

# COACHING *for* LEADERS

## Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less

*by Greg McKeown*

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### Dave's Reading Highlights

Instead of making just a millimeter of progress in a million directions he began to generate tremendous momentum towards accomplishing the things that were truly vital.

In this example is the basic value proposition of Essentialism: only once you give yourself permission to stop trying to do it all, to stop saying yes to everyone, can you make your highest contribution towards the things that really matter.

Essentialism is not about how to get more things done; it's about how to get the right things done. It doesn't mean just doing less for the sake of less either. It is about making the wisest possible investment of your time and energy in order to operate at our highest point of contribution by doing only what is essential.

The way of the Essentialist means living by design, not by default. Instead of making choices reactively, the Essentialist deliberately distinguishes the vital few from the trivial many, eliminates the nonessentials, and then removes obstacles so the essential things have clear, smooth passage. In other words, Essentialism is a disciplined, systematic approach for determining where our highest

point of contribution lies, then making execution of those things almost effortless.

If you don't prioritize your life, someone else will.

As Peter Drucker said, "In a few hundred years, when the history of our time will be written from a long-term perspective, it is likely that the most important event historians will see is not technology, not the Internet, not e-commerce. It is an unprecedented change in the human condition. For the first time—literally—substantial and rapidly growing numbers of people have choices. For the first time, they will have to manage themselves. And society is totally unprepared for it."

It's a method for making the tough trade-off between lots of good things and a few really great things.

What if we stopped celebrating being busy as a measurement of importance? What if instead we celebrated how much time we had spent listening, pondering, meditating, and enjoying time with the most important people in our lives?

To embrace the essence of Essentialism requires we replace these false assumptions with three core truths: "I choose to," "Only a few things really matter," and "I can do anything but not everything." These simple truths awaken us from our nonessential stupor. They free us to pursue what really matters. They enable us to live at our highest level of contribution.

After all, we have been taught from a young age that hard work is key to producing results, and many of us have been amply rewarded for our productivity and our ability to muscle through every task or challenge the world throws at us.

The overwhelming reality is: we live in a world where almost everything is worthless and a very few things are exceptionally valuable. As John Maxwell has written, "You cannot overestimate the unimportance of practically everything."

In a piece called “Laugh, Kookaburra” published in The New Yorker, David Sedaris gives a humorous account of his experience touring the Australian “bush.”<sup>9</sup> While hiking, his friend and guide for the day shares something she has heard in passing at a management class. “Imagine a four-burner stove,” she instructs the members of the party. “One burner represents your family, one is your friends, the third is your health, and the fourth is your work. In order to be successful you have to cut off one of your burners. And in order to be really successful you have to cut off two.” Of course, this was tongue-in-cheek; I am not here to suggest that living the way of the Essentialist requires us to decide between our families and our health and our work. What I am suggesting is that when faced with a decision where one option prioritizes family and another prioritizes friends, health, or work, we need to be prepared to ask, “Which problem do you want?”

WITHOUT GREAT SOLITUDE NO SERIOUS WORK IS POSSIBLE. —  
Pablo Picasso

No matter how busy you think you are, you can carve time and space to think out of your workday. Jeff Weiner, the CEO of LinkedIn, for example, schedules up to two hours of blank space on his calendar every day. He divides them into thirty-minute increments, yet he schedules nothing. It is a simple practice he developed when back-to-back meetings left him with little time to process what was going on around him.<sup>4</sup> At first it felt like an indulgence, a waste of time. But eventually he found it to be his single most valuable productivity tool. He sees it as the primary way he can ensure he is in charge of his own day, instead of being at the mercy of it.

WHERE IS THE KNOWLEDGE WE HAVE LOST IN INFORMATION? —T.  
S. Eliot

“I realized that journalism was not just about regurgitating the facts but about figuring out the point.

Being a journalist of your own life will force you to stop hyper-focusing on all the minor details and see the bigger picture.

Essentialists are powerful observers and listeners. Knowing that the reality of trade-offs means they can't possibly pay attention to everything, they listen deliberately for what is not being explicitly stated. They read between the lines.

Play, which I would define as anything we do simply for the joy of doing rather than as a means to an end whether it's flying a kite or listening to music or throwing around a baseball—might seem like a nonessential activity. Often it is treated that way. But in fact play is essential in many ways. Stuart Brown, the founder of the National Institute for Play, has studied what are called the play histories of some six thousand individuals and has concluded that play has the power to significantly improve everything from personal health to relationships to education to organizations' ability to innovate. "Play," he says, "leads to brain plasticity, adaptability, and creativity." As he succinctly puts it, "Nothing fires up the brain like play."

Albert Einstein once said: "When I examine myself and my methods of thought, I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than my talent for absorbing positive knowledge."

EACH NIGHT, WHEN I GO TO SLEEP, I DIE. AND THE NEXT MORNING, WHEN I WAKE UP, I AM REBORN. —Mahatma Gandhi

In K. Anders Ericsson's famous study of violinists, popularized by Malcolm Gladwell as "the 10,000-Hour Rule," Anders found that the best violinists spent more time practicing than the merely good students.<sup>1</sup> His finding supports Essentialist logic by showing that mastery takes focused and deliberate effort, and indeed it's encouraging to learn that excellence is within our sphere of influence rather than a blessing bestowed only on the most naturally gifted. But it also comes dangerously close to encouraging the Nonessentialist mind-set of "I have to do it all," the pernicious myth that can lead people to justify spending longer and longer hours working, with diminishing returns. That is, until we look at a less well-known finding from the same study: that the second most important factor differentiating the best violinists from the good violinists was actually sleep. The best violinists slept an average of 8.6 hours in every

twenty-four-hour period: about an hour longer than the average American. Over the period of a week they also spent an average of 2.8 hours of napping in the afternoon: about two hours longer than the average. Sleep, the authors of the study concluded, allowed these top performers to regenerate so that they could practice with greater concentration. So yes, while they practiced more, they also got more out of those hours of practice because they were better rested.

In a piece called “No More Yes. It’s Either HELL YEAH! Or No,” the popular TED speaker Derek Sivers describes a simple technique for becoming more selective in the choices we make. The key is to put the decision to an extreme test: if we feel total and utter conviction to do something, then we say yes, Derek-style. Anything less gets a thumbs down. Or as a leader at Twitter once put it to me, “If the answer isn’t a definite yes then it should be a no.” It is a succinct summary of a core Essentialist principle, and one that is critical to the process of exploration.

The team also uses an explicit set of criteria in making their evaluation. Their primary criterion is, “Will this person be an absolutely natural fit?” That is why they have designed the selection process to include multiple interviews. That is why they developed the workday trial run. It’s why they send the questionnaire. Like any true Essentialist, they are trying to gather the relevant information so they can make an informed, calculated, deliberate decision.

Here’s a simple, systematic process you can use to apply selective criteria to opportunities that come your way. First, write down the opportunity. Second, write down a list of three “minimum criteria” the options would need to “pass” in order to be considered. Third, write down a list of three ideal or “extreme criteria” the options would need to “pass” in order to be considered. By definition, if the opportunity doesn’t pass the first set of criteria, the answer is obviously no. But if it also doesn’t pass two of your three extreme criteria, the answer is still no.