

The More Effective To Do List: The "To Stop" List

Article by Herb Rubenstein, President, Sustainable Business Group

Introduction

The "to do" list is a staple of executives, house wives, college students, and even elementary school students whose parents have drilled into their heads staying "on task." Thanks to a webinar by Marshall Goldsmith, this article provides key insights into a potentially very effective complement to the "to do" list. This is the "to stop" list.

The basic premise of the "to stop" list is that people today are very busy. They multi-task, have challenges delegating tasks because they don't have time to get organized enough to hand off some of their to do lists in an effective manner to others. People want to do different things, but don't have time to do them. The goal of the "to stop" list is simple. It is to help people in an organized manner begin to eliminate activities that are taking their time, but are no longer producing sufficient value or enjoyment to merit filling up our days and nights. The theory is simple. An excellent way to make room in our busy schedules, or "make time" as some people like to say, for new or different activities, or activities we never seem to get to, is to eliminate some of the activities that have been regularly taking our time up to this point.

The Approach

Creating a "to stop" list is actually pretty easy. It can start as simply as foods you no longer find useful to eat. In some ways it works just like a "to do" list, except in "reverse." Most people do not always complete everything on their to do list. Similarly, you, in all likelihood, will not stop everything completely on your "to stop" list. Some people respond better when someone, or especially, when they themselves, tell themselves to stop something rather than being told, or telling themselves, to do something.

The "to stop" list can be created and executed at the individual level, the family level, or at the organizational level. The "to stop" list can successfully change a culture in an organization where discipline is lacking and "anything goes." It can create an opportunity for self-examination at whatever level it is implemented, and is needed more and more in our ultra busy and hurried times.

Specific Examples of Typical "To Stop" Items

In addition to putting things you do that are time wasters or not the most effective use of your time, you can actually put certain people on your "to stop" list if spending time with them is not useful or enjoyable. Do you watch more TV than you think you should, or participate in too many staff meetings that do not contribute to the effectiveness of the organization in which you work. Of course, if someone is on your "to stop: list," I urge you to be polite to them, but you need not continue to spend inordinate amounts of time with them that is not useful to you, or in your opinion, not beneficial to them.

Items on the "to stop" list may be very specific or include general categories of behavior. For example, you might put a particular not useful activity like trolling on the internet to find bargains in home furnishings that you don't really need or just list an item that is broadly applicable like "stop noise in my life." Another purpose of the "to stop" list is to have us look at our behavior that has become routine, including our habits, and re-evaluate their usefulness compared to the time they cost us.

In business or organizational life, one small business owner in her first day of writing her "to stop" list decided to stop doing all of the "minimum wage" activities that she was doing. During the day she wrote down all of these "minimum wage" activities which a clerical assistant or high school or college intern could have performed just as effectively, and through writing down all of these activities, she had created a "job description." She posted the job description on several websites and in one week had hired an administrative assistant that freed up ten to fifteen hours of her time a week to do more productive and valuable things to promote her business that only she could perform. Now she has more time to work "on the business," rather than spending so much of her time "in the business."

Conclusion

You can add or subtract items to the "to stop" on a regular or periodic basis. It is a good practice to review the list at least weekly to see how you are doing in stopping or reducing the amount of time you spend on activities that are not producing value or enjoyment for you or your organization. At the organizational level, having a discussion or posting items on a blog, list serve, chat room, or sharing ideas on that to stop is a useful exercise that will point out significant time wasters. There will always be things you have to do because the activity is very important to other people or has some potential for benefit in either the short term or the long term. These items should not be on your "to stop" list.

The "to stop" list at the individual level may lead to your finding ways to delegate or automate tasks, or become much more efficient in completing them. Overall, a good "to stop" list has the dual benefits of making you and your organizations both more efficient and more effective. If we could say that about everything in our life, we would be more productive, more satisfied, and less harried.

Finally, to combining your to do list with a to stop list is an excellent combination. In a separate article I write about a third list that completes the package. It is the "to decide" list. Combining your "to decide" list, with your to stop list, and your to do list is a three pronged approach that will make you a more effective executive, student, and a person who become not only more decisive, but better at executing your decisions in a timely manner.

About the Author

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