

Effortless

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Tags: [#work-life-integration](#) [#productivity](#)

Dialogue

Chap. 6/8 (Define, Simplify)

What happened after you finished Essentialism?

We're reading The Little House on the Prairie series. Puritan work ethic.

Linear results and residual results.

Invitation --> Define what done looks like. The story of the Vasa.

Point --> What's the outcome you want?

Done for the day list.

Invitation --> Simplify: start with zero.

Key question --> What are the minimum steps required for completion?

Distinction --> Minimum number of steps vs. "phoning it in."

Story --> A work vs. B work.

In writing this book, what have you changed your mind on?

You cannot complete something that is vague.

Reserve

In Buffett's words, "I don't look to jump over 7-foot bars: I look around for 1-foot bars that I can step over."

When we remove the complexity, even the slightest effort can move what matters forward.

Quotes

There are two types of results: linear and residual.

Whenever your efforts yield a one-time benefit, you are getting a linear result. Every day you start from zero; if you don't put in the effort today then you don't get the result today. It's a one-to-one ratio; the amount of effort you put in equals the results received. But what if those results could flow to us repeatedly, without further effort on our part?

From an evolutionary perspective, this bias for ease is useful. For most of human history it's been crucial to our survival and progress. Just imagine if humans had a bias for the path of most resistance. What if our ancestors had been wired to ask, "What's the hardest way to obtain food? To provide our family shelter? To maintain relationships within our tribe?" They wouldn't have made it! Our survival as a species grows out of innate preference for taking the path of least effort.

What if, rather than fighting our preprogrammed instinct to seek the easiest path, we could embrace it, even use it to our advantage? What if, instead of asking, "How can I tackle this really hard but essential project?," we simply inverted the question and asked, "What if this essential project could be made easy?"

For some, the idea of working less hard feels uncomfortable. We feel lazy. We fear we'll fall behind. We feel guilty for not "going the extra mile" each time. This mindset, conscious or not, may have its roots in the Puritan idea that the act of doing hard things always has an inherent value.

At a key moment in my career, a client at a high-profile technology company asked me to give three presentations on leadership. They told me that if all went well they were prepared to hire me for the next year or more. It was exactly the career break I needed. I understood their needs well. I had ready-made content they had already approved.

The afternoon before the first presentation, I decided to add some finishing touches. It already looked good. But I worried it didn't look good enough. I decided to scrap it all and start over.

I got consumed with a new idea that I was convinced would wow them. I ended up staying up all night rewriting my whole presentation: new slides, new handouts, all of which were, of course, untested.

As I drove to the company's offices the next morning I was exhausted. My mind was foggy. When I arrived, I was running on the fumes of my nervous energy.

As the presentation began, my stomach sank. My opening story was unpolished. The slides were unfamiliar; I kept having to turn around to see what was on the screen. One of the first slides failed to convey the point I was trying to make.

In short, I bombed. As I left, I was hyperventilating. I had been given this incredible opportunity, and I had blown it.

The client canceled the other two presentations. They did not hire me for the extended engagement. It was my most humiliating professional failure—ever.

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But essential work can be enjoyable once we put aside the Puritan notion that anything worth doing must entail backbreaking effort. Why would we simply endure essential activities when we can enjoy them instead? By pairing essential activities with enjoyable ones, we can make tackling even the most tedious and overwhelming tasks m...

When you focus on what you lack, you lose what you have.

And so the most expensive naval project in Sweden's history sailed less than a mile before being buried in the sea—all because the king had made the project almost impossible to safely complete by constantly redefining what "done" looked like.

"Done" isn't always going to apply to an individual task or project. We have all experienced the overwhelmed feeling that comes from staring down the barrel of a seemingly infinite "to do" list—one that has usually become longer by the end of the day than it was at the beginning. It creates an unwinnable war. So how do we know when the work of the day is "done"? Anna and I like to use a "Done for the Day" list.

A Done for the Day list is not a list of everything we theoretically could do today, or a list of everything we would love to get done. These things will inevitably extend far beyond the limited time available. Instead, this is a list of what will constitute meaningful and essential progress. As you write the list, one test is to imagine how you will feel once this work is completed. Ask yourself, "If I complete everything on this list, will it leave me feeling satisfied by the end of the day? Is there some other important task that will haunt me all night if I don't get to it?" If your answer to the second question is yes, that is a task that should go on the Done for the Day list.

But as the team soon learned, Jobs had something else in mind. He walked to the whiteboard and drew a rectangle. Then he said, "Here's the new application. It's got one window. You drag your video into the window. Then you click the button that says BURN. That's it. That's what we're going to make."

His most brilliant insight wasn't some advanced breakthrough in the science of flight. It was simply that focusing on the elegance and sophistication of the aircraft was actually an impediment to progress. An ugly aircraft that could be crashed, repaired, and redesigned fast would make it much easier to make progress on what really mattered: building a plane that could, as MacCready put it, "turn left, turn right, go up high enough the beginning and the end of the flight."

From the very start of their journey, Amundsen had insisted that his party advance exactly fifteen miles each day—no more, and no less. The final leg would be no different. Rain or shine, Amundsen "would not allow the daily 15 miles to be exceeded." While Scott allowed his team to rest only on the days "when it froze" and pushed his team to the point of "inhuman exertion" on the days "when it thawed," Amundsen "insisted on plenty of rest" and kept a steady pace for the duration of the trip to the South Pole.

This one simple difference between their approaches can explain why Amundsen's team made it to the top while Scott's team perished. Setting a steady, consistent, sustainable pace was ultimately what allowed the party from Norway to reach their destination "without particular effort," as Roland Hunford, the author of a fascinating book on this race to the South Pole, explains.

Without particular effort? They accomplished a feat that had eluded adventurers for millennia. Of course, not every day was easy. But even under the harshest of conditions, the goal was doable, thanks to that one simple rule: they would not exceed fifteen miles a day, no matter what.

Even when we want to make consistent, steady progress on a priority project, life often intervenes. We may have planned to spend the morning at our desk and instead find ourselves stuck in meetings. We may have blocked off hours on our calendar for important work and instead find ourselves dealing with a toddler meltdown. Then to compensate for our perceived lack of productivity, we work all the way through the weekend, in a mad rush for progress. We know this comes at a cost: low-quality work, increased guilt, and reduced confidence.

References