

# Finding Order Out of



by Lucy Katz

One of the major sources of stress today is a lack of organization. I've listened to some people lament over how difficult it is for them to be organized, while others have said "that's just the way I am," as though disorganization is a genetic trait. Over the years, I've watched and listened to suggestions of how "other" people stay organized, and those that really manage the task, I admire greatly. My goal in writing this article is to change my bad habits and not do as I do but do as I say.

Getting our professional and personal lives organized is not all that difficult, but it does require discipline and concentration. Sticking with the status quo if you are disorganized only guarantees that things will get worse as well as creates an increased level of stress. Lack of organization **never** seems to heal itself!

## How to Find Order

Take a look at your list of things to get done on any given day. If it seems overwhelming and you can't see the light at the end of the tunnel, then follow these simple steps.

**Prioritize.** This is one of the first steps to bringing order into our chaotic lives. Not

everything is equally important, and you need to evaluate where things rank on your to-do list. Prioritizing has two main components: **a mindset and an action plan.** One cannot exist without the other. If you only do half the job, you will have little or no effect.

**Setting your mindset.** Our industry seems to create and encourage a "firefighter" personality — days often consist of going from one "fire" to another and putting them out. Often "fires" that are being put out may be better left undone in order to concentrate on more important things. The only way to test this is to stop before you do a task and ask yourself: "do I really need to do this now or would it be better if I left it undone and concentrated on something more worthwhile?" Analyze your activities to see if you are prioritizing them. Are you giving attention to those tasks that need the most attention or simply reacting to the tasks that "yell the loudest."

**Developing your action plan.** Once you have made the commitment to prioritizing as a goal, it is time to put your mindset into action. Use a "to-do" list to prioritize your activities, listing your action items by priority. Commit to not ending your day until those top six items

are taken care of. Sometimes, when put into writing, a seemingly important activity will lose a lot of its perceived importance and can be relegated lower in terms of priority.

## Managing Your Time

Time management goes hand in hand with prioritizing. Both take work before they become a habit. You may spend some time spinning your wheels as you begin to make decisions as to what is important and what carries much less importance, but simply making these decisions will sharpen your skills.

Think of time in terms of money. Like money, the time that you waste (or don't use efficiently) is gone forever. And like your finances, knowing where your time is going now is the only way you will ever be able to change how you are spending it. Take a "time inventory" for a week. Mark down all of your activities and how long you spend doing each of them. This need be nothing more than a notebook, kept on a daily basis, that keeps track of your time expenditures. For example, if you get up at 6 a.m. and stretch, jot that down. If you take a two-hour business lunch one day, jot that down too. Over several days,

you will be able to assess where your time is being spent.

**Learn to Delegate.** Don't say "it's better if I just do it myself" when doing so does not leave you enough time to complete the tasks you need to do. Yes, it is true that delegation will require training and monitoring of those to whom you delegate, but generally, once the training has been completed, it is almost always easier to monitor a task than it is to do it yourself. Surround yourself with people who complement your skills and compensate for your weaknesses. Train them in areas where you are strong, and learn from them in areas where they bring strength to your organization.

**Do! Don't talk.** You'll get a whole lot more accomplished if you simply plan your tasks and then do them. We often spend so much time talking about an activity that we need to accomplish with our coworkers, clients, trades, suppliers, spouses, children, friends and neighbors, that we actually steal time (or force it to a later time) from the task itself. Do it. Get it done and keep becoming all that you can be.

Schedule time on a daily basis to handle your paperwork just like you would if you had an appointment with a trade or client. Choose an hour when there are few distractions in the office, like in the morning before anyone comes in the office. Be sure to use an answering machine, voice-mail system, co-worker or assistant screen, and hold your calls.

Use the desk clock as an important ally. If you're procrastinating about something, tell yourself you'll work on it for "just 15 minutes." And use the clock to help you stop early enough so you will have time to put things away at the end of the day.

## The Paper Trail

Now that you have mastered time management basics, you need to clear your desk so you can get even more accomplished. Working over piles of paperwork or a desk cluttered with assorted phone messages, contracts, change orders and general disorder does not make you feel in control. Instead of feeling as though your business is running you, clean off your desk so you can feel like you are running the business.

## Organizing Your Desk

Start by taking seven boxes and labeling them with the following:

1. To file, to do, to read, contacts, office equipment, magazines/catalogs, other rooms.
2. Sort items as you uncover them, and don't get side tracked with unnecessary trips to other rooms.

Years ago, I read somewhere that the most important step while going through this process is: **take no prisoners and be ruthless.**

- Get a lawn and garden trash bag, and start sorting and weeding through all the papers that seem to have been breeding in your office or on your desk. Trash anything that is expired or not vital to your existence. The rest should go into the "to file, to do or to read" boxes.
- Trash any magazines and catalogs that are older than four to six months or that you have no interest in reading.
- Instead of keeping an entire magazine, pull out the article(s) that you would like to read, date and label if necessary, staple the pages together and place in your "to read" box.
- All business cards, notes, scraps of paper with phone numbers and addresses should go into the "contacts" box to be put into your computer, electronic organizer or daily planner.
- Do not move paper from one pile to another. Once a piece of paper is in your hands, make a decision on what to do with it.
- Place all pens, staplers, paperclips etc. into the office equipment box.
- If you need to add another box, do so.

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Be persistent; give yourself enough time to get the job handled. Within a few hours, most of the sorting will have been accomplished, and once that is done, you can tackle each individual box.

### Sorting the Boxes

**Magazines/Catalogs** — Look at each issue and ask yourself:

1. Do I have time to read this?
2. Is it out of date?
3. Are there more than three months here?

Toss, be ruthless and don't look back. Next check the index of your remaining magazines and clip any article you wish to read. *Don't get sidetracked and start reading the articles. Stay on purpose and keep plodding along.*

For issues that you absolutely have to keep, purchase some inexpensive magazine holders made from cardboard, plywood or wood that can be placed in or on top of a filing cabinet.

Any article that you have already clipped should be placed in a folder or envelope. Keep this handy in your car or briefcase so that you can do some reading while waiting for appointments or while stuck in traffic.

**Return to Other Rooms** — Replace the items in their correct places and don't stop until the box is empty.

**Contacts** — Tackle this box by asking yourself "do I need to keep this number? Will I ever refer to this business card again? Will I really use their services?" Toss whatever you don't need. If you really want to be organized, before you begin entering names and numbers, weed through your contact book and delete the dead names and addresses. Your contact book can be a day planner, Rolodex, electronic hand-held device or a program on your computer. If you use a Rolodex, just staple the business card onto a blank card.

Once you are up to date, place a small box on your desk or in a drawer to put any new contacts in it. Try to update your resources at least weekly.

**To Do** — With each piece of paper ask, "Is it too late to do this? Do I have the time? Do I really need or want to do this?" Any piece of paper that has the answer yes, either deal with it immediately by placing it in the **Urgent Today Action** or the **To-Do Action** desktop trays/files.

**To File** — Initially, all paper should fall into two very basic categories, archival

(legal, tax etc) or current business files. As you sort each piece of paper, ask yourself those by-now-familiar questions: "Do I really need this? Is the information available elsewhere? Can I live without it?" Statistics show that 80 percent of filed paper is never looked at again. Once the box is empty, keep the piles separated and place in your desktop to file tray.

**To Read** — Look at each item in this box and again ask yourself those questions. Anything that you really must read can then go into your reading basket.

**Office Tools** — Sort through and toss any leaky pens, etc. Put the essential items on your desktop, organizer or in your desk drawer. Use little organizer trays that can be found in most any office supply store to keep things neat and tidy.

Finally, make sure that your wastebasket is large and easily accessible from your desk to continue to "discard ruthlessly."

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