

A Better Way to Manage Your To-Do List

When my wife Eleanor was a little girl, maybe nine or ten years old, she needed new shoes. So she told her mother and they agreed to go shoe shopping the following Saturday morning. But when Saturday rolled around, Eleanor's mother was too busy and realized she wasn't going to be able to fit in the shoe-shopping trip. So she told Eleanor they'd have to do it later.

"When?" Eleanor asked.

"Sometime this weekend," her mom responded.

"When this weekend?"

"Tomorrow."

"When tomorrow?" Eleanor persisted.

"How about two in the afternoon?"

At that, Eleanor relaxed. "Sounds great! Thanks, mom."

And, sure enough, at 2 pm the following day, Eleanor and her mom went to buy new shoes. The shopping trip that would not have happened had Eleanor not insisted on knowing exactly when they were going to go.

She reminded me of this story the other day when she asked me how my day had gone and I responded that it went well but there were a lot of things I had hoped to do that I didn't get done. She remarked that I felt that way every night. She observed that I never get to the end of a day and feel like I accomplished everything I had set out to accomplish. Perhaps, she mused, what I hoped to get done in a day was unrealistic.

She's right of course. For many of us, our to-do list has become more of a guilt list: an inventory of everything we want to do, plan to do, really should do, but never get to. It's more like an I'm-never-going-to-get-to-it list.

And the longer the list, the less likely we'll get to it, and the more stressed we'll become, The solution to this I'm-never-going-to-get-to-it list can be found in Eleanor's childhood shoe-shopping trip, specifically in that final question that satisfied her: "When tomorrow?"

Even at that early age, Eleanor understood the secret to getting stuff done. She had a formula for turning an *intention* into an *action*.

It's what I call the power of when and where.

Decide when and where you will do something, and the likelihood that you'll follow through increases dramatically. The reason we're always left with unfinished items on our to-do lists is because those lists are the wrong tool to drive our accomplishments. A list is useful as a *collection* tool. It's there to help us make sure we know the pool of things that need to be done.

A calendar, on the other hand, is the perfect tool to guide our daily accomplishments. A calendar is finite; there are only a certain number of hours in a day. That fact becomes clear the instant we try to cram an unrealistic number of things into a finite space. So, once you've got your list of things to do, take your calendar decide when and where you are going to do your to-do's. Schedule each to-do into a time slot, placing the hardest and most important items at the beginning of the day. And by the beginning of the day I mean, if possible, before even checking your email. That will make it most likely that you'll accomplish what you need to and feel good at the end of the day.

Since your entire to-do list will not fit into your calendar — and I can assure you that it won't — you need to prioritize your list for that day. What is it that really needs to get done today? What important items have you been ignoring? Where can you slot those things into your schedule? Then, once you schedule an item, cross it off your list.

Following this process will invariably leave you with things still on your to-do list. But don't worry: that's actually a good thing.

If you hadn't scheduled those items, you'd still have had things to do left over at the end of the day, only you wouldn't have had control over which items got done and which got left behind. And that would have left you surprised, disappointed, and, most importantly, helpless.

Now, on the other hand, you can be strategic about what gets left behind. You can decide, in the morning or the night before, what's really important to do and commit to when and where you'll do it.

And you can be sure that if you decide when and where you're going to do those things — if you answer Eleanor's question, "When tomorrow?" — you'll reliably and predictably get them done.