

STALKING THE WILD PROJECTS

—DAVID ALLEN

Perhaps the most profound result of creating a complete and accurately defined inventory of our projects is how it can propel us to do something positive and concrete about ephemeral and ambiguous situations that have our attention. We are all capable of taking dominion over every problem or challenging situation we encounter. But this doesn't happen by itself.

Nailing down the real outcome we're committed to in those situations, when "the answer" is still not clear, takes awareness and focus. There is a subtlety and rigorous mental discipline required to create that "complete and accurately defined inventory of our projects."

Defining a "project" as "anything you're committed to complete that takes more than one step" means that most people have between thirty and a hundred projects. Though many are somewhat obvious (hire a new assistant, set up the new computer, finish moving in), many aren't. And as mundane as making a complete version of this kind of list may seem, it is key to masterful self-management.

It's challenging enough to get someone to write down even the most evident projects (it takes some guts to face objectively all the commitments you've made with yourself). And even when you think you have your "total list" of projects, it seldom is. The ones that will elude you are the projects that you can't even see yet as projects. They are the situations you implicitly have committed to change or improve, but haven't gotten a grip on yet.

Often what will hang you up are uncomfortable, unfamiliar, or distracting circumstances you find yourself in, for which you haven't yet gotten clear about how you're going to relate to them. For example:

- **Potential professional relationships:** "Acme Brick has approached us about a joint venture, but I'm not sure that's something we want to do right now." "Smedley Company has asked for a proposal, but I don't know if we even want to do work for them."
- **Sticky interpersonal situations:** "My sister and her husband continue to avoid talking to me about the money they owe us." "I don't know if I can stand working for the person I have as my boss much longer."
- **Personal development issues and opportunities:** "I'm frustrated that I'm not further along in my career." "I'm not sure if I should take time to learn more computer skills."
- **Miscellaneous life and work situations:** "I'm concerned about what Mom is going to do now about her house." "We're frustrated about the latest changes in the policies of our organization." "I've got to do something about my energy." "I don't know how to deal with the troubles Jimmy is having in school this year."

Then, because people don't in the moment "have the answer" to the situation, they don't take the opportunity to define a project of resolution, clarification, or research. If the above inner dialogs were part of your reality, your "Projects" list might begin to look something like this: "Research possible JV with Acme Brick," "Clarify money issue with my sister," "Evaluate career change opportunities," "Resolve Mom's living situation," etc.

Then, and only then, can real next actions be determined which will be the key to your positive engagement with still vague and ambiguous things. Something that has been gnawing at your psyche melts away as you "Call Maria re: suggestions for elder care options" and "Email Chuck/Sally/Bertrand re: meeting about Acme offer." You don't need the final solution to take away the pressure—you just need forward motion toward it.

Training yourself to identify all the things that are "yanking your chain" at any level of your awareness and define for each a positive result and an action to take to move toward it—that's installing an extremely productive behavior, and a mark of significant maturity.

CONFUSION IS A WORD WE'VE INVENTED FOR AN ORDER WHICH IS NOT UNDERSTOOD.

-Henry Miller

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