

What To Do With Your To-Do List

Last week, in *A Better Way to Manage Your To-Do List*, I wrote about the importance of using your calendar — not your to-do list — as your main tool to guide what you do in a day.

Transferring items from your to-do list to your calendar will help you make strategic choices about where you spend your time, but it will also leave you with the probability of a long list of items that didn't fit into your calendar for the day. And that list will simply grow longer and more stressful day by day, a continued reminder of what you *aren't* accomplishing. I call it my guilt list.

What do you do with those things?

I have a rule to handle those items: my three-day rule. It ensures that no item on my list ever stays on it, haunting me, for more than three days.

Here's what I do: after I've filled my calendar for the day, I review what's left on the list. I leave new items, those I just added that day or in the previous two days, on the list to see if they make it onto my calendar the following day.

But for everything else — anything that's been on my calendar for three days — I do one of four things:

- 1. Do it immediately.** I'm often amazed at how many things have been sitting on my list for days that, when I decide to do them, take a few short minutes. Often they turn out to be 30-second voicemails or two-minute emails. Those things I do immediately.

2. Schedule it. For those things that I don't do immediately, I look for a time to slot them into on my calendar. It doesn't matter to me if it's six months away. If it's important enough for me to have on my list, then I need to be able to commit to doing it at a specific time on a specific day. I can always change my plan when I review my calendar for that day, but if I want it done, it needs to be scheduled.

There are, of course, some things that I'm not willing to schedule at all. Perhaps a meeting with someone that I think would be a good idea but isn't a priority enough to schedule. Or something that I schedule and then, each time I get to the scheduled day, I choose to bump off for more important priorities. If that's the case, then I face the fact that while I'd like to think that particular item is important, I'm not acting that way. So I let it go.

3. Let it go. That's a nice way of saying delete the to-do. If I'm not willing to do something immediately or schedule it for a specific time and day, I simply admit that I will not get it done. I face the reality that while I might like these things to be priorities, they simply aren't enough of a priority to do.

Sometimes, though, it's too hard to delete something. I don't want to admit that I'm not going to do it. And I don't want to forget that I think, someday, maybe it would be a good idea. So I put those items in a someday/maybe list.

4. Add it to a someday/maybe list. This is a list I learned from David Allen, author of the bestseller *Getting Things Done*. It's where I put things to slowly die. I rarely, if ever, do things on this list. I look at it monthly or so, periodically delete the ones that are no longer relevant, and then put the list away for another month. I probably could delete everything on this list but I sleep a little better knowing I can put things on it when I'm not courageous or guilt-free enough to delete them right off the bat. And who knows? Perhaps someday, maybe, I'll do something on that list.

There's one other list I keep and that's my Waiting list. If I've sent someone an email, left a voicemail, or expect to hear back from someone about something, I put that item on my Waiting list. This way I don't lose track of things I expect from others — and I'm able to follow up if I don't receive them — but I also don't have to look at those items every day or confuse them with things I have to actually *do*. This list is on my computer, and I assign a date and reminder to each item. That way I don't have to think about what I'm waiting for or when I should review the list. I simply wait for the reminder and if I haven't received the thing I'm waiting for, I'll know to follow up or, simply, let go of the expectation of hearing back from the person.

That's my process. It ensures that nothing stays on my to-do list for more than three days. And once I've scheduled everything I plan to do for the day, I don't have to look at my list again that day, except to add items that come up throughout the day.

It takes all the guilt out of the list.