

THE BIG IDEAS

Clear Heads

+ New habits.

2 Key Objectives

Capture + next actions.

Mind Like Water

Think: Still pond.

Make It Up.

Make it happen.

The 2-Minute Game

<2 minutes? Get 'er done!

Inbox Zero!

Is a magical thing.

Before Vacation Time

= Super productive.

Wild Success

Envisioning + planning for it.

Getting Things Done

The Art of Stress-Free Productivity

BY DAVID ALLEN · PENGUIN GROUP © 2002 · 262 PAGES

“Welcome to a gold mine of insights into strategies for how to have more energy, be more relaxed, and get a lot more accomplished with much less effort. If you’re like me, you like getting things done and doing them well, and yet you also want to savor life in ways that seem increasingly elusive if not downright impossible if you’re working too hard. This doesn’t have to be an either-or proposition. It is possible to be effectively *doing* while you are delightfully *being*, in your ordinary workaday world.”

~ David Allen from *Getting Things Done*

David Allen is brilliant.

And Getting Things Done (aka GTD) rocks.

Although I don’t follow the GTD methodology precisely, David and his approach have been one of my primary inspirations for how I manage my time and life.

I’m an OmniFocus guy (check it out [here](#)) and use that to GTD-ify my projects. His books, newsletter, and products are awesome. (I love [this recording](#) of a live workshop he gave and I have used [this mini-credit card holder/notepad thingy](#) to capture ideas/to-do’s/etc. for years.)

I HIGHLY recommend you dive deeper into David’s work if you’re looking to master the art of stress-free productivity. Check out his site here: www.GettingThingsDone.com.

(Here’s an interview I did with David a couple years ago you might dig as well.)

I’m not going to try to capture the systematic methodology of GTD in this Note (which would be impossible anyway). Rather, we’ll have fun looking at a handful of my favorite high level, uber-practical Big Ideas.

Hope you dig it.

Let’s jump in!

CLEAR HEADS + NEW HABITS

“It’s possible for a person to have an overwhelming number of things to do and still function productively with a clear head and a positive sense of relaxed control. That’s a great way to live and work, at elevated levels of effectiveness and efficiency. It’s also becoming a critical operational style required of successful and high-performing professionals. You already know how to do everything necessary to achieve this high-performance state. If you’re like most people, however, you need to apply these skills in a more timely, complete, and systematic way so you can get on top of it all instead of feeling buried.”

Two things:

1. It IS possible to have a *ton* of things that need to get to done AND have a clear head and a calm, centered, sense of control.

“Teaching you how to be maximally efficient and relaxed, whenever you need or want to be, was my main purpose in writing this book.”

~ David Allen

"The art of resting the mind and the power of dismissing from it all care and worry is probably one of the secrets of our great men."

~ Captain J.A. Hatfield

2. You already know how to do everything required to achieve this state, but you'll need to build some new habits to make it all a consistent reality.

Alrighty. Sounds good.

So what do we need to do?

2 KEY OBJECTIVES

"The methods I present here are all based on two key objectives: (1) capturing *all* the things that need to get done—now, later, someday, big, little, or in between—into a logical and trusted system outside your head and off your mind; and (2) disciplining yourself to make front-end decisions about all of the "inputs" you let into your life so that you will always have a plan for "next actions" that you can implement or renegotiate at any moment."

So, GTD can be boiled down to two key objectives.

Objective #1. Capture EVERYTHING that needs to get done into a trusted system.

Key words there: Capture. Everything. Trusted system.

Too often we have things flying around in our heads that we never nail down. It's like having a computer with a thousand programs open. Not effective. As David says, "Most people walk around with their RAM bursting at the seams. They're constantly distracted, their focus disturbed by their own internal mental overload."

We want to make sure that ALL of the things that ever (!) need to get done are captured.

Where? In a trusted system. (I use OmniFocus.)

Then what? Then our minds are clear (or at least clearer!)—knowing that we have the info in a trusted system that we can refer back to when the time is right and we can let it dance out of our consciousness as we focus on what needs to get done now.

Objective #2. We need to discipline ourselves to translate those "inputs" in "next actions."

What needs to get done with the info we allow into our lives?

Action. Action. Action.

Specifically, next action, next action, next action!

As David says: "What's the next action? This is the critical question for everything you've collected; if you answer it appropriately, you'll have the key substantive thing to organize. The "next action" is the next physical, visible activity that needs to be engaged in, in order to move the current reality toward completion."

MIND LIKE WATER

"Your ability to generate power is directly proportional to your ability to relax."

~ David Allen

"In karate there is an image that's used to define the position of perfect readiness: "mind like water." Imagine throwing a pebble into a still pond. How does the water respond? The answer is, totally and appropriately to the force and mass of the input, then it returns to calm. It doesn't overreact or underreact.

The power of a karate punch comes from speed, not muscle; it comes from a focused "pop" at the end of the whip. That's why petite people can learn to break boards and bricks with their hands: it doesn't take calluses or brute strength, just the ability to generate a focused thrust with speed. But a tense muscle is a slow one. So the high levels of training in the martial arts teach and demand balance and relaxation as much as anything else. Clearing the mind and being flexible are key."

How's your mind?

"If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything."

~ Shunryu Suzuki

Like a still pond? Or with tons of turbulence?

Learning how to relax, clear our minds and show up with flexibility and calm power is where it's at.

Reminds me of Dan Siegel's wisdom from *Mindsight* (see Notes). Dan is one of the world's leading neuroscientists + psychotherapists and the core of his work is reaching a state of what he calls "integration."

Here's how he describes the optimal state of integration: *"Now the qualities of an integrated flow spelled a universally memorable word: FACES, for Flexible, Adaptive, Coherent, Energized, and Stable. We can say that any healthy complex system has a FACES flow. In other words, when the self-organizational movement of the system is maximizing complexity, it attains a harmonious flow that is at once flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable..."*

I like to imagine the FACES flow as a river. The central channel of the river is the ever-changing flow of integration and harmony. One boundary of this flow is chaos. The other boundary is rigidity. These are the two banks of the river of integration."

Kinda like that still pond, eh?

Only this river is flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized and stable.

THAT's the ultimate aim of adopting David's GTD methodology.

MAKE IT UP. MAKE IT HAPPEN.

"You have to think about stuff more than you realize, but not as much as you're afraid you might."

~ David Allen

"It's all connected. You can't really define the right action until you know the outcome, and your outcome is disconnected from reality if you're not clear about what you need to do physically to make it happen. You can get at it from either direction, and you must, to get things done.

As an expert in whole-brained learning and good friend of mine, Steven Snyder, put it, "There are only two problems in life: (1) you know what you want, and you don't know how to get it; and/or (2) you don't know what you want." If that's true (and I think it is) then there are only two solutions:

- Make it up.
- Make it happen."

I like it.

—> Do you know what you want?

—> Do you know how to get it?

If not:

—> Make it up.

—> Make it happen.

THE TWO-MINUTE GAME

"If an action will take less than two minutes, it should be *done* at the moment it is defined."

This is probably THE NUMBER ONE (!!!) thing you could do to improve your productivity. (Seriously.)

It's super simple.

If something takes less than two minutes to do, DO IT.

Period.

*"Think like a man of action,
act like a man of thought."*

~ Henry Bergson

Try that out and watch your life change.

I kid you not. It's **that** big.

Roy Baumeister, one of the world's leading (and most cited) psychology researchers and an authority on willpower (check out the Notes on his great book [Willpower](#)), echoes this wisdom. He tells us: *"The Two-Minute Rule: If something will take less than two minutes, don't put it on a list. Get it out of the way immediately."*

Notice how often you let less-than-two-minute things pile up.

The dish you drop into the sink. The mail you set on the kitchen counter. The email you could easily respond to but leave in your inbox.

All of those could have easily (!) been one-touched and dispatched of in less than two minutes.

Now, when you get in the habit of rockin' those little things, a couple things happen.

First, you eliminate the pile of two-minute things—which easily and quickly become multiple hours of work. AND, you create a new sense of awesome velocity in your life. It feels REALLY good to get things done. By playing the two-minute game, you put yourself into flow more and more often—which catalyzes even more energy in your life.

So...

Back to *you*.

Ready to rock the Two-Minute Game?

(Let's do this!!! :)

INBOX ZERO!!

*"The ancestor of every
action is a thought."*

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

"It requires much less energy to maintain e-mail at a zero base than at a thousand base."

<— That is huge.

How's your inbox doing these days?

You at zero?

Or 1,000?

As David advises, paradoxically, it requires MUCH less energy to maintain e-mail at a zero base than at a thousand base.

Why?

Remember all the stuff floating through your mind that's like turbulence in the pond/open programs on your computer? David calls those "open loops." We want to close them. Having one thousand emails in your inbox silently screaming for your attention is a LOT of open loops—draining you a lot more than you may think.

How do we close those loops?

There are a lot of practical ways to get to zero and David goes into detail on his approach.

For me, it all starts with elevating our standards and deciding that we'll get to and maintain an Inbox Zero.

When I have that standard, it's **fascinating** to notice how the emails that stay in my inbox aren't the ones that necessarily require the most work. They're the ones that require me to make a decision. And they're still in my inbox because I have been unwilling (consciously or unconsciously) to make that decision.

"Rule your mind or it will rule you."
~ Horace

But something magical happens when we have the Inbox Zero standard.

We can no longer avoid making a decision. And that's a very very good thing. Open loops get closed, leaks get plugged and an enormous amount of forward momentum is created.

If you do this already you know what I'm talking about.

If you don't do it yet, try it!!

#inboxzero!

THE WEEK BEFORE YOUR VACATION

"Most people feel best about their work the week before their vacation, but it's not because of the vacation itself. What do you do the last week before your leave on a big trip? You clean up, close up, clarify, and renegotiate all your agreements with yourself and others. I just suggest that you do that weekly instead of yearly."

Love that.

Don't you feel great the week before you take a vacation?!

As David suggests, it's not simply because of your vacation. It's because you're cleaning up all your commitments to yourself and others.

He's big on what he calls a "weekly review" where you basically go thru that process in a systematic way on a regular basis.

(I don't do this as well as I could but it's awesome. :)

ENVISIONING + PLANNING FOR WILD SUCCESS

"You can try it for yourself right now if you like. Choose one project that is new or stuck or that could simply use some improvement. Think of your purpose. Think of what a successful outcome would look like: where would you be physically, financially, in terms of reputation, or whatever? Brainstorm potential steps. Organize your ideas. Decide on next actions. Are you any clearer about where you want to go and how to get there?"

That's really good. For a lot of reasons.

a) It's simply awesome.

b) It's a perfect distillation of the GTD process in a fun paragraph.

So, let's take a moment and unpack it and make it real.

Choose a project that's new, stuck or could just use some optimizing. What is it?

My project is: _____

OK. Awesome. Now, think of your purpose related to this project.

My purpose with this project is: _____

Now, let's think of what a successful outcome would look like. Where would you be physically, financially, etc. (And remember this gem from David: "Have you envisioned wild success lately?" Let's imagine that. :)

Wild success for my project looks like this: _____

"People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can't find them, make them."
~ George Bernard Shaw

"Have you envisioned wild success lately?"

~ David Allen

Fantastic. We're on a roll. Let's brainstorm potential next steps. Just let it rip.

Potential next steps include: _____

OK. Now let's organize those potential next steps a bit more.

These next steps make the most sense: _____

Sweet. Time to decide on specific next actions.

I will do THIS next: _____

Any clearer on where you want to go and how you're going to get there?

Nice.

Now...

Let's get it done!!! :)



Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.