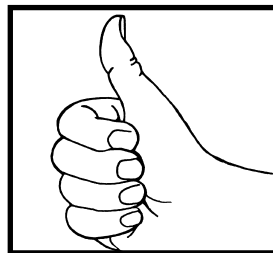

CHAPTER 1

Do It Now!



*Lose this day loitering—'twill be the same story
Tomorrow—and the next more dilatory;
Each indecision brings its own delays,
And days are lost lamenting o'er lost days.
Are you earnest? seize this very minute—
Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.
Only engage, and then the mind grows heated—
Begin it, and the work will be completed!*

—JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

Chapter 1 Preview

In this chapter, you will learn how to:

- Get more done by doing it *now*.
- Overcome procrastination by getting in the habit of acting.
- Reduce your workload by doing the work once.
- Become more decisive by looking at the worst possible consequence of your action and then getting on with it if you could live with that consequence.
- Stop using priorities as an excuse not to do things.
- Start thinking: It is either important enough to do or it isn't; if it's important, then I'll act on it; if it's not important, I won't do it.
- Be as clever about completing things as you are about putting things off.

WHY THE PERSONAL EFFICIENCY PROGRAM WORKS

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Now! No doubt you hear the word all the time. If not from your boss, your spouse, or your child, you hear it from advertisers and salespeople. Some days it seems everyone and everything is demanding something *now*. A manager or coworker tells you someone didn't show up for work and what she was doing needs to be done by you, now. Or someone from home calls to tell you a pipe is leaking now. Or the telephone rings and demands to be picked up, now. An advertisement tells you to buy it, now. People and things demand our time and attention now, this moment, immediately. And so we find ourselves buried in our work, in spite of all the nice time management theories and tools.

Some time management gurus tell us we should ignore all the things that clamor for our urgent attention, including the telephone. They tell us we shouldn't react to circumstances and people around us; instead, we should organize, prioritize, and gain control of our lives by putting off some tasks and focusing our attention on those activities that are "most important," or "first things," or "top priorities."

Planning, setting goals, and priorities have a place. But too often when we set priorities, we don't get around to everything on our lists. "Less important" activities get shoved into the closet by "more urgent" activities. Eventually the "less important" things rot there. Not surprisingly, when they start to stink, they become very high priorities. And guess who has to clean up the mess? You do, of course, *now!*

WHY THE PERSONAL EFFICIENCY PROGRAM WORKS

The only method I've found that really produces the results people want (the method you're going to learn here) is to gain the advantage by getting the "now" on your side. I call it the *Do It Now* approach to personal efficiency.

By *choosing* to *Do It Now*, you make *now* your ally, not your enemy. So, what do you do about the mess that accumulates on your desk? You *Do It Now*. Doing it now enables you to be better organized; to exercise greater control over the when, where, and how of what you're doing; and to feel better about yourself and your performance. Not surprisingly, *Do It Now* is the first tenet of the Personal Efficiency Program (PEP).

The beginning is the half of every action.

—GREEK PROVERB

Does the following scenario sound familiar?

You arrive at the office, sit down, turn on your computer and open your e-mail. You have 50 messages in the box—many of them there for days or weeks. The subject line of one from Mary reminds you, “Oh, I have to call Mary.” Dutifully, you start a To Do list somewhere on your desk. You look at the next e-mail and this one is a complaint by a customer. You think, “I must answer this.” You go to the next mail, you see it represents a problem, and you think, “I must talk to my boss about this,” and onto the To Do list it goes. You look at the next mail and say, “This isn’t important; I can do it later.” And so it goes—on and on. You end up shuffling through your scores of e-mail and possibly stacks of paper representing your things to do and by the time you go back to your e-mail and read each one you plan to actually do, you have wasted time reading everything twice! In effect, you’ve done the work twice, doubling your time commitment but accomplishing little.

This procedure would almost be okay if we only went through it twice! But too many of us look at our mail three, four, or five times before we ever act on them. It takes a lot longer to do something five times than it does to do it once.

The first rule for improving personal efficiency is:

Act on an item the first time you read or touch it.

I’m not talking about those things that you can’t do now or even those things you shouldn’t do now. I’m talking about all the things that you could and should do, but you don’t. I’m talking about routine paperwork and e-mail of the sort you encounter every day. Take care of these things the first time you touch or read them, and you’ll save yourself a lot of time in the long run.

Call Mary. Respond to that e-mail message immediately. Answer the customer’s letter of complaint. Act on that voice mail as you listen. Talk to the boss about the problem. *Do It Now*. You’ll be amazed at how little time it actually takes and amazed at how good you feel when it’s done.

If you’re not going to act on your paperwork, don’t waste time looking at it. If you’re not going to return your voice mail messages, don’t waste time listening to them. If you’re not going to respond to your e-mail messages, don’t waste time looking at them. Don’t clog up your day with things you *aren’t* going to do. Instead, move on to what you *are* going to do, and *Do It Now*.

START WITH YOUR DESK OR WORK SPACE

When people ask for my help in getting organized and putting the Personal Efficiency Program in place in their work and their lives, the first thing I do is put them through a personal desk cleaning. I actually go to the person's desk and go through all the bits and pieces of paper with them. I begin with paper even if electronic communication and documents are quickly taking over as the medium of choice in business. The reason is people can more easily conceptualize with paper than with documents they cannot touch. I'll pick up a paper and ask what it is. They say, "Uh, well, that's something I was supposed to respond to."

"Okay," I say. Then they naturally start to put it somewhere, but I stop them. "Hold it a second. Why are you putting it over there?"

They give me an incredulous look and say, "Well, I have to do it, so I put it over there."

"Well, let's *Do It Now*."

"You want me to *Do It Now*? It could take some time. . . ."

"I don't mind. I'll sit here while you do it."

And they do it. Usually I clock it. And I say, "How long did that take?"

"One minute," they say, or "three minutes," or whatever.

"Look at that," I tell them. "See?"

"Yeah," they say. "It didn't take much time at all."

And I say, "I was hoping you'd notice that."

When this task is done the first time, it makes people uncomfortable. They do it, but they usually haven't grasped the concept yet, even though we talk about it and ask them to commit themselves to the concept and the work style. What they don't understand is that *Do It Now* is meant to be permanent and ongoing.

Even if they remember *Do It Now* and believe they follow the principle in the beginning, they are often inconsistent in their application of the *Do It Now* concept.

This is evident when I go back for a follow-up visit. Usually, they've cleaned up their office or work space in anticipation of my coming, with everything stacked neatly into piles. They're very proud they've mastered the concept. After all, it's easy enough to talk about *Do It Now* and even to get a person to agree with it. But most people think they *Do It Now* when they don't. Only by working with this concept consistently over time—as I do—do you begin to see more and more evidence of *not* acting the first time and all the reasons people make up for why they can't or shouldn't act now.

A first visit with one client included a thorough desk cleaning. We worked through every item on his desk, one at a time, until everything had been done that could be done. We talked about acting on things the first time—about doing it now—and he was so impressed that he committed himself to *Do It Now* as his new work philosophy.

When I went back for a follow-up visit, I hardly made it through the door before he started telling me that *Do It Now* was the greatest thing that had ever happened to him—it was just marvelous. He was very enthusiastic about the program and about the change it had made in his life.

Then I picked up the papers from his pending basket. The first was a phone message. I said, “Why don’t we call him now?”

He frowned just a little. “Now?” he said.

And I said, “Yes.”

And so he picked up the phone and returned the call. By the end of our meeting, we’d gone through every single piece of paper in his pending basket.

Why was I able to empty his pending basket when he hadn’t been able to? Because his definition of “pending” was something to be done later, and one visit with PEP obviously hadn’t changed that.

Let me emphasize then. *Do It Now* means *Do It Now*, regularly and consistently, day after day. Not doing it now is what got you into trouble in the first place. Your pending basket is strictly for things you *can’t* do now, for things that are out of your control. For example, you call Mary back on Monday because that’s when she’s back from vacation, not because Monday seems like a good day to do it. *That’s* pending.

Grasp the concept of *Do It Now* and the real meaning of “pending”—and function accordingly each and every day—and these simple words will literally change the way you approach your work and your life. You’ll find yourself getting more work done than ever before.

Procrastination is the thief of time.

—EDWARD YOUNG

OVERCOMING PROCRASTINATION

Simple procrastination probably eats up more time in the workplace than anything else. If you’re a procrastinator, you’ll find *Do It Now* is a key element in helping you to identify where procrastination exists in your work habits and helping you to overcome it.

Most people are very clever, even ingenious, about putting things

off. “I don’t have time” is a common excuse. “I think they said they’re not going to be there today, so I didn’t bother to call.” “This could take forever, so I had better wait until I have a free day to start.” “It’s not so important.” The list of reasons why a task can’t be completed is endless.

My approach is this: *Be as clever about completing things as you’ve been about putting them off.* So Mary’s not there. Who else could give you the information? Her assistant? Where else could you get this information? Who could this task be delegated to? How can you get this job done? That is the point, isn’t it—how you can get that letter, that folder, or that report out of your in basket and off of your desk so that you never have to look at it again? That’s where you should focus your brainpower—not on clever excuses.

How soon not now, becomes never.

—MARTIN LUTHER

This may sound simple, but it’s a bitter pill to swallow: Too often the reason you’re not getting things done is that you’re just not doing them. You can reverse that trend, though, starting now—right now—by learning how to overcome procrastination and to increase your personal productivity. How? The following eight ways to overcome procrastination can benefit you immediately and immensely.

1. Do It Once. Sorting through all the papers on your desk and creating To Do and Do Later piles for yourself is a common practice. You have plenty of company if you’re a pile creator. One woman I know goes through this creating piles process regularly. The first time through she calls it “reading for familiarity.” The second read-through is her “action” read, unless she sets it aside “to do later.” Now, this woman is a two-time cum laude graduate of a prestigious university, handling a responsible position in business! By adopting and implementing *Do It Now* she could immediately experience the most immediate benefit of PEP: *Do It Now*, and you do it once.

Needlessly rereading everything on your desk or in your e-mail before acting on it achieves nothing. You know what’s required the first time you read a customer’s letter of complaint. Reading the letter twice only doubles your reading time and the letter still is not answered. Answer the letter the first time you read through it—*Do It Now*—and you save time, move toward customer satisfaction, and accomplish a task that otherwise prevents you from doing more important things.

2. Clear Your Mind. A client once described to me what it was like for him to drive home from work at the end of the day. When he would drive past a gas station, he would think: “I must get a spare tire for my car. I had a flat some time ago and have not gotten around to getting the spare.” On he would drive and pass a pharmacy and think: “Vitamin C. We need Vitamin C. Winter is coming, and we need it for the expected sniffles.” He would drive past a supermarket and think: “My wife wanted me to pick up bread. Ah, I don’t feel like it.” By the time he got home, he was exhausted. He told me he would be breathing hard. He needed a drink to calm down. “Everything I looked at reminded me of things I hadn’t done!” he said. Mind you, not once did he stop and do any of those things. But he sure felt as if he had worked hard on these things. He was exhausted from procrastination.

Consider how many tasks and projects you have connected with your work. One hundred? Two hundred? Now consider how many tasks, incomplete activities, and wish-list items you have connected with your family. How many tasks or wish-list items could you list that are connected with your hobbies, your friends, as well as civic, church, or other groups you belong to? As you add these up, you’ll discover that the outstanding items—the things taking up space in your mind—probably number five hundred to one thousand.

***Think only what is right there, what is right under
your nose to do. It’s such a simple thing—
that’s why people can’t do it.***

—HENRY MILLER

Experience tells us that we’re limited in how many tasks or activities our minds can juggle at any given time. How does this affect your work? Let’s use the example of a customer’s letter or e-mail. You look at the first line: “Can you please send me some information about a new product?” Immediately your attention flies off to the information you were supposed to send to someone else, but haven’t gotten around to yet. You drag your attention back and read a bit further. “Can you meet with some of my colleagues to discuss a certain project?” Again your attention wanders off to several other meetings you need to prepare for but haven’t gotten to yet. Once again you drag your attention back to the task at hand. The sheer volume of incomplete activities in your life distracts you from concentrating on and completing what’s in front of you. This is where priorities fit into the picture.

Obviously, prioritizing can be an important part of controlling your

work. But prioritizing can also be the best excuse *not* to do something. Prioritizing means that “unimportant” tasks get pushed off until later and may not ever get done at all. The consequence of not doing tasks in a timely way is your inability to focus on the work at hand because of the voices in your head reminding you of uncompleted tasks.

Have you ever kept a list of 10 things to do, only to have the bottom five never change? We tend to focus on top-priority items and neglect lower-priority items. That’s why we call them lower priority, yet we still consider these things to be important.

My view is that things either should or should not be done. If deadlines are involved, certainly they must be considered, but if something is important enough to do, do it. Otherwise, don’t.

The best way to eliminate task overload is to eliminate these little things that make you feel overloaded and that pull your attention away from your major tasks. Act on these smaller, “less important” tasks. Make a list of all of them, set aside some quiet time, and do them one by one. Or decide not to do one and trash it. Better yet, get yourself organized using the ideas in this book and don’t allow tasks to accumulate in the first place.

With this overload eliminated, you’re no longer distracted. Your level of concentration increases and, accordingly, you not only finish more tasks, you finish them better and more quickly than before. Komar was reported to have said:

Concentration, in its truest, unadulterated form, means being able to focus the mind on one single solitary thing.

If you can concentrate—focus—on what you are trying to do, you will bring to bear on the task one of the most critical elements of success.

3. Solve Problems While They’re Small. As you gain experience in a job, you learn to detect those little red flags that tell you something is wrong and will only get worse unless you take action. The question becomes: When and how do I act on these small indicators? Unfortunately, we tend to ignore these red flags too often in the face of more pressing issues.

Sometimes I point out a questionable stack of papers on the corner of someone’s desk. Rather sheepishly, the person admits, “It’s my problem pile. I figure if they sit there long enough, they’ll go away.” And sometimes they do.

You’ve heard of Murphy’s Law. In England it’s called Sod’s Law: If

anything can go wrong, it will. There's a corollary to Murphy's Law: If 10 things can go wrong with something, you can be sure the thing that will cause the most damage will be the one that goes wrong! Maybe most of those items in your problem pile will go away if you let them sit long enough. But you can be sure the one problem you don't want to happen will be the one that happens. And how much longer will it take you to take care of a crisis than to take care of the warning flag?

Get into the habit of acting on these things now, and you'll catch problems when they're still small, before they become big, time-consuming crises. As a result, you'll have more time to concentrate on the important things.

4. *Reduce Interruptions.* A common complaint I hear is about interruptions. Most people admit they have a hard time avoiding or preventing interruptions. Instead, interruptions are seen as something beyond the control of mortals and the cause of nearly all our problems. How often have you heard or said, "Well, I would have gotten it done if I hadn't been interrupted every time I turned around!"

I remember a time I did some work for a bank in Luxembourg. I delivered my coaching services and sent an invoice. Two months later I hadn't received payment. I called the managing director, and his response was, "I did it now!"—with a chuckle—"I signed the invoice and sent it to the accounts payable department." We both got a laugh out of that and I suggested I would talk to the accounts payable department. I followed up with a young lady in the department. By telephone, in my typical American way, I asked, "Where's my money?!" She said, "I am so sorry you haven't been paid. But I have been so busy explaining to people why they haven't been paid that I haven't had the time to pay the bills!"

All too often, the interruptions people complain about are the result of their not having done something in the first place. Consequently, they not only have the work itself to do, but they also have to deal with those people who depended on that work being done, which only creates more work! Furthermore, most of us don't relish having to explain why we haven't done something. Even if you have a perfectly good reason, and the person on the other end of the phone sympathizes with you, you'll be left with a bad taste in your mouth just because you had to beg off one more time with an excuse and an explanation.

If you want to avoid interruptions, do the tasks related to them. You can then spend more time on your work and less time explaining why you haven't done it. Gain a reputation for completing work on time,

and you'll reduce interruptions further by eliminating those bothersome requests for interim project status reports.

Mind you, some interruptions are desirable. If a sale depends on immediate feedback, of course the sales manager wants to be interrupted. Eliminating unnecessary interruptions and not aggravating the situation by creating reasons for others to interrupt you is what I'm referring to. Other benefits to eliminating these self-created interruptions are the improved quality of your work when you're free to concentrate on it fully and your ability to complete more work in the same amount of time because you're able to work undisturbed.

5. Clean Up Backlogs. If you have to keep up with an ongoing heavy work flow and, at the same time, you have an accumulation of backlogs, you must address the backlogs if you're to get your work flow under control. Remember, backlogs create their own additional work, so eliminating them cuts down your workload more than you may imagine at first. There are five essential steps for handling backlogs:

1. Identify the backlogs.
2. Prioritize what backlogs to clean up first.
3. Schedule time each day to take a piece of a backlog and clean it up.
4. Identify the cause of the backlog.
5. Take steps to remedy the cause to prevent the backlog from happening again and to prevent any further buildup of backlogs.

Once we clean up old backlogs and prevent logjams from happening, we'll be better able to look to the future.

6. Start Operating toward the Future instead of the Past. Figure 1.1 illustrates what occurs mentally when you have lots of past due, incomplete, or old tasks yet to be done. The Xs on the diagram symbolize all of the tasks that should have been done then. Your focus is clouded by being dragged back into the past. Psychologists say that one indication of a person's mental health is the degree to which they operate in the past as opposed to operating in the present and future. Operating from the present toward the future is considered healthy. No wonder we can feel a bit crazy when we are overwhelmed with so many overdue tasks.

When you are operating in the past, you tend to focus on what might have been, on lost opportunities. Anything that directs you from the present toward the future is healthier than that which drags you back in time.

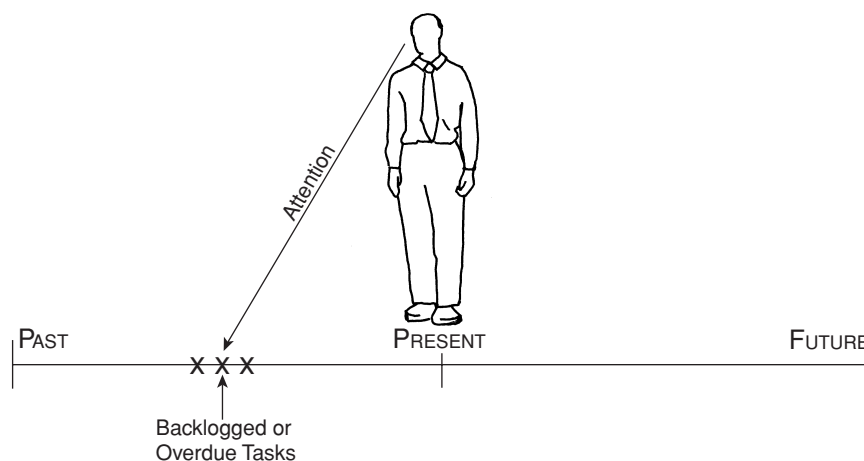


Figure 1.1 Attention focuses to the past, not the future, with a backlog of tasks.

Suppose you are running a race in which the starting line is Present and the finish line is Future. If rather than starting the race at Present you start from the Past, you have that much more to run just to get to the starting line!

Figure 1.2 illustrates how as we clean up these tasks that attract our attention to the past we free up attention capacity for the present. This is important because we all have limited attention capacity—much less capacity than we might imagine. Attention is critical to getting to the meat of the matter and pushing things through to completion.

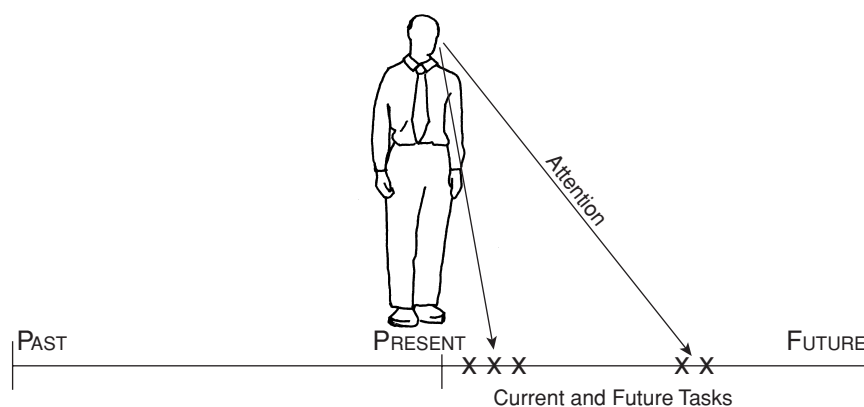


Figure 1.2 When backlogs are cleaned up it is much easier to concentrate on current and future tasks.

Life is denied by lack of attention, whether it be to cleaning windows or trying to write a masterpiece.

—NADIA BOULANGER

7. Stop Worrying about It. It's one thing to waste time doing things over again or dealing with added interruptions or bigger fires, but the real harm of putting things off is how it affects you mentally and emotionally.

Almost everyone tends to put off unpleasant tasks. Facing up to your unpleasant tasks and completing them isn't easy, but the consequences of *not* doing them can be much worse than simply dealing with the unpleasantness early.

The greatest amount of wasted time is the time not getting started.

—DAWSON TROTMAN

To compound the problem, most people who procrastinate not only don't do the task, they also tend to dwell on the unfinished or undone task and worry about not having done it. This worry consumes far more time than people may realize. And it makes it harder to take causative action to solve the problem.

Think of some of the problems you've had to face in the past. Did dwelling on them get you anywhere? No. It was only when you finally initiated some action that the problem began to be resolved. If you face up to the big problems and unpleasant tasks and do something about them, they usually vanish rather quickly.

I once worked with a group of highly educated, bright, young service technicians from a large company in Denmark. I noticed a large machine on the corner of one of their desks and asked about it. The technician replied, "That's a bit of bad conscience. I received it from a customer a month ago to repair and I haven't repaired it yet."

I said, "That's terrible!"

He said, "I know. I've thought about it a lot, but I'm so busy that I haven't had the time to repair it. It could take me two days to fix it, and my schedule is so tight I haven't been able to devote the time to it." He went on to say, "As a matter of fact, you could help me."

"How?" I asked.

He said, "You could tell my boss how busy I am."

Well, my help took a little different direction. I said, "*Do It Now.*"

"I can't *Do It Now*," he argued. "I have a meeting at two o'clock, and. . ."

“Okay. Just *Do It Now*, and let’s see how far you get,” I suggested. Well, off he went into the repair area with the machine, muttering to himself. Fifteen minutes later he came back.

“Oh, no,” I thought. “This could be trouble.”

He looked at me and said, “It’s done.”

“Done?” I echoed.

“Yes, done,” he said. “But it could have taken two days.”

Of course, we don’t always get so lucky. It could have taken two days to repair. But how often have similar things happened to all of us? When you finally get down to the business of doing something you’ve been putting off, it isn’t nearly as bad as you thought it might be.

The shortest answer is doing.

—GEORGE HERBERT

Most of us tend to exaggerate how long an unpleasant task will take or how unpleasant it really is. We dread doing it, so we put it off. Here was a man who had put off a job for a month, with the machine sitting there on his desk as a reminder of the thing he dreaded. He’d let it become a sore spot in his conscience and a sore spot between him and his boss. And rather than giving the task the 15 minutes it actually required, he’d been blaming his boss for his being too busy. In fact, of course, he’d been procrastinating, but regardless of the cause, the customer hadn’t received service and had been without the machine for a month.

The trick? Face up to the unpleasant tasks and *act on them now*.

M. Scott Peck, in his book *The Road Less Traveled* (Simon & Schuster, 1978), calls acting on unpleasant tasks “delaying gratification.” Peck points out that life is difficult. People who procrastinate tend to want immediate gratification. Peck says:

Delaying gratification is a process of scheduling the pain and pleasure of life in such a way as to enhance the pleasure by meeting and experiencing the pain first and getting it over with. It is the only decent way to live.

What tasks in your own work would you treat on a “worst first” basis? Committing to a *Do It Now* mentality will help you overcome your resistance to dealing with unpleasant tasks. It will help you tackle the things you don’t relish doing with a determination to have them over and done with. Some people take an almost perverse pride in being able to deal with the ugliest, meanest, most difficult things first. Most of us can im-

prove our ability to handle the difficult head-on. Remember what Mark Twain said: "If you have to swallow two frogs, swallow the big one first, and don't look at it too long." So, if you can choose the sequence of your work each day, choose the task you enjoy least and do it first. Not only will the second task of the day be not quite so bad compared to the first, but completing the worst first tends to give your self-confidence a boost.

8. Now, Feel Better about Yourself. Dr. Linda Sapadin in her book *It's about Time* (Penguin Books, 1997) says:

Procrastination inevitably diminishes one's self-esteem, which results in a loss of optimism, happiness, and creative energy. People who suffer from chronic procrastination and do nothing about it find it increasingly difficult to strive toward personal goals or, often, even to formulate them.

Procrastination and attendant cover-ups create a buildup of negative emotions not always evident on the surface. In one PEP course, a newly married young woman began to laugh almost uncontrollably when the subject of procrastination was brought up. When asked what prompted this reaction she said:

Oh, I was thinking about my husband's ruffled shirt. You see, I hate ironing, particularly my husband's shirt with the ruffled front. I would pull all the other items in the ironing basket out from under this shirt and do them first.

When asked, "What happens when this shirt is the only thing left?" her response was, "Oh, I throw it back in the washing machine! My husband can't ever figure out where his favorite shirt has gone." A tremendous amount of emotional buildup comes with this habit of procrastination. It has strong impact on one's self-image.

By committing to *Do It Now*, completing the hard jobs first, and handling the big jobs bite-by-bite, you'll trim a tremendous load of stress and anxiety from your work. You'll gain more self-confidence and self-respect. Even after completing only one day of the PEP program, participants have processed and purged all of the papers and documents on and in their desks, their file drawers, and their computers. They discover that they can accomplish much more than they ever realized before. They no longer have a guilty conscience. Almost instantly participants feel better about themselves.

***Knowing when not to work hard
is as important as knowing when to.***
—HARVEY MACKAY, *Swim with the Sharks
without Being Eaten Alive*

NOT EVERYTHING CAN OR SHOULD BE DONE NOW

Having said a lot about doing things now, let me point out that it isn't always possible or desirable to do everything now. You try to call Mary, but she won't be in until Monday. You're on your way to get coffee when a client calls about business. Clearly priorities do play an important part in productive work and in achieving results. However, ultimately success comes from getting things done. And too often people don't get things done because they don't do them! They do not *act now*.

In fact, priorities can be the best excuse a person has not to do something. Yes, there will be times you can't *Do It Now*. There will be times you shouldn't *Do It Now*. Common sense is a necessity; it should be a given. The way to increase your personal efficiency is not to *Do Something Stupid Now*. However, if your approach toward work is to always choose, always prioritize, always give it some time to ripen, always have an excuse to look at it later, always shuffle through your papers or scan through your e-mail, you are *not* acting. In fact, you are reinforcing the habit of not acting. With *Do It Now* and no more excuses to procrastinate, the end product is a propensity to *act*.

BUILD DECISIVENESS INTO YOUR WORK HABITS

Doubt, of whatever kind, can be ended by action alone.

—THOMAS CARLYLE

Successful people in general take little time to make a decision but take a long time to change a decision once it has been made.

Many people are afraid to be decisive. After all, if you make a decision, you have to live with the consequences. If decisiveness is a weak spot with you, there's an easy way to help you handle the quandary. Simply imagine the worst possible consequences of any decision you can make, and ask yourself if you can live with those consequences. If the answer is "yes," go for it.

You can't expect to be 100% certain of your course of action at all times. I understand, though, that George Patton, the famous World War II American general, worked with the following formula for success: "If you have a plan you're 80% certain of, you should violently execute it."

Then there is the Ben Franklin technique. Ben, the famous inventor, politician, and philosopher of the eighteenth century, had a method to help make decisions. Take a piece of paper and fold it in half to make two columns. On one side, list all the reasons for making the decision. On the other side, list all the reasons against. By comparing these two lists, you can often get clarity on the direction you should go.

I've seen decisive people make the wrong decisions. Interestingly enough, they almost always made the intent of their decisions—that is, their objective—happen anyway. I believe there is some natural law connected with this phenomenon. The act of deciding may, in fact, be more important than the correctness of the actual decision and have more influence on the consequences. Be decisive, take action, and get on with your work and life.

***A good plan violently executed now is better
than a perfect plan executed next week.***

—GENERAL GEORGE S. PATTON

ESTABLISH *DO IT NOW* WORK HABITS

Whether we like it or not, we're all creatures of habit. Most of us fall very easily into established routines. How often do you drive the same route to work, or eat at the same restaurant for lunch, or start each workday the same way, for example? Some of these habits and routines are good; others can work against us, and living totally by habit can be very destructive.

Are there habits worth cultivating? Certainly. Habits such as driving safely or showing courtesy to friends and colleagues should be routine and are definitely beneficial. Cultivating the *Do It Now* habit is intended to reinforce an action-oriented lifestyle: to become more decisive and to start and then to stay in motion. Many tasks we need to complete don't require a great deal of consideration and yet, because that's our way of working, we treat them with the same weight that we assign to very important tasks with grave consequences. It's a habit. Your goal in reading

this book is to break your old work habits and to become more efficient, and therefore more productive. Having a decisive and proactive approach toward work will enable you to do exactly that.

Procrastination is itself often only a bad habit.

In his book *Getting Things Done: The ABC's of Time Management* (Scribner, 1976), Edwin Bliss describes procrastination as a habit in this way:

When we fail to act as promptly as we should it usually is not because the particular task in question is extremely difficult, but rather because we have formed a habit of procrastinating whenever possible. Procrastination is seldom related to a single item; it is usually an ingrained behavior pattern.

I couldn't agree more. Learn to *Do It Now* and you'll short-circuit the habit of procrastination. *Do It Now* substitutes an action-oriented behavior for the "do it later" behavior. You act before the mental barriers are activated, so you don't have time to think, "It's too hard; maybe it will go away; maybe someone else will see it; I'm not in the mood; I don't feel like it."

PERFECTION

Some may believe there is an inherent conflict between *Do It Now* and doing things right. Most of us have experience with people who execute their work in a slipshod way. I struggle with this with my kids: a homework project that could be typed on the computer instead of handwritten; that last bit of searching on the Internet to get a photo for the project that would top it all off and produce an A grade instead of a B. It is good and healthy to expect a high standard of performance. But some people mix this up with when to *act*.

Perfectionists often procrastinate. After all, if you believe you cannot execute the work perfectly, why do it? And *Do It Now* may mean you will not be able to do it as well as you would like.

Dr. Sapadin puts it this way:

Perfectionists are extreme in their thinking: If they're going to do something, they reason, they should do the best possible job that can be done. There is no acceptable "middle

ground.” . . . Faced with a demanding task, perfectionists are inevitably torn between two extremes: giving all they’ve got, or giving up altogether.

How can one realistically define that “middle ground”? Should we work to produce that Rolls-Royce, as near to a perfect car as one can get? Or a Mercedes? Or a Ford? The Rolls costs \$250,000; the Mercedes, \$80,000; the Ford, \$25,000. All get you where you want to go. Each auto manufacturer serves a special customer market. That market has a threshold of what its customers are prepared to pay for a car. The manufacturer produces an automobile that meets its customers’ expectations.

When acting on your work, don’t ask the question of yourself: “What is the best possible job I could do on this task?” Instead ask yourself: “What level or degree of quality do our customers expect from us?” If you have perfectionist tendencies, you are likely to procrastinate tasks; often your customers primarily want you to be responsive.

Certainly, *do it right*, but establish what *right* is, and *Do It Now!!*

DISCIPLINE

A common word heard when discussing the subject of changing behavior is *discipline*. “It is a matter of discipline. If I had more of it, I would be able to exercise, . . . stop smoking, . . . diet. . . .” While discipline plays a part, I believe it is a red herring. If you exert discipline enough to establish a routine, you make a new habit. The habit helps you maintain the new routine. Discipline yourself to act now, and it will very soon become a habit. Then the habit will lessen the need for discipline. William James, whose studies of human behavior are well known, suggests that if you do something every day for 30 days, it will become a habit. Try it with *Do It Now*.

To be honest, this is more than dealing with procrastination. It is a philosophy toward work and life. It is the view: I am proactive; I am action-oriented; I am bigger than the problems I face. These characteristics begin (and end) with how you face up to and habitually act on the small details of work and life.

So, what is the first thing you should do now? Go ahead—write it down. Focus on the first things. Get yourself organized to *Do It Now*, and do it better!

FOLLOW-UP FOR CHAPTER 1

1. Get started. Go to your desk—if need be, with this book in hand—and go through every single bit and piece of paper on your desk or anywhere near your working space. Pick up the first piece of paper and determine what it is and what must be done to process it to completion. Do whatever is required to complete that task and get that piece of paper off your desk so you never have to look at it again. If a task is going to take you several hours to complete, schedule a time to do it.

2. Go through any saved e-mails, voice mails, faxes, and so forth one at a time and begin dealing with each of them to completion. Again, if any will require hours of work, schedule them on your calendar for action at a more appropriate time.

3. Determine what tasks ought to be done and decide what must be done to process each task to completion. Take the task as far as you possibly can. If you run into a roadblock, get clever. Ask, “How can I get this done another way?” If you decide to delegate the task or pass it on to someone else, remind yourself to follow-up.