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Meet the MasterMinds: David Allen Helps You Get Things Done

David Allen is the author of the best selling, *Getting Things Done: the Art of Stress-Free Productivity*, and founder of the David Allen Company, a consulting, coaching and training company. He is also a frequent speaker on the topics of time and stress management, individual and team productivity and high performance work practices.

In the past twenty years, Allen has helped improve productivity for more than half a million professionals in hundreds of organizations worldwide, including *Fortune* 500 companies and governmental agencies.

MCNews: Getting more done, with less stress, is probably at the top of many New Year's resolution lists. What's different about your approach?

Allen: A lot of people, even with great intentions, are less than successful when they try to get themselves organized. The main reason for the high failure rate is that most people have not had a model for productivity they could trust. The approach I've written about tells you what to do with everything. You see how it actually works and that makes it a lot easier to see the payoff. You realize there will be a valuable outcome at the end of the process, rather than it being just another blind path.

MCNews: People do seem really stressed these days with too much to do and not enough time to do it. Has our world gotten that much more complicated, or is something else going on here?

Allen: There is something else going on: the frequency of having your world disrupted. You will change careers more times than your parents changed jobs. When your parents were thrown into new situations, they had an overwhelming sense of ambiguity and stress until they adapted. Then, they got to cruise for another twelve point six years.

You, on the other hand, have about two weeks to adapt to changes, and then you've got to do it again. The issues are the same, but the constant upheaval and need to recalibrate are new. The stress of change is ongoing right now. Some of that is due to more technology and globalization. One thing is certain: we are constantly in crisis mode.

But in a strange way, people relax more in crisis because it gets them focused and relieves the pressure of future crises. If you blow a tire on the freeway, you roll up your sleeves and focus on that crisis. You aren't thinking about that staff problem you haven't figured out, or the kids at camp, or whether you need a new investment advisor.

The real stress comes when you take away the immediate crisis and the next level of stress that's been sublimated bubbles to the surface. It's the sublimated stress that burns people out.

MCNews: What do you mean by sublimated stress?

Allen: Think about what happens when you need to complete some task. If you can't finish it right when you think of it and you don't park it in some trusted place outside your head, it creates an infinite amount of stress for you.

The reason is that the place in our heads where we file stuff has no sense of past or future. So, as soon as you file two things in your head without an objective system to track them, some part of you thinks you should be doing both of them at the same time. That builds subliminal stress, which is what drains our energy.

MCNews: So, the first step to stress-free productivity is to get the "stuff" out of our heads?

Allen: Yes. Of the five stages for managing the flow of work, the first and primary is to make sure you've got all of your potential commitments in a place where they are easily retrievable. Your head is a major source of leaks because an item is virtually lost as soon as you file it in there, just as it's lost if you put it on a post-it that gets stuck somewhere you won't look.

All your commitments must be captured and tracked in some way. At the very least, you need to throw them into temporary buckets, like your paper in-basket. But, of course, the buckets—whether it's voicemail, email, recording devices or your in-basket—have to be emptied, processed and organized, sooner rather than later. Otherwise, the stuff crawls right back up into your head.

MCNews: What's the next step once you have emptied the commitments from your head and elsewhere?

Allen: Well, once you have collected it all, either on a list, on scraps of paper or have recorded everything somewhere, you need to go through each item one at a time and make the processing decisions about it. Is it actionable, yes or no? If it's actionable, you decide what the next action should be. Then, you decide if you should do it, delegate it or defer it. That is the thinking that needs to be done about every potential item of work that we generate ourselves or that we collect from other people.

You know intuitively that there is something important about distributing your cognition and getting stuff out of your head so you can be more objective. But most people only note enough to remind them about the work at hand; they don't finish defining what that work is.

Quite simply, the way you get things done is you define what done means, and you define what doing looks like. Because, guess what? Most people have not made those two decisions about most everything that demands their attention.

You have to sit down and ask, okay what am I trying to do about this staff situation or about this client presentation? You've got to define what you are trying to accomplish, and then you have to decide what, exactly, is the very next physical thing that needs to happen. Until you decide what to do next, your brain will keep bothering you about it.

You must decide what doing looks like, whether that next step is yours to take or somebody else's. Until you actually get it down to that level, your brain keeps running this loop: got to decide, got to decide, hey, I got to decide, bother, bother. Most people have just lived in that mode constantly since they have been conscious, so they don't even know there is another way. The key is making the operational decisions about what doing would look on each item.

The whole point of making decisions and defining your work as best as you can is that the work keeps coming at you. You need to look at the predefined work against the ad hoc stuff to make a professional triage call and not get snared in the busy trap, just dealing with the latest and loudest because you can't think about the rest.

MCNews: Many people use to-do lists, and would probably say they work okay. What do you think about the effectiveness of the traditional to-do list?

Allen: It depends on what you mean by a to-do list. My lists are ultimately to-do lists because they define what doing is. But, what most people call a to-do list is incomplete and unclear, which is highly unattractive. Everything on your list is either attracting or repelling you psychologically. There is no neutral response: it's either, oh boy, when can I mark that off or, get out of my face. If there are still a lot of decisions you need to make about items on your list, your brain glances at the list and says, I don't have the energy to do all that thinking, go away.

You don't usually see specific actions on to-do lists because most people haven't forced themselves to sit down and finish their thinking about what has their attention. They collect items in their in-basket or think they have made a list, but there is another level of thinking that is required to move forward.

Another problem with to-do lists is that people try to do all five phases of the workflow process at once. They get their back up against the wall and feel stressed. So they try to collect everything they need to do, process, organize, review and make priority decisions about the whole thing all at once. You can blow a fuse trying to do that.

It does relieve pressure temporarily to know you need to do "something" about an item, but that approach does not get your energy positively engaged to be productive. So, back to your question on to-do lists: no, they don't usually work the way most people use them. Daily to-do lists haven't worked since the telephone was invented.

MCNews: There is no shortage of tools and techniques, like planners and PDA's to help people get a handle on the stress in their lives. Do you think such tools work?

Allen: They don't work any better than a knife works. It's all in how you use it, right? Tools are static. They don't get you organized, make decisions for you, or teach you how to think. They can facilitate thinking a little bit because your mind, to some degree, works in a function-follows-form fashion. In other words, give yourself a blank page and your brain wants to fill it up because it can't stand a vacuum. So, as long as you create the right forms, tools can facilitate thinking.

The point is that tools are critical, but before a tool can really work for you, there needs to be an understanding of how we think. What's different about my approach is that it is based on our thinking algorithm, not just a set of organizing tools.

MCNews: How much time does it take to do the kind of thinking you are talking about?

Allen: The executive thinking needed to process input from your in-basket, email, notes, etc., takes from thirty minutes to one and a half hours a day for the typical professional. You could be working off your list, dealing with the phone calls you didn't expect or processing your email.

Those are three very different activities, and you can't do them at the same time. People get upset when they are not getting their to-do lists done, but the truth is that most people are relatively unconscious about all of the things that are coming at them and how sophisticated their lives are.

Most people just haven't trained themselves to sit down and do the kind of thinking on the front end that would allow them to manage their commitments in a complete way. It doesn't get rid of your problems, but it does elevate them to a level where they can be managed.

MCNews: When you start to work with someone, what is the most common improvement you see right away?

Allen: Getting it all out of the head and into a trusted bucket, and then making the operational, executive decisions. Most people are doing that to some degree, but there is a light-year difference between getting it all and getting a lot. It can feel worse to get a lot, because you don't know where the end is—you can't see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Then, whatever system you are using is not giving you the payoff, which is to relieve the brain from the lower level tasks of remembering and reminding. The certificate or degree you get from doing it completely is that your brain graduates to a higher level where you get to make intuitive choices from your options. Used properly, an external system manages lower level tasking much better than your brain can anyway.

Until you empty your brain completely and organize and process everything that was in there, it's almost not worth doing at all. Maybe I'm getting old and cranky, but I think if you are not willing to get it all down, don't do any of it. Otherwise, you are just giving yourself something else to do that you aren't going to feel good about.

MCNews: What challenges are there in implementing your approach?

Allen: The good and bad news about my approach is that it's a transformational way to think about your life, and once you do the hard work, suddenly you start to see the fog lift. But, implementing my method is far outside most people's comfort zone. They start the process, feel fabulous and then they back off because they can only handle so much fabulous feeling.

People's addiction to stress is the biggest barrier to truly getting organized. You start to feel good and excited, but you can handle only so much of that before some part of you unconsciously slacks off and lets the world fall apart again to get you back to the level of stress to which you are addicted.

And, here's the pain: this is not light-weight information; once you do get organized, there are a whole lot of people who are going to start upsetting you who never upset you before. Once you raise your standards, you start noticing behavior you never noticed before: people not asking what the next action is, or nodding and saying they got it without writing anything down. And, you're thinking, well that went into a black hole.

MCNews: Are you working on another book?

Allen: Two books, actually. The first should be out by the end of 2003. The book is based on the underlying principles and dynamics that lie behind the best practices of personal productivity—everything that we could all do more of, and be more aware of (other than work harder!) that makes things function better in life and work. The next book is related to a seminar I do called "Leveraging Focus in Vision," and is about the magic that happens when you start to image things and how that affects perception and performance.

MCNews: We will be watching for them. Thanks for being so generous with your time.

Find out more about David Allen, his services and his e-newsletter at www.davidco.com.