

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 9: The 9 Habits to Stop Now

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Tim Ferriss: Good day, Ladies and Gentlemen. This is Tim Ferriss and welcome to another edition of the Tim Ferriss Show. This is an in between-isode as one of my fine readers suggested calling it and that is short form audio essays in between the longer interviews. So, if you want the longer stuff, just go to iTunes or anywhere else, search The Tim Ferriss Show and you will find lots of long interviews with everyone from chess prodigies to master photographers to scientists and in between.

In the meantime, I am going to present a short essay and it is entitled The Nine Habits to Stop Now, The Not to Do List. Not going to edit this because quite frankly I do not know how, so if I stumble please forgive me. Here it goes. Nine Habits to Stop Now, The Not to Do List.

Not to do lists are often more effective than to do lists for upgrading performance and the reason is simple, what you do not do determines what you can do.

So, I am going to elaborate on nine stressful and very common habits that entrepreneurs and office workers should strive to eliminate. Focus on one or two at a time, just as you would with high priority to do items. So, one or two per day, no more and I have worded them in a not to do action form to try to make these actionable.

1.) Do not answer phone calls from unrecognized or unknown phone numbers. Feel free to surprise others, of course, but do not be surprised yourself. It just results in one unwanted interruption of various types and there is task switching costs. So, when you go from task to task, you will typically – let us just say 40 percent of time, not complete the task that was interrupted. Another reason to use an app like Freedom. And secondly, you will end up in a poor negotiating position. You do not want to be surprised. So, let unknown phone numbers go to voicemail and consider using something like Google Voice where you can listen in on the voicemail or something like SimulScribe that will allow you to receive voicemails as email.

2.) Do not email first thing in the morning or last thing at night. The former scrambles your priorities and all your plans for the day and the latter just gives you insomnia. Email can wait until 10:00 A.M. or after you have completed at least one of your critical to do items and read more of course of what I have written about working first thing in the morning offline. And you can find plenty of that stuff on the blog at fourhourblog.com.

3.) Do not agree to meetings or calls with no clear agenda or end time. Phrased another way, you always need a clear agenda beforehand and a stated end time for meetings or

calls. If the desired outcome is defined clearly, this is what we want to accomplish in this call or in this meeting, and there is an agenda listing topics, questions, to cover no meeting or call should really last more than 30 minutes. So, request them in advance so you can “best prepare and make good use of our time together.”

4.) On the not to do list, do not let people ramble. Small talk takes up big time. So, forget how’s it going when someone calls you. Stick with, what’s up? Or I am right in the middle of something, but what is going on? A big part of getting things done is getting to the point. So, you do not have to be rude about this, but remember what I mentioned about task switching and the cost of interruptions. It is not a question of if you have the time to engage in five minutes of chit chat. It is whether you can afford the interruption or not and I guarantee you 99 times out of 100 you cannot afford the interruption. So, go from, “Hey how is it going? How was your weekend?” to, “What is up?” or, “I am in the middle of something. What is going on?”

5.) Do not check email constantly. Batch checking email and check at set times only. So, of course, I am somewhat known for the policy of checking email twice per day, something I recommend.

I belabor this point enough elsewhere, so I am not going to elaborate too deeply. But, needless to say, get off the cocaine pellet dispenser and focus on execution of your top to dos instead of responding to manufactured emergencies. So, hitting refresh or inbox repeatedly in Outlook, Gmail, is not a constructive way to spend your time. Email is everyone else’s agenda for your time, as I have said before. Set up a strategic auto responder and check email two or three times daily. You can also use tools such as Boomerang to schedule follow ups if you do not hear back from someone or to send email at a later point in time so that you are not refilling your inbox as quickly as you clear it. So, do not check email constantly. Check it at set times. Batch – just like you would not do your laundry when you have two pairs of dirty socks. You wait for a critical mass and then you process.

6.) Do not over communicate with low profit, high maintenance customers. There is no sure path to success, and this is actually a quote from Bill Cosby, but the surest path to failure is trying to please everyone. So, do an 80/20 analysis of your customer base in two ways. Which 20 percent are producing 80 percent or more of my profit? And which 20 percent are consuming 80 percent or more of my time? Then put the loudest and least productive on autopilot by assigning and changing company policy. It is pretty straight forward, right?

Send them an email with new rules as bullet points. Number of permissible phone calls, email response time to be expected, minimum order necessary for A, B, C, D, and E, etc. Offer to point them to another provider, supplier, if they cannot conform to the new policies. Sometimes you really have to fire your customers to create the business and the life that you want.

7.) Do not work more to fix overwhelm. Prioritize. If you do not prioritize, everything seems urgent and important. If you define the single most important task for each day, almost nothing seems urgent or important because that one thing is the force multiplier that will render everything else unimportant or less important or make them all easier. So, define that single most important task for each day. Oftentimes, it is simply a matter of letting little bad things happen. So, examples of that would be returning a phone call late and apologizing, paying a small late fee for some type of return, losing an unreasonable customer, etc. etc. to get the big important things done.

The answer to overwhelm is not spinning more plates or doing more. It is defining the few things that can really fundamentally change your business and life. So, if you do not have time, the truth is you do not have priorities. So, think harder, do not work harder.

8.) Do not carry a cell phone, iPhone, crackberry, whatever 24/7. A digital leash. Do not carry a digital leash 24/7. Take at least one day off per week. Turn them off or better still – and I tend to do this on Saturdays, which is also cheat day. Leave them in the garage, in the car, somewhere you cannot get easy access. I do this at least once a week and I recommend you leave the phone at home if you go out for dinner. So what, if you return a phone call at let us say an hour later or the next morning. As one reader put it to me, when he was explaining how he responded to a miffed coworker who worked 24/7 and expected the same from everything and everyone else. “I am not the President of the United States. No one should need me at 8:00 P.M. at night.” Okay, you did not get a hold of me, so what bad happened? The answer of course, nothing.

Alright, last but not least. 9.) On the not to do list, the nine habits you should stop now, do not expect work to fill a void that non work relationships and activities should. Work is not all of life. Your coworkers should not be your only friends. Schedule life, cool activities, and defend it just as you would an important business meeting. Never tell yourself, “I will just get it done this weekend.” That is how you end up screwed where you have neither productivity nor relaxation. So, review Parkinson’s Law and *The Four Hour Work Week*, force yourself to cram within tight hours so your per hour productivity does not fall through the floor. Focus, get the critical few done, and get out. Emailing all weekend is no way to spend the little time you have on this planet.

And those are the nine. So, to reiterate and summarize this, it is very hip to focus on getting things done, but there are a million new tools and tricks every day, every week, on a million different websites. But, getting things done truly, is only possible once we remove the constant static and distractions.

If you have trouble deciding what to do, as many people do including me, just focus on not doing. Focus on the not to do list. Different means, same end. So, I hope you enjoyed the essay. I would love to hear what other items you would put on your critical not to do list. If you had a not to do list of only two or three things, what would you add to that list that I did not just describe? I would love to hear from you. Let me know what you thought of the episode. Just ping me on Twitter @tferriss, T – F – E – R – R – I – S – S. Thanks for listening.