotional investment to the minimum required. Invest in better relationships as soon as you can. Sometimes the grass really is greener when you get there.

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Limit pointless rumination

Pointless rumination devours precious time and emotional energy. Ruminators turn painful issues over in their minds for minutes or hours at a time, feeling ever more hopeless or angry or hurt or resentful, and squandering productive time forever. Rumination is not an exercise in problem solving; it is an exercise in futility. Rumination is a mental cancer and it always spreads. First, it destroys our peace of mind. Then it attacks our motivation to move on to something more productive. Finally, it destroys perspective, turning its victim into a hateful plotter, preoccupied with perceived wrongs and consumed with fantasies of revenge.

You must first recognize that you are doing this. The sooner you figure it out, the better. Saying the word, “Stop” aloud will halt the rumination, but you may have some difficulty in explaining yourself to those working or ruminating nearby.

Mental activity never stops. You must eventually replace the destructive rumination with some constructive mental effort. Almost anything is better than ruminating your life away. This is the one circumstance when even watching MTV may be a healthier alternative.

Strive for excellence

Mediocrity is easier to achieve, but it is much less satisfying. Motivational business books notwithstanding, a lot of us are just putting in our time at work, grinding through the day, longing for the next day off. Bloated consumers already, we still cannot get enough of the mesmerizing leisure that its purveyors insist is the point in life. The startling truth is that achieving excellence in one’s life and work is

not all that hard. In the organizational forest of sodden mushrooms, the occasional flower stands right out.

Take an unflinching look at your strengths and weaknesses. Of course you will want to minimize your weaknesses but, since perfection is in such short supply, most of your energy would be better invested in taking your strengths to the next level. When you start to focus on becoming the very best at something your organization needs, the low-lying smog that settles around the contented quickly evaporates. You will see what you need to do, and what you no longer need to do. Hankering for some growth-enhancing risk, you will suddenly realize that failure is not the end of the world. You will find yourself wanting to measure things, to find national benchmarks and to plot your progress on a graph. You will seek out other high performers and feel a little superior to the slackers you have left behind. Well, maybe more than a little.

Embrace technology carefully

The current obsession with technology may lead you to believe that unless you are doodling with the latest electronic data funnel, you are missing a chance to be more productive. These digital marvels can be fun, but whether they will actually improve your productivity is another thing altogether. Technology enables us to work when we might be otherwise be idling. Then again, it really is possible to work too much, and the electronic cuffs that restrain us are powerful inhibitions, discouraging those emotional and intellectual investments that would pay larger dividends in our lives.

At the very least, create a simple pro and con list before you adopt the newest technology. A pen and a piece of paper are still remarkably effective tools. Be realistic about the time you will have to invest to master and use the latest device. Ask yourself whether you really need more data. Asking for additional data may be the most successful stalling technique used in the business environment today. Sooner or later you will need to take a position and actually do something. The endless quest for better data often obscures this basic truth.

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Blend your work and personal lives

The most contented persons usually cannot draw a line between work and play. Highly satisfied and productive workers always characterize their work as fun; laughter peppers their workplaces. Their relationships with valued colleagues immerse them in challenges that depend more on teamwork than individual stardom. Moreover, a productive leisure is usually more satisfying than the passive consumption of another's work. Maintaining a gated border crossing between your vocation and avocation is a costly contrivance, impeding the freedom of mental movement that is at the heart of creativity, innovation and the surprising joys of daily life.

Instead of seeking the perfect balance between your work and home lives, look for opportunities to blend the two. Think and speak often of your other world. Implement what has worked in your family in the work environment. Imagine how you might behave differently if you came to view your family members as your most important customers. To the degree that your job duties permit it, vary the times you spend at work and at home. Mindless routines become ruts, and ruts become canyon walls that limit your view of the larger picture and your imagination about what is possible.

Refuse to be held hostage by others

By now you have realized that you are surrounded by people who know exactly how you ought to conduct your life. And they are not shy about sharing their thoughts with you. This onslaught of unsolicited advice begins with our parents and never quits. There are several reasons why this tendency to manipulate others is so persistent. It is much easier to tell others what they should do than it is to do the right things ourselves. Millions of adults hold onto the childish need to please others at any cost. The sorry reality is that bullies still exist after middle school; those who seek to dominate others in an attempt to feel better about themselves are never in short supply. In short, manipulation thrives throughout the life cycle because it works. Every emotional insecurity that persists into adulthood is a yoke that aspiring controllers can grab to take control of our lives.

You can identify these exploitations by taking time to ask yourself exactly why you feel compelled to do this or that. This simple reflection may reveal that you are pursuing this particular course because someone wants you to, not because the commitment is consistent with your own priorities. Using your discomfort to question your motivation is the right thing to do. Asserting yourself with those who badger you with

unreasonable demands and requests is not easy, but decreased vulnerability and resentment will make it worth your while.

Work on your attitude

Each of us is haunted, to a greater or lesser degree, by bad attitudes that get in the way of productive, satisfying lives. These dark apparitions appear uninvited to blacken the way we perceive things, and to foment irritation and discontent. Such attitudes are deadly threats to a life well-lived. Because of their danger, bad attitudes must be recognized early

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and banished quickly before they spell irreparable harm. When you realize that you are in the attitude ghouls grip, isolate yourself while you select the stake to drive through its heart. While certainly unpleasant for you, your bad attitudes can damage your relationships with others forever. Removing yourself from the opportunity to do such violence is the first step. There are many effective antidotes. Exploring your underlying feelings with a trusted friend or venting your thoughts in a private journal produces immediate relief. Vigorous exercise is an effective attitude adjuster. Even a nap can make all the difference in the world in your perspective. Focusing on a specific task can provide a helpful distraction. The good news is that—among the highly motivated and fully engaged—bad attitudes are generally fleeting.

Conclusion

It is a fact. Some people lead more productive, satisfying lives. It is true that some are dealt better cards, but most successful persons just play the hands they are dealt more skillfully. These practical ideas will assist those who intend to play their hands the best they can.

This paper is a modest challenge to live an intentional instead of an incidental life. The meaningful life does not just happen. It results from applied wisdom, thoughtful decision and persistent action.

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